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'Rorschach in Wonderland'

by khilari

Summary

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'Have read Alice in Wonderland,' he announced to the universe at large.

'How fortunate for you,' said a voice. He looked up and saw, perched on a shelf, a purple cat wearing a golden collar and a disturbing smile. It had very familiar blue eyes.

'Veidt,' he said.

The cat stood and stretched ostentatiously. 'Who's Veidt? I'm the Cheshire Cat.'

'Ridiculous,' said Rorschach. 'Am dreaming. Possibly hit head.'
'Possibly,' said the Cheshire Cat. 'Probably, even. But even if you're dreaming you can't wake up until you reach the end.' He laughed, and the tip of his tail began to fade away. 'We're all mad here. But then, we are inside your head.' His smile faded last.

Rorschach turned back to the table. If he was dreaming, he could stay here until he woke up. The Cheshire Cat had said it wouldn't work, but he was just a figment of Rorschach's imagination. On the other hand, waiting around doing nothing was bad enough when he wasn't doing it inside his own head. He could at least try looking for a way out. The bottle would, if he remembered, make him smaller. He scowled at it, he didn't want to get smaller. Something to make him bigger would be better, but he didn't have much choice. With a sigh he uncorked the bottle and swallowed the contents.

The table rushed up past him at an alarming rate, far too fast. Once he had finished shrinking he was barely mouse sized, and far too small to reach the handle of even the smaller door. Stupid. He should have tried sipping instead of downing the whole bottle like that. He looked around hopefully for an 'eat me' cookie, but was clearly out of luck. The door knob, with a large keyhole underneath, was far beyond his reach. Hrm. He pulled out his grappling hook and aimed for the keyhole, it caught and held easily. After that it was a simple matter to scale the door. The keyhole was a tight fit, he was forced to wriggle violently to make it through, and his struggles sent him plummeting to the forest floor on the other side.

If Rorschach remembered correctly mice could fall a long way and not be hurt due to their size. He was hoping this also applied to him when talons closed around him and he was carried into the air. He went still, conserving energy to fight when the creature put him down. It swooped into a hollow tree, making him squeak at how close the edges seemed, and set him down on a nest. He rolled away from it and fell into a crouch, but the owl was looking at him through its glasses with eyes even more familiar than Veidt's.

'Daniel?'

The owl smiled around the end of its beak. 'Would you like some coffee? I've got sugar cubes as well, if you like.'

Rorschach cautiously nodded. While the owl bustled around putting the kettle on with one talon he had time to look around. The nest was a normal bird's nest made of twigs, but it also contained a kitchenette, a table and chairs and a cozy armchair. Next to the armchair was a pile of books with talon marks around the edges.

'Nice nest,' he said. Daniel hooted happily and fluffed his feathers, bustling harder to hide his being flustered at the compliment.

A little while later Rorschach was drinking coffee and munching his second sugar cube. The cup was owl sized and he had to hold it with both hands, but on the plus side so were the sugar cubes.

'Want to regain normal size and find exit,' he explained to a sympathetic Daniel. 'Could use information.'

Daniel shook his head, turning it far too far in each direction. 'I'm afraid I've never seen an exit,' he said. 'Or any way of changing size, although I've never looked for that.'

'Looked for an exit?'

'Yes. I don't want to leave really, I mean, I'm comfortable here. But I do feel sometimes that if I could go somewhere else I could really make something of myself. You know?'
'Yes.' Rorschach took a contemplative sip of coffee. This version of his partner wasn't a hero, and that was more disconcerting than him being an owl. His thoughts were interrupted by a huge curved beak poking through the opening in the tree and arriving bare inches from him. Rorschach flung his mug at the intruder and retreated to the far wall. A huge grey owl stepped in, wiping coffee off its face with one wing.

'Oh, I'm so sorry!' said Dan, as if he had thrown coffee at his guest. He grabbed a towel in his beak. 'Lt me gt tht,' he muttered through it, dabbing at the grey owl's face. Once he had put the towel down he turned to Rorschach. 'You remember Hollis, don't you?'

Rorschach nodded, he had always respected the original minutemen and was mortified at having thrown coffee at one. 'Sorry about coffee. Did not recognise you.'

'It's fine, I startled you I should think,' said Hollis, cheerfully. He peered at Rorschach. 'Aren't you a little smaller than usual?'

A little? Rorschach stood as straight as he could and still barely reached Hollis' chest. 'Trying to remedy that,' he said stiffly.

'An old friend of mine might be able to help, but he's a bit hard to talk to these days,' said Hollis, his wings drooping slightly as he spoke.

'Am willing to try,' said Rorschach.

The place Hollis set him down was in a ring of mushrooms, surrounded by enough long grass to make him feel claustrophobic. 'He's usually around here,' said Hollis, before leaving. 'Be gentle with him. He's been through a lot.'

Rorschach pushed through the grass, increasingly hot, tired and furious. Having something as insignificant as grass cause him this much trouble was humiliating. He shoved his way around a clump and found himself looking at a huge mushroom. Spreadeagled on top of it was an enormous butterfly with bright yellow wings, a bottle clutched in one of its four hands.

'Are you Hollis' friend?' he asked.

The butterfly shoved itself up on three elbows and took a swig from the bottle. 'Used to know Hollis,' it said dreamily. 'Good man.'

Rorschach took a step closer. 'Need your help,' he said.

'Used to help people,' continued the butterfly in the same tone. 'Used to. Back when I could fly. Can't fly now.'

'Because you're drunk,' snapped Rorschach. 'Can help me. Don't need you to fly. Need to know how to get bigger.'

'Drunk,' muttered the butterfly. It looked at the bottle as if trying to figure out how it got there and took another drink, almost experimentally. 'Tastes better than nectar.'

'Listen to me. How do I get bigger?' Rorschach was considering shaking the wretched creature if it didn't answer him soon. It focussed on him for a second then flopped forwards, bottle falling from its hand and rolling off the mushroom to land in the grass below.

Rorschach growled and went to grab one of its wrists, but it muttered, 'One half will make you bigger. Other half makes you smaller.'
'Of what?'

'Mushroom,' said the butterfly, then it sighed and fell asleep.

Rorschach stretched his arms around the mushroom and broke off a piece from both sides. A small nibble of one made him start shrinking again so he hastily took a larger bite of the other. A moment later he was as tall as the trees around him. Much more convenient this way. He started to walk forward, shoving trees out of his way with no more effort than the grass had taken earlier. A flash of bright feathers made him look around as a Lory came in to perch on a branch nearby. She took the pipe out of her beak with one claw and cocked her head at him.

'Could you try to be a little less conspicuous?' she said. 'The Queen of Hearts is looking for you already.'

'Not scared of her,' said Rorschach. Being scared of Alice in Wonderland characters would be ridiculous.

'Yeah? We'll see how fucking brave you are when she catches you,' said the Lory. She put the pipe back in her beak and flew off.

It was the swear word that did it, reminded him that this wasn't Lewis Carroll's innocent world. Because it might be stupid to be scared of Alice characters but he knew there were things inside his head that he didn't want to face. And suddenly he was shaking, feeling trapped, and for the first time finding the exit felt like more than a way to pass the time. What if he was in a coma, what if the Cheshire Cat was right and he couldn't leave until he found his way out? What was he stuck in here with? He nibbled the mushroom almost guiltily, returning to his his regular size (although he did leave himself a few inches taller than normal). He was getting tired of pushing through trees anyway.

Sometime later, and he didn't know if it was minutes or hours, was starting to lose track, he found a path and, a little after that, a signpost. One side read 'MAD HATTER' and the other read 'MARCH HARE'. Rorschach couldn't remember which way the tea party was in the book, but he had a feeling he would find it either way. He set off towards the March Hare's house resolutely.

The tea party was taking place in the March Hare's garden. Seated at an enormous table was Moloch in full evening dress, a $5 sign affixed to his hat, the Twilight Lady in a red leotard, red rabbit ears, domino mask and high heeled shoes, and Big Figure asleep between them wearing a headband with enormous grey mouse ears. The table was littered with cake and scones. Moloch looked at him and raised an eyebrow.

'Why is a raven like a writing desk?' he asked solemnly.

'Ennk. Poe wrote on both,' said Rorschach.

The Twilight Lady laughed. 'Smart boy.' Rorschach shrugged and helped himself to a scone.

'A literature student,' said Moloch. 'Recite Blake's 'The Tyger'.

'No,' muttered Rorschach with his mouth full.

The Twilight Lady leant back, crossing her legs as she did, and took a dainty sip of tea. 'Don't be so stubborn,' she said. 'We'll tell you where the exit is if you get it right.'

Rorschach finished his scone and tried to recall the poem while licking cream off his gloves. He hadn't read it since high school. But, after a moments thought, the words came easily and he began to recite.
'Tyger, tyger, black and white
Scaring citizens at night,
Broken fingers screams of pain
What is it you hope to gain?'

Rorschach frowned, but the words had their own momentum now and he couldn't stop.

'In what lonely alleyways
Do you spend your nights and days?
Warning with a childish sign
Cardboard battered as your mind…hrrnk.'

Rorschach managed to choke himself to a stop and stared at his feet.

'That wasn't right at all,' said Moloch disappointedly.

'Sounded right to me,' said the Twilight Lady. 'Does this mean we don't have to show him the exit?'

'No, I don't think we- Guh!' Moloch's sentence came to an abrupt end when Rorschach lunged across the table and grabbed his hand, bending the index finger back far enough to hurt.

'Tell me, or will break finger,' he hissed.

Leaving with the information he needed (and leaving Moloch with a broken finger) Rorschach headed down the path he had been directed to. It wasn't long before he found a wall crossing the path. It was a red brick wall, and looked easy enough to climb, but when he tried it just seemed to get higher and higher until even pure stubbornness wasn't enough to keep him going and he half slid half climbed back to the ground. His grappling gun didn't work either, the wall was barely higher than his head, now he had stopped trying to climb it, but the hook wouldn't catch. Well, the wall had to end somewhere. He turned right and started walking along it.

After a while he saw someone sitting on it. On closer inspection it proved to be a giant egg, in leather trousers with a smiley face pinned to the belt, smoking a cigar.

'Wrong book,' said Rorschach. 'Humpty Dumpty was in Through the Looking Glass.'

'Hey, it's your dream, kiddo,' said Humpty. He puffed on his cigar. 'Don't be so anal. You've been hanging around with bird boy too much.'

'Nite Owl is good partner,' he said. Then added. 'Looking for exit. Seen it?'

'Sure. Right there.' Humpty made a ta-da gesture at the wall just to the right of him and Rorschach noticed for the first time that there were two doors, one black and one white. The white door said 'RORSCHACHS ONLY' in black letters and the black one said 'WALTERS ONLY' in white letters.

He grasped the handle of the 'Rorschach only' door and twisted it firmly, but the door refused to budge. Kicking it only gained him a stubbed toe. He was reluctantly contemplating the 'Walters only' door, when an oval shadow fell across him. Looking up he could see that Humpty had edged up the wall, and was leaning over precariously to watch him.

'Going to fall,' said Rorschach.

'Didn't know you cared.'
Rorschach shrugged. 'Stupid place to sit.'

'I like it up here. And if I fall, King Nixon's men will just put me back together again.'

'Stupider and stupider.'

Rorschach gave in to the inevitable and grabbed the 'Walters only' door as if he was thrusting his hand into a fire. It didn't budge any more than the other one had.

'It won't work like that, you have to be logical about these things,' said a voice from behind him. Rorschach looked around and was not surprised to see the Cheshire Cat sitting on a tree branch.

'Hurm. Logical?'

'You see,' began the Cheshire Cat. 'In order to get through one door you must be a member of the set of all Rorschachs which are not also Walters. While in order to get through the other you must be a member of the set of all Walters which are not also Rorschachs. And you are, in fact, a member of the set of Rorschachs which are also Walters. Which is no more use than being a member of the set which is neither.'

Rorschach shook his head, maths had never been his strong point. Especially when people stopped using actual numbers, which he was sure defeated the entire purpose of maths. 'Not a logic puzzle,' he protested.

The Cheshire Cat smiled at him. 'I'm afraid it is.'

'I. Am not a logic puzzle.'

'Well, I'd have to agree that there's not much logic to you,' said the Cheshire Cat.

'Logic's over-rated,' said Humpty. 'The world doesn't make sense anyway, so fuck logic and go with the flow.'

'That is precisely the kind of attitude that causes so much trouble in the world,' said the Cheshire Cat, starting to sharpen its claws on the branch. 'People assume problems are insoluble, so they don't even try to look for solutions. At least none that don't involve blowing each other up.'

'A vigilante who doesn't believe in solving problems with violence? Why the hell hang around with us in the first place, kitten?'

'I am not a kitten, I am a fully mature adult cat.'

'When I use the word kitten it means 'cute little pussy with his head a long way up his ass'.

'That is not what the word kitten means.' The Cheshire Cat was starting to fluff up with anger, tail twitching rapidly below its branch.

'When I use a word it means exactly what I want it to mean, no more and no less,' said Humpty.

'I think we were all aware of that,' said the Cheshire Cat.

Rorschach grabbed it by the tail, yanking it down hard and putting his foot on its neck before it could escape. 'Stop arguing. Need to think.' He glared down at it, inkblots shifting rapidly. 'Tell me how to get through doors, or will break…' He paused, the Cheshire Cat didn't have fingers. 'Will break something. Possibly neck.'
The Cheshire Cat started laughing, and faded out from under his foot before he could stop it. Soon all that was left was its mouth, still laughing at him from a few inches above the ground, then that faded as well.

Rorschach turned back to the wall and tried the 'Rorschachs only' door again, rather hopelessly.

'You already know that won't work,' Humpty pointed out. 'You know what they say about trying the same thing over and over and expecting a different result?'

'Should work,' said Rorschach. 'Walter's dead.'

'Or just buried. Clearly not as dead as you think.' Humpty looked down at him, half smirking half sympathetic. 'Come on. You already know the solution.'

Rorschach nodded, hunching his shoulders miserably. If he couldn't get rid of Walter to become purely Rorschach, then he had to get rid of Rorschach. He just wasn't sure it was worth it, even to find the way out of this place. His face afforded him more protection in his dreams, not less, and he hated being helpless. Still, he had come this far and he was too stubborn to give up now.

Slowly, reluctantly, he peeled off his face and set it neatly on the ground in front of the 'Rorschachs only' door. He followed up by taking off the rest of his costume. There were more layers than he remembered and by the time he had them all off he was barely tall enough to reach the doorhandle. The 'Walters only' door swung open at a touch. He hesitated, staring nervously into a shadowy hall, before glancing up at Humpty.

'Go on, kid. I'm rooting for ya,' said Humpty.

Walter nodded, and stepped through the door.

The hall was full of fractured funhouse mirrors, cracks spiderwebbing over their surfaces, turning his reflection into something distorted and broken. Every so often a larger shard showed him as he was, a child in a grubby nightshirt with the eyes of a frightened animal. Walter preferred the fractures. His bare feet left footprints in the dust, he was clearly the only person who had been here in a long time. It was a relief to open the door at the other end and step out into sunlight again.

Walter stepped cautiously over the forest floor, watching out for sticks and stones now that he no longer had his boots. When he happened on a little cobbled path winding between the trees he opted to walk beside it for the sake of his feet. It led to a pretty little house with palm trees growing outside. The knocker on the door was shaped like a naked woman, so Walter rapped on the door with his knuckles instead. It was opened by a newt wearing a waistcoat.

'Who are you?' the newt demanded.

Walter hesitated, no longer sure of the answer, and the newt sighed. 'The Duchess is not available,' it said, and started to close the door.

'Walter Kovacs,' blurted Walter, although he was no longer sure he wanted to enter the house. In the book the Duchess had been shaking her little boy, who had later turned into a pig because he was such an ugly baby. Walter had hated that scene.

The newt paused and looked down at him haughtily. 'And your reason for wishing to see the Duchess?'

'I'm looking for the exit,' he said.
'I am afraid we have no knowledge of such a thing,' said the newt. It started to close the door again, but was interrupted.

'Let the poor kid in, Larry,' said a voice from inside. 'I don't mind talking to him.'

The newt stood aside to let Walter enter, watching him as if he was a stray dog which might start chewing on the furniture. He walked down a hallway covered with tapestries and into a room where the Duchess was sitting rocking a crib. She was wearing the Duchess's dress, but when she looked up her face was Sally Jupiter's. She smiled wryly at him.

'So I'm a raddled old harridan, huh? You really don't like me, do you, sugar?'

Walter pulled up inner reserves of Rorschach, or at least faked them. 'Whore,' he said. 'Whore pretending to be a hero.'

'You look too young to be using words like that,' said Sally.

'Why? Knew them when I was this age,' said Walter. He's not sure how old he is, really, but anything over six would make that true.

Sally shook her head. 'And Laurel thought I was a bad mother.'

'Were. Made her dress like that.'

Sally didn't bother trying to justify herself. Walter drifted over to the crib, drawn by curiosity against his will. Tucked inside it was a piglet, pink and healthy and not really ugly at all.

'He's kind of cute, isn't he?' said Sally. 'Larry doesn't like him, of course, but he's a newt so he's got no room to complain.'

Walter didn't answer, and was surprised when Sally continued speaking. 'I wasn't pretending to be a vigilante,' she said. 'Sure, I did it for the publicity, but the criminals I stopped were still real. So what's wrong with getting something for my trouble? You don't have to throw yourself against the world until you break to do good in it.'

'Spent time making movies you could have spent saving children,' said Walter.

'I took care of myself. If you don't do that then no one else is going to,' said Sally.

Walter shrugged, he already knew that. It just wasn't important. 'Looking for...' he began, but was cut off by a commotion in the entrance hall. A moment later the newt put its head around the door and handed Sally an enormous piece of gold edged cardboard. She pulled a face.

'Croquet with the Queen. Do I have to go?'

'It's good publicity,' said the newt. 'Not everyone gets these invitations.'

'Fine, I know.' Sally stood up, brushing down her dress as she did. 'Larry, take care of the piglet. I expect him to still be fine when I get back.' She bent down and ruffled Walter's hair, ignoring his glare. 'Take care of yourself, sweetie. There's no one you need to rescue here.'

The newt ushered Walter out swiftly, and he caught sight of the White Rabbit hurrying down the cobble path. Presumably she had brought the invitation. If he had been Rorschach he would have planned to ambush her and demand information. Since he currently came up to her waist he didn't have a plan beyond following her to see where she went. She didn't notice him, his bare feet made him silent without even trying, and she led him to a large white building that looked like a bank.
She strode through the glass doors, high heels tapping, and Walter slipped in after her.

The place was full of animals, lined up to talk to cashiers, and the White Rabbit joined the queue behind a fox. At the head of it was a dodo taking out life insurance. Nobody paid attention to Walter. He hesitated, twisting the hem of his nightshirt between his fingers, and then joined a different queue. Maybe the cashier would tell him where the exit was.

The queue shuffled along, past brochures about nest insurance and uninteresting interest rates. There were inkwells with quills in and, for some reason, a little china bowl with sugar cubes in it. Walter helped himself to a handful and crunched them while he waited.

When Walter realised he was on eye level with the animals in the queue he was relieved, thinking he was growing back into Rorschach again. But he kept on growing and by the time he reached the cashier he had to bend down to look through the service window.

'Excuse me,' he began. The collie behind the window looked up at him and let out an alarmed bark. The next thing he knew she had pressed a button and the air was filled with sirens. Walter covered his ears hastily, knocking a family of goats flying as he did.

'There's a monster attempting to rob the bank. Send Bill immediately,' barked the collie into a radio.

'I'm not trying to rob the bank,' protested Walter, head already pressing against the ceiling. 'And I'm not a monster.'

Nobody was listening, most of the animals had panicked and were rushing for the door. The White Rabbit, walking calmly at the back of the crowd, paused to smirk at him before she left. Once the cashiers had followed the exodus there was no one left to explain to. Walter sat down on the marble floor of the bank with his arms around his knees, it was the only way he fitted now. The china bowl of sugar cubes was still on the counter. Walter groaned, he should have known better than to eat things in Wonderland.

There was no escape, none of the doors were big enough, and he doubted he was strong enough to knock down the walls. He would just have to wait until Bill came to deal with him and hope he didn't plan on shooting him. Like this he was too cramped to put up any kind of fight. Walter sniffled, then told himself firmly that he was still Rorschach and Rorschach didn't cry.

'I told you to be less conspicuous,' said a voice, and he looked down to see the Lory perched on the counter.

'Didn't do it on purpose,' croaked Walter, dismayed that he sounded as tearful as he felt.

'Don't start crying or this place will be flooded in no time. There's no point in getting you back to normal if you're just going to drown.'

'Not crying,' said Walter. He wiped his face on his sleeve and then added, 'Can you? Get me back to normal?'

'I don't know, but someone had better. How did you change in the first place?'

'Sugar cubes. Before that it was,' he paused. 'Mushroom. The one the butterfly was on. One side makes you bigger and one side makes you smaller.' He looked at the Lory hopefully and she bobbed her head.

'Be right back,' she said, and darted out of the window.
Walter curled up again, feeling less despairing but even more embarrassed. He could hear the sounds of the mob outside, and then measured dramatic voices that sounded like the media. He tugged the nightshirt down self consciously, not sure it was enough to keep him decent at this size.

A commotion outside made him glance around as a Texas banded gecko walked through the doors. He was wearing a black cloak spangled with gold stars and a matching black and gold mask to go with his natural black and yellow bands. He paused inside the door, falling into the stance of an experienced fighter. To Walter's dismay he had a gun. Walter stared down at the lizard, wishing he could think of a plan. Rorschach would have had a plan, but it was getting harder to pretend he was anything other than a frightened child.

'Agree to leave this bank, or face the consequences,' said the lizard.

'I can't,' said Walter, but the lizard either didn't hear him or didn't believe him because it chose that moment to fire the gun. He gasped and threw his hands over his face, but instead of the sting of bullets something sticky wrapped around his wrist. The lizard broke off the strand of webbing it had fired from the gun and calmly loaded another capsule. Walter, less frightened now he knew he wasn't about to be shot, tried to grab the lizard before it could cover him in webbing. It dodged, darting around him to fire a shot at his feet and managing to stick one of them to the floor. Walter would have been more worried about that if he'd had room to move in the first place.

The next shot got webbing over Walter's left hand, and he was reduced to trying to catch the gecko with his right. He managed to herd it into a corner, but it scampered over his hand and would have got away if its cloak hadn't caught on a rack of pamphlets. The gecko pulled the rack over on top of itself and, before it could recover, Walter grabbed hold of it and took the gun away. He then shoved the gecko out of the nearest window.

He settled back to wait for their next attack, tense and alert now, but calmer.

He was almost disappointed when all the crowd did after that was throw stones at him. They stung, but did no real damage, so he just waited until there was a giant sized handful on the floor and then threw them back. When the Lory returned she had to swerve wildly to avoid the barrage of stones from both sides. She swooped down and dropped a piece of mushroom into his hand, then perched on the counter. Walter nibbled the mushroom, and soon the room seemed to be growing around him. He squeezed behind the counter as soon as he could, the stones were more painful now. Once he was back to his original size the Lory took off.

'Wait,' he called. She paused, swooping around his head while she waited for him to continue. 'Thank you.'

'You're welcome,' she said, and darted off.

Walter made his way carefully through the barrage of stones, not quite able to avoid a few bruises. The media descended on him when he slipped through the doors, wanting to know how he had escaped the monster, but lost interest when he remained silent. With a great deal of relief, but no more information about the exit, Walter headed back into the forest.

What felt like hours later Walter was still walking. He rubbed at his bruised shoulder, which felt worse now than when it had happened and was beginning to stiffen up. The sky looked darker than it had and he wasn't sure if it was nightfall or a thunderstorm. The tang of ozone in the air suggested thunder. He stumbled over a tree root, only just catching himself, and admitted that he was exhausted. Which, given that this was a dream, just wasn't fair. He shook his head and carried on doggedly, refusing to give into tiredness that was, quite literally, all in his head.

The sound of sobbing drifted through the trees and he angled towards it, not sure if he wanted to meet anybody else but still needing information. He missed being big enough to break people's
fingers. The sound led him to a clearing containing a huge black gryphon with a rope around its
neck tied to a stake and a mock turtle, who was the one doing the crying. He had a red mask over
his calf-like face.

'Stop crying,' said Walter. 'Masks shouldn't cry.'

'That's what I've been telling him,' said the gryphon in a German accent.

'I can't help it,' sobbed the mock turtle. 'Nobody needs me now. When I was a real turtle back in
the army…'

'Don't start that or we'll be here all day,' said the gryphon.

'I don't mind,' said Walter. 'My father was in the army.'

The mock turtle looked at him and actually smiled, while the gryphon yawned and buried its head
under its wing. Walter sat down in the clearing, wrapping his arms around his knees. They seemed
friendly enough, at least by Wonderland standards, and he needed the rest.

'When I was in the army our drill sergeant was an old narwhal,' began the mock turtle. 'He had a
nose for drilling. He taught all of us to swim in formation. Turtles are good at that, turtle formation
has been famous since the romans. Although we didn't just have turtles in the army. We had all
sorts of marine life, mostly fish. All fish were allowed to join the army except pike.'

'Why not pike?' asked Walter.

'Only a very old fashioned army would allow use of a pike nowadays,' said the mock turtle.
'Swordfish swear by the old weapons, but they're no use at all against a fish in a tank. Now, aside
from pike, the army accepted all sorts of creatures. Even jellyfish and squids, and both of them are
spineless.'

Walter yawned and missed the next few sentences, something about yellow bellied sliders he
thought.

'There,' said the gryphon from under its wing. 'I told you it was boring.'

'I'm just tired,' said Walter. 'I didn't know you could get tired in dreams.'

'Go to sleep then,' said the mock turtle. 'We'll keep watch for you.'

Walter nodded, they seemed trustworthy and he wasn't sure he could go any further without sleep.
He curled into a tight ball on the forest floor and drifted into unconsciousness. He dreamt that he
was somewhere warm and bright, and someone was calling him. He tried to open his eyes, but
couldn't move at all no matter how he struggled. It was almost a relief to find himself back in
Wonderland, and at least able to sit up. He rubbed at his eyes sleepily.

'Feeling better?' asked the gryphon.

'Yes. Less tired, anyway.' Walter stood up. 'Do either of you know where the exit is?'

The mock turtle and the gryphon exchanged a look which spoke indecipherable volumes.

'In the Queen of Heart's palace,' said the mock turtle. 'But you don't want to go there.'

'I've been told to avoid the Queen of Hearts,' said Walter.

'You should,' replied the gryphon. 'Since the King of Hearts left no one has been safe. You should
stay here, forget about leaving.'

Walter shook his head. He had given up Rorschach to get this far, now he had nothing left worth losing. 'I need to get out of here. Can you tell me the way to the palace?'

They looked at each other again, and the mock turtle looked away refusing to answer. But the gryphon pointed with one huge paw.

'Take care,' it said. 'Try not to be seen by any playing cards.'

'I will,' said Walter. 'Thank you.'

And he set off towards a palace owned by a mad queen. He glanced back to see that the gryphon now had its wing around the mock turtle's shoulders, and the mock turtle was sobbing again.

The forest ended abruptly at another wall, although this one had open archways built into it and served more as a marker than a barrier. Walter stood to one side of the opening, peering cautiously into a garden of box hedges shaped into strange and fantastic creatures. There was no one in sight, playing card or otherwise, so he ventured into the archway.

'I wouldn't do that if I were you,' said a voice from behind him. He looked up to see the Cheshire Cat perched on a branch.

Walter stared back defiantly. 'I'm me,' he said. 'And I'm doing this. Tell me something useful or go away.'

The cat sighed. 'Keep your temper,' it said, and vanished abruptly. This time all of it went at once, as if even its smile couldn't be bothered to linger.

Walter stepped into the garden and followed a winding path between the box hedges, carefully tended grass soft under his feet. The path led him to a rose garden, roses fountaining around him in delicate sprays so white that they almost glowed. He reached up to touch one and the silky petals parted at his touch, spilling sweet scent into the air. As he went further on the roses changed to red, but not natural red. They were gloopy with paint, layers of it turning the delicate petals into something thick and fleshy smelling of chemicals and rot. He tried to wipe the paint off one with his hands, but the petals disintegrated under his fingers leaving his hands stinking and stained. He scrubbed them against his night shirt.

Distracted he only noticed the approaching footsteps in time to slip behind a rose bush and peer out between the thorns. The people going by were Jon, all three of them, but with dark blue marks on their fronts in the form of card faces. The Three of Diamonds, the Three of Spades and the Two of Clubs. The Threes carried a pot of red paint between them, and the Two carried three paintbrushes. Once they had gone past Walter followed them, staying on the flowerbeds with rose bushes between him and them.

They stopped once they reached a part of the garden where the roses were still white. After setting the paint down and sharing out the brushes, they began daubing red carelessly over the white petals. Walter's fists clenched, ragged nails biting into his palms. Why did everything pure and lovely have to be ruined? He edged closer until only a spray of thorns and leaves hid him from the playing cards, the paint pot was barely a foot from him. A playing cards reached up to paint a rose practically over his head, loose white petals spiralled down and paint spattered the ground like blood.

Walter acted before he could think, ducking out to kick the paint pot over. Spilling red across the grass, and then running. He ran back among the rose bushes, meaning to use his size to his
advantage as he ducked under trailing branches spiked with thorns. But playing cards were suddenly converging on him from all around, the whole deck alerted by his action. He slipped past the Four of Hearts, only to run smack into the Six of Spades. He got away by biting the Six's shoulder and managed to tumbled through the Eight of Diamonds' arms. But the Ten of Spades caught him from behind, and, although Walter snarled and scratched like a feral cat, there was nothing he could do to get away.

They tied his hands behind his back and led him through the gardens into the palace. They walked through dusty halls, with furnishings that were rich but dirty, until they came to a stop in the open door of a court room. The jury was of people he had met, even the gryphon and the mock turtle had somehow got here ahead of him. There was the Duchess, Humpty Dumpty, Bill the lizard, Hollis perched on one corner while the butterfly was draped over the other. The Queen of Hearts, huge embroidered dress standing out around her, had her back to him and was watching the Duchess' newt footman read out the charges. The piglet was at his feet, a piece of string around its neck as a leash.

The one on trial was a woman dressed in black leather, but her hat and a sash decorated with hearts showed her to be the Knave of Hearts. She looked almost contemptuously at her jurors, not cowed by the two playing cards holding her arms.

'...And she is thus charged with stealing the products of the Queen's most excellent cooking, to whit, twelve jam tarts,' finished the newt. It looked to the jurors. 'What say you? Guilty?'

The butterfly piped up with 'nay', barely audible in the gigantic audience hall, but the others all said 'aye.' Hollis, said it sadly, wings drooping, the mock turtle whispered it and couldn't meet anyone's eyes afterwards. But they all said it. For a moment there was utter silence.

'OFF WITH HER HEAD,' bellowed the Queen. The Ace of Spades raised his hand, gazing at the Knave with dispassionate eyes. Her head flew from her neck, hitting the lectern with a sickening thwack, while her body folded slowly to the ground.

Walter bit his lip to stifle a gasp, terrified that he would be next if he attracted her attention. But the playing cards were already pushing him into the room. The Queen turned and she had his mother's face, screwing up in hatred at the sight of him. She was bleeding from her mouth, wiping the blood away with a handkerchief leaving stains like badly applied lipstick. Walter froze, unable even to think of running. She just got angrier if he ran.

She screamed the words, spitting blood as she did. 'OFF WITH HIS HEAD!'

The Ace of Spades began to raise his hand but, in a flash of bright feathers and another of crisp brown, Daniel and the Lory entered the court room and dove straight for the faces of the playing cards holding Walter. He wriggled free and ran, arms still tied behind his back. Daniel swooped ahead of him, he was wearing aviator goggles instead of his glasses, and headed down a corridor calling for him to follow.

Walter followed, down corridors and up stairs, until he was panting with exertion. Sometimes he followed Daniel and sometimes the Lory, while the other distracted the playing cards. It was no use, they got closer every moment. And then, like a miracle, there was a door at the end of the corridor. Written on it was one word, 'EXIT'. He sprinted for it, the hands of the playing cards already clutching at his night shirt.

'Come on, buddy. Come on,' called Daniel, swooping around it.

Walter was so close he could almost touch it, but the playing cards had their hands all over him now and were holding his arms and legs down. He didn't have a hand free to reach the door knob.
Daniel and the Lory threw themselves down into the fray, buying him one precious second in which he slipped loose enough to fling his entire body at the door. He fell.

Rorschach woke in Daniel's guest room with the bed clothes wrapped around him so tightly it was a wonder he could breath. Daniel was attempting to untangle him, using slow cautious movements as if he was a wild animal that might bite if startled. Familiar comforting shadows swirled in front of his eyes.

'Come on, buddy,' murmured Daniel, too intent on his task to notice Rorschach was awake.

'Daniel?' he said.

'Rorschach?' Daniel let go of the bed clothes and looked at him in surprise. 'How are you feeling?'

'Thirsty.'

'Uh, sure. Hold on.'

Once he had been untangled and Daniel had fetched him a glass of water, Rorschach cleared what felt like a year's worth of cobwebs from his throat and asked. 'What happened?'

'You were hit on the head and then injected with something,' said Daniel. 'I didn't get there in time to stop it. Sorry.'

'No need. Charged straight into an ambush,' said Rorschach, annoyed with himself now he remembered. He had run straight through the door without even looking, much less waiting for backup.

'So,' said Daniel. 'You were thrashing around a bit at the end there. Weird dreams?'

Rorschach nodded. 'Possibly read too much literature as a child.'

Daniel stared at him. 'Uh, what?'

'Nothing. Am fine now.' He put the glass down and looked up at Daniel. 'Hungry?'

'Sure, I'll cook us both some breakfast,' said Daniel. They went down to the kitchen which, full of warmth and the smell of pancakes, really was a little like a nest.

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