“I’m not strange, weird, off, nor crazy, my reality is just different from yours.” -- Cheshire Cat

If someone told you that Alice in Wonderland was a true story, you would probably laugh. Or maybe you would just call them crazy and run like hell. When someone told me that the story was true, I wanted to do exactly that. But it’s hard to tell someone they aren’t real when you’re staring them in the face. Particularly when that someone is the Cheshire Cat.

*ON HIATUS

Notes

"In a Wonderland they lie,
Dreaming as the days go by,
Dreaming as the summers die:
Ever drifting down the stream --
Lingering in the golden dream --
Life, what is it but a dream?"

"A Boat Beneath a Sunny Sky" by Lewis Carroll
This fic will be pretty dark. But have no fear, there will be plenty of fluff along the way. I have drawn inspiration from many versions of the 'Alice' story, but I will mostly be referencing the original tale by Lewis Carroll.

My Tumblr come talk to me and we can cry about how jeanmarco has ruined us together
When I was eleven, my father took me to visit my mother in the hospital for the last time. He pulled me out of school because my mother was having a 'good day' and we sat in the old truck together in silence until we arrived at Sina Hospital, where he held an umbrella up for me as we walked into the towering building.

“Mrs. Liddell is ready to see you now.” I don’t remember what the nurse’s face looked like anymore, but I remember the rotting feeling in the pit of my stomach, and I remember confusion. What did she mean, ‘ready?’ My mother was nuts; there was no ‘ready’ for her.

I remember taking a deep breath, and bracing myself, because the tide that was my mother’s mood could be gentle, or it could be overwhelming, and I could never count on my father’s claims of how great my mom’s day was going. He squeezed my shoulder and gave me a little nudge through door number 54017.

It was sanitary, and white, and cold, and everything my mother wasn’t. She shouldn’t have been here, but Liddell’s can rarely avoid the loony bin for very long.

“Mom?” I stepped up to the bed, where my mother lay, a lazy grin on her face. The room smelled of chemicals and sweat and death.

“Hello, darling. Come sit with me. How have you been?” She patted the bed, fluttering her hands like she always did when she was drugged out.

“Good. I’ve been good, mom.” I kept my voice calm and cautious as I came to perch on the side of her bed. I had been trained, over the years, in the ways of dealing with my mother, and I was an expert at reacting to her by now. “What about you? Dad says you’re having a good day?”

My father left the room quietly despite the nervous looks I sent his way, giving my mother and I some precious time alone. The door swung slowly shut behind him, leaving us in the darkness and silence my mother loved so much, and I chewed my lip, fighting the nerves I always felt in the dark.

“Marco.” The moment he was gone, her grin faded; replaced by something serious and present and desperate. “Marco, honey, you need to listen to me. Your father was right; today is a good day. It’s a clear day. I need to tell you something. I’m not…I’m not doing very well, sweetheart. I need to tell you something, before I get any worse. When the madness passes to you, and it will, you need to be strong. You won’t want to be, but you must. You must pass the test. You must. It will be difficult, but it is the only hope you will have.”
“What do you mean, Mom? What test? Have you had your meds today?” My heart thudded at her insinuation that I would inherit her madness, and I tasted blood on my lip.

“Don’t mock me. I’m crazy, not a child.” She snapped, and I winced.

“Sorry.” I looked away from her, and she brought her hand up to touch my cheek, her mood changing quick as a flash to something gentle and kind and almost comforting.

“You got your freckles from my side,” She said fondly, brushing them with the tips of her fingers. I half expected that hand to wind back and strike me, even though that had only happened twice.

I leaned into her touch, sighing a bit. “Mom. What test?”

She got a faraway look in her eyes, like she was speaking to someone else, from somewhere else. “I love you, Marco. You have to remember to take your happy moments when you can get them. Life is all about the moments. Promise you’ll be strong for me.”

“I love you too, mom. I’m not going anywhere. I’ll try.”

“Try what?” She drew her hand away from my face, and started fanning her hands out, grasping for something I couldn’t see. My heart dropped to my stomach. I knew what was happening; had seen it more times than I could count. But I still tried to reach her every time.

“Mom?” I tried to keep my voice calm for her sake.

“The sea was wet as wet could be, The sands were dry as dry. You could not see a cloud, because No cloud was in the sky: No birds were flying overhead—There were no birds to fly.” She almost sang the words, and her fingers danced in the air in time with the rhythm of her poem, almost like she was playing her cello again.

“Um. Mom? Is there anything I can do for you? D-do you need anything? Can I get you some water?” I started to stand up, but her hand darted forward and took my arm in a vice-like grip.

“There were so many doors! I didn’t know—how could I know? It wasn’t my fault!” Tears spilled down her cheeks, and she seemed to plead with me, though I knew she couldn’t see me anymore.

I tried to pull at her grip, but she wouldn’t let go. “D-dad?” I called, my voice weak; too weak for anyone to hear through the darkness.

“Edith?” She blinked. ”Edith, where’s mother? Can you ask her to put on some tea? The hatter wants some and he keeps pestering me about it. It’s always easier to give him what he wants.”

“Mother? I’m not Edith. Mom, it’s me. It’s Marco, your s-son? Remember?” tears were collecting in my eyes too, despite my hardest efforts.

“Remember!” She let out a cackle, digging her nails into my arm.

“Dad!” I shouted, and I heard footsteps approaching from outside the door.

I pulled away until I was standing at her side, but still she wouldn’t let me go.

“Do you have any idea why a raven is like a writing desk?” She whispered, and she
sounded so broken, I broke with her.

My father burst in through the door with a nurse, and they pried her fingers from my arm. Then he took me by the shoulders and led me out of the mental hospital as quickly as possible. It wasn’t fast enough to stop me from hearing my mother’s screaming sobs as they echoed behind me.

I never saw my mother again. My father kept me away; sheltered me from her madness. And a year later, when I was twelve, my mother passed away. I knew she was gone before my father came back from the hospital carrying her favorite stuffed rabbit and rubbing at red-rimmed eyes. I knew because I began to suffer fever dreams that night; dreams of horrible crimes that were never clear but plagued me with guilt. Often they were just emotions that made me feel raw on the inside; I was filled with guilt over things I had never done or seen but knew in my bones that I was blamed for. That was just the beginning.

... My name is Marco Bodt, and I may be insane delusional hysterical a bit mad.

I used to be perfectly sane! I was just a perfectly normal teenager, doing perfectly normal teenage things. Alone alone I was always alone I just didn’t know it and then I turned eighteen.

Let me just tell you right now; being sucked into a crazy delusion is not how I planned on spending my eighteenth birthday. Nothing ever goes as planned.

But there I was. It was the first time I had ever suffered an actual ‘flight of fantasy’ as my mother liked to call them, rather than just a dream. They are so much more than that.

Basically, one minute I was standing in my living room, saying goodbye to my friends acquaintances people who tolerated me, and the next, I was standing in Wonderland.

Honest to God, straight-out-of-a-novel Wonderland.

It was only for a second, only long enough for me to see a large cat with a grin sitting atop a mushroom, but it was enough. Enough for me to know.

I had the crazy too. My mother had warned me I should have known.

It wasn’t a complete shock. Alice Liddell herself may have outgrown her madness, but as it turns out, her descendants were not so lucky.

That’s right. I am an unlucky descendant of the Alice Liddell, as in the one who inspired Lewis Carroll’s books. Like, Alice in Wonderland Alice Liddell.

And it is terrifying horrible painful sucks.

The moment I came out of the delusion, I turned to my dad, and he saw the look in my eyes and he knew. I wasn’t the first in the family to suffer from madness, after all. My heart was broken.

It has happened to our family too often to be anything but generational. It can affect anyone and we never know when it will strike.

And it scared the hell out of me that I would be facing the insanity too, because I had watched my mother be placed in a mental hospital; watched her shrivel away as the delusions
grew worse and worse until finally she passed away and left me alone.

I didn't want to end up like my mother. All I wanted out of life was to be normal, and have normal friends, and for no one to ever make the connection that I was related to “The” Alice. To fall in love and be happy.

But try as I might, I couldn't escape blood. My first glimpse into the future was the night my mother died, when I suffered those terrible, terrible dreams. I should have known then.

The moment the first real, honest-to-God delusion struck, things changed forever. Socially, of course. My father immediately pulled me from school, and had me finish my senior year online. I only had a few months left anyway.

He also had me begin to try what had seemed to work for my mother in the beginning lies lies just prolonging the inevitable. I had to meditate every morning, and I trained physically for several hours a day to stay fit, and I ate only healthy food. Basically, my life became all about staying healthy; staying sane. I dwelled in soothing darkness, just like my mother had.

The biggest changes took place internally, and they were changes I never told anyone about. The day the crazy hit me, I came to a conclusion that I had been considering since I first understood that the madness was a family trait. I was unworthy of love, and if anyone ever seemed to grow close to me, or if I was beginning to grow attached to someone, I would push them away.

No one deserved to watch their loved one fade away into insanity until death parted them the way I had my father had.

So, having given up on any real relationships with anyone excepting my father (and him only because it could not be avoided) I carried on. And for a while, it seemed to work just more delusions. Until earlier this morning.

I hadn't been able to sleep all night, which wasn't too uncommon these days, and in the early morning just before sunrise, I went rigid on my bed and fell into a delusion, with no control or knowledge of my body whatsoever. But I had seen my mother when she was pulled into the madness, so I had a vague idea of how I was probably twitching and clenching my fists, with my eyes rolling back in my head. Basically I probably looked as crazy as I felt.

When I opened my eyes I was standing in a beautiful valley, with large mountains capped in snow in the distance, and trees in full bloom of every color imaginable, and a few unimaginable.

There was also a very large cat sitting atop a mushroom directly in front of me and purring loud enough to make me squirm. He was grey, with black tattoo-like markings all over his body, and his eyes nearly glowed yellow, though his pupils were slitted like any normal cat. The oddest part about him (aside from his being nearly my height when sitting) was his grin. It spread across his whole face, and he had teeth like any human, though his mouth was spotted in blood.

He was unmistakable.

“You must be the Cheshire Cat.” I stated, still a little shocked over my sudden transportation into what could only be Wonderland.

The cat arched an eyebrow, and swished his tail. I would think he was irritated, if not for his grin. Then again, perhaps his grin was really a grimace. “Just ‘Ches’ or ‘Cat’ if you please.
And you must be Alice. You look different this time.”

I frowned at him. “No, I don’t think so. My name is Marco Bodt, and I’m a man. I’m not Alice.”

The Cat tutted, and vanished, appearing on my other side and beginning to walk away. I followed him, having nowhere else to go and nothing else to do until I came out of the attack.

“You may claim what you like, but blood doesn’t lie. Only Alice’s blood may enter this Valley. If anyone else tried, they would be cooked, so to speak.”

“Then how are you here?”

“I am the exception that proves the rule. Now, follow quickly. There is much to show you.” He vanished into smoke, and I ran ahead, trying to keep him in sight as he would appear and disappear lazily through the trees.

Eventually we reached a large house. It was painted completely white, and it stood out from the dark forest in a way that made sense, if only to me. Though I suppose I was the only one to see it.

The white front door creaked open as we approached it, and the cat led me inside. But while I expected something familiar, like the layout of my own home or something similar, I was greeted by a single, small, room.

It should have been entirely unremarkable. In a perfect world it would have been just a normal room, with nice painted walls and comfortable furniture. It should have been a place of calm; someplace soothing for my mind, but it was not. In fact the sight of it nearly made me start to hyperventilate, because the entire room, from floor to ceiling and walls was covered in doors. Big, small, ornate, plain, wooden, metal. They were everywhere, in every color, and I lost all sense of up and down.

“Ches? What...what are we doing here?”

“The Time has come,” The Cat purred, “To talk of many things: of shoes—and ships—and sealing wax—of cabbages and kings. Do you remember, Alice?”

As he spoke the door creaked shut behind me, and when I ran to open it, it was locked. I tried the doors around me, even stooping to pull and push at the ones on the floor. Locked. All locked. And I was beginning to panic.

“Cat.” I turned again, pressing my back to the wall. “What’s going on? I’m not Alice.”

“Curiouser and Curiouser. You know, I think you believed that this morning. Now, I’m not so sure. Where is your muchness? Have you lost it, or was it ever there to begin with? We shall see...perhaps you have changed...Alice.” The cat vanished again, only to appear behind me.

“Alice.” A harsh whispering filled the space around me; there was no escaping it as it weighed me down and beat at my mind.

“Look at what you’ve done, Alice.” I recognized the voice as my mother’s, and it drew a choked sob from me. I hadn’t heard her voice in so long, and I didn’t remember ever having heard it so angry.

“Remember Alice.” A different voice spoke this time; one I didn’t recognize that sent chills running through me.
“Remember.”

“Alice.”

“Alice.”

“Alice.”

“Alice.”

“Alice.” Each voice was different, and they all held so much anger and fear that ripped and tore at my insides like a disease.

I pressed my hands into my ears and sank to the ground; the room was spinning around me and I had no way to ground myself, because up was down and down was sideways and there were just doors everywhere. The cat continued to vanish and reappear in a cloud of golden smoke, and I could not stop him, or call out, for fear of screaming.

“Alice.”

“Stop it, Alice.”

It was no wonder my mother had gone crazy, really. After seeing this, I wondered if I was sane; if I had ever been sane.

“Make amends, Alice.”

“Alice.”

“Alice.”

“Alice.”

“ALICE.”

“ENOUGH!” I roared, breaking through the tide of my mind to rise and stand on shaking legs. “I AM NOT ALICE. I AM NOT MY MOTHER! I WON’T GO MAD LIKE SHE DID! I WILL NOT ALLOW YOU TO BREAK ME.”

The whispering stopped as suddenly as it had started. The cat appeared before me again, licking his paw. He yawned, and flicked his glowing eyes up to meet mine.

“Interesting.”

I heaved a sigh and collapsed back against the door behind me, holding a fist to my mouth to press back the tears that threatened to overwhelm me. Apparently the cat was done tormenting me for now.

“What?” I choked out. “What is so ‘interesting?’”

“You’re the first one to share her eyes. Strange, when one considers.”

“What are you talking about?”

Before the cat could answer, his presence began to thicken and turn to smoke. The room with doors followed, until I was surrounded by fog, and all I could still see was the swishing of his tail.
“Until next time, Marco-Who-Isn’t-Alice.”

I sat up in my bed, gasping for air. Early morning light filtered in through my window, illuminating the dust flecks in the air and permeating the room with a false sense of calm.

Trembling, I stumbled into my bathroom and looked long and hard in the mirror. I was covered in sweat, and I was deathly pale. I looked the way my mother did when she died.

I looked like my mother. I had the same crazed gleam in my eyes that I had seen in her after she came out of her ravings.

The sight was enough to throw me over the edge. I crumpled to the floor of the bathroom and, grasping the counter, dissolved into broken, harsh cries.

“I’m so sorry, Mom.” I moaned, gagging on my sobs. “I know I promised you I wouldn’t let them get to me; I promised I’d be normal. But I can’t do it. I’m not strong enough. I’ve failed you.

When I had finally pulled myself together, I put on a coat and headed out the door, leaving a short note for my dad in case he got home before I did. My mother might have found the darkness comforting, but I was suffocating, and I needed to get out of there.

I arrived at our local coffee shop in only a few minutes, and ordered the strongest, hottest thing on the menu, not bothering to add anything to it. While I was waiting for my coffee, I took stock of my mind. I needed to get a hold of myself. Delay the crazy as long as possible.

First I focused my breathing. It wasn’t that difficult; I’d been practicing since my mother died and I learned that hysteria is not a myth or a wives’ tale.

“Marco!” The barista handed me my drink, and I turned to leave.

As I did so, I bumped into someone so hard I nearly dropped my coffee, and they did drop theirs.

“Shit,” They muttered, before lifting their gaze to meet mine, and they stopped. Their eyes widened almost comically for a split second, before they licked their lips and smoothed their expression down to one of calm boredom. Do they know me?

“Sorry,” I said tiredly, before turning to grab some napkins and crouching down to wipe up the spill I had made. Yet another reason this day was going to suck.

“No! No, it’s ok! My fault!” The stranger leaned down, making little frantic motions with his hands to get me to stop, and when that had no effect, he physically grabbed my hands and pulled me up to standing.

My face instantly heated up to roughly one thousand degrees, and I jerked my hands away, covering my actions by turning to throw away the wet napkins.

Don’t touch me I’m tainted a barista was already coming over with a mop, and she kindly motioned us out of the way.
“Seriously though, it wasn’t your fault.” The stranger sounded nice enough, but there was an edge to his voice that gave me the feeling he wasn’t always this way.

“Yeah…ok.” I figured I had avoided his gaze for as long as socially possible, and I looked up to meet it again.

He was shorter than me, though only by an inch, if that. He had pierced ears, and two-tone hair that would have looked awful on anyone else, and I could see the tips of what looked like a tattoo peeking out as it curved around from the back of his neck.

He was gorgeous. And he was looking at me. I needed to escape.

“The name’s Jean Kirschtein.” He extended his hand, leaving me no choice but to take it. Please don’t let my hand be sweaty.

After standing for a moment in awkward silence, I realized that he wanted to know my name as well.

“Oh. Uh, Marco. Marco Bodt.”

“Well. It’s nice to meet you, Marco Bodt.”

“Yeah. Same.” I chewed on my lip a bit, but despite my nerves and shyness around other people, I couldn’t look away from this strange, outgoing, angry looking boy.

He met my gaze, and his golden eyes appeared to see right through my mask of normality and down to what was underneath. I wasn’t sure if I was pleased about this or not.

He checked his watch. “I should probably go. See you later.”

He headed for the door, but stopped with his hand on the handle and turned back to face me again. “Hey, Marco?”

“Y-yeah?”

“It’s going to be alright.” He spoke warmly, and with a familiarity that should have made me uncomfortable, but didn’t. Then he left, letting in a burst of cold air as he went. It wouldn’t occur to me until later how strange it was that he didn’t get a new coffee.

I blinked. How did he know? Was I that obviously shaken? Or did he know something else? I hurried home before my coffee grew cold, but my walk wasn’t so nice this time. I couldn’t shake the feeling that someone—or something—was looking at me following me.

The shadows stretched out from the trees and buildings and almost seemed to reach for me with spidery fingers. I’m going mad.

I slammed the door shut behind me and leaned against it when I reached the house, trying to get a hold of my breathing.

The boy had confused me, but he had also given me hope. I thought that maybe I’d be stronger this time. Maybe when the Cheshire Cat called me, I’d be strong enough to resist him. Maybe I could have a life. I was afraid I was wrong.

. . .

Jean waited by the door until he was summoned. He entered a little hesitantly, because
even after a year with the Corp the Captain still scared the shit out of him.

“What is it? I thought this was supposed to be your day off?” Levi didn’t even look up from his stack of paperwork.

“Yeah…it was.” Jean’s tone made Levi look up.

“Well, what is it?”

“Do you remember that woman we kept a watch on a few years ago?”

“Charlotte Liddell? Yeah, I do. But you weren’t even with us then. Why bring her up?”

“We all had to look at her file, if you remember correctly. She was a shining example of what happens when we fail. But you remember how there was some debate about whether or not she carried on the line?”

“Yees… get on with it. I have work to do and I don’t have time to listen to you blunder on pointlessly.”

“I…I found her son. I’m sure of it. And I think he’s one of them.”

Chapter End Notes

props if you understood the room number
"When the path is problematical, consider a leap of faith. Ride the wind."--Cheshire Cat, 'Alice: The Madness Returns'

Song for the chap: Feather on the Clyde

See the end of the chapter for more notes

“Marco? I’m home!"

Lifting my head from the keyboard and rubbing at my face, I stared at the glowing face of my clock. I had fallen asleep at the computer again. Pathetic. “Hey Dad! How was work?”

I stood, stretching the kinks out of my neck, and came into the kitchen, where my father was putting away groceries. It looked like he had actually purchased some fresh vegetables, instead of the frozen stuff we usually had.

“It was pretty good. New client—can’t talk about it.” Ah yes, my father the lawyer, always ready to keep a secret.

“Right; like always.” I leaned on the counter, folding my freckled arms over it.

“What about you? Do anything interesting?” He drew out the word ‘interesting,’ like he expected me to tell him I had been out partying or doing drugs or something.

“Nope. Just worked online homework for a bit; went out for coffee this morning.”

“Went out?” As in with someone? A girl?” My dad pushed his glasses up the bride of his nose and filled a pot with water; pasta for dinner again.

“Nope. I went alone. I ran into someone while I was there though—I think I knew them from somewhere…maybe school? They seemed to recognize me…”

“Was it a girl?” He waggled his eyebrows at me, and I rolled my eyes.

“No! God, Dad, leave it alone, ok?” No one would ever want me... I rested my chin on my arms, remembering how Jean had looked at me. Like an equal; not as someone whose mother was dead in a hospital, or who was suffering from the same insanity himself. He had met my gaze like a human being, even going so far as to offer words of comfort; God knows why I certainly didn’t.

“Alright, alright. I just want you to be happy, that’s all. So…it was a boy?” He poured some noodles into the pot, and I winced. He had forgotten to let the water come to a boil first again.

“No! And I am happy, right here with you.” Liar.

To his credit, my father didn’t buy that one. “Give me a break, Marco. Your mother wouldn’t want you to be alone forever like this. She tried to protect you so you could have a life.”
Please. As if he was doing any better. I could see the circles under his eyes, and the way he always looked dazed when he would stumble across one of her belongings somewhere. I could see the way he hadn’t gone on a date in the seven years since she had passed away. He was still just as broken as I was.

When the noodles were ‘cooked’ we sat down at the table together and continued to make awkward small talk. Somehow we had managed to keep up this tradition, when all the others had flown out the window. I scarfed down my chewy pasta and told my dad about how great my life was, and then we watched some spy movie until nine, when my dad went to sleep and I went to pretend to sleep. The night was never comforting.

Once I was in my pajamas and under the covers, I stared at the dark ceiling above me, tracing pictures in the popcorn texture. I’d had a feeling all day that this wasn’t over. The Cat wasn’t done with me yet, and I knew when I closed my eyes I would be pulled back into that room; back into madness. Some part of me just wanted to succumb; to let myself drift into the pull of the voices in that room and fall into Alice, like my mother. But I couldn’t. Despite everything, I wanted to know more. I hoped curiosity wouldn’t kill me. I wanted to know why my family was so insane; I wanted to know if that insanity could be stopped, and if it couldn’t…well, I wanted to know that too. Plus, Cat seemed to think I was special.

I sighed, squeezing my eyes shut, and not a moment later I was standing in the room of doors. I found it interesting that this time I hadn’t appeared in the Valley, but instead I had materialized directly in the room. Or perhaps the room had materialized in my mind? I wasn’t sure, and I supposed it didn’t matter I was crazy either way.

“Hello Cat,” I whispered, knowing he was there, though I could not see him.

The room was almost the same as it had been before; the doors were all there, and I still wanted to rip my hair out, but there was one noticeable difference. In the center of the room, a tabletop floated. There were no legs attached to it, nothing to support it, but that didn’t really surprise me somehow. Its surface was reflective as a mirror, so I could see the doors above it when I stared at it.

Two items rested on its smooth surface; a purple flask about the size of my palm, and a small pink cake. The flask had the words ‘Drink Me’ scrawled intricately onto its surface, and the cake had ‘Eat Me’ spelled out in frosting. It was just like the stories, and I knew exactly what to do with them. The problem lay in the fact that I had no idea which door to go through. Exactly what will it do to me?

“What are you thinking, Alice?” The Cat’s voice brushed my ear, and I slapped at it, jumping a mile in the air.

“I’m not Alice,” I scowled, staring at the tabletop. “I’m just thinking about what I should do. I’m not about to just eat or drink that stuff when I don’t know which door to go through. Exactly what will it do to me?”

The cat licked its teeth, where a few spots of blood dripped disgustingly from its gums. “A strange question. Though I suppose any question is strange when none have been asked before. You could try partaking in either, and I think you know what they will do to you. You have not actually identified the real problem yet, though. I’m disappointed.”

I licked my lips, staring around the room, before it struck me, and I flushed in shame. “I… I suppose I’ll be needing a key, won’t I?”
The cat only swished its tale in reply, before vanishing and appearing with its face a mere two inches from mine.

I stumbled backward, throwing my hands up in a meager excuse for self-defense, but the cat only chuckled and stretched back on his legs.

“If I wanted to harm you, you would be dead, Alice. You should know this by now. Now, to business. You have passed the test, somehow, amazingly. Congratulations. Or perhaps good luck.”


The Cat yawned widely, showing all of his teeth. “Please, Alice. Not all tests are written, or even spoken. I tested your strength of will, as I was instructed to do so many years ago. And you have passed. Your mother thought you would. It was one of the few things she was still sure of, at the end.”

I swallowed hard, and immediately began to chew my lip. I didn’t like that the Cat seemed to know my mother almost better than I had. My mind rationalized it; the Cat was part of my psyche, so of course he would know. It was part of the curse. It shouldn’t have worried me. But it did. It did and I wanted to cry because the only parts of my mother that I had left were in the broken fragments of my battered mind.

“Alright. So I passed this ‘test.’ What now? How do I get out of here? Where is the key? Why am I here in the first place?”

“Too many questions now. But at least they are correct. First thing’s first. The key.” Ches flicked his tail, and I felt a weight on my chest that hadn’t been there before.

When I looked down to see what it was, I saw what looked like a fang about the size of my palm with carvings etched into it hanging from a string around my neck. On closer inspection I found that the two designs etched into it were just mirrors of each other; one was the symbol for spades in a card game, and the other was the same symbol, only upside down.

“This is a key?” I asked suspiciously, blinking up at the Cat.

“What else would it be?”

“Well, it doesn’t look like a key. It looks like a tooth.”

“Why couldn’t it be both?” The Cat prowled around me, choosing for once not to vanish and instead to never break my stare. I wasn’t sure which was worse.

“I…I don’t know. I suppose it could be.”

The Cat sat back on his hind legs and inspected his paws. “Your ignorance is beginning to aggravate me. The key is made of the left upper fang of the Jabberwocky. It was stolen from the beast when your ancestor Alice slayed it.’

“You make it sound almost real.” My voice was soft; almost wistful, and I couldn’t help but imagine a little how glorious it would be if this Wonderland was real, and how wonderful it would be if I wasn’t in fact mad as the proverbial hatter.

“Well?” The Cat flicked his ears in annoyance and curled his tail. “Are you going to try it, or are we just going to sit here while you dream the day away? Time works differently once you actually arrive in Wonderland, but for now you are just sitting in your room. Probably
“What do you mean, once I’m actually there? Where are we now?”

The Cat sighed and turned away from me, scratching his claws on the ancient doors and probably regretting his decision to let me pass his test. “We are still in your mind, you mushroom.”

He hopped up on the table next to the potion and cake, and I stepped back, wetting my upper lip.

“Did you just call me a mushroom?” I asked, caught somewhere between laughter and confusion.

“Are you going to use your damned key or not? I do have other things to do, despite appearances.”

“You’re mad.” I groaned, pushing my bangs out of my face, only for them to fall back again.

“Only half.” His grin widened, and he faded out until only his grin remained. “Open the door, and do it fast. If you are the correct Alice, you should find it quickly enough. If not, then perhaps I have chosen incorrectly, and you shouldn’t be allowed to see it anyway.”

“Now now, there’s no need to get angry.”

“Anger is subjective. Figure it out, Alice. You don’t have long.” His grin faded, and I was left alone with the doors.

“I’m not Alice,” I whispered, before holding out the key again. It sure looked like a normal fang, but if the Cat told me it was a key, then it was a key, and that was that. I wasn’t sure why I trusted him not to lie to me, but I did. I didn’t trust him beyond that, though.

I looked around the room, trying to guess what door fit the idea of Wonderland. I wasn’t sure just how much time I had, but it couldn’t be very much if the Cat thought to warn me about it. I wondered what would happen to me once I ran out of time, but had no time to waste on that fear.

Some of the doors looked like they belonged to ancient castles, while others could have swung open to reveal the inside of a wooden wardrobe. Some were small enough to belong to a dollhouse and others big enough for a giant, but none of them especially stuck out as something belonging to Wonderland. I stared at the key again, and traced the Spades sign, wondering what it could mean.

Then it hit me. The Spades! I began to inspect the room once more, searching each and every door for one that bore the Spade mark. I remembered something about Alice going through a small door, and so I searched for that until…

“Got it! I found it, Cat!” I held up the key in triumph, and turned to the table, ready to grow smaller.

“Yes, very good.” The Cat purred into my ear, but it didn’t frighten me quite so much this time.

“What, no second guessing me? No trying to lead me the other way?”

“I see no reason to push the point, so to speak. Well, what are you going to do now?”
“I suppose I’d better drink the potion and go through the door. No sense in staying here any longer.”

“Quite.”

“Which reminds me…Cat, will there be something to make me large again on the other side?”

The Cat purred again, as he watched me walk up to the table and pick up the flask that read ‘Drink Me.’ “Size is a matter of perspective. It is only relevant when compared with the setting. I think you’ll find that no matter which door you go through, Wonderland will adjust to you…or rather, you will adjust to it. For Wonderland bends for nothing and no one. It’s best if you remember that, through your travels.”

I nodded, and took the potion with me over to the door. I was grateful that the key hung around my neck, as it would be one less thing to carry with me. When I reached the door, I crouched down, uncapped the potion, and downed it in one big gulp. It tasted of raspberries and mint, which was quite unexpected, and the moment I had swallowed it down I felt myself begin to change.

It started with a fuzzy tingling in my head, and spread until my whole body felt like it had been in one position for too long and was waking up. I saw the room grow larger, though I didn’t feel much of a change in my own body, until the door was just the right size to walk through. I turned to the Cat, and set the flask down on the doors at my feet. As it touched the floor, it vanished, only to reappear on the table so far above me.

“Well, I suppose I will see you on the other side, then,” I said, saluting him.

“Yes. A word of caution; once you leave this room you will not be able to return unless someone locks you out of Wonderland, which is impossible and a half but achievable by a little. You will also leave the comfort and safety of your mind. Things are about to get as real as they can be. I hope you are ready, and as strong as your mother said you were. When you wish to come here next, you must use the fang. Good luck.” The Cat vanished as he spoke, until his last words sounded from emptiness.

I wasn’t sure what he meant by ‘real,’ since none of this actually existed, and I was left with more questions than answers by his presence, though that was to be expected.

“Well, I suppose I will see you on the other side, then,” I said, saluting him.

“Yes. A word of caution; once you leave this room you will not be able to return unless someone locks you out of Wonderland, which is impossible and a half but achievable by a little. You will also leave the comfort and safety of your mind. Things are about to get as real as they can be. I hope you are ready, and as strong as your mother said you were. When you wish to come here next, you must use the fang. Good luck.” The Cat vanished as he spoke, until his last words sounded from emptiness.

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“Here goes nothing,” I muttered, pulling out my bone key and sticking the sharp end into the key hole of the small door.

I didn’t need to turn it, which made sense since the fang had no ridges and would have been difficult to force a lock with. Instead, the moment the fang touched the handle, the lock clicked.

I reached out to open it, dreading a little what would be on the other side. Would I be cast further into madness? Would my delusions only grow worse? Maybe I should just stay in my little room. As the door swung open, a ringing filled my ears, and as I pushed forward I was met by light too bright to see through, until—

“Marco!” My father’s voice brought me out of it, and I sat up, sucking in air as quickly as possible. He held my arms to my side, which meant that my shakes had been worse. Usually he didn’t need to restrain me like an animal.

“I-I’m sorry!” I gasped, still shaking a little.
He let go of me, allowing me to wrap my arms around my knees and lean back into his waiting arms.

“It’s alright. Sh, sh, you’re awake now. It’s ok. I’m here.” He rubbed soothing circles on my back, and I inhaled his comforting ‘Dad’ smell, not allowing myself to cry. I would not cry.

“It was different this time, Dad. I think something’s changing.” I leaned away from him until I could meet his tired, wrinkled brown eyes.

“Different how? Should I be worried? Do we need to go in? Maybe some medication…” He trailed off, knowing how aware I was that once we went in to the hospital, everything would change. My life would be over. My life would begin to spiral out of control. The hospital was the beginning of the end, and I wasn’t ready to face it.

“N-no…no. I’m fine. I-I can d-d-deal with it.” I rubbed my arms until my teeth stopped chattering, and then I smiled wearily at him. “You can go to bed, Dad. I think I’ll be alright.”

He squinted at me; apparently he hadn’t had time to grab his glasses. “You sure?”

“I’m sure, Dad. Thanks. Love you.”

“Love you too, kid.” He ruffled my hair, and left me alone, and I lay back down with my thoughts.

Sleep came easily after that, probably because the delusion had exhausted me. But I was interrupted again in the early morning by the doorbell ringing of all things.

My father groaned faintly, and I heard his heavy footsteps as he dragged himself to the front door. I followed him, because I knew sleep was futile at this point and also because I was curious.

“Who is it?” He didn’t open the door at first, which made sense; no sane person would be knocking this late and we’d had quite enough experience with insane people, thank you very much.

“How do you know my son?” My father’s voice was grim, as though he knew exactly how they knew me but he wanted them to say it nonetheless. Why did everyone know things I didn’t know?

There was silence for a moment, and then a familiar voice called out. “Marco? Marco, are you in there? Do you remember me?”

I stepped forward until I stood with my father, and I ran a hand through my hair. “Jean? Jean, is that you? From the coffee shop?”

“Yeah…yeah it’s me.”

My father raised an eyebrow at me. You know this boy?

I just nodded, and he sighed, before unlocking the door and opening it until we could all
Jean stood in the doorway of my home, with a man a few years older than us who looked ready to kill anything that moved too quickly for his liking, and another man a few years older than him who looked almost too nice, like he always smiled that way, even when he killed people. Just who were these people?

“Do you want to let us in?” The angry short man—Levi—crossed his arms, and my father blinked, before gesturing for them to come in. He looked just as surprised as I felt at the man’s animosity.

“Should…should I put on some coffee?” My father led them into the living room, turning on lights as he went, and I walked behind the adults with Jean, suddenly wishing I was wearing something a little more acceptable than an old sweatshirt and my blue pajama pants.

“Coffee would be nice, thank you.” The blond, tall too-nice man spoke up, before sitting gracefully in my mother’s old chair. I had to resist the urge to shout at him; no one sat in my mother’s chair, not even me.

“So…nice house.” Jean still looked a little like a punk serial killer, but something about him told me that he was no more threatening to me than a slightly confused puppy.

“Thanks.” I said flatly. I was not in the mood to talk pleasantries when there were three men who somehow seemed to know me sitting in my living room at dawn right after I’d had a psychotic episode. “So you’re with the government? What are you doing here?”

Jean shrugged, collapsing onto my couch as we reached the living room. I joined him, but I didn’t break eye contact. I wanted an answer.

“Yes and no.” I turned to face the blond man, who leaned forward and pressed his hands together. “We are from the government, but you won’t have heard of us. We cannot speak about it here, for your own protection and for your father’s. But if you want proof, here.”

He held out his badge and government ID. The ID told me that he was Commander Erwin Smith, and on the badge were two wings; one black and one white that crossed over each other that read ‘Survey Corp.’ In writing along the border of the badge were the words ‘For the Glory of Humanity.’

My father entered the living room, and took the ID from Commander Smith, inspecting it carefully before handing it back to him.

“Alright, so you’re with the government. What are you doing here, and what do you want with my son? And why do you have a teenager with you?” My father stayed standing, trying to make himself look as big and impressive as possible, but I don’t think anyone was fooled.

“We’re here because your son is also the son of Charlotte Liddell. A fact that we uncovered recently, despite your careful measures to hide it from us.”

My father wet his lips, staring at Jean. Jean stared right back, leaning back in the couch to look as defiant as he could. I almost rolled my eyes at his façade; I wasn’t sure just what he was
trying to prove, but he was only managing to make a terrible first impression.

“As for what we want with your son…to be honest, we need him, sir. We deal with problems that most of the public is unaware of; problems that cannot be explained by science or religion and thus are problems that are viewed as belonging to the delusional. I cannot tell you more than that. But we want to do the right thing…to right the wrongs done to your wife…We couldn’t save her, and for that I am truly sorry. But perhaps we can do better with Marco.” Commander Erwin spoke with total confidence; he even managed to look genuinely sad about my mother. Lies lies no one could save her or me.

My father whistled. “A pretty speech. But you still haven’t really told me anything. What do you want to do with my son?”

“We want to take him with us. We want to train him, and we want him to help us as we help him. We are fighting battle here, and to be frank, we are losing.”

My dad let out a low laugh “Still haven’t told me anything. Where are you taking him? Will he be safe? What will he be doing? You know he has a…condition. How do you plan on dealing with that? You cannot honestly believe that I’ll let you take my son away without a warrant, when you have no information other than a badge and some pretty words about war.”

“Well, Mr. Bodt, no offense, but it’s really not your fucking decision.” Jean managed to keep his voice almost completely smooth, but I could hear the beginnings of anger biting at the edge of it.

“What Jean means,” The Corporal Levi spoke up, flicking his gaze to Jean in what could only be warning, “is that Marco is nineteen. He is a legal adult, and if he wishes to come with us, it really is his decision, not yours. Not yours, but not ours, either. We will not force him either way. The Survey Corp isn’t something you can be forced into, Marco. We only want you if we know you made the choice for yourself. As for your questions, I can’t tell you anything more than I already have, except about his ‘condition,’ as you said. Marco isn’t crazy, Mr. Bodt.”

“No, indeed.” Commander Smith smiled gently at me, and it raised the hairs on the back of my neck. “Marco is just incredibly gifted, and he is also more at risk for things unknown than your average person. I have the feeling he’s a lot stronger than you give him credit for, too.”

“I know that.” My father snapped. “I know my son. He’s the strongest person I know. That still doesn’t mean I’m going to let you take him away.”

“Marco?” Jean spoke again, looking at me from where he had taken over the couch. “What do you want to do?”

I chewed my lip thoughtfully. “You say I’m not crazy.” Liar.

Commander Smith nodded earnestly, and I laughed.

“I don’t believe you. I knew my mother, I knew my family, and I know myself. I know how crazy I am. But do you think you could really help me, if I join you? You could help me get better? So I don’t end up like my mother?” I tried to convey the seriousness of my questions, without betraying my desperation. I don’t think it worked.

Commander Smith shared a look with the angry man, before returning his gaze to me. “I can’t make any promises, Marco, I’m sorry. This job is dangerous and unpredictable. But there is another like you, I believe, and he’d probably be able to do more than we could. But I still say you aren’t crazy. Come with us and we’ll show you that.”
I turned to my father and saw the fear in his eyes that I would leave him, and it was almost enough to make me want to stay. If I was being honest, I was just as afraid. There were too many variables; Commander Smith used too much ‘probably’ and ‘I believe’ and not enough ‘we know’ and ‘definitely’ for me to be comfortable. But I also saw that if I stayed, I had no hope at all, but if I went with them, I might be able to do something. I might be able to come fully into reality someday. The dizzying possibility of normal was what made my mind up for me, in the end. The possibility that my father might not have to watch another person he loved fall apart and die of insanity, which was something I didn’t think he could stand.

“Dad.” I whispered, going over to stand in front of him and rest my hands on his shoulders. “I think…I think I have to try. I can’t spend my whole life not knowing if I could have done something. I want to go with them.”

My father, who had given me as much as he ever could, sighed and pulled me into a hug, and didn’t let go for a long moment. “I don’t want you to go, Marco. I’m afraid for you. But…I understand. You’ve got to do this. Please just promise me you’ll come back.”

I pulled away, and saw the beginnings of tears in his eyes. I looked at the angry man, and saw the grim line of his mouth, and I knew that there was a distinct possibility that I wouldn’t be coming back. “I promise I’ll try. And you’ve got to promise me that you’ll take the happy moments, ok?”

My father let out a little hoarse laugh, before stepping back and facing the others. “It seems that my son has made his decision. When do you leave?”

“As soon as you’re able. We’d like to get to work as quickly as possible.”

I nodded, and squeezed my dad’s hand. “I’ll go pack.”

My father nodded in a sort of dazed way, and headed into the kitchen. “The coffee’s ready…I’ll just go and get it.”

I went to my room and shut the door. I felt anxious and nauseous but somewhere in my insides I knew that I was doing the right thing. Ignoring the fluttering in my stomach, I threw some clothes into a duffle bag and pulled on a t-shirt and jeans.

Strangely enough, as I pulled my pajama shirt over my head, it pulled at something around my neck, which fell back as the shirt came off. Gazing down at it, I recognized the key that the Cat had given me in the delusion. Staring at its markings, I sat down hard on my bed. The fact that it was still there could only mean one thing; the delusions were growing worse.

Looking around, I said goodbye to the room I had spent most of my growing up in, and let the door swing shut slowly behind me. When I got back to the living room, the angry man was looking slightly more alert, and Jean was staring up at me from behind a steaming mug of coffee.

“Ready?” Commander Smith stood, still smiling gently.

“Yes…well. Goodbye, Dad.” My heart ached to leave him, but I knew the hopelessness that I faced if I stayed.

“Bye, son.” He pulled me into a quick hug, before pushing me away and shooing me out the door.

I smiled at him, and hoisted my duffle bag over my shoulder, before following the other men out the door and into the night.
We piled into a large silver truck, with Levi and Erwin in the front and Jean and I in the back. As we drove down the dark road, I watched Jean start to drift off, but found that sleep eluded me, for more reasons than one. So instead I occupied myself with staring at Jean and trying to figure him out.

He clearly thought he was tougher than he was, and he clearly knew that no one actually believed his act, yet somehow he kept pretending. It was sort of admirable, in a weird way. I had to admit that his piercings were kind of hot too, and I wanted almost desperately to know what his tattoo was, but it would probably be inappropriate for me to ask an almost complete stranger to take his shirt off for me.

Suddenly aware of where my mind was headed, I turned my gaze back to the front of the car, where Erwin and Levi had been speaking too quietly for me to hear.

“Where are we going?” I asked, sure that they could tell me now that we weren’t around my father anymore.

“Sorry Marco. We still don’t know that we can trust you. It should be enough to know that we’re heading to a government facility.” Levi didn’t actually sound sorry at all.

“How can you not trust me?” I couldn’t keep the anger out of his voice. “I’ve just given my whole life to you. What do you think I’m going to do, anyway?”

Levi twisted in his seat to look at me, his eyes harder than before. “First of all, you haven’t ‘given your whole life’ to us, Brat. You can’t say that for yourself. Not ever. Second, we don’t really know what you’re going to do. We don’t know what you’re capable of. Until Hange—our head scientist—researched you we thought you were the enemy. You still might be. The truth is, your father did his very best to conceal you from everyone, including us, and that doesn’t exactly say ‘trust me, I’m harmless.’ So no, we’re not going to tell you where we’re going, and you’re just going to have to sit still and hold your shit.”

I swallowed, feeling thoroughly put in my place, and said nothing as Levi turned back to face forward and resumed his quiet conversation with Commander Erwin.

“Hey.” I turned to see Jean peering at me from his seat; his dark sweatshirt hoodie pulled low over his face. “It’s not your fault. He’s like that toward everyone, and it’s worse right now. He just lost some good people—his good people. It’s not you.”

I nodded, wondering if I had perhaps just made the biggest mistake of my life.

“But,” Jean grinned at me, and shoved his hands in his sweatshirt pockets. “You should probably try not to say any dumb shit in his presence. He may be in a worse mood than usual, but his toleration for bullshit pretty much always at zero.”

“Yeah…yeah, ok.” I breathed, trying not to panic. If these were supposed to be the good guys, then what the heck were we going to be fighting?

. . .

After several more hours of driving in heavy silence and one gas stop, we arrived at dawn in what looked like your typical military base. Two armed guards stood at the gated entrance, and as we passed through the barbed fences I felt like I was entering a prison.

“Welcome to Base.” Commander Erwin pulled the truck to a stop, and we all climbed out, stretching out sore limbs.
“ERWIIIIII! LEEEEVVII!” A crazy haired person came running up to us, waving their arms madly like they didn’t already have our attention.

“Hey, Hange!” The Commander waved, and Levi sort of lifted his hand in greeting.

“IS THAT HIM?” They reached us at the end of their shout, and wasted no time in invading my personal space, ruffling my clothes, and even going so far as to open my mouth and peer at my teeth.

“Ould ou ease et e go?” I tried to speak around their fingers, but didn’t make a move to stop them. I wanted to leave as good of an impression as possible.

“Hange. Seriously?” Jean set his hand gently on the brunette’s arm, and they let me go with some reluctance.

“It’s a pleasure to finally meet you, Marco. I was a big fan of your mother’s.” They smiled softly at me, and it was nice to see kindness, but not pity in their eyes. “You’re very welcome here, and don’t let these losers tell you any different.”

“You…you knew my mother?” I asked, surprised.

“Well…I knew of her.” Hange’s smile faltered, and they turned to walk off in the other direction.

I looked to Jean for an explanation, but he just shrugged. “Come on, Marco. Let’s go show you where you’ll be staying.”

“We?” Levi cleared his throat, and Jean turned a little pink, before giving Levi a salute and taking off toward a collection of buildings that were probably sleeping quarters.

“Come on, Soldier. Let’s go.” Erwin led us all through the compound and to the largest building on the compound, where two more soldiers stood guard.

We entered the building, turned down a hot hallway, and headed down a flight of stairs to what looked like a bunker. It had thick cement walls, and small doors, and as we headed further and further along it, my hopes sank further and further. How was I supposed to get better in dark claustrophobic quarters? My only hope was that I wouldn’t be there all the time.

We reached the end of the hallway, where yet another set of soldiers stood watch at a heavy cement door with one small window with bars on it.

“This…” I swallowed. “This is where I’ll be sleeping?”

“Yes. Do you have a problem with that?” Levi searched my eyes, and I knew my answer was a test.

I sighed. “No. No problem.”

One of the soldiers opened the door and let me through, revealing a cot pushed up against the wall, and a small table with three drawers. There was also a large mirror covering the expanse of the wall across from the bed, and I had seen enough crime shows to know why it was there.

“Well, you can set your stuff down, and then it’s off to the mess hall, where you’ll meet the rest of the group. We want you to know that this is a temporary situation. We—”
“We want to trust you.” Hange’s voice sounded over some hidden microphones in my room. “But we don’t know that we can yet, and we can’t be too careful. You’ll soon learn just how dangerous our enemy can be. This is just until we can trust you.”

“Right…I guess…”

“You’ll report here when everyone else goes to bed. Let’s go.” Levi was already out the door. I set down my duffle bag and followed him out, feeling queasy.

We stepped out into the bright sunshine again, and made our slow way to the large Mess Hall. Now, I don’t know what I was expecting, but the chaos inside was certainly not it.

There were many, many shouting people, all around my age, and they laughed and generally looked like they were having a wonderful time while eating some pretty disgusting looking food.

I turned to Levi in shock at the pure bedlam of it, and saw that he was rubbing his temples, a disgusted look on his face.

“Just…” he said, “Just go find Jean.” He turned away, throwing his hands up, muttering something about “disgusting filthy teenagers, can’t even eat without making a mess.”

I almost laughed, until I realized that I was now alone in a room full of people my own age, who all knew each other, and I would have to speak with them. I couldn’t breathe get me out of here.

Thankfully, I spotted Jean waving from across the room before I could begin to hyperventilate. I made my way over to him.

“Hey. Did they scare you?” Jean shoved the kid next to him over so I could sit down, and I took the spot, taking in the group at the table.

“Nah. Hey…Why isn’t anyone in uniform here? And why are there so many teenagers?” I asked, rubbing my hands together nervously under the table.

“Wow. They really didn’t tell you anything, did they?” A big guy with a deep voice and blond hair two seats to my right leaned in to look at me. “How’d they get you to come in the first place?”

I just shrugged, and Jean thankfully covered for me. “None of your goddamn business, Reiner. Anyway, to answer your questions, Marco, things here aren’t…well this isn’t like a normal military compound. We aren’t known by…well by anyone, actually.”

“We’re kinda a big deal.” A kid with a buzz cut spoke up, and as he did, the girl next to him snatched his bread from his hand. “Hey! Sasha, come on, I gave you my roll yesterday; it’s my turn today!”

“Ok…so what do you do here?” I was still just as confused as I had been all morning.

“We fight shadows.” A very serious-looking girl with black hair spoke up, before covering her mouth with the red scarf she wore around her neck. Great they were as crazy as I was.

I raised an eyebrow. “You fight…shadows.”

The boy sitting next to Scarf Girl slammed his hands on the table, and squinted his
bright green eyes at me. “Yeah. You got a problem with that?”

“Eren, Jesus Fuck, calm your shit. Don’t fucking talk to Marco that way. He doesn’t know.” Jean was already clenching his hands into fists, and I could see scabs on his knuckles that I hadn’t noticed before. So Jean fought a lot. Great.

“It’s ok, Jean.” I murmured. I reached out to him, almost touching his hand before pulling back with a jolt. I didn’t know him. It was hardly acceptable for me to touch him. I shouldn’t be touching anyone anyway.

“Sorry, Marco.” Green eyes—Eren—grunted, before going back to eating.

“It’s fine, really.” I could see the dark circles under Eren’s eyes, and the way his hands shook briefly before set down his spoon and gave up on trying to eat. I could see that there was more going on here, and I forgave him instantly for any bad behavior on his part.

“The things we fight prey on the weak,” Jean said, finally getting to the point. “They attack the mind, so it makes sense that they would strike older people. We’re young, so we have strong, pliant minds. We’re more resistant to their attacks. As for why we’re not in uniform; it’s not really necessary, except when we’re fighting. We’re still teenagers, so the high-ups like to give us freedom where they can.”

“Right…ok. But I want to know more about the things you fight. Do you really call them shadows? Are they actually shadows? How do they work? Where do they come from? How do you fight them? And if they prey on older people, then how come your commander is older?”

Jean looked at me with a grim expression, like he was sorry I had brought up the subject. “We don’ know a lot about them…really anything. But we’re learning. Up until the last year we thought we had to kill the host they were in to defeat them. As it turns out, there’s a way to expel them.”

He stopped for a moment, and an oppressive silence hung low over the group. As I looked around, I could see the heartache that all these kids had, and I remembered how Levi said that joining the Corp had to be a decision you made for yourself.

“We call them Executioners. Ex’s, for short. They don’t affect Commander Smith or Corporal Levi because they were exposed to the Ex’s when they were young. They woke up; they became aware.” A blond, innocent looking kid spoke up from the other side of Eren. “And we actually do know where they come from, now. Thanks to Eren.”

Eren blinked, as if he was coming back from somewhere far away, and he let out a shaky breath.

“So…where do they come from?” My concern for Eren was growing by the moment, and I wondered how it was that no one else was seeing how pale he was.

Sasha let out a harsh laugh. “You’re going to think we’re crazy.”

“Trust me,” I said, smiling genuinely for the first time since coming to the base. “I won’t.

“You know the book ‘Alice in Wonderland?’” Jean asked gravely, meeting my gaze and trying to read my expressions.

My stomach dropped. “Yes…”
“Turns out, it’s a real place. And the Ex’s come from there.”

Before I could respond, Eren stood abruptly, and the girl and boy on either side of him stood too. “I’m going to bed early,” He said, turning to leave.

The other two followed him without hesitation, and the blond one rested a hand on his shoulder as they left.

“Don’t mind him,” The kid sitting next to me spoke softly, watching as the trio left the room. “He was with Levi when their whole squad was killed last time we went out.”

Well that explained it. The poor kid had just been through hell.

My mind was exploding. Wonderland was real. I wasn’t crazy. Did that mean the Cat was real too? Was everything he had said real? Was he right? And what did that mean about my mother? Had she been locked away for nothing? And what about the key?

“Marco?” Jean’s voice brought me back to the moment, and I tried to calm my breathing, which had been rapidly escalating into hyperventilation. The room was also spinning a bit, which I figured was probably not normal.

“I’m fine. I’m fine.”

“What is it? I know this is pretty hard to take in at first, but—”

“No. It’s not that. It’s just…It’s just…do you guys know about my mother too?”

I was met with blank stares from everyone but Jean, who reached out and squeezed my hand.

“Marco’s mother was Charlotte Liddell.” He said quietly, looking knowingly at them.

The stares morphed hideously, varying from pity to horror to guilt, which I hadn’t expected. Apparently my mother had been famous. Famous for insanity; how about that.

Before anyone could say anything, a beeping alarm sounded from some speakers on the ceiling.

“Bed,” said Jean, and everyone stood to go.

I followed them out, but separated from them at the door, saying goodbye to my new group of friends whose names I didn’t know and heading toward the main building.

. . .

I almost made it. Almost home free. I had already changed into pajamas, and I was in the small bed, and Hange had warned me of the lights going out. I had practically managed to convince myself that I wasn’t crazy. Then it happened.

I wasn’t pulled into Wonderland again; instead I was pulled into a dream, the same way I had when my mother died. I felt my body collapse to the floor; felt it begin to twitch and heard my voice cry out before I wasn’t in the room any longer.

“Alice? Where are you going Alice?”

I ran quickly through the forest of mushrooms, wiping at the tears on my eyes and ignoring the way the flowers grabbed harmlessly at my dress around my ankles.
“Come back here, this INSTANT!”

Ignoring the voice, I twisted and turned, trying to throw off my pursuers.

“OFF WITH HER HEAD! BRING HER TO ME!”

Gasping, I sprinted as hard as I could, ignoring the pain in my leg where she had swung at me. I could see the door; it was right there, and I knew if I could just run those last few steps, I would make it. But there were Shades hanging around the doorway, as there always were, and I didn’t have time to get rid of them before passing through.

Far behind me, I could hear the Red Queen’s dying wheezes, as well as her crazed laughter and screams for my head. More pressing was the metallic clanking of her Card Guard as they approached, weapons bared.

I reached the door, where the shadows’ whispers nearly drowned out the Guard’s heavy footsteps.

“Not now, not now. Why couldn’t you have just waited?” I sobbed, pushing through them to quickly burn the upside-down spade onto the door with the dripping fang.

“You cannot escape me, Alice! Look at what you have done to Wonderland! You think this will stay here? Such devastation cannot go unnoticed! It will not go unanswered! You think because I am gone you will not be PUNISHED for your crimes? OFF WITH YOUR HEAD!”

I pushed at the shadowy creatures, but their whispers did not fade, and I was out of time. Though my heart was heavy with the weight of knowing what I had done, I reached out and grasped the handle of the door, and pushed it open. The Queen’s voice fell to silence as I was pulled back through the mirror, but the guilt stayed, pressing down, harder and harder until I thought I would implode—

“MARCO!”

I opened my eyes to near darkness, and found that Levi and Hange were holding me down. Someone was screaming, and it hurt to listen to; I wished they would stop. Someone save me.

“Marco, please calm down. You’re awake, you’re here, and no one’s going to hurt you. You’re safe.”

Oh. I was the one screaming. I stopped, and let my body go limp until they let me go. As I reached up and felt the tears stream down my face, I sat up, staring at the two of them with no emotion in my eyes.

“I thought you said I wasn’t crazy.”

Chapter End Notes

this was one long-ass chapter jfc.
After the delusion was done with me, I spent the night in fretting wakefulness. I should have known better than to hope, but somehow, after the day’s events, I had allowed that dangerous feeling to bloom somewhere deep inside. But after the vision, or delusion, or whatever it was, however, I found myself terrified of what was to come. I’d never had nightmares like this before; not even in the beginning, right after my mother died. They are getting worse. What if I had come to this place so far from my father only to go crazy without him?

After all, I was still in a sterile little room, being observed, just as if I were in the asylum. Maybe it was mistake coming here. Maybe I should give up.

When the morning bell rang, a soldier opened the door to my cell (I had no other word for it) and stood by as I got dressed in an outfit they had laying on my dresser. He politely stepped out of my way as I left the room, but he didn’t make eye contact. I was isolated. Just like before. But I couldn’t tell if my isolation was intentional or not… What were Hange, Levi and Erwin trying to accomplish?

I joined the others in the Mess Hall, and I found Jean and his group as quickly as I could. I learned all of their names today, though I doubted I would remember them. They were all exceedingly kind, and it was clear that they cared very much for each other. They tried their best to include me, even though I didn’t really know what to say and I was the only very new member of the group.

After breakfast was over, we went outside to start our training. It was different than anything I had ever done before. Apparently, to fight these Ex’s you needed to work in at least pairs, so your partner could watch your back. Though, like the rest of the Corp, there were exceptions to this rule. Annie Leonhardt worked alone, and no one seemed to care at all. Also, Eren Jaeger, Mikasa Ackerman, and Armin Arlert worked together the majority of the time, and everyone just let them do it.
Apparently before I had arrived, Armin and Jean had been working together, so Jean could have a partner, but now that I was here, Armin smiled and went back to join his best friends, and Jean stood at my side with a small smirk on his face.

We went out and ran several laps around the compound, which left me much more winded than everyone else, much to my embarrassment, but at least I could do it. Then we stretched a bit and gathered for the next task.

We stood together in the main open area of the compound, in rows in front of Commander Smith and Captain Levi, and I tried to contain my nervous excitement; I had no idea what was happening, but I was happy to be included.

“Today a new member of the family stands with us,” Commander Smith said, his voice echoing through the compound. “We welcome him to our ranks, as he has chosen to fight for Humanity. Welcome, Marco Bodt, and good luck.” Then he turned and marched away, and Levi followed him out.

“These are mostly just drills for the rest of us,” Jean muttered to me as they left the yard. “But you won’t be expected to do as well as us in the beginning. Just try as hard as you can, and you’ll be fine.”

I nodded, and let out a breath. I had been cooped up inside for so long, but I was strong, and I couldn’t wait to see how I’d do.

“Alright babies, time to get your sorry asses to work!” A scary looking bald man with a small patch of beard shouted at us, and the large group broke off into pairs to train.

“That was Shadis,” Jean said, jerking his finger toward the bald man. “He’s an asshole, but he’ll generally leave you alone as long as you do what you’re told. Ok, let’s get to work, shall we?”

I nodded, though I still had no idea what we were doing exactly.

“So we fight the Ex’s using these.” He brought a hand up to his left arm, lifting the short black sleeve up to show a black armband. Instead of holding knives or something, like I expected, it was covered in syringes. They were missing the needles, and contained no liquid, but they were still surprising.

Jean pulled one out, and held it out for me to take. I plucked it from his palm, rolling the cool metal in my fingers.

“You fight monsters with this?” I asked doubtfully, raising an eyebrow.

“That’s just how we kill them. The stuff we use is mostly the same stuff that’s in bioluminescent creatures, like some jellyfish and shit, but we just call it Liquid Light. Makes sense, right? To kill shadows. Anyway, before Jaeger’s dad showed up and gave him the formula and that stupid tooth we used to have to kill the hosts…yeah. It was fucking awful. But now there’s a 90 percent success rate, and the hosts don’t remember anything. Which is pretty good compared to before—”

“What was that about a tooth?!” I interrupted, clenching my hands around the syringe. My heart had begun to pound, and I couldn’t help the wave of emotion that hit me.

“Oh, yeah. He has this fang thing? It’s on a string around his neck. His father just showed up one day when we were still trainees and gave him the formula in a syringe and the tooth. He told Eren to ‘use the mirrors’ and took off. He also told Eren that the Ex’s came from
Wonderland. And we haven’t been able to find him. Honestly, based on Eren’s description of his behavior, Hange thinks old man Jaeger probably offed himself, but we can’t know for sure until we find a body.”

“Oh…right. Ok.” I could feel the world start to spin, but I didn’t know if I should tell Jean about my key. And I didn’t know if he’d be able to see it. Just because Eren had a tooth too didn’t mean anything. If I told Jean and he couldn’t see it…he was the closest thing to a friend that I had, not that we were that close at all. I had spoken to him what, four times? But still…I—

 “…arco?” He trailed off, and I realized he had been speaking to me the whole time. I hadn’t even been paying attention how embarrassing.

“W-what? Sorry. I was zoning out.”

“Right…ok. Well, like I was saying. That’s the reason we work in groups of at least two, though usually we try to work in larger groups. One person distracts the Ex usually by fighting it, while the other comes up and jabs them with the needle. It works the best if it’s on the back of the neck, since that’s the entry point for the Ex’s, but it’ll stop them if it’s injected somewhere else too, and then you can just stick ‘em in the neck while they’re down.”

“You said that it has a ninety percent success rate. What about the other ten percent?” I asked, handing the syringe back to Jean.

He bit his lip, before tucking the syringe away again. “Well, a little under ten percent of the Ex’s can be…smart. The majority of them just take over a host and drive them crazy until they kill themselves, but the ten percent…they are more aggressive. All of them are incredibly violent, and they’re much stronger when they’re possessed…it’s like the Ex’s have released all of their bodies’ restrictions. Like, you know how they say when a person’s in danger they can do things that they shouldn’t be able to do? Lifting cars and shit? It’s like that. But that ten percent…they’re almost impossible to take down, and they can read you like a book. They like to dissect the host’s minds while casually picking apart yours as well.”

I took that in for a moment. “Is that…is that what happened to Levi’s people?”

Jean blinked at me. “Oh. Captain Levi’s Squad? Yeah.” His voice quieted. “I don’t know exactly what happened, but from what I’ve heard…They were attacked by one of the strongest Ex’s we’ve ever seen. It made…It made the members of Levi’s squad…well it made them turn on each other. They were supposed to be protecting Eren, and Captain Levi had gone back to help Commander Erwin. He wasn’t even there to protect them. I don’t know if I could handle that, honestly.”

I felt my heart break for Eren. From what I had heard, it sounded like he’d had to watch some people he cared deeply about kill each other in cold blood. Was I going to have to watch things like this? I’m not strong enough

“Well.” Jean cleared his throat. “Anyway. Let’s start with eval. I need to see where you are. You look pretty fit—” He cut himself off, choking a bit, and his face went pink.

I looked over my shoulder, trying to see what was distracting Jean, but, seeing nothing, I turned back to him, eyebrows raised.

He cleared his throat. “S-sorry. I uh, choked on my own spit. You know. Anyway. You’re pretty strong, but let’s see what happens.” He stepped a few paces back from me, and sank into a fighting stance.
I couldn’t help a small smile from flitting across my face, and I rolled my shoulders, slipping into my own familiar stance from training with my dad and a boxing bag. I was so excited I could taste it, and my body was crackling with energy.

Jean flicked his gaze up my body, and I could practically read exactly how he was processing my fighting stance. I could see him planning, trying to come up with how best to attack. And I knew he would attack first. From what I had seen he was impulsive, rash, and passionate, and that stuff doesn’t just leave you when you start fighting.

Sure enough, in a few more seconds he surged forward, coming at me almost too quickly for me to dodge. Almost. I faked to the right, and rolled left, sweeping my leg out to trip him. Instead of falling, however, he somersaulted over my leg and turned incredibly quickly. He grasped my calf in strong hands and dragged me down so I was lying under his crouching form.

“Dead.” He said, grinning. Then he offered his right hand. I took it, and stood, laughing a bit. I couldn’t help myself. This was the most interaction I’d had in…in a long, long time, and I couldn’t help but enjoy it. I was already so relaxed around Jean; more relaxed than I had felt around anyone but my dad. I was starting to trust him despite my instincts to turn away. Run run trust no one.

“Again,” I said, before pulling him forward by his hand still linked in mine and throwing him to the ground. He fell with an ‘oof’ but came up just as quickly, lunging at me and taking me to the ground beside him, before flipping me onto my stomach with ease and pressing the syringe to my neck.

“You didn’t think I would lose that easily, did you?” He said, before using a quick jab to press the syringe to my neck. “Dead.”

We wrestled like this for some time, and sometimes I lost, but a few times, I won. And soon enough we were both sweating, and getting really into the competition. I hadn’t felt this way maybe ever, and it sure looked like Jean was enjoying himself. He was breathing hard, and he had a determined look in his eyes. He lunged at me again, and I almost rolled my eyes. However quick and focused his attacks were, he was too quick to strike, and I could use his impulsiveness to my benefit. I was getting tired, and so was he, so when he came at me, I tripped over my feet in my haste to get back from him, and he fell into me with an ‘oof.’ We tumbled back to the ground, huffing, but I wasn’t about to lose just because I was a little sore.

I used my position under him to wrap my legs around his back and roll us, so I was straddling him. Then, caught up in nervous energy and while he lay stunned, I hooked my finger under his chin and gently turned his head to the left, before pressing the syringe to the back of his neck.
Under the sweaty smell and the grass that we were sitting in...he smelled so good.
Leaning down to press against his chest, I whispered in his ear. “Dead.”

I felt goose bumps running down my back, and in another moment, I sat up, shocked at my own behavior. I practically leapt off of him, before pulling him up. He didn’t say a word the whole time, but his whole face and neck were bright red, and his eyes were wide and practically black with pupil. He was probably so angry...God I hope he doesn’t hate me.

“S-sorry. I was just... I was just caught up the moment. I didn’t mean...sorry!” I could feel the blood drain from my face in my haste to get him to believe me.

“It’s ok! Stop apologizing!” Jean was still red, and he wouldn’t meet my gaze, but at least he was talking to me. “Christ.”

He was staring at my chest, and I looked down to find that in our last match, the tooth had fallen out of my shirt and was dangling over my clothes.

My eyes widened, and I licked my lips. Could he see it? I didn’t want to say anything, still worried that I was crazy, so I stayed silent waiting for him to speak.

“Is that...Is that what I think it is?” He asked shakily, pointing to the key.

Deciding that there was nothing else he could be gesturing to, I finally spoke up.

“You...you can see it too?”

He let out a harsh breath and raised his eyebrows. “What do you mean? Of course I can see it. Fuck, Marco. Why didn’t you tell me about this before? Like, as soon as you knew about Eren’s?”

I blushed, and looked away. I’m awful...I thought I was the only one who could see it?”

He stepped up close to me, and reached out to touch the key, rubbing his thumb over the etching of the spades symbol. “Shit. Well, you’re not. You can’t keep that kind of stuff from us, Marco. From me. Look, we’re partners now. We’re going to have to watch each other’s backs. You can’t keep shit like this from me, ok?”

I chewed my lip, still staring resolutely at the ground.

“Marco? Look at me.” He planted his hands on his hips and didn’t say anything until I reluctantly met his gaze. “You’re gonna have to trust me. You’re gonna have to tell me about this stuff, even if you think you’re going crazy. Can you do that?”

I felt that stupid wave of emotions crash over me again. I was happy, because someone was offering to be there for me. But at the same time, I was so very afraid that I would hurt him somehow.

“I can try,” I said finally, sighing.

“Ok.” He nodded, before letting go of my key. “Come on. Let’s go report this to the Captain.”

“What?”

He grabbed my arm and started pulling me toward the main building—the Headquarters—of the compound.
“Hey! Jaeger!” He shouted, as we passed by Eren, Armin, and Mikasa. “Come on. You’ll want to be there for this.”

Eren wiped his forehead, eyeing Jean suspiciously, but he followed. “What’s this about, Jean? I have shit to do. Hange wants me for research later, and I want to finish practicing for today —”

Jean reached back and held up my key for Eren to see, which effectively shut him up. We made our way to HQ, and when we entered, we took a different path than the one that led to my cell, thankfully. We walked until we reached a small office, where Jean knocked on the door, finally letting go of my arm.

In a moment, Levi opened the door, looking slightly miffed at having been interrupted from whatever he was doing. “What? Shouldn’t you all be in training?”

Jean just held up the key again, and Levi blinked, before standing back to let us into his office.

“Hange!” He shouted down the hall, and the brunette stuck their head out from a few doors down.

“What is it?”

“Come here.” Levi went to sit at his desk, and gestured for all of us to do the same in the seats across from him.

Hange entered the room, and flounced over to sit on the arm of Levi’s chair.

“Marco, would you care to explain that?” Levi gestured to the key. He was eerily calm, almost as if he had expected something like this.

I swallowed, before nodding. “I think I have the same key as Eren.”

“Key?” Levi raised an eyebrow. “I was under the impression that it was a tooth. Where did you get it? And why did you hide its existence from us?”

I swallowed, and looked over to Jean, where he nodded encouragingly. He had told me to trust him, so I would. Stupid

“I hid it because I thought I was the only one who could see it; I thought I was insane. And I got it…” I had never said the words out loud before, and it was a pretty recent discovery anyway.

“Yes?” Levi didn’t look angry, exactly. He just wore the same, emotionless expression that he had most of the time, which I couldn’t read, to my frustration.

“IgodtitfromtheCheshireCat!” I blurted out in one breath, clenching my fists at my sides and shutting my eyes tight.

When no one started shouting at me or attacking me, I opened my eyes a bit. They were all just sitting there, staring at me. They didn’t look angry. If anything, they just looked surprised, or even excited. Hange in particular looked ready to burst into pieces, but they were holding themselves together, probably for my sake.

“Would you like to tell us exactly how you came to meet the Cheshire Cat?” Levi asked. If I were any less observant, I would say his expression hadn’t changed, but as I was, I
could see a flicker of... *something* there. I couldn’t tell if it was excitement or hope or something else, but it was undeniably there.

I exhaled slowly, and began my story. Not wanting to leave anything out, I started with my mother’s death, and talked until I reached last night. They all sat patiently and listened to my story—even Eren—and none of them interrupted with any questions or anything, and it was actually a little unnerving how rapitly they paid attention to me.

When I finished, Eren was the first to speak up. “So you’re Alice’s descendant?”

“Yes.”

“Me too.” He pulled the key over his head and held it out, and I held mine out too, and we compared them. They were almost exactly identical; even the strings that held them matched. The only differences lay in small nicks and scratches on the teeth.

I stared at him in shock; was he getting the nightmares too then? “So, we’re related?”

“I guess so.” He screwed up his face in concentration. “But that doesn’t make any sense. How’d I get a tooth if the Cat didn’t give it to me? I’ve never been to Wonderland—not even in my mind. I’ve seen it in a dream, I think, but never vividly. Besides, my dad is the one who gave me the tooth and told me I was related to Alice. Where’d he get one?”

I shook my head. There were too many questions, and I didn’t have the answers to any of them. “I don’t know. I don’t know *anything*, actually, and the cat has been very unhelpful. I thought I was crazy until last night—still do, to be perfectly honest.”

Levi and Hange shared a look, and the captain nodded before standing and leaving the room. Eren suddenly looked incredibly nervous, like he’d seen this behavior before, and he seemed to brace himself.

“Ok! Levi has gone to report everything to Erwin, which leaves the research to us! Yahoo!” They fisted the air, before standing and coming over to clap both Eren and I on the shoulder—hard.

“Ok, but Hange, I think Moblit should be there this time, just in case.” Eren stood and followed Hange out the door, and I followed, holding the door open for Jean and meeting his eyes just briefly.

“Yes, yes. Go get changed and eat some lunch, and we’ll start in an hour. We’ve got lots to do, gentlemen.”

Hange left us at the lobby of HQ, and Eren and Jean left me to go change in my room, telling me to meet them in the mess hall in ten. I changed into what was apparently my fighting uniform—I found it in the small dresser next to my bed. It was just a loose black short-sleeved shirt and long black khakis with a black belt.

I headed out and across the gravel road, making my way to the Mess Hall. I wondered why I wasn’t being watched, but when I looked around, I saw cameras following my every move from many places around the compound.

I had simply been under the illusion of freedom. I wondered if this was better than being directly followed, and after some deliberation came to the conclusion that perhaps it was better to live in ignorance sometimes. Ignorance of the awful things happening in the world; ignorance of the cage trapping me in. It was certainly happier.
When I reached the Mess Hall, I found it to be completely empty, except for Eren sitting in the corner with two plates of sandwiches. I walked over and sat with him, and he slid one of the plates over to me.

“Thanks,” I said, as warmly as I could. “Where’s Jean?”

“He had stuff to do. I don’t really care.” Eren shrugged his shoulders and glared down at his food, but I could see the lie in his movements. He did care. He cared a lot—much more than he let on.

I took a bite out of my PB&J sandwich, considering what to say from here. From my vantage, we sat in companionable silence, but I could see that Eren was still shaking a bit, and I knew I couldn’t just let him stay hurting like this.

“Hey,” I said softly, putting down my sandwich. “Are you ok?”

He met my eyes for the first time, and I could see how broken he was. His eyes reflected the same pain I saw in my father’s eyes; the same pain I could see in many of the people here; the same pain that I’m sure was somewhere in my eyes too.

“We’re sort of like cousins, aren’t we?” He asked, completely ignoring my question.

“I…I guess so, yeah. I mean, not directly, but we could think of it that way if you’d like. If you’ve got a key and I’ve got a key…you said your dad gave it to you, right?”

I could tell right away that that was the wrong thing to say. He clenched his hands for a moment, but then breathed deeply and visibly relaxed them.

“Yes. He did. Right before giving me the Cure and leaving to kill himself or whatever.”

“Eren, what—”

“Jean told you, didn’t he?” Eren said suddenly, narrowing his eyes in desperation.

“What?”

“He did, I can see it in your eyes. You pity me, just like the rest of them.”

“You mean…about your team?” I didn’t know how to handle his accusation about pitying him; it was true.

“My squad, yeah. You want to know exactly what happened? Everyone else knows, so you might as well find out now.”

“You don’t have to tell me if you don’t want to. I don’t need to know,” I said softly, reaching out to touch his hand.

He started at the touch, staring at me with confusion. Apparently he hadn’t expected me to react that way.

“You’re really weird. Anyone ever told you that?” He said, before pulling his hand away.

“Yeah, a few people actually.” I said, smiling.

He smiled a little, before letting all emotion fall from his face. “No, I want to tell you.
You’ll be here for a long time, I hope, and you’ll know eventually. And I’d rather you hear the truth from me, and not some rumor from someone stupid. Even if I don’t think you’d listen to a rumor.”

I nodded, folding my arms on the table.

Eren took a deep breath, closing his eyes for a moment to prepare. “On my last mission, two weeks ago, we set out to take out an aberrant Ex. The mission was tough. She was especially... she was especially dangerous. We thought we could take her though. There were six of us, after all; five, after Levi went to report our progress to Commander Erwin and ask for backup.

“He was only gone for a few minutes; just long enough to radio the Commander, but... it was enough time, I guess. The Ex’s... they have a way of just getting to you, especially when you’re not prepared. And this one...” He trailed off for a moment, taking in a deep breath.

“This one could voice our weaknesses. She sat in the middle of the room and spoke in the voice of someone who could just get to each of us. She couldn’t affect me... none of them can. I think it must have something to do with my father... maybe they won’t be able to affect you either, since we’re related or whatever. Anyway, this aberrant started just saying the absolute worst things she could come up with, and she knew exactly what to say.

“The things she said to each of us...” He stopped again, swallowing, and I knew better than to interrupt him. “She spoke to the deepest darkest fear of all of us. All of the Ex’s have their ways in that respect, but they aren’t usually that powerful. After she’d been talking for a while... it started to sound like all the voices were speaking at once.

“We took off then. None of us were in very good condition, after hearing our deepest, darkest secrets in that way, and we were disobeying orders, but we couldn’t stay there any longer, and every time we tried to attack her she would dodge our attacks in a way that we couldn’t possibly hope to beat.

“She followed us, chasing us until she had us cornered in an alleyway. The squad tried to protect me. They put me behind them, but they weren’t right in the head by then. It only took a few words from her and then they...” He trailed off, and I could see tears welling up in his eyes. For all his bravado, Eren was as damaged as I was.

After a moment, he had composed himself for the most part. “It was all my fault. After Levi left, they wanted to leave too. They knew that it was probably a hopeless battle, since we couldn’t even get near her. They wanted to leave, and find her again when we had more backup. But I insisted... I thought we could take her. I haven’t been out on very many missions, and I thought... it’s all my fault. They’re dead because they stayed to protect me, because I made the wrong decision when it counted most.”

He stopped talking, apparently too overwhelmed to continue, and I reached out again and took his hand despite his previous attempt to push me away.

“It’s not your fault, you know.” I said quietly, holding his hand tightly on the table. He looked like he was about to protest, so I cut him off before he could. “No. Really. You made a mistake, yeah. But it wasn’t your fault that they chose to stay. It wasn’t your fault that the group couldn’t handle the Ex. It’s not your fault that she was too strong for them. It’s not your fault they’re dead. Believe me.” I could feel tears pricking at my own eyes. I felt so terrible for Eren, and I knew the guilt he felt, if in a different way.

His was so much worse. His was such a heavier burden to bear, and I wanted to help
him; I wanted to share it. It was awful that he’d had to go through this alone.

Eren saw the raw emotion on my face, and looked at me curiously, though there were still tears in his eyes. “Why do you care so much about how I feel? We barely know each other, but you’re practically crying for me. Are you messing with me?”

He pulled away again, severing the connection we’d had.

“What?” I blanched. “No! Just because I don’t know you very well doesn’t mean that you deserve to feel this way. You’re not guilty of anything, and you don’t deserve to feel like you’re guilty of something so horrible. You’re a good person, I can tell. I’m good at reading people. And you shouldn’t feel this way. I know you probably don’t want to hear this at all, but… they wouldn’t want you to feel like this.”

“What, do you think they’d want me to be happy? They died two weeks ago! I still look around and expect them to be standing there, joking, or making fun of me, or ordering me around even though they shouldn’t, or making fun of Captain Levi when hardly anyone else can without being murdered. I still see them, and they are gone.”

I looked at him, feeling my heart break into a million pieces. “What were their names, if you don’t mind me asking?”

“…Eld. Gunther. O-oluo. And P-p-petra.” A few tears slipped down his cheeks, and he rubbed furiously at them, as if their very presence enraged him.

“They sound like they were wonderful people,” I murmured. I held back my own tears, knowing that if I cried it wouldn’t help him any. “I’m so, so sorry.”

I got up suddenly, and came around the table so I was sitting next to him, instead of across from him. He didn’t respond, and I didn’t really expect him to. Instead we just sat in silence, and I pulled my plate over to me and ate my sandwich slowly.

I was shocked at how horrible truth of our enemy, but I was glad Eren had told me his story. If everything they all had to say was true, then these Ex’s probably had something to do with my mother’s insanity, and beneath my sorrow I could feel a slow rage begin to boil. Eren’s story was just one of many, I knew, and I also knew that I now had a chance to be a part of the solution to their devastation. I didn’t even know his full story, and I got the feeling that I wouldn’t for a while, but I knew enough to understand him, and to feel for him.

After a few moments, he pulled his own sandwich to him and started to eat, and I noted that the shaking in his hands had lessened, much to my relief.

“You know, I can see them too.” He said, monitoring my reactions carefully. “That’s part of why they needed to protect me. Maybe you’ll be able to see them too, even though I can’t understand why you wouldn’t have already seen them. They’re pretty obvious when they think you can’t see them.”

“What do they look like?” I asked, unable to hide my curiosity.

“There’s a reason we call them ‘Executioners.’ They look like grim reapers, kinda. Just big black shapes that look sort of human, with no faces. They carry scythes, and they get in by slashing the back of the neck and pouring themselves in there. I don’t know why people don’t notice it as it’s happening, but I’d guess it has something to do with how their attacks are psychological; it’s like they’re not even there. Just a figment of our imaginations. Who knows; maybe we’re all crazy, and none of this is real. Maybe this is all just a dream.” He sounded tired.
“Whose dream, though?” I asked, finishing my sandwich.

“What?” Eren stared at me.

“That’s what I tell myself when I think I’m dreaming, or insane. I see the things that other people do around me that I could never dream up on my own. I’m not sure of much, but that usually calms me down.” After a moment where he just sat quietly, I realized that he might not actually have been asking me a serious question. I flushed, staring down at my food. “I should never open my mouth.

“You are something else, Marco.” He said, shaking the hair out of his eyes and standing. “Come on; Hange’s expecting us soon, and it never hurts to be early.”

I followed him out and around the back of HQ, where there was a large grassy area. It was clear of all people, but had large, ancient trees lining the sides of it like a long quad on a college campus. It was beautiful, and stood out sharply from the gray of the rest of the compound.

“This is where we do all our research.” Hange said, appearing behind us and spreading their arms out in pure, unadulterated joy. Jean was with them, and he came to stand beside me, bumping Eren with his shoulder in a kind of friendly-yet-not-friendly gesture.

“What kind of research…” I trailed off as Jean and Eren gestured violently for me to stop behind Hange’s back. Apparently that was not a question I wanted to ask. I’d have to talk to Jean about that later.

“So, Marco!” We turned to see Commander Smith coming up behind us, followed by a man carrying a large mirror. “I hear you know how to get to Wonderland.”

“N-not really.” The Commander made me nervous. His competence scared me, because I was so used to people not having a clue what they were doing.

“Well, that’ what we have research for.” They reached us, and as they did, the group I’d eaten with appeared from around the building.

Mikasa and Armin came to stand at Eren’s side, and the rest of them joined us too, bringing a hopeful kind of energy with them. Ymir tossed a long sheathed knife at me, and I caught it, half-expecting Levi to say something about weapon safety. He didn’t.

“Ok. We are going to try this. Marco, you are going to stay here with Jean, Connie, Sasha, and Annie as backup. Reiner, Bertholdt, Armin, Mikasa, Eren, Ymir and Christa, you’ll come with Hange and I and scope out the area. If this works, that is.”

“Nonono” I said nervously. I didn’t want to make them distrust me, but I had to go. I had to have validation. I had to know that I wasn’t crazy; that my whole existence up to this point, and my mother’s existence before me hadn’t been for nothing.

“Why’s that, Marco?” Levi asked, folding his arms.

“W-well,” All eyes were on me, and I could feel my face go red. “I’m the only one who’s seen it. I’m the only one who’s spoken to the Cheshire Cat, and he might not trust you all, when he first sees you. I could make him trust you. I don’t think he takes kindly to strangers.”

Levi and Erwin exchanged a look.

“Ok,” Erwin said. “Ymir and Christa, you stay here, Jean and Marco, you’re up. Jean, I
expect you to keep an eye on Marco.”

I blinked, shocked that I had gotten my way so easily. I didn’t understand why Erwin had agreed with so little persuasion, but I did know that he knew what he was doing, and I tried to trust that.

There was a flurry of motion as those of us who would be attempting to enter Wonderland stood before it, and everyone else stood back.

Eren and I stood before everyone else, and we held our keys.

“What do you think we have to do?” Eren asked quietly, staring at me. His bright green eyes stood out in stark contrast from the black circles beneath them.

I remembered my vision, or nightmare, or delusion or whatever it was from the previous night.

“I think we have to draw the symbol onto the mirror.” I said plainly, holding up my key.

“Both of us?” Eren asked. In my peripheral vision, I saw Erwin shift his weight from one foot to the other, and I knew that he was sending out a warning; be careful. Everything Erwin did was purposeful and driven and conveyed a message.

“I don’t think that’s necessary.” I remember Alice drawing the inverse of the spades, and I reached out and pressed the tip of the fang to the mirror’s smooth face. As I moved it, the symbol appeared, burning and sizzling and marring my reflection.

When it was complete, I stepped back, expecting something, anything to happen. In the delusion Alice had just opened the door, but there was no door here. After a few moments of nothing, the symbol faded away as if it had never been there in the first place, and I pressed my hand to the mirror.

Nothing happened.

“Well?” Levi asked a little impatiently.

“I… I don’t know. T-that should have worked, I don’t know why…” I trailed off, suddenly afraid of my failure.

“Marco?” Jean stepped forward, resting a hand on my shoulder. “It’s ok. Try something else.”

His hand felt warm even through the loose shirt I had, and I could feel a little blush spread across my face, but I nodded. Turning, I saw Eren staring at Jean with a confused expression on his face, before he returned his gaze to me.

“Why don’t we try the opposite?” He asked, holding up the tooth to show me.

I took a deep breath, and reached out again, drawing the symbol as it normally appeared. The same thing happened, with the sizzling and everything, but when I finished drawing it, a strange rippling effect started at the symbol and spread throughout the mirror, bubbling out like water until it reached the edges and stopped.

I looked at the others, and reached out to press my hand against the mirror’s face again. This time, however, instead of hitting it solidly, my hand met a weirdly malleable surface, like jello. I pressed further, and the mirror rippled and boiled until my hand…disappeared.
I yelped, and jerked my arm back, and my hand appeared again, fully intact.

“Well that was fuckin weird,” Jean said. “You alright?”

I nodded distractedly, before touching the mirror again. Nothing happened. It appeared that the mirror was back to normal.

“Ok.” Hange appeared at my side, and looked up from where they had been writing everything down. “Try writing the symbol again.”

Licking my lips, I drew it again, a little faster this time, and when I finished, Hange stopped me from reaching out so they could try. Their hand went through same as mine had, and when they brought it back it was fine, and the mirror was just a mirror again.

“So as far as we can tell so far it has one use. What if we try holding hands and going in together? Also, before we do, Eren, you try your key too.”

Eren stepped up and drew the symbol himself, before trying his own hand. The same thing happened.

“Well. Let me try drawing the symbol now,” They asked. I reluctantly lifted the key from its position around my neck, and handed it to them.

When Hange tried to draw the symbol, nothing happened. No sizzling, or burning, or anything. Just the scratch of tooth on glass. They let out a puff of disappointed air, before handing the key back to me.

“Ok, so one of you will need to stay here. Eren, I think it should be you. We haven’t known Marco for long, but it’s true that he’s the only one who’s seen Wonderland, and that could be the difference between life and death. Just know,” Hange turned to me, and pulled me close to them by the shirt, “that if you try anything to hurt any of us, I will rip out your fingernails one by one.”

They had a terrifying glint in their eyes, and I knew they meant every word. I nodded vigorously, and they released me, letting me stumble back a few feet.

“Let’s go everyone! Time to hold hands!” Hange sang as they grabbed my hand and Jean’s and forced them together until we linked fingers on our own. The Jean grabbed Hange’s hand, and Hange took Levi’s, and so forth until the whole group was linked.

“Go ahead, Marco.” Erwin said from where he stood next to the mirror. “And Levi, no more than ten minutes or I’ll assume something’s wrong. Got it?”

Levi nodded through pursed lips, and I took that as my go-ahead. I drew the symbol one more time, and pushed my hand against the mirror. It went through, just like before, but this time I continued to push, until my whole arm was swallowed whole. I didn’t stop there; I continued and pushed my foot through, and my shoulder, and then, when I couldn’t handle going slowly anymore, I closed my eyes and threw myself forward, tightening my grip on Jean’s hand so we wouldn’t break contact.

As I fell out of the mirror, my feet landed on hard ground and I opened my eyes slowly. The sight was enough to make me gasp; this was Wonderland, but not the Wonderland I had seen in my nightmares, or the one in my visits with the Cat. The sweet smell of flowers overpowered my every sense and made my eyes water, but I didn’t stop gazing around in amazement.
It was beautiful; I stood in a garden of sorts, only the flowers towered above me like the most ancient of trees. The garden was quiet, with the exception of the tweeting of birds from far away, and it was so peaceful I felt my worries instantly begin to lift a little.

Jean tumbled out beside me, and the rest of the group followed in quick progression. As they did, the flowers began to slowly turn their massive petals from where they faced the sun, until they were angled down at us. In the center of each of them was a face, and while some looked tired, and some angry and others happy, they all looked curious.

“What…” Jean trailed off as he stood next to me, gazing around in open-mouthed wonder.

I wanted to cry as I looked at my companions, because they could see it too. The relief that I felt was overpowering and confusing and all I wanted was to shake Jean by his shoulders and make sure that this was real.

“Hello, Alice.” The Cat’s voice surprised me, though I supposed it shouldn’t have. “How nice to see your corporeal self.”

“My name is Marco, Cat. And hello, it’s nice to see you too.”

“I see you have brought friends.” His eyes glinted maliciously as he took in the group, and when he returned his gaze to me I could see the question in it.

“You didn’t tell me there was another key,” I said, choosing to ignore that question.

He arched an eyebrow. “You didn’t ask if there was another. If you have seen it, then I must see it too. Where is it? Who found it?”

I just squinted at him, until he growled a flicked his tail at me.

“It doesn’t do to hide things from me, Alice. Not when you are lost in the flower garden.”

I glanced around, before turning to Captain Levi for direction. He stood a few feet away, staring at the cat with an expression that was hard to read.

“Armin!” Levi snapped, not breaking his stare with the Cat. “Go back and get Erwin and Eren.”

Armin turned to leave, and found that the door had swung shut behind us and was now locked.

The Cat chuckled, padding around me and weaving his way through the group until he stood beside the door. “I see you have begun your journey without a first step. How bumbling of you.”

“Here,” I said, striding up to the door. I drew the upside-down spade, and creaked the door open. We couldn’t see anything but white space, but I had expected that.

“Captain?” Armin turned to Levi, and I felt my heart pang a bit for him.

Levi glared at the door, as if expecting it to reveal what lay beyond it.

“Don’t worry,” the Cat said, licking his paws. “You’ll come out wherever the other key is.”
“What if the mirror there isn’t big enough to fit through?” Armin asked nervously; I was shocked he had the courage to speak to the Cat, honestly

The Cat cocked his head. “I’ve answered this question before. Size is subjective. You’ll fit.”

Armin nodded, before looking to Levi one more time and disappearing through the door. After a moment, it swung gently shut, but opened again as Eren and Erwin came pushing through.

“What is it, Levi?” Erwin asked, sword drawn. When did he even get a sword?

“I thought you’d want to see this,” Levi said flatly. Though his voice remained unchanged, he stood stiffly, and I could see that he was uncomfortable with his surroundings.

In fact everyone looked uncomfortable except Hange and Eren, who almost smiled at the sight around him. I guessed that he must be feeling the garden seep his worries away as well, and I wondered if it was only happening to the two of us.

Looking around, I noticed that the Cat had vanished, and I braced myself for him to speak next to my ear. But it wasn’t me he wanted to talk to.

“So you are their leader.” The Cat appeared a mere two inches from Erwin’s face, teeth bared and bleeding.

Erwin didn’t even flinch. “Yes. Commander Erwin. You must be the Cheshire Cat.”

The Cat hissed a little, hackles raised, and vanished, appearing before Eren instead.

“And you are the other Alice. I see you have to have your key. And you received it without a test. No…”

The Cat leaned in close, peering into Eren’s eyes and, no doubt, reading him like a book. Eren swallowed.

“No…there was a test. And you passed. Congratulations.” The Cat prowled over to me and sat down, so his eyes were level with mine.

“I hope you know what you’re doing, Marco. Wonderland doesn’t often take kindly to strangers, and if your companions aren’t strong enough, they will not survive it. Also, you should be careful about who draws symbols where. If you both use the key on opposite sides of the same door at the same time, you will lock Wonderland. Permanently. Need I say what would happen to the person stuck here? Your race isn’t made for Wonderland. Speaking of, what are you doing here, anyway?”

Erwin stepped forward, seemingly not caring at all if the Cat disliked him or not. “We’re here to stop the damage that has been done to humanity. We have traced the Ex’s—monsters made of shadows—to this place, and we want to make them stop coming to Earth. They are doing indescribable harm to people, and they need to be stopped. Can you help?”

A flicker of emotion flitted across the Cat’s face; annoyance? “You assume much, Commander Smith. But at least you are sure of yourself, in the ways that count here. Anyway, I can’t help you. It isn’t my place to interfere with the goings on of Wonderland.”

“What do you call giving me the key?” I asked indignanty.

“I call that interfering with your goings on.” He said snobbishly. “If you want to find the
source of the madness in your world and this one, I suggest you find the Red Queen. She knows everything that happens here, but I can’t guarantee that she will cooperate.”

“Of course,” Erwin breathed. “The Red Queen. She is always the culprit, in the stories. It makes sense.”

“Yes.” Ches licked his teeth, and I almost got the feeling that he was imagining something horrible happening to Erwin. “It does.”

“Yes, yes, speak with the Rose Queen. She knows things.” A giant white daisy leaned down slowly, her stem creaking like the boughs of a tree. All the flowers were moving slowly, and they all looked terribly uneasy.

“And get out of here. You’ll call unwanted attention if you don’t.” a Rhododendron turned her many faces to us, spinning so all could get a look. They all spoke at once.

A pink peony bowed her head, letting a few huge bugs that really should have been small drop to the ground and scutter away. “Please. Ches, you know we respect your judgment, but we have people to protect too.”

The Cat rolled his eyes. “Don’t worry your empty heads, we’re leaving. Besides, this is their first journey into Wonderland. They haven’t built up an immunity to stay here for very long yet.”

“What do you mean?” Erwin’s deep voice interrupted the conversation between Wonderlanders.

“I mean that Wonderland is a bit like a poison, you limp noodle.” Ches swished his tail angrily; he clearly had no patience whatsoever for Erwin, for whatever reason. “You need to build up an immunity or you will go mad very quickly. Even once you do become somewhat immune, if you stay here long enough you will go absolutely, completely daft. So I suggest you get out of here.”

The Cat leaned in toward the Commander, very nearly pressing their faces together. “Be warned, Erwin Smith. If it’s a war you want, you will get one, and it will be unlike anything the world has ever experienced. But be careful; if you are unsuccessful, you will lose everything, and Wonderland will fall.”

Erwin blinked, before nodding and turning to me expectantly. I sent a fleeting glance to where the Cat stood, seeing the hard edge to it. I knew he disapproved of my bringing people here (except maybe Eren) but I couldn’t just stop them. Not when they were my best chance at redemption.

I drew the symbol into the door, and proceeded to hold it open as everyone filed out, until only Jean and I remained. I gestured questioningly at the door, waiting for him to go.

“Oh no. Partners? Remember? It looks like you’ll need to get the hang of what that means. We go through together. I don’t know you very well yet, but I’m not just leaving you here alone.”

An unfamiliar warmth spread through me, and I fought to keep both a blush and a smile from my face.

“Ok.” I said softly, before linking my fingers with his and passing through the door.
When we landed back at the Compound, Hange was practically screaming their delight, while a very stressed-looking man followed them around, trying very hard to calm them down.

“Well done, Marco. Thank you.” Erwin addressed me directly, before heading off to HQ.

“We took a major risk bringing you with us,” Levi drawled. “We took a risk listening to you at all. That should tell you how desperate we are. You’ll go on a mission with Jean next week; he tells me you’re almost ready to take on an easy one. That doesn’t mean we trust you. But we’ve made a big step, and that means a lot.”

He didn’t wait for me to answer before striding off after Erwin. I turned to Jean, but he just shrugged stiffly, face a little red.

“Woo!” An excited Sasha came over and hit me on the shoulder—hard. “It’s all thanks to you and Eren! Wow!”

The others in the group surrounded me as well, clapping me on the back and offering their congratulations. I could feel my face turn redder and redder, and I tried to deflect their attention as best I could, but it was no use. They didn’t even let me escape after a few minutes; I was engulfed in their group as we made our way to the rec hall, and I was shoved to sit down on a lumpy couch next to Jean and Bertl while they shared stories and laughed and just did things that seemed so wonderfully perfectly normal.

“So, Marco. You used to go to public school, right?” Connie asked from where he was playing a very intense game of ping pong with Mikasa. She was winning.

“Yes, I did.” I smiled, fighting the nerves I was feeling. I tried to shove them down by telling myself that they already all knew about my mother, my nightmares and Wonderland; there was nothing to hide from them, and nothing to be afraid of.

“Why’d you stop? I mean, most of us did, but what about you?”

“I…” I swallowed, cursing myself for the lump in my throat. I couldn’t say it. Come on, stupid, speak up! I was so used to hiding it, and I hadn’t known these people for very long, and I just…”

Seeing my discomfort, Armin spoke up. “I dropped out when I was sixteen, but once you come here they make you finish high school online if you haven’t. My grandpa was killed by the Ex’s.”

“I ran away from home when I was fourteen because I started seeing them after one tried to attack me. No one else believed me, but I ran into Connie on the run, and he had been approached by Captain Levi when he was younger but turned him down because he didn’t buy the story.” Sasha was lying on a bean bag, sharpening a knife as casually as if she were reading a book.

“Well of course I didn’t. Would you? Someone claiming to be a government agent appears and tells you that a fairy tale you read as a kid is real and monsters from it are attacking and killing people, and then asks you to come with them? Of course I didn’t. Until both my parents were attacked, and I hit the road.”

“I…I’m still confused about something.” No one seemed to notice or care that I wasn’t ready to share my story, and I was filled with that warmth again. They weren’t interested in me just because of the mystery of my coming here. They wanted to get to know me. I wondered if
they knew about my delusion from the previous night. Probably. It didn’t seem possible to keep secrets from these people for long.

“What is it?”

“How do you know that they’re trying to attack? You can’t see them, right?”

“Well, if you know how to look, you can see the way the shadows jump around unnaturally. And as for how they attack…you know that feeling you get sometimes, like a sudden chill when the hairs on the back of your neck raise?”

I nodded.

“That’s it. Not every time, because they aren’t that common, but that’s the feeling. That’s them trying to get in. Trying, but failing if you are strong enough to resist. And we think they don’t attack us here because they’re afraid. We all know about them, and how to defeat them, and Eren can even see them. They should be afraid.”

“Oh. Wow.” I looked around the rec room, and I wanted to seize the happiness I felt with these people and bottle it up, to have when my sanity left me. “You all must be really strong.”

Something must have been strange in my voice, because they all paused, just for a second. It was a tiny moment; so insignificant that it might have been a hiccup, but it felt important. It felt like a step.

When I went to bed that night, the darkness didn’t bother me, and I didn’t have any nightmares. The warmth didn’t leave me either, and I hoped it would stick around for a while, despite what I knew lurked in the shadows around us.

Chapter End Notes

Sorry this chap was kinda information-heavy.

All I can think this chapter is how Erwin probably just sits with Levi later that evening and cries about how the Cheshire Cat doesn't like him. Thanks for reading!

EDIT: I am very sorry about the delay on the next chapter; I should have it up as soon as my finals are finished. Thanks! :)

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