A what-if exploration of the world Underground in a steampunk verse.
The Mad Hatter had seen warehouses before this, factories that churned out all manner of consumer products with the steady thrum of a beehive built to accommodate both the personnel and the machinery enclosed with its ten square foot walls; but never one quite like this. Serving in the capacity as personal advisor to her Majesty the Queen he had been tasked with the tour of the various factories and warehouses scattered about the kingdom.

At the moment, his tour guide, the March Hare seemed to be on the verge of bubbling over with unrestrained intent to assure that his tour went over as smooth as silk. Not knowing what to expect, the Mad Hatter felt it would be best to err on the side of caution and gave his guide a polite nod. “Lead on,” he replied.

“You will be amazed, simply amazed,” replied his guide.

Sweeping away the velvet burgundy curtain that shrouded a large, tall, free-standing object, the guide, his restraint at last giving away, behind was a mirror its polished surface gleaming with a radiance all of its own; unaffected by the dust and soot that had covered a good deal of the surface areas elsewhere in the great warehouse.

With the ever-present noise muffled or at least not as noticeable and the laborers out of sight in their designated divisions, the first thing that Mad Hatter realized was that his guide’s manner abruptly altered; he went from eager and chipper and anxious to please to coy and conspiratorial. “Mr. Hatter,” the March Hare whispered. “Can I trust you to keep a secret?”

“Very well,” the other replied,” although I am at all certain if I have a choice.”

Nodding his head, “Ah, a man of caution, well indeed, I give you the access way to one of the most if not the most important invention of our age: the perpetual motion machine. Revolutionary, wouldn’t you say?”

At first, as he gazed into the swirling vortex of he could make nothing out, in fact, it reminded him of nothing so much as the bizarre ink blots that he had once seen the Duchess show him as a young boy.

The Mad Hatter removed his spectacles from his face, held them up to the slanting rays of diffuse lighting in the cavernous room and inspected them for a moment. He then buffed the lenses on his linen shirt and replaced them over his nose and ears. The swirling vortex of blue, white and silver swirling against a black background gradually resolved itself into a series of overlapping diamond-shape patterns.

“I am just the foreman and I have been briefed on a sparse handful of its technical aspects,” the White Rabbit remarked as he reached up to wipe away the sweat beading on his brow; the average temperature in the room was approximately fifty degrees; however, even as the Mad Hatter observed the machine or whatever it was; the doublet worn by the March Hare stuck to his body like a second layer of fur.
“Where did this all come from?” The Mad Hatter had known that the current regime was a progressive one that the royal personages wished to embark on a new age of innovation and creation; despite certain members of society who wished things to remain at the status quo. Thus, his mission to inspect the various factories and granaries; but this machine was something he could not have envisioned.

“I don’t know, but someone out there obviously does.” The Marc Hare then scampered off into a corner of the room where he was swallowed up in the shadow and emerged a few moments later with a manila folder in his hands.

“Here’s everything you might conceivably require to investigate this case is enclosed within. Take it or not, that’s your choice, Sir.” He trailed off for a moment and then standing as tall on his hind legs and he possibly could without falling down, for he was much shorter than the Mad Hatter; whispered. “Do yourself a favor and take the case, Sir.”

“I might very well come to regret this,” he replied. “But, I accept.”

“Excellent! Wonderful!” His guide replied, suddenly regaining his previous bubbling excitement. “If you will come this way I will be glad to escort out of the premises.”

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The steps that led up to the very top of the tower were narrow and winding and seemed to wrap around the interior of the structure in a manner that reminded him of a boa constrictor. The narrow windows did very little to allow the brittle winter sunlight to pass through and so he took his ascent very slowly. Upon reach the top and passing through the doorway, he stopped in his tracks, when he saw the sight that greeted his eyes.

It was a ship, yes, but one such as he had never seen before in his life, a construction of wood and brass, steel and leather and the thrumming sound he had only faintly perceived upon nearing the top had become an all-around roar that sounded like the ocean. This ship, however, was not intended to sail on the world’s oceans, but upon the currents of the air.

The White Knight came around from the rear of the craft where he had been putting some finishing touches to the propulsion system; he wore a workman's smock over his tunic and hose and his long wispy green hair had been streaked with a dollop of oil and paint. “What took you so long?” he asked.

Taken aback the Mad Hatter at first did respond immediately, but he finally recovered enough to stammer: “I was not aware I had an invitation.”

Only for a brief moment could the Mad Hatter detect a faint hint of surprise in the older man’s eyes then it as quickly was replaced by an affable eagerness. “That’s of little import when weighed against what you are about to experience! Welcome aboard, once we get this bird airborne, you will have the opportunity few have ever experienced; to wit: We shall attain a bird’s eye view of this land of ours.”

“I am not so certain of this…” hemmed the Mad Hatter.

“Come on! No time like the present!”

So saying the older man stepped forward and grasped hold of the sleeve of his tunic, and with a sheepish grin that slipped past his bearded lips; propelled him aboard the flying ship, calling it a dirigible, due to the wicker basket which comprised its base and the steaming vents of a gaseous matter that would give it propulsion.

“Will this actually work?”
“Stop being a nervous nelly, my good Hatter,” the White Knight exclaimed. “Our hearts must be light so that we may travel all the faster!

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A passage of time that seemed to an apprehensive Mad Hatter and like hours, but in reality was mere minutes; the dirigible lifted off and pulled away from the tower.

Moving forward to the stern and gripping the railing with as tight a grip and he could manage, he surveyed the bowl of the sky that greeted his wondering eyes. It was magnificent and tinted a shade of blue the color of a robin’s egg blue. He squared his shoulders determined to do his position as royal surveyor proud; then looked down to the ground so far beneath their flying craft.

One of the very first things that struck him was how much the landscape resembled that of a black and white chessboard, but not as even, more like a quilt that had been patterned after the game, dotted here and there with patches of lighter and darker colors; forests, lakes, rivers, manor houses.

With the wind at their back and the sun now climbing to the meridian he felt as if he could see all the way to the horizon, but perhaps that was merely an illusion brought on by both distance, elevation and his own imagination working over-time. He loosed his grip on the railing and stepped back a few paces, turning a speculative glance at the White Knight.

In the back of his mind he wondered, if there might not indeed be more than the Red Queen was letting on about the extent and breadth of the innovations she now wished to introduce and if that was the case, if his mission to survey the land now had more of an import than he had been led to believe.

On the heels of that particular thought the Mad Hatter, normally a withdrawn and practical man, who prided himself on his skeptical approach to dealing with matters of policy, allowed himself a small smile brought on by pure excitement. “This is an eye-opener and no mistake!”
Disclaimer: Alice in Wonderland and Through the Looking Glass are the original creations of Lewis Carroll and as such, do not belong to me. Note: The story picks up a little bit after where the previous story: From Point A" left off.

prompt #47 stars 50scenes, Table 1

"On Red Herrings and Paper Tigers" by karrenia

Where did all the speaking creatures go? That particular question vexed the Mad Hatter in search for answers in this brave new world. He had approached the Queen of Hearts in this regard and her Majesty was as ever, vague in her own behalf. She had muttered something vague about progress and industry and the futility of chasing after red herrings and paper tigers, and put him off, and put him off until he stopped pestering her.

Her husband and equally royal personage, the King of Hearts, had been a bit more forthcoming, probing at him in the form of many a glass of wine, at last mumbling something about a menagerie.
Not to be balked in his endeavor the Mad Hatter was determined to see the matter through to its logical conclusion.

He had last seen the March Hare at the factory where he had discovered marvel of marvels, the Perpetual Motion Machine, and while staring into its swirling depths had made him quite dizzy, he figured the best make further inquiries.

He had often heard that neer-do-wells frequently returned to the scene of the crime, so by that logic, the Mad Hatter ventured back to the warehouse. It was as much as he recalled a humming, steaming, teeming hive of activity; much of the details obscured by the billowing clouds of steam. This time he had wrapped the tail ends of his ascot tie up around his mouth which breathing the smoky air much easier.

He was met half-way by the White Knight who were aviator goggles over his eyes, but who had pulled them to lie against his chest. “I had wondered if I’d see you again, did you enjoy your flight on the air-ship?”

“I did, to be honest, I did not expect to see you here. I was looking for the White Rabbit.”

“So am I,” the other replied. “He’s been here since I don’t know when wait, he’s been here since they launched the Perpetual Motion Machine, and while it’s entirely possible to get lost around here, I haven’t heard from him in weeks.” The White Knight paused and tugged at the cords of his goggles and idly glanced around as if afraid of pricking ears or of picking curious eye tracks, then he began to snuffle. “I realize that you are investigating this fascinating device at the behest of her August Majesty, and in that capacity, I suppose everyone is a suspect and I shouldn’t even be telling you this…” he trailed off and heaved a sigh.

“Telling me what exactly?” asked the Mad Hatter.

“I miss the old days, I miss when times were simpler. You might say that I’m just an old fuddy-duddy who won’t bring himself to embrace progress, but the White Rabbit’s disappearance has shaken me badly. Pardon me, while I sniffle.”

Much taken aback by both the reaction and the sudden out-pouring of halt salty tears shed by the White Knight, at first the Mad Hatter did not know how to respond.
“There, there, old chap, steady there,” the Mad Hatter said soothingly as he patted the White Knight on the back.

“It’ll be all right.”

“Disgraceful, the way I’m carrying on. I know that you were once close friends, but have you heard from him lately?” the other asked.

“No, not lately. In point of fact, since he said he would be out of communication for some time and would not be attending our tea parties, I thought nothing more of it.”

“Until now.” The White Knight paused and leaned forward, laying a finger to his lips, “Just between you and me, he isn’t the only, I have it on good report that neither the Mock Turtle nor the Gryphon has been seen lately, but I recommend checking in with the Caterpillar, or even the Cheshire Cat.”

Then he tilted his head to one side as if thinking something through, then added. “That last might prove the most difficult, but you know what they nothing ventured, nothing gained.”

“Indeed. Might have another look at the machine.”

“I don’t see why not.”

**

The machine was much as he remembered it, but there were subtle differences, for one thing, the swirling kaleidoscope geometric shapes had gained a much more cohesive appearance, one that did not make the Mad Hatter as nauseous as the first time he had seen them. And the clarity of the surrounding murk had been much improved. He also noted that a control console and a set of dials had been added to the base of the mounted mirror. “I could wish for the White Rabbit to make a reappearance, if for nothing else than to explain how these controls work.”

“I have been trying to ascertain that fact myself,” the White Knight replied, ‘but I have restrained myself from making a haphazard pushing and pulling of levers for fear of blowing either myself, the warehouse, the machine, or all of the above to smithereens.”

“A wise precaution.” The Mad Hatter replied.

“I am grateful that you did not mention my propensity for doing so,”

“Well, um, yes, you’re welcome.”

Just at that precise moment the shapes began to swirl and there was a solidifying force at work. If one concentrated very hard one could discern the vaguest image of a face coalescing in the center of the mirror. It was vague and the features of nose, eye, mouth, and chin were vague and ill-defined however there was little doubt that it was a face.

“Hello! Hello! Is anyone out there? No matter, if anyone is listening to this, be apprize that this world of our, believed to only exist in one dimension is actual two, that are capable of perceiving. The one on your side of the mirror represents progress and industry and revolution but at a certain price. This other one, while seemingly chaotic and well, fanciful, lies just on the other side of the mirror.”

“Is that the White Rabbit? And if so, what kind of message is he trying to tell us?” the Mad Hatter asked of no one in particular.

“Is he telling us the mirror is some kind of portal?”
“If it is, does that mean that he crossed over of voluntarily? Is it too much for me to take in right now?” The Mad Hatter stated and wiped the sweat from his brow. “I must sit down and think about it.”

On the other side of the mirror the White Rabbit turned to the Gryphon and sighed. “I do hope someone was monitoring the Perpetual Motion Machine, but it took a tremendous amount of energy to get even that much of a message across the ether. “Time, was of the essence, and all that. But I’ve never very good at being punctual so I could not be certain.”

“I should certainly hope so. I don’t know about you, but this side of the mirror isn’t so bad, the rivers are cleaner, and the sky isn’t as blue and the grass is greener. However, a vague feeling that we were meant to choose one world over another keeps nagging after me, like an itch that you can never quite reach.”

“I know the feeling,” the Gryphon gruffly added. “I can not recall if her Majesty on the Other Side gave us a choice in the matter when we crossed over, do you? Turtle? Rabbit?”

“To be honest, I really can not remember,” replied the Mock Turtle.

“Oh, my stars and garters,” sighed the White Rabbit, I do hope someone got our message.”

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