Tick Tock, When Time Stops

by mesmerize

Summary

The White Rabbit's watch stops, and so does all time in Underland.

Notes

This was written as an assignment for a class, the prompt being to write a prequel or sequel to Alice in Wonderland, so I decided to do both. It's set between Through the Looking Glass and Burton's Alice in Wonderland, and attempts to imitate Carroll's style of writing. Enjoy!


Tick. Tock.

Tick. Tock.
The White Rabbit froze in place, the hair on his ears standing on end. He couldn't move nor speak; his eyes were wide, his heart was hammering. No sound came from the pocket watch in his hand. No sound at all.

Slowly, very slowly, he lowered his foot to the ground and lifted the watch to his face. He jumped back five feet. His pocket watch had stopped! No ticking, no tocking, no knock knock knocking! He whimpered, cowering on the ground. He was no longer late nor earlier. He was nowhen at all. Without the time spinning round in circles, there was no on time. There was no time.

The longer he cowered there, the stiller the world became. The air grew stall and he grew more afraid. Fear curled like a hedgehog in his heart. He may have lain there for an hour, a week, a month, a year. He did not know. Time did not exist.

Suddenly, through the stillness, came a loud, joyous shout, followed by a shrill scream. He only moved when he was bowled over by a woman all in white, her snowy hair flying behind her. They rolled together in a swirl of white on white, fear on fear, tumbling through the grass into the river. The rabbit sputtered, his muscles sore from being still for so long. Next to him, the White Queen, for that is who he saw her to be, sputtered, gasping for air.

"Oh, Rabbit!" She cried, hugging him close, nearly drowning him in the water. He allowed her, for she was the White Queen and would not harm any living creature. "Rabbit, my beautiful Rabbit, whatever shall we do?"

He could not answer with his face pressed into her bosom, and so only mumbled a response. "What was that, dear Rabbit?" She pulled him away from her chest, holding him up out of the water. He gasped for breathe, about to respond when the joyous laughter came again and the Red Queen rode up to the river.

"Ah, my dear sister," the Red Queen shouted so the words did not seem sweet at all. "Look at how wet you all! Like a drowned rabbit. I find it very fitting. But not fitting enough. Out you come."

Her soldiers tried to wade into the water after the White Queen, but their paper bodies soaked through and they scrambled back toward the shore. The Rabbit pushed the White Queen toward the other shore, the Queen being so stunned that she could not do it herself. "Your Majesty, your Majesty!" He cried, but she could not look at him, her eyes frozen in fear, fixed on the Red Queen.

"You would not kill me," she spoke in a quiet voice.

"Speak up, dear," the Red Queen cooed, her lips pursed in a heart-shape.

"You would not kill me!" The White Queen shrieked at her, suddenly animated, her limbs flailing in the water, causing the White Rabbit to be immersed again. He did not hear what happened next, nor did he see it, or experience it in any way. When next he breathed air, two of the Red Queen's soldiers had him under the arms are were carrying him away from the river. He did not see the White Queen among them, but the Red Queen was in a foul temper. She snapped at the Knave of Hearts, ordering him to snatch the White Queen and cut off her head.
He did not remember much after that.

Madness reigned Underland, turning the clean cut checker fields into tangled messes, the white and the red flowers turning a horrid brown. Everyone who was mad became madder, and the Mad Hatter was the maddest still. Only those under the care of the White Queen were some parts sane, by Underland standards, and that is tenuous at best. The scraps of the old Underland who were left after the Red Queen's coup gathered often or seldom, no one quite knew, but gather they did. How much time had passed since the Red King's death, the White Rabbit did not know, but he knew that however much more time he would have to spend in the Red Queen's court would be unbearable.

Sitting around the Mad Hatter's tea table sat the White Rabbit, the March Hare, the Dormouse, the White Queen, Bayard the Dog, Tweedledum, Tweedledee, the Caterpillar, the Cheshire Cat, and, of course, the Hatter himself. The Rabbit twitched nervously, eyeing his pocket watch every few moment, though how long a moment it was, he could not fathom. Even after this much or this little time, he could not accept the absence of time.

The Hatter sat at one end of the table, the White Queen at the other. Neither spoke, nor did anyone else dare to. The silence was near unbearable, and the Rabbit could feel it on his shoulders, and he prayed that someone else would break it, else it might squash him. The Hatter stared at a broken teacup, his gaze unwavering, bright green and rather mad. The Queen watched as a butterfly flew past. She snatched it from the air and squeezed it so some of its butter might butter her crumpet.

At last, she spoke. The Rabbit nearly toppled over in relief. "My dear friends," she said airily, picking up her crumpet. She did not continue speaking until she had taken a bite, savored it, and placed it down on her saucer. "My dear friends," she said again, "as you all may know, our land is in quite a state. Such a terrible state, in fact, that all time seems to have stopped moving, and my sister is taking even greater pleasure than ever in chopping off every creature's head. My dear White Rabbit, can you please speak on this matter."

The Rabbit jumped, knocking teacups this way and that. Once he was settled back in his seat, a teacup hanging off one ear, he spoke with a tremble in his voice, "ah, y-yes, your Majesty. The Queen, the Red Queen, she, I suppose, she rather does, does rather, enjoy chopping off as many heads as she can. She very nearly chopped off mine last week, she did."

He sunk back down into his seat, skin rosy under his fur from the tip of his nose to the tops of his ears. The teacup fell off onto the ground, landing with a dull thump.

"She has not changed," the White Queen said with a soft, airy laugh, waving her hand delicately. "What news from the Wilderness, my lovely Tweedle boys?"

Tweedledum and Tweedledee leapt to their feet, both struggling to be the first to bow while the other tried to hinder him. When they had both managed it, and in the process became very wound up in each other, they spoke, first one, then the other, "No news, you Majesty." "No, no news at all. Quiet as a" "Bandersnatch in the middle of summer!" "Fierce as one too, I might warrant." "Fierce as a Jabberwo--!"

"Do not," the Mad Hatter spoke as fiercely as a Bandersnatch in the summer, rising from his seat, his hands splayed on the table, "speak of it." He suddenly started speaking in a very violent gibberish and the White Rabbit cowered in his seat, too afraid to move. The Dormouse jumped up from her seat in a teapot and scurried over the him, stabbing his hand with her little sword. "Hatter!"

He suddenly stopped and slumped down in his chair. "Thank you, Mallymkun."
"Of course, Hatta," the Dormouse said curtly, and scampered to a different teapot, settling herself down quite comfortably. The Rabbit could breathe again.

"I apologize, Tweedledum, -dee," the Hatter continued, nodding to each of them, his voice quieter, nearly inaudible. The Rabbit craned his neck to hear. Tweedledum and Tweedledee settled down in their chairs, glaring at him, but they did not argue. The Rabbit was glad for that. "I believe that what we must do is quite clear," the Hatter leveled the White Queen with a rather serious look that looked quite comical on his face. The Rabbit struggled not to laugh nervously, and settled for winding his pocket watch, though it never did anything anymore. It was comforting.

"Is it, my dear Hatter?" The Queen smiled, though the Rabbit did not know how she could. If he were in her position, he would be much too frightened, and he was very glad that he was not. Being a Queen? He shuddered to think of it.

"Yes, it is," the Hatter sat down without saying another word. Silence stretched again, and the Rabbit twitched, wanting to break it. It took quite a while, or so he thought it might be a while, and he managed to say something, just a squeak, "I found the Oraculum."

The silence that followed his pronouncement was a very different sort of silence. It was the sort of silence that is on the edge of exploding into sound. And explode it did, with everyone shouting "what?!" together. The Rabbit sunk further in his chair, his large feet pushing at the table to sink himself further into the chair. He was nearly a part of it before Bayard pulled him out of it by his coattails.

"What did you say, Nivens?" Bayard asked in his gruff, gravelly voice. It was somehow comforting, even though the Rabbit's hair stood on end since Bayard was a dog.

"I said," he spoke, a little bit stronger now, "that I have found the Oraculum. I found in it the basement of the Red Castle when I was seeking some jewels for the Red Queen."

"Do you have it?" Bayard asked, and the Rabbit looked at him, glad that Bayard wasn't the sort of dog to eat a rabbit. Mice and hares, perhaps, but not rabbits.

He slowly pulled the scroll from his waistcoat and everyone sitting around the table gasped. The March Hare snatched it from his paws, and he tried to protest, but the Hare already had it open and was staring at it upside down. "It's it! It's it! The Orawhosiwhatsit!"

"Calm down, Thackery," the Caterpillar said in his deep, soothing voice. The Rabbit felt his heart rate slowing again. How lovely it was when that happened. "Give it here."

The Hare handed it to him, and the Caterpillar spread the scroll out on the table. "Oh I see... I see..." He murmured that again and again, blowing smoke over the surface of the Oraculum. "Very good, yes..." No one dared interrupt him, and it was many more murmurings and mumblings before he said something useful to the Rabbit. "It does indeed seem as though it is quite clear." He looked up slowly, and his hazy eyes met the Rabbit's bright, beady ones. "Nivens, I believe that you have known for quite some time. Why have you not acted?"

"Time?!" The Rabbit blanched, hopping up on the table. "Time! Well I never. There is no time, Absolem. Time has stopped! I have not known for quite some time since there is no time!"

"Hm..." The Caterpillar gave him a look that made him quite uncomfortable, but he did not look away. "Is there not? The Oraculum reads of time."

"Yes, but-- it is not time here," the Rabbit scoffed, thumping the table with a large foot,
causing the spoons to jangle.

"No, not here, no..." the Caterpillar shook his head, then blew a smoke ring at the Rabbit which burst around his face, making him cough. "But there is time there. There is not here."

"Perhaps," the White Queen said in her quiet voice that pierced through their banter, popping it like so many balloons. "You should tell us about there, Absolem."

"Mhm... There, your Majesty, is a land very different from our own. But it is also the land where Underland is created. Once, it was created here, but that was before time stopped. The Red Queen killed our dreamer, but we were fortunate to have another." He took a long drag of smoke, one that stretched so long that the Rabbit thought he might burst.

The Rabbit could not wait any longer, "what? What is the dreamer?"

The Cheshire Cat laughed, his head suddenly in front of the Rabbit, who jerked back with a squawk. "It is not a what, Rabbit. It is a who! Who indeed, one might ask?" The Cat laughed, his head lolling to the side, then it was upside down, then right side up again and the Rabbit felt very woozy.

"Who, then?" The Rabbit took the bait, huffing at him.

"Alice, of course!" Everyone's attention was back on the conversation at the mention of that name.

"Not Queen Alice!" The White Queen proclaimed, her teacup dropping from her hand with a crash which no one took notice of.

"Why, yes! Exactly that Alice!" The Cat laughed, his grin stretching wider.

"Queen Alice is the dreamer..." The Hatter muttered to himself, and the Rabbit looked at him, but the Hatter did not go on.

"That's why all the changes are going on! It's all her fault!" The Dormouse raised her sword, but Bayard shook his head. "It is not. It is the Red Queen's fault."

"Quite," the Caterpillar sighed, smoke bowling the Dormouse right back into her teapot. "It is Alice's fault that we are still here, and it is the Red Queen's fault that we are all rather mad."

"Mad?!" The March Hare shouted, "we are not mad! If anyone's mad it sure isn't me!" and he proceeded to put a teacup on his head, flattening out his ears.

The group continued to debate faults and Alices and Queens until the Rabbit's head hurt and he yelled, "so what are we going to do?!

Silence fell again, and all eyes were on him. He was tempted to try sinking into his chair again, but he resisted, instead standing tall. "What do we do now? We have the Oraculum, we know when and what is going to happen, even if we do not know quite when, since we don't have a when anymore. What does it matter that Alice is the dreamer if she is not here?"

"It matters," the Caterpillar said in a puff of smoke, "time stopped at the Horovendoush Day, and it will not begin again until the Griblig Day. We will all be quite mad until the Frabjous Day."

"What happens on those days?" The Rabbit said patiently, though his foot was thumping in the rhythm of a clock.
"The Horovendoush Day was the day the Red Queen murdered the Red King," the Hatter said quietly. The Rabbit did not look at him, afraid of his eyes.

"Indeed," the Caterpillar nodded to him, "the Griblig Day," he pointed to a spot on the Oraculum with his pipe, "is the day when the Queen Alice returns to Underland, and with her here, time will begin again."

He was about to go on when the Rabbit interrupted him, "then we must find her!"

"Are you volunteering?" The White Queen said with a smile. The Rabbit swallowed, staring at her for a hundred ticks of his foot.

"Yes," he said definitively, standing tall and proud on the table. "I am. I shall find Alice, just as I did the first time."

"I think she found you, that time," the Cat laughed, slinking around the Rabbit, who shivered.

"Well-- yes, but I still know better how to find her than anyone else!" His voice went higher and higher as he spoke. The Cat pat him on the nose before he retreated to his seat. "I will find her."

"Oh, I believe you!" The White Queen cooed, holding her hands to her chest. "Find my dear sister, the Queen Alice, and bring her to us, dear Nivens."

"Yes! Yes I shall. I shall find the Queen Alice and bring time back to Underland!"

With that he leapt off the table, scampering off into the burnt, twisted forest. All of this happened because the Red Queen killed the Red King, and Alice took over as dreamer. Whether it was the Queen Alice's doing or the Red Queen's, he did not care. All that mattered in his little, quick beating heart, was to find the tick tock of the world again.

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