



The White Queen

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Category: Erotic, Paranormal, Fantasy, Dark, Horror

Description: The devil owes the Hatter a favor...

...and he knows just what he wants for his prize.

But unless he can corrupt sweet Alice, he cannot claim her—for one cannot steal a soul that isn't tainted. That is... unless an innocent offers it of her own free will.

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Chapter 1

Every childhood memory, every last horror I suffered over the years held one object in common: a stuffed white rabbit. The snowy toy sat on a shelf above my reach, high atop the nursery's sprigged walls. I had many playthings I was not allowed to touch lining that shelf, the china faces of dolls with golden ringlets like mine in plenty. I expressly recall my mother telling me to only look, never touch—that like me, these dolls were expected to remain immaculate and beautiful.

There were many rules in the nursery: I was not permitted to dirty my frock or pinafore, nor was I ever allowed to muss my hair. I was to be always clean, starched, crimped, and expressionless—my overlarge blue eyes lowered in a demure position should someone address me. It was never phrased so bluntly, but even as a small child I understood that, like the jewels of my nursery, my purpose was to serve as a pretty item for others to enjoy.

Often, I was put on display.

When Mama and Papa would throw their soirees, our house transformed into a fairyland—flowers, exotic foods, extra staff bustling about our London brownstone. After dark, the magic of music would seep upstairs, above the crowds of gentlemen in their dress coats and ladies stuffed in taffeta and ribbons. My nanny would spend the entire day preparing me to be seen for five minutes.

In a fresh dress, scratchy lace at my throat and spilling from cuffs of my sleeves, she'd take my hand and lead me down the twisting staircase to where my proud parents waited.

If it were near Christmas or my birthday, all eyes on me, mother would give me a new doll to add to the collection on the shelf. Like clockwork, my arms would reach out and the new toy lain upon them. Always I would thank her for her generosity, tuck the doll carefully under my arm, and then to be sent right back upstairs.

The doll with its cold china face would be taken from me the moment I was restored to the nursery, and placed upon the shelf with its myriad counterparts. I never minded the loss of the bauble. My favorite toys were my miniature porcelain tea set and the worn rocking horse at the foot of my bed.

Though I'd smiled as expected when my mother handed me the cursed thing, truth was the dolls' fixed expressions frightened me.

They judged me.

They had no compassion.

For if they had, why did they permit the stuffed white rabbit to nestle within their ranks?

Right there, at the end of the polished shelf, it lay in wait.

I could not tell you how long it had been up there, or who had given it to me. I could tell you nothing about it.

But I could tell you this—the dolls with their dead stares could be ignored. I could pretend they were not there. The same could not be said of that snowy furred rabbit. Black glass eyes followed me wherever I played, when I napped, dressed, did my toilette. I was always watched... and there was no getting rid of it.

One autumn morning, I had scrounged up the courage to climb atop my bureau and

reach for the cursed thing. I threw it in the fire before my nanny might notice, and I watched it burn.

That afternoon, for the first time in my life, I had felt whole. I had not been afraid of the glass eyes or what they would bring when the house was asleep.

But, when I had returned to my nursery after the daily, elegant tea with my parents, my short-lived bravery died. In fact, I think a part of me died, sank right out from my toes and into the floorboards. The drip, drip, drip of my soul slipping all the way down into the musty root cellar to be lost in the dirt forever.

The rabbit was back, on the shelf innocently sitting, tucked between the dolls that looked like me. The white of its fur was pristine. There was no soot or rips. The glass eyes had not melted; they shone under the lamplight, glowering at me in malice.

One look at the thing, and I had screamed my head off. My nanny had come running, and in the end, I'd earned a whipping for my noise. Like all good children, I was to be seen and never heard.

For the hundredth time, I'd begged her to take the white rabbit away.

My pleas fell on deaf ears.

Every few years, months, weeks... I would pluck up and again try to make my move against the rabbit. I had thrown it out my window and into the street to be run over by carriages and made dirty by the dust and shuffling of strangers. Other times, I had hidden it someplace else in the house: locked it in cabinets, buried it in the attic, set it upon the bed in the surly maid's room. The rabbit always came back.

I don't know why. I never know the why of anything.

Night after night that rabbit would infect my little nursery with evil. Tucked into my bed, alone, the house would be soundless save the ticking of the grandfather clock downstairs: tick-tock, tick-tock, tick-tock, tick-tock, louder and louder. No steam engine could have roared through the halls as furiously as that screaming timepiece.

Covers to my chin, wide blue eyes would dart to and fro. Though the noise was wretched, I longed for it to continue into eternity. I would rather feel it vibrate through my bones than face what came when silence cut that screaming racket like a knife. When evil came, that cranking cog of noise vanished, leaving the ears ringing and sense unhinged. Then I would be trapped in deafening silence, with only the sound of blood racing through my veins to warn me danger had arrived.

Silence was unsafe.

The dark was a living thing, monstrous. The thin slice of moonlight cutting through the curtains offering no succor. Casting the shape of my window's panes against the papered wall, that scant light illuminated a single horrid thing.

If I let my gaze stray, peeked just a little to the right, I would see something that should not be.

The rabbit's stitched head had turned, those flat glass eyes staring right at me. And then they would come.

The first time I'd seen her grace my nursery, I had been very little—so very young. The apparition was naked, slender—a young woman, her shoulders hunched forward in the shadows. Long hair, tangled and matted, hung messy to her waist. Every bit of her bared body was covered in dripping blood. Before her, she'd rub her slippery hands together, pacing back and forth, a terrible clicking coming from her throat.

One sight of her, and I had wet the bed.

Hours stretched by, her dark eyes shining behind the wet tangles of blood drenched hair, watching me, waiting. The monster's prowl endless, I cowered in sodden covers, tracking her every step.

In my heart I knew that to place even a toe from that bed, to consider running for my nanny, would be the end

of me. I didn't dare breathe. I knew that naked, bloody woman wanted badly to hurt me.

At daybreak, when my nanny arrived to prepare me for the day she scolded me soundly for dirtying the sheets. I was marched in my soiled nightdress before my parents, intruding upon their private breakfast so that they too might echo the castigations.

I had tried to tell them that there had been someone in my room. I tried to make them hear me. My father had scowled, his waxed mustache twitching in anger.

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Tantrums and melodramatics were not to be tolerated. I had earned myself a spanking and a day locked away in my room, made to lie on the same wet bed, where every time I closed my eyes, I was certain bloody hands would slip from some dark corner to strangle me.

Even after a sleepless night, even with the safety of the sun bright in my room, I could not find rest. It was too wet and cold, my blankets smelled, and I was ashamed of myself.

It was not until twilight that the maid came to change my sheets and dress me in a clean gown for sleeping.

She should not have bothered.

The tick-tock, tick-tock, tick-tock, of the grandfather clock crashed through the house so loud, so very loud I was certain the whole city must have heard that drumming.

Before I was fully prepared, before my childish prayers to Jesus were done, all went quiet.

Swallowing, I cut a glance where I should never have looked. Up high on the shelf, moonlight showing the perfect white fur, the rabbit had once again turned its head to watch me.

The woman was coming back, I knew it. She was coming and she'd figured out how to rip open my throat.

But then there was no wet slap of her sodden feet on the floor. No chesty, clicking breaths.

All was quiet and I began to breathe easy. It had just been a bad dream; the rabbit must always have been facing my direction. My papa was right; I was just a silly little girl full of nonsense.

I was so very wrong.

There were worse things than the bloody woman.

In the silence, I heard a pair of soft, childish giggles. Spider-like hands crept up the side of my bed, fisting my covers.

Something was under my bed!

With a terrible yank, my blankets began to be dragged under the mattress, the childish laughter growing mean. I tried to make a grab for my only defense, but whatever was hidden beneath me was so much stronger. In vain, I toppled to the floor. Before I might clamber back up, hands shot out from the dark space under my bed, encircled my ankles, and yanked my little body across the floor.

Next thing I knew I was stuffed under my bed, prodded and scratched by the unseen nightmare.

Unlike the evening before when I had kept silent, doing my best not to draw the red woman's attention, I screamed. No one heard, no one came to save me. Scrambling to claw my way free, I fought and I kicked. My gown was ripped, white ruffles torn right off. I got myself to the nursery corner. Pressed my boney shoulders into the tasteful wallpaper and stared around the room, knees knocking together.

My arms smarted, my legs. I had been scratched so badly there were bleeding cuts all over me.

Then I saw them.

The first one leapt upon my bed and began jumping. The other took my sheet, threw it over his head, and ran about the room like a shrouded ghost. Two little boys... they were just two little half-dressed, emaciated boys.

Chortling as he bounded up and down on my mattress, the cruel-eyed waif grinned at me. His teeth had been filed into points, sharp and sinister. Looking at my wrist, I could see the bite marks those teeth had left behind—little puncture wounds that did not bleed much, but stung so badly my eyes watered.

His cohort was exactly the same.

The remainder of the night I spent pressed back against that corner. Sometimes I think the demented pair forgot I was there, or they had grown bored of me. They would play their vicious games. Turning their claws and teeth on one another, the scamps crashed about my room—knocking toys from shelves, breaking things.

When they would pull apart from their fighting, again they would turn their beady-eyed stare at me.

Snarls turned to giggles. In seeing my terror, the boys had found a new game to play. Trying to trick me, the pair of them worked in unison to sneak, to make a grab at my hands or feet, to drag me back screaming under the bed. My knees were bruised, elbows too, from all the times I had fallen trying to break free and hide from the pair of devils.

They were more cunning than one tired little girl.

After hours, I grew too shattered to fight back. Powerless, they took me by the ankles, and rolled my body in the sheets. Tangled in dark, I could hardly breathe. They were trying to crush me, giggling in their work as I groaned and begged them to stop stomping on my back.

When my nanny came to rouse me, I was still twisted in my blankets, crammed under the frame of my bed.

My room was a wreck. Standing meekly, I told my nanny that two boys had done it all. She did not believe a word.

I got the strap and no supper.

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Night came. I had another visitor, and the next night, and the next—all of them dangerous, all of them horrid.

I never knew rest. While London found the peace of sleep and sweet dreams, I was awake and plagued.

No matter the lessons I was taught every Sunday in church, no matter how hard I'd silently prayed to God, nothing changed.

The older I grew, it was easy to grasp that God could not possibly exist. Either that or he hated me.

My singular desire in life was no longer for toys, or sweets, or even the attention of my parents. All I wanted was sleep.

In the daylight hours, I would sneak to my mama's bed. I would crawl under the covers while she was gone, bury myself behind the pillows where I might not be noticed. The household always found me. I was always tugged out of the soft nest, my dress and pinafore straightened.

Then there were lessons. I had to go to all my lessons.

How else would I learn to be a lady?

Letters and numbers, the inky curl forming each mark was of utmost importance. Mama loved to see my little writings; the more elegant they grew the more she would praise me. Then there was the harp. Every day for three hours I was at the mercy of a

mean, old crone with a walking stick she wielded like a switch.

I would inevitably start to doze during each lesson. Almost daily, I earned three smacks across the palms from that blasted cane.

It got to the point that her smacks no longer provoked so much as a whimper from my throat. They were nothing compared to what might wait for me once the dark came and the rabbit turned its head.

The bloody woman was a regular visitor. She paced, she clicked, and so long as I watched her, she could not slip nearer. If I closed my eyes, if I accidentally dozed, she would edge just a little bit closer.

I had to stay awake.

There was another one who came often. Unlike the bloody woman, he did not have to be watched. Unlike the horrible little boys, he didn't scratch or bite. He never tried to take my covers. The man with a paunch like my father would do nothing but sit in the room's distant rocking chair and creak the thing back and forth, laughing so loud I had to cover my ears.

Lumpy face pinched, maniacal in his tone and cadence, on and on he would shriek peels of unsettling mirth.

He stared at me the whole time. He pointed at me... laughing and laughing and laughing.

With all that racket, the rocking chair, the cackles, I could not sleep no matter how hard I tried. Little hands pressed to my ears, I would rock in time with him, unable to keep my thoughts clear, feeling as if I were growing ill.

More often than naught, I'd vomit.

Even though he turned my stomach, I didn't mind him nearly as much as I hated the boys. The dirty pair would play the cruelest jokes. Their laughter was different from the fat, old laughing man. The boys, they sounded so innocent but were so very corrupt.

Over the years I saw more and more of them, their rotted teeth on display behind grins of mi

schief. And as I grew taller, they grew more violent.

They liked to bite.

They loved to scratch.

They left marks on me that I was punished for the next morning. Good girls were not supposed to itch themselves raw in sleeping fits. Good girls were always to be tidy.

Of all my nightly visitors, I hated the boys the most.

Night in and night out, while I waited for the rabbit to turn my way, I would lay there and wonder. Would it be the bloody woman, would it be the laughing man... would it be those horrid boys?

How many bruises would I have to explain away? How much more would my nanny hate me? How many more disappointed looks would I get from Mama and Papa when they were told of how I'd wet the bed, or torn my nightclothes, or marked my pretty face—that face, with high cheeks and long lashed eyes... it had to be intact.

It was my only significance in this household.

My mother loved my face. As I grew more troublesome, I think it was the one thing about me she did like.

Chapter 2

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“Poor, sweet, Alice.” A song bearing my name came from the shadowed corner where my little table was set with my precious tiny tea set. “Did that red woman scare you?” In the dim light, I could barely make out what waited.

It was a man, far too tall to be seated at my play table. His knees bent up, spread apart so he might fit. He seemed ridiculously tall, though all adults looked large to children.

His trousers were striped in alternating black and white from his hips, over his knobby knees, down to scuffed shoes. On his shoulders and around his waist was a green velvet coat. His shirt and cravat were yellowed, crinkled, and not at all pretty no matter how big the bow he had tied. Atop his head was a hat like my father wore when he went out in the evenings with Mama.

It was black beaver, hinting at a dint if one looked close enough, and greyed by dust.

He reached for the teapot and poured, holding out the cup he had filled for me, as if I might creep from the bed to play with him.

This one was new, and I knew better than to trust.

I would not move.

Voice dropping impossibly low, he growled, “You don’t need to be afraid of her, you know. She can’t even speak.” Lifting his chin, the man drew his finger across his throat. “Her head was cut clean off. All shhheeee can do is garble. Cracking fun to watch.” He poured more imaginary tea into my cup and held it even farther towards

me. “Don’t ever let her touch you though.”

Blinking, feeling the sleepy crust in my eyes, I whispered, “Why?”

“Madder than a march hare, that one. The Red Queen, she’s something special. A true psychopath. Do you know that word, sweet Alice?”

I shook my head no.

“Your skin... she’ll take yours, tie it in knots, and wear it on her head like a hat.” He’d said it in a way that his yellow eyes bugged, his singsong almost silly as he pointed to his head.

Giddy as I was, I giggled.

Looking back now, I see that I should not have done it. All it did was invite more from the monster. “And the boys... they are naughty, naughty boys, aren’t they?”

I nodded frantically, clutching at my bedsheets. My arms were still marked with healing reminders of their claws. Under the covers, I had teeth marks on my ankles.

“Don’t whimper, good, little girl. Come here and have your tea. I’ll keep the rest away tonight.”

I’d seen a puppet show on the street once on a rare occasion when I’d been allowed to accompany Mama on a special trip outside. The marionettes had been controlled by strings. That was how I felt when my covers peeled back and I dared step a stocking foot out of my bed.

I went to that table and I sat across from the tall, grey-skinned man.

His arm holding out my tiny cup was motionless, abnormally unmoving. Reaching forward, I gingerly took the saucer, the edges of my pinky brushing his grip on the plate.

The man with long sideburns, grinned, he stared, and I cowered.

“What is wrong with your fingers?”

There was a bruise across my knuckles, my palms were blistered. Fat tears collected in my eyes, and my pouted lip began to shake. It had been such a terrible day. When I’d dozed during my lessons, the hag who taught me harp had cracked my hands with her cane again.

I wanted to please my parents. I wanted to be good. But I could not help but fall asleep at my lessons.

Where I held the tea cup, the man in the dirty hat reached forward. His finger caught the end of my pinky and drew it up in mimicry of how fine ladies held their libations. “Your tea will get cold.”

“I don’t like the boys. They get me in so much trouble!”

“They are easy to tame. When they poke at you,” his grin, the edges of his mouth shifted enough to take all mirth from the expression. Instead, he looked utterly scary, “give them each a hard smack in the face.”

They were bigger than me, and so much stronger. When I kicked, they bit. When I clawed, they squeezed.

Before I might complain on the topic, the man poured himself a measure of the invisible tea and held up his cup. I sipped in mirror to his movements. He’d made

slurping noises and smacked his lips, declaring the flavor superb. My frown grew less severe.

At my shy smile, those yellow eyes became alive in a way the rest of him was decidedly not. “Alice, be a good girl and drink all your tea.”

“It’s good tea, sir.”

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“I’m the Hatter. No need to call me sir. We are to be very close, you and I.” The curls at his temples as messy as the blunt ends of his hair at the nape of his neck, my latest visitor posed so I might take him in. Again, he gave a full lipped smile. “As I was saying, little dear, the Red Queen that makes you cry and wet the bed. Do not, under any circumstances, let her touch you. She wants you for herself.”

I took another sip, unexpectedly warm and about ready to nod off right before the lanky, strange man. “The man who laughs? Does he want to wear me like a hat?”

“No.” There was an extended, disheartening pause. “That is not what he wants.”

“The boys?”

My visitor smirked. “Want to play.”

The whine in my voice made the complaint pathetic. “Sir, I don’t want to play. I am so tired... all I want is sleep.”

He reached over the little table and traced my pinky again, following the line of bone from knuckle to nail. He marveled at it. “I can give you that.”

“Really? You’ll let me sleep. No laughing? You won’t take my covers, or walk around the bed hissing at me?”

Unfolding like a cricket ready to spring, the man grew tall. “I’ll just stand here and watch.”

I scrambled out of the chair so quickly it fell over. Up in the bed, the covers tugged to my chin, the grinning monstrosity leaned over me. Yellow eyes unblinking, he looked over the shape of my body under the quilt. "Shall I pat your head, child?"

"Mama gets vexed when I muss my hair."

The man did not seem at all pleased with my answer. "Are you sure?" He held his hand up, the long, knobby fingers hovering over the top of my head. "All little girls like to be tucked in."

Shrinking into the mattress, I shook my head.

To my ultimate relief he withdrew his hand and did exactly what he'd said he'd do. He stood at the side of my bed and stared down. My eyelids slipped closed, my breath changed, and for the first night in ages, I found sleep.

Chapter 3

"Look, sir." Mouth open so my playmate might see what all the fuss was about, I used my tongue to wiggle a very loose tooth. "When it falls out, the tooth fairy will visit, and I'll get a penny under my pillow. The new maid who builds the fires told me so this morning."

Eyes narrowed so that the yellow glow of my friend's stare was dimmed, he craned his neck forward and peered into my mouth. "I don't see anything."

"What do you mean?" I wiggled the tooth more frantically with my tongue, proud. "It's going to fall out any moment."

"What is?"

In a pique, I pointed to my tooth. “This!”

Long fingers released his tea cup and reached over our shared table. Just before reaching my lips, he hesitated. It was not until I opened my mouth wider in invitation that the pad of his pointer depressed my tongue. He grinned, positively gleeful, running a touch that tasted of dust over every last one of my teeth.

I wanted to spit him out, anything to get that awful taste from my mouth, but even more, I wanted him to find the tooth and share my joy.

At last, his probe behind my lips found the loose tooth. After a quick pinch, he yanked.

The immediate taste of blood overpowered the flavor of moldy dirt. He had stolen my tooth, right out of my skull!

Already in a state of tears, eyes wet from his betrayal, I cried, “It’s mine! The tooth fairy won’t come if you don’t give it back to me!”

He was holding it up to the sliver of street light that penetrated the curtains, inspecting my tooth like a diamond. Ignoring my protests and weeping, he hummed. “There is no tooth fairy for you. Which one of them do you think would make way for your pathetic apparition? The boys would tear her wings off. The Red Queen would rip out her guts. The laughing man... you don’t want to know what he’d do to her.”

I had not cared about the penny that should have been left under my pillow, all that my little mind had clung to was that a fairy would come to my room. Fairies were good, she’d let me sleep, keep me safe for one whole night from the others.

From the glint in the Hatter’s eyes, I could see he knew my thoughts and was

offended deeply by them. “I will give you the two pennies in my pocket for the tooth.”

He’d imprisoned my tooth in a tight fist, his other hand delving into his waistcoat.

“No.”

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Hissing like a snake, he chastised me roundly. “You bad, thankless, Alice. There will be no more tea for you!”

I could see in him an impatience I had not noticed in our earlier play

time. Had his skin not been grey and dusty, I am sure it would have burned red in anger.

The bloody woman had kept me up all night the previous evening, the laughing man stealing my sleep the night before that. I was tired, and heartbroken there would be no tooth fairy in my future. In a tantrum, I threw my teapot, happy to see it roll and bounce over the floor.

Instantly I sat full of regret.

The handle had broken off. Even with it lying all the way across the room, I could see a great chip in the spout. My tears fell for another reason.

What had I done? My favorite toy was spoiled.

A great roar and the man was standing over me. “Open your mouth, Alice, and I’ll shove your precious tooth back in. I’ll then tell the boys to come. Oh, how they love to play with you.”

“NO!”

He was not done with me, not by a long shot. “The Red Queen then? Is it her

company you prefer to mine?”

This night was not going right at all. The Hatter was the funny one who liked to share my tea and lean over side of my bed as I slept. He was the one who always wanted to pat my curls, and offered over and over to tuck me in. It was not his part to yell and scare me.

That was what the others were for.

“You want the Cheshire, the fat man? He can drive you as mad as he is with that laugh!”

I fell to my knees before my friend. “Please, I just want my tooth back.”

His chin went to his chest, eyes blazing. “I’ve already lost it.”

I pointed to his clenched fist. “Sir, it’s in your hand, there.”

His boney fingers uncurled and it was there, my stolen tooth and a little mark of my blood resting on his cracked palm. “So it is.” His viscous mouth turned into a half-cocked smirk. “I’ll tell you what, child. I’ll trade it to you.”

I nodded, earnest to have my chance at the fairy. “Yes.”

The turbulence was gone from his barking. He’d grown contemplative and sedate. “I want to kiss your cheek.”

I had never particularly enjoyed it when the Hatter put his icy touch on my pinky. Every time he’d handed me a teacup he would trace my baby finger over and over before I was allowed to hold the saucer myself. I had definitely not at all liked his finger in my mouth, and was certain if his face was near mine, his breath would reek

of dead things. Even so, I turned my head and presented the side of my face.

There was no kiss, not at first. Instead, I heard the clink of my stolen tooth being dropped into my cup. Before I could turn my head to make sure he was not playing some trick on me, the Hatter clicked his tongue. I remained still, my eyes, of course, locked upon the white rabbit.

I jumped at the touch of ice on my face, fingers colder than death tracing the bones of my jaw and eye socket.

“Do you know how many years I’ve been coming to visit, Alice?”

One? Maybe two? It was hard to say. One night bled into the next... an endless loop of sleepless murk.

“An eternity, sweet Alice.” He was utterly indulged, touching my face as I’d never let him before. “Are you not happy to have me?”

I favored him immensely over the others. “You are the only friend I have. I even told Mama and Papa about you.”

“Yessssss, yeeeeesssss, that is what I am. I am your friend.” His stole his kiss, but he missed his mark, pressing his lips to the corner of my mouth instead. “And friends give presents to one another, do they not?”

His mouth had been wet and I’d shivered, longing to wipe the back of my hand over the smear of spit he’d left behind. “They do.”

“Then will you not give me the tooth as a token of our friendship? It would make me very cheerful.”

He had taken his seat again, his knees high and his hat crooked. I turned away from the horrid rabbit and looked to my cup. In the small porcelain bowl laid my bloody tooth.

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It was a currency, I could see that. With it, I might buy leniency from the Hatter's temper. Still I was very unhappy to hand it over,

Pushing the cup closer to my guest, eyes downcast and voice timid, I said, "You may have it."

"I will be much better to you than any fairy..."

No, he wouldn't. I let out a sigh and watched his fingers dart out to pocket my offering. He was grinning again, tapping his toes as he crooked a finger at the broken teapot across the room. It flew to his hand like a darting bird flies to a tree.

Mouth agape, I almost fell out of my chair.

It lacked a handle and he had to hold it with his great long fingers curled around the teapot like a spider. Even so he poured.

Steaming tea came out the spout.

"I have made you cold. You need a warm drink."

What was this magic? First, the tea pot came at his call, and now there was real tea in my cup.

"Take your cup now. Be a good girl."

I did as I was told, mesmerized and delighted. The tea was at my lips, I sipped

daintily, pinky up just like he had taught me.

I knew the flavor, he'd created my favorite variety, and indeed, it did warm me. The fluid mingled with the grit in my mouth, with the blood, and washed both away.

Chapter 4

"You look a mess, Alice." My mother buttered her toast, angry to see the dark circles under my eyes, made all the worse against my sallow pallor. "It's positively shameful."

Dutiful, I smoothed my pinafore and kept my eyes downcast. For years I had heard the same castigation that I had grown less beautiful than before. "I am sorry, Mama."

She was fresh in peach silk, her golden hair arranged to showcase her glowing health and beauty. "Do you not think you are too old for nightmares and the abuses you heap on your nanny? Most girls your age have outgrown their governess, they speak Latin and French... yet you still wet the bed."

The shame I felt at her words, if I could have sunk into the fine dining chair and burst into a puff of dust, I would have welcomed it. "I told you, Mama. It wasn't me who wet the bed. It was the boys. They did it right in front of me."

My father slammed down his fork, the china on the table clattering. "That is enough of your outlandish tales!"

"Are you going to tell us these imaginary boys scratched you too?" Eyes the same shade of cornflower as mine, looked down to where my sleeve showed a hint of my wrist. The edges of a scabbed line of scratches peeked out for my mother to frown at. "That you did not do that to yourself?"

No one ever believed me. “I didn’t.”

“These imaginary friends of yours, at your age, it is an embarrassment to our family!”

I had heard them talking, my parents, the servants, about my oddness. I had heard them call me strange and wicked, and I had cried to the Hatter on the nights he came to see me, and I had tried to be the most obedient student even with my awful harp teacher.

“Please listen to me, Mama.” For a moment, I thought to beg my mother to hear me, and then the sad weight of inevitability sank deep into my belly. They were tired of my stories and excuses. I vexed them, my nanny had grown to hate me, and there was no point in any of it. So I lied, hoping it might make them happy. “There are no boys. I wet the bed.” The lie tasted worse than the dirty fingers the Hatter liked to put in my mouth during our games. “It was I who cracked the mirror on my bureau, and I who put the frog in Nanny’s chamber pot. I confess.”

My bid for mercy had been for nothing. My mother’s head, her hair piled up and shining, was turned away from me. “Go to your room, girl. I cannot even look upon you anymore.”

Standing, I followed decorum even as I asked a question to which I already knew the answer. “Am I to be excluded from the Christmas party tonight?”

It was the first time I’d been considered old enough to stand and be seen by the guests. I had been coached for months. My mama had even had a dress special made for me. I wanted to eat ice cream and watch the musicians, and be anywhere other than the nursery.

Papa scoffed. “Acting out as you do, how could you possi

bly imagine we would allow you to attend?”

The injustice broke my heart.

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Resentful of my parents' scolding, a desire for fairness inspired me to do something truly naughty. After a day of sulking at my mistreatment, I'd stolen into my nanny's room and scampered off with the fancy dress I was no longer going to be allowed to wear, and hid it in my toy box. Before the first guests might arrive, my nanny turned the key and locked me away for the night. No one would look in upon me when more fun could be had elsewhere. So, while the music was jolly downstairs, and the servants were distracted with their own festivities, I pulled glimmering blue silk over my mottled shoulders, arms like a monkey to work all the buttons, so I might spin around and pretend I was a part of it.

Intensely careful, I had made sure not to crease the silk or so much as smudge the lace. I had even wound my hair up as Mama did, pins haphazard and curls falling prettily.

Even with the large crack through my mirror, I could see the fractured image of a beautiful girl—a miniature lady with ruffles and bows, golden ringlets, and sapphire eyes.

The party, my party, I'd have alone. I knew the simple steps of a waltz, I could imagine a prince, a castle, garlands and flowers around me. I could dance in my dress, talk to a string of suitors, and know that everyone loved me.

Distracted in my games, I played too late. I was still in the gown when the grandfather clock ticked, and the noise shook my walls.

Oh no...

My every intention had been to take off the pretty dress and get into bed before the clock sounded, but I'd grown lost in pretend, frolicking around my room as princesses must dance around their castles.

I'd been given less than three ticks before the rabbit turned his head and my visitor appeared.

"How comely you look, sweet Alice. What is the occasion?"

Relief it was not the evil boy was short lived, for the dust on my playmate... if he were to so much as stand close, would spoil the dress.

"There was a Christmas party tonight." I sighed, certain I had made a foolish decision by taking the gown. My parents would never let me out of my room now. "I was to go, but... Mama changed her mind."

Eyes glowing yellow, smirk earnest, the Hatter tapped his fingers upon his chin. "Turn around. Let me get a good look at you."

One pirouette, then I smiled, fluttered my eyelashes as my mother had taught me, and gave a curtsy. "Do you really think I look fine?"

"Almost grown up, Alice."

The compliment set my cheeks to aching, my grin was so large. "I was to have ice-cream and dance with the sons of my father's friends. They are downstairs making merry..." my smile faded, and again I felt utterly left out. "I'm never going to get to grow up."

Spreading his hands before him, the Hatter offered an extended bow, going to far as to whip off his hat and flourish it to the side. "May I have this dance?"

Who would ever know that I'd had my fun? Settling my fingers into his cold palm, for a split second, I did not care if he smeared dust on my dress. At least he was kind to me.

He looked at our conjoined hands and seemed unreservedly taken. Speaking as if in wonder, he muttered, "It's the first time you've ever touched my hand. Now yours is mine to hold when I will."

Before I could reply, he yanked me forward and set an arm to my waist. Flailing our arms in a ridiculous fashion as he hummed bars of silly music and had me laughing so hard, I failed to notice his other long-fingered palm had dirtied the velvet sash at my waist. We caterwauled, hopped to and fro, and masqueraded as king and queen of our very own wonderland. Once I was breathless and dizzy he spun us to the table. The Hatter plopped down in the low chair so quickly that I fell after him.

He caught me before my face might meet the floor, and propped my flailing person at once upon his boney knee.

Yellow teeth on display his grin was so large, his dusty voice rumbled low and scratchy. "Now look at this, sweet Alice. First your hand, and now you sit upon my lap. For that you must have a treat."

Jostled by the repeated twitch of his thigh, I thought of the rare times my father had bounced me on his knee. I was too big for such baby games. Ladies sat in their own chair; they were prim and proper, not oddly balanced on a bumping leg.

Flustered, I fanned at my face and moved to stand. The Hatter took my hand, pulling me right back down to his lap so hard I omphed.

He chatted, ignoring my squirming, and reached for something past me on the table. "You mentioned ice cream? Do you want something sweet on your tongue?"

It was then I finally noticed the state of what had once been a beautiful gown. Smeared and dusty, the blue had grown dull. It was a mess. “You’re getting dirt all over my dress, sir.”

Tutting, the Hatter jostled me once more. “I could undo the buttons at your back. Take it off if you think it more important than I.”

His suggestion wasn’t a terrible idea, but I didn’t want his dirty hands, the caked grit under his fingernails black, making the satin covered buttons as foul as his shirt. “What do you do to get so dirty each day?”

Pulling a face, the Hatter, pouted. “These are my finest garments.”

“So they are.” I giggled. “But as dusty as the grave.”

Wagging a finger in my face, he teased. “We have to put the bodies somewhere... if I left them out, everything would start to smell.”

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Silliness was my favorite sentiment he might grace me with, and I smiled. “I just remembered, I have a present for you.” I leapt from his lap before he might catch me, and ran to my bureau drawer. Rummaging through, I found my hidden prize and pranced back to the table. Taking my seat, I put a hand stitched drawstring bag between us.

I had made it myself, just for him.

“I have lost my last two baby teeth.” Scooting the parcel forward, I smiled at the blue satin bow and how clever I was. “I know how much you like them.”

Cocking a brow, wrinkles pinched on his forehead, the man at my table refused the gift. “Why would I want your teeth?”

“What?” No, that could not be right. I had saved them so faithfully just for him. Even the blue velvet ribbon I had pilfered from the dressmaker to make the present pretty. “But... you were happy when I gave you the others.”

Frown deepening, his eyes narrowed and our games were at an end. “But these already fell out. You’ve even washed the blood away. I want things from you that I take or shove in. I want them warm from your body and wet with your juices.”

The Hatter’s rejection of my gift had hurt my feelings, more importantly, his wacky ramblings had gone over my head.

I’d had enough discord for the day. I decided to ignore the whole thing, lifting up my sad, broken tea pot, I pretended all was easy between us and poured a serving in my

friend's waiting cup. "One lump or two?"

"Take off the dress, Alice. You want to be grown up. It's been long enough. Give me that instead of old teeth."

Eyes glued to the table, I reached for the sugar and asked, again, "One lump or two."

"Two." The word was growled, despoiled in anger... and sounding oddly far away.

I had misjudged the level of his temper, for though the Hatter had threatened such a recourse in the past, he'd never followed through. That was how they were able to get me so easily. Before I might defend myself, one had me by the hair, the other barging forward to send all three of us crashing to the floor.

The boys, the horrible twins, had crept from some dark corner, and my friend, my Hatter, had abandoned me to make way for them.

Blue silk, rich velvet, all of it was torn to pieces. That was their game that night. By morning it looked as if the blossoms of a cherry tree had fallen to scatter all over my floor, my furnishings, the fragments of silk too numerous to be gathered up and hidden before my nanny might come.

By noon, the entire household heard about what I had done to the dress.

A little rough for wear considering the previous evening's festivities, my father was the one to attend to my punishment. He took the strap to me himself. He called me a disgrace.

It had been a long time since I'd cried so hard.

Chapter 5

“It cannot be allowed to continue any more. We have tried and tried, but there is no correcting her.”

Ear pressed to the door, I listened to my mother’s complaints, on my father’s harrumphing, and on a stranger’s opinions on why I must be sent away.

“I have no doubt that your Alice can be made well. She’s not the first young lady exhibiting this level of hysterics. My asylum is just the place to set her right.”

“If word were ever to get out that we had her committed, it would ruin us.” My mother sniffed and I knew she was crying, but not for me. She was weeping for herself. “The shame would be unbearable.”

“Rothfield Asylum is secluded in the country. We pride ourselves on the rigorous application of privacy for both our patients and their families.” The man spoke with confidence, eloquent and genuine. “Many families choose to tell friends and connections that their loved one is away on holiday... Italy, Spain, France. You may decide that for yourselves. A few months, maybe a year in my care, and she will be returned to you in glowing health. It will appear as if she’s summered in the continent.”

The terms in which the stranger spoke were beyond my comprehension. I had never heard of an asylum or hysterics, all I could glean was that my parents wanted to send me away. Even suffering immense hurt at the idea of it, a part of me could not imagine that anywhere could be worse than where I already was.

Except that I would be even more alone.

It had been years since the dress incident. It had been years since a member of the household was pleased with my presence.

I was the walking condemned. I hardly spoke, I rarely ate, and I could not recall the last time I'd shut my eyes to find sleep.

It had been longer still since I'd seen the Hatter. Before my parents had considered casting me off, he had abandoned me first. Without his presence, I knew no peace at night. It made me resent him, hate him, for letting me believe he had ever been my friend.

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The things that came in his place... It was no longer just the foul twins, the Red Queen, and the laughing man. There were others, a fresh hell each night.

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There was not a piece of furniture in my room that was not splintered, or a wall that was unmarked by my scraping fingernails when I tried to flee. The sprigged wallpaper that had once been so pretty, was in tatters. My mattress was now kept on the floor, stinking of old urine... and spattered blood.

“I cannot comment on her level of treatment until I might observe the patient myself. Do send her in.”

My father was the one to fetch me, his red face warning that I was to behave before his guest. He led me into the dayroom by a grip on my thin shoulder and stood me before a grey-haired stranger.

Blue eyes cast to the rug, I stared unblinking at the polished shoes of the one they wanted to give me to.

He set his hands to his knees and leaned forward. “She is a pretty thing.”

It was expected for me to softly smile at the compliment. I did so robotically. “Thank you, sir.”

“Look at me, Alice.”

Older than my father, but more sturdy by half, sat a well-dressed man with grey hair and thick sideburns. Tidy hair oiled back, he smelled of cigars and rosewater. I met his eyes, uncomfortable with the practice, and tried to keep my fingers from fidgeting in my skirts.

“Very pretty indeed, but why is she dressed like a child at her age?”

My father’s disgust at having to speak on such topics was obvious. “So long as she behaves as a child, she will be treated as one.”

The old stranger addressed me directly. “Do you want to wear stylish clothing and be presented to society, Alice? Is that something you look forward to?”

“Yes, sir.” I wanted that more than anything. A true smile, one born of hope came to my lips as I glanced to where my mother sat. “And to wear my hair up like Mama.”

My mother cleared her throat, pretty blue eyes whirring about the dayroom, landing on anything but me. “She may behave in childish ways, Sir Rothfield, but Alice is accomplished with the harp. Her penmanship is flawless. We have done all we could to craft the girl into a lady in preparation of her coming out.”

The stranger kept his brown eyes upon me, measuring something I could not grasp, but spoke to my parents. “Has she ever grown violent? Has your daughter harmed the staff or struck one of you?”

At this, my mother seemed unsure how to answer. She shook her head, but frowned. “No. Alice is meek. It’s herself she harms, wreaks havoc upon her room, her clothing, her furnishings.” Softness left her voice and she barked, her face sour. “Show him your arms, girl.”

Turning my wrists upward, I lifted my sleeves. Forearms gnawed with teeth marks, marked with scratches, were pale and mottled in bruises.

“It’s a wonder she has all her fingernails today. The girl is usually missing at least one. She bites them down to nubs.”

The old man leaned forward, perusing the map of injuries on my forearm. “Yet still finds a way to scratch herself? Singular. When she is in these fits, is her demeanor much changed?”

My mother was at a loss for words, her explanation half-formed. “You see, ummm, she waits until alone. We’ve never seen...”

“And who is charged to watch her in the evening hours?”

“She is locked away to keep her mischief contained. Her nanny sleeps in the room beside her, and has never once heard a thing. It’s deviousness on Alice’s part, she plots, then blames her destruction on phantasms.”

Bushy brow lifting in my direction, the stranger prodded me for an explanation. “Is this true, Alice?”

I had not been exposed to a new person in ages, and somewhere under my silence and melancholy, a horrible screw of hope twisted around and around. Foolishly, I sought help. “It is not I, sir. It’s the ones the rabbit brings. They torment me night after night.”

Eyes narrowing in thought, the man hummed to himself. “Delusions... self-harm... paranoia... general hysterics.”

My father finally added to the conversation. “Can you set her right?”

“Of course!” Jovial, a smile was offered to my father, and the stranger even let his eyes twinkle in my mother’s direction. “Tell me, has Alice begun her monthly courses?”

My face must have grown as red as a beetroot.

“Five years now.” Even my mother was uncomfortable with such forthright talk to a male. “It was a very upsetting time.” Lowering her voice as if another might hear the terrible thing my mother was about to confess, she whispered, “She claimed that some bloody woman was pulling things out of her. At night, Alice refuses to attend to it and bleeds all over the bed, her clothing.”

That was a half-truth. That was not what I had said to my mother the first time I had found blood on my sheets. And I only bled freely when my courses came unexpected and I was unable to creep from my bed. For every evening my womb cramped, I could rely on a very specific guest: the Red Queen.

Four nights she’d circled my bed, and then the day the blood had ceased, a rare visit from the Hatter had come instead. He’d been stalking the floor in the same manner of the naked bloody woman.

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Disapproving, cutting me a sideways glare, he'd hissed, "Stand up and let me get a look at you."

I was self-conscious to do it, afraid small dots of remnant blood may have marked my night rail, or that he would find fault in the state of my face as my mother had only that morning. My hair was still golden, and it was long and full, but the rest of me was far less glorious. Wan, dark circles under my eyes and bruises on my face, I was unpretty. I had grown taller, the baby softness of my cheek gone, and my limbs felt lanky and awkward. "We have not shared tea in quite some time, sir."

He ignored my cheek and my bitterness, yellow eyes running over my form from toes to crown. "Your gown is ripped and worn. Half the lace is spoiled. Do I not deserve better?"

Everything he claimed was true. My night clothes were tattered, my ankles on display because the skirt was too short. "I am not to enjoy new things until I cease ruining what I have already been given. But I am not the one who spoils them. The horrid boys always grab at—."

The Hatter stopped abruptly and spun to stand over me. "But, you've let the Red Queen touch you too... we all know it! You let her slide her slimy hands around your throat."

I vehemently disagreed. "That is not true! Only the boys wring my neck. It is them I have to thank for this bruise under my eye."

The weight of the Hatter's disapproval sat on me like a pile of rocks. There was

something disgusting in his voice, something very bad. “Lies. I can smell the blood from here.”

I knew what he spoke of, and it had nothing to do with the one he called Red Queen. Cheeks flaming, I set my mouth into a stiff frown.

“You stink of her!” He’d spoken with venom, spittle flying from his lips. “What value is there in devouring a child’s innocence when you are not a child anymore? If you are going to bleed, it should be because I made you bleed. After all the years of my attention, all I have done to mold you, how dare you give her what is mine!”

I had no idea what it was he alluded to. All I knew from the past few years since that terrible Christmas, was that when he got in these tempers he was far more terrifying than the rest of them combined. I crossed my arms over my chest. Above them bulged a roundness the flopping, unstarched ruffles had hidden until I’d pulled them tight.

I saw yellow eyes dart to the swells, and dropped my arms before he might see.

“What do you have there, Alice? I thought you claimed you’d never grow up.”

Swallowing, I looked away, embarrassed to my core.

“There are such worse things I can send your way than two vicious brats. Do you seek the attentions of the others? Shall I allow the Madman of Cheshire to rise from that chair and carry out what he dreams of doing to you? Continue to refuse me, sweet Alice, and you have no idea what nightmares I can release from the pit.”

Eyes wet with unshed tears, I felt my lip quiver. “You’re my only friend, but you never visit me anymore. Now that you’ve come, you’re cross.”

In a snap, he was cooing, all sweet smiles and soft looks. “Dear Alice, every night should be ours, I agree. It pleases me to know you long for my attention. Take my hand now, let me kiss your mouth, then I shall pour our tea.”

The Hatter had already snatched at my fingers, toying with them and weaving his boney knuckles with mine until our hands were fully united. I stood ramrod, not even so much as blinking. The only way he might reach my cheek was to bend at the waist, his yellow teeth displayed by a full grin. He had kissed me before, often and with great enthusiasm, but that night was the first time I had an inkling of what he thought to accomplish by pressing his mouth to the corner of mine.

He wanted me to turn my head... he’d said kiss my mouth.

I finally understood. Without my participation, unless I offered, he couldn’t do what he desired and it irked him. That was why he asked, why he tricked. My hands he could handle at his whim, the left side of my waist available to trill his fingers upon since the night I’d let him waltz me ‘round the room.

In that moment I grasped, there were rules to this game. The Red Queen could not approach so long as I stared at her. The Laughing Man could do nothing but drive me mad with noise. The boys could pinch, bite, and scratch me... but that was all they could do. My moment of clarity may have come with the wisdom of greater age, but I saw through the Hatter’s smiles and gentle coaxing, muttering, “You cannot touch me without my permission...”

With his face so close, his lips grazing my cheek, in his eyes, those yellow burning eyes, I saw a multitude of evils. “It is a wonder the way your imagination deceives you. Your soul has been mine from the day you first drew breath. Guiding you to me, to all you’ll ever know, has been my greatest pleasure. You will come begging.” His fingers crept towards my lips, dipping to trace over my teeth, threatening to pry them apart. “Apologize to me and give me my kiss. If you do, I will allow you to sleep

tonight. If you do not, the others will be set loose and the next time I come to you, I will make you suffer.”

He slid his fingers from my mouth, smearing spittle down my chin, gloating like he’d already won some prize.

I had to know if I was right. If there was a way to outwit the Hatter, then there was a way to outwit them all. “I will not kiss you.”

Jaw unhinged and head thrown back in a roar, the sound of a thousand beasts let loose to shake my walls. As the Hatter raged, I was plunged into darkness, and in that darkness I had dwelt all the years since.

The old man sitting on the couch in my mother’s dayroom room, spouting diagnoses, and asking uncomfortable questions would not be able to change that.

In fact, he would only make my torment unbearable. Where before my days had been lonely, in the care of Sir Rothfield, sunlight hours would grow to hold a fresh agony.

The Hatter had been right. I would beg for his help. And he had also been honest. He would make me suffer.

Chapter 6

While standing before my parents, I was told that I should appreciate how gentle my care would be. I was told that modern medicine and carefully applied practice would cure me. But, all progress hinged on trust; Sir Rothfield said so. I was to trust him. I was to obey.

I promised faithfully, Mama and Papa as witness, to do just that.

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Be a good girl; be faithful to the family name. Be quiet.

My banishment had all been prepared ahead of time, a new cloak of soft blue wool ready for my shoulders. It hid my sorry garments. It fell all the way past my stockinged ankles. My mother fastened it under my throat and would not meet my questioning gaze.

Sir Rothfield led me from my house; my parents did not even see me to the door.

My nanny, her shape I did see standing at my nursery window, looking down as I made my way. Whether it was because she would miss me, or because she longed to see me gone, I could not tell.

The whole arrangement stirred a nagging sense of betrayal in my breast: the cloak, a case prepared, a carriage waiting... their only child cast into the power of a stranger.

Soon my feelings were forgotten, for you see, the ride from London gave me a view of the world I'd never known before. I'd had only the nursery window overlooking our street. My universe had been dotted in gas lamps and cobblestones, brownstone houses and the random pedestrian. I could not even recall how long it had been since I'd seen a park. An hour in the carriage and the world became new. Outside the city limits there were green things, grass, cows, different smells. Glued to the window, I watched it all, my fingers clinging to the casement so the rocking of the coach might not upset the show.

There was little conversation. Sir Rothfield only spoke at me, not to me.

“That door is barred from the outside, Alice. It cannot be pried open.” He sounded more like my stern father and less like the contemplative stranger I had met only this morning. “Now, sit back in your seat like a lady.”

Unfolding from my awkward perch was harder to manage than I’d thought. My fingers rebelled, and it felt strange to make them uncurl. As always, I obeyed. Wrapped warmly in my cloak, I let the seat bounce me, and did my best to take in the now obstructed view.

For the next several hours, I sat still as one of the few unbroken china dolls on the highest shelf of my nursery. I am not even sure I blinked, as there was so much to see. In hindsight, I wish I had been disobedient and clung to that window. I wish I might have looked more at the world.

Soon enough it would all be taken from me.

Once we cleared the gates of Rothfield Asylum, there was no more green, no cows, no landscape. There was a yard of gravel and a manor larger by far than the house I had grown up in. A robust man dressed in white unbarred the door of the carriage and I was pulled out by my arm without so much as a hello.

Outside of my nightly visitors, I had never been handled with such roughness... not even by my father when he was in a temper. Yanked through the courtyard, Sir Rothfield at my heels, I was dragged inside that house, down halls, upstairs, around corners, and past muttering patients until standing in an office bright with electric lamps.

Polished mahogany dominated the room’s center position, a desk of huge proportions bearing stacks of books, papers, a tray of letters.

With the huge man still holding me above the elbow, Sir Rothfield circled, taking the

desk's overstuffed leather chair and scrutinizing me as if we had not previously met or spoken.

He looked less the grandfather with his brows drawn down and more the cold academic. Setting a pipe between his teeth, he struck a match, puffed to ignite the tobacco, and blew out a great cloud of smoke. "What you have, Alice, is a disease of the mind. It is my sacred duty to cure it."

I nodded, swallowing nervously, my arm aching where it hung trapped by the grip of a man Sir Rothfield introduced as head-orderly Calvin. He was to be mainly charged with my care. He was to be treated with the utmost respect.

"This is a hospital for the privileged, Alice. Our techniques are cutting edge. Aggressive treatment, medication, and practice, will end your mania. There will be no child's indulgences, starting with your manner of dress. There will be no toys like those kept in your room. Should you show adequate progress, I may allow you to play the harp."

I hated playing the harp and had long ago outgrown toys.

"I have yet to decide whether or not to cut your hair." He glared at the freefalling locks, eyeing the golden waves with contempt. "Like all attractive young woman, you reek of a bloated sense of vanity."

He could not touch my hair. My mother would never forgive me if it were shorn. Alarm made my eyes go wide, a chirp struck from my mouth when the orderly's fingers went to the frogs of my cloak. "Please sir, you mustn't. I'll be good."

"And I give you an opportunity to prove it now." Leaning back in the chair, puffing on the pipe, Sir Rothfield explained, "It is best to conduct initial examination immediately upon arrival. Behave, and you may keep your locks."

I had promised Mama and Papa devotedly to behave. There was nothing I could do but stand still, and quake while in full view of them both, head-orderly Calvin stripped me down to my shabby underthings. Left cold, trying to make myself smaller than a mouse, I cried silent tears but said nothing.

Measurements were taken as if I stood before the dressmaker. Foreign hands touched me, turned my chin this way and that. I was ordered to stick out my tongue, to cough, to touch my toes. Every last mark on my body was catalogued, questions asked about each scratch, scar, or bruise. They even bent me forward, tugged down my drawers, and spread my buttocks.

I thought that was the worst of it. I thought there could be no greater degradation than to be pinned down by a man's forearm to my back, a cold desk under my elbows and chest. It was Sir Rothfield himself who took the trouble of parting the flesh of my thighs and looking upon a place I had been taught was unclean.

Where downy blonde hair grew, I was spread, the old man making note. "Her hymen is visibly intact. Direct stimulation produces no immediate arousal. Cauterization of the clitoris may be unnecessary."

Unsure when I had started screaming, I found it was my voice bouncing a banshee's screech off the walls. "Please!"

"Do you touch yourself here, Alice? While locked in your room do you rub against things?"

A fit came upon me as I struggled against the elbow digging into my spine. I could feel the blood rush to my head and knew it would not be long before I slumped into a full faint. The boys, the Red Queen, the laughing Madman of Cheshire, I would take them all night after night. Anything but this. "NO!"

“Chronic masturbation may not be the cause of her nervous disorder. Let her up, Calvin. An ice soak will calm her agitation.” I could hear the old man retreat, circling the desk as if nothing untoward had just happened. “She is to be restrained and left in the padded cell to curb any urges to self-harm. I want her brought here in the morning for further diagnosis.”

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In all the years the twins had pinned me, when they'd sat on my chest and

legs to scratch and bite to their heart's content, never had they touched me in this way. The Red Queen may have been shamelessly nude, but never had she drawn attention to that part of her. Even the laughing madman of Cheshire never looked me anywhere but in the eye.

My shift was allowed to cover twitching buttocks, I was released to slide down the front of the desk.

Crouching, I wept.

Calvin reached down to tug me up. Without thought, I sprung to my feet and tried to evade the human wall. There was no escape. My cheek hit the carpet and the weight of a horse fell upon my body, twisting me into submission until I was certain my bones would splinter.

Well-polished shoes came into my line of sight, and Sir Rothfield voiced his disapproval. "Her parents assured me she was meek. I wonder how many other falsehoods we shall uncover."

I was going to pop under that great weight; I was going to squish like an overripe blueberry. And then I was up, dragged by an arm round my neck, made to stumble out of the room where more would be done to me than the jabbing of my lady parts.

In a room tiled from floor to ceiling, the last vestments of my modesty were torn away. Naked, my wrists were strapped to a wall and I was hosed down with water so

cold it crystallized near the drain. By the time Calvin shut off the hose, I was limp, muscles cramping, and quiet as a church mouse. Chilled to the bone, even my nipples had gone a shade of blue.

When my wrists were released, I was caught before my knees might smash against the floor.

Like a noodle, I was flopped about, each arm shoved through a strange garment that tied at the back and did nothing but stick to my wet skin. Over that went something more bizarre, a coat of unbleached linen with sleeves twice the length of my reach. It was buckled around me, the sleeves wrapping around my middle and fastened in some manner behind my back.

There was no getting out of it.

Lacking the strength to try, even the will to think clearly, I was sat on a pot and ordered to relieve my water.

I did.

I was sat in a chair and told to open my mouth.

I did.

Stew served as dinner. Rabbit stew.

A door opened, soft floor connecting with my dangling legs. Everything was white, like a quilt, walls fluffed and ground padded.

I was left alone, the cell door's bolt thrown, the room's electric light twinkling to chase away all shadows.

In the hours I lay there, some feeling returned to my toes, my shoulders began to smart, and I grew thirsty. There had been no drink since breakfast. The stew had been salty, and there had been no tea.

Tears came anew when my thoughts turned to those who had allowed this.

Did my mama miss me?

Had my father known what lay in store at this terrible place?

Could they really hate me so much?

Buzzing electricity snapped the solitary bulb's filament, but the endless light meant nothing. Darkness was not required to keep my demons at bay. In fact, I welcomed them. They would never leave me... ever. How sad to find comfort in horrors.

Somewhere in the hospital's many rooms a clock began to tick.

As always, I knew if I turned my head I'd see the white rabbit had found its way into the room, propped up, waiting. I knew that it would be watching me.

Safest with my back to the wall, I pushed my weakened legs against the floor and inched like a worm for the corner.

There was some mercy when the crash of the ticking clock ceased. Across from me, mirroring the way I huddled to soft walls, rocked the laughing Madman of Cheshire.

All night he pointed, peals of giggles turning my stomach, because now I knew why he laughed so hard.

My life was a joke.

Chapter 7

“Melancholia... it’s not abnormal to grow mildly depressed upon beginning treatment. It is common for new patients to feel overwhelmed, and I happily assure you, Alice, that with your continued willingness, remedy shortly follows.”

‘Mildly depressed’ was not the term to describe what I was. I was miserable. In my tenure at Rothfield Asylum I had grown to despise the day far more than I’d once feared the night.

Every morning I found myself dumped into the chair before Sir Rothfield’s desk, folded to sit upright when my trapped arms could not steady my upper body from toppling forward. Day after day I was blessed with the attention of the most imminent psychiatrist in the entirety of the empire. Sir Rothfield’s smiles seemed kind, but they were no more real than the toothy, manic grin of the twins who’d taken to chewing my ankles now that they could no longer get at my bound arms.

My bruises, according to head orderly Calvin, had come from struggling when I had tried to climb from the ice bath or refused to sit in the rotary machine. The bite marks, he claimed, I had given myself once locked away at night.

A straightjacket had not been enough in their estimation to properly constrain me. For weeks I had been strapped down to rings embedded in the padded floor of my cell. Once I was perfectly unable to move, stuck under the flicker of my cells blinding light, there was nothing I could do to defend myself from whatever visitor the white rabbit conjured up to haunt me.

The old doctor's kind smiles meant nothing, stood for nothing. Every morning he had the same questions. "Tell me more about the white rabbit."

I knew that to remain silent would get me dunked in a tub filled with ice, or injected with something that made foam gather at my lips. "It sat on the shelf with my dolls. I didn't like it."

"While in the rotary machine yesterday, you began to scream that it was in the room. Is it in the room now?"

Of course it was. They had it on the doctor's massive wooden desk between us. Just as they kept it in my cell. Just as it was in every last room I was tortured in.

My eyes twitched in the toy's direction. "It's..."

"Is it here, Alice?"

"It's... not here."

"Then why are you looking at the desk?"

I had never developed a talent for subterfuge, but in the growing tenure of my time at Rothfield Asylum I'd quickly recognized that lies led to progressive treatment just as much as truths.

Had I learned to conceal all I felt long ago, had I not pled with my parents for respite from the white rabbit, I might not have ended up strapped to a table my third day at the hospital, my legs caught in stirrups, while head orderly Calvin, dressed in a smock, put something cold against a part of me I was taught never to speak of. It had vibrated... to relieve my hysteria. Sir Rothfield explained it all when I panicked, but his explanation was not for me. It was for his fellow observing doctors.

I had wanted to die.

That thing had buzzed until I'd gone numb, long after a piece of rubber had been fit between my teeth to silence my complaints, long after most of the observing physicians had left to tend other patients.

After I finally stopped struggling, Calvin had pulled the whirring machine away and dipped down to stare between my spread legs. "The skin is pink, but there is no sign of dampness or shortness of breath. Manual stimulation may have greater effect."

Sir Rothfield had cleared his throat and came to take a closer look himself. "No penetration, outer pelvic massage only."

The pig-faced orderly, with his fleshy chin, and pug nose had stood between my legs. The same man who wiped me each morning after I was done on the pot, used his fingers in another manner.

He'd held my eyes while he did it, and I'd found myself powerless to look away.

Those special examinations took place almost every day, just like these morning meetings.

At my hesitation, Sir Rothfield's voice chirped louder across the desk. "Is the rabbit in the room, Alice?"

Last night I had tolerated the companionship of the bloody woman, the night before the twins had giggled in the dark, bouncing off the walls and barreling over where I was tied to the floor. They were honest about their evil; they did not hoodwink themselves like the docto

r and the asylum staff with their delusions of grandeur.

I was so tired. “On your desk, sir, crouched back on its hind legs, it’s a stuffed white rabbit. It’s looking right at me.”

The old man reached forward, and swept his hand over the desk. “There is no white rabbit, Alice. There never was.”

Not true. A white rabbit was right there. But the eyes weren’t glass... they were buttons. And the fur wasn’t white, not pure white, but a pale shade that leaned grey. The doctor was trying to trick me into lying.

Getting caught in a lie led to things I did not want to consider. I committed to my previous statement. “There is a toy rabbit on your desk, sir.”

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“What if it were a real rabbit? A living thing? What would you do with it?”

This was another one of his lessons. Weeks ago I had watched him dip his fingers into a small cage and pinch a bunny by the scruff. I’d flinched when he’d broken its neck. Never had I seen something die, and it had shocked me to tears when the doctor set the dead animal on my lap.

That first time he’d killed the bunny with his bare hands. A week later, he’d used a cleaver to sever the poor thing’s skull from its shoulders. Today was to be a new lesson. With an approving smile, the toy rabbit was taken from the desk and replaced with a small, helpless animal.

Beside it Sir Rothfield laid a carpenter’s hammer.

“Now, Alice, you have power over your mind. Destroy the rabbit.”

Even while I shook my head no, head orderly Calvin unlatched the workings of my straightjacket. My arm was set free. After so little use, and so many injections, the muscles were hard to control. Calvin put the hammer in my fist, his meaty palm wrapped around my grip. He guided my arm to draw back. Under his steam, our joined hands smashed down. It took three hits to kill the fluffy beast that would serve as my dinner.

I just wanted to go home. That’s what I thought each time droplets of blood splattered my face.

All I wanted was home.

Chapter 8

Stomach sour from another supper of rabbit stew, I lay on my back, eyes to the ceiling, and waited.

Maybe I was crazy. It no longer mattered. I had to get out of Rothfield asylum. It had to end.

I knew she would come after the clock's booming ticks shook my bones. I don't know why I knew, but I knew.

The Red Queen slithered out of her corner.

Turning my head to the side, arms still bound in the straightjacket and my ankles cuffed to the floor, I watched bloodied feet stain the pillowed ground with each slinking step the Red Queen took.

I offered her one word, the first I may have ever spoken to her. "Hello."

Crackling noises, her squished, bubbling breaths, they would be my dirge. Tonight I was going to close my eyes and I was going to let her have me. Maybe she would peel off my skin and wear it as a hat. Then this would be over and I would be free.

There was no fight left in me.

She sensed it too, for her beady eyes shone bright behind the dripping tangles of her dark hair.

It's funny that I had borne all the years of sleepless nights, all the treatments and examinations—hilarious even to think I'd ever thought I might find a way to do more than just delay the inevitable. Being made to inflict pain on a defenseless creature,

having to hear a bunny squeal when the first strike of the hammer had not been enough to end it, had been my ultimate undoing.

I could see clearly now. Had I not fought to hinder Calvin's initial swing, the animal might have died without pain.

All this time, I was standing in my own way; fighting back was pointless. I was the bunny on the table. Resisting the inevitable hammer was the reason the pains I'd known had never struck hard enough to kill, they only left me there twitching and unable to hop away.

The Red Queen looked me dead in the eye, she'd even stopped her pacing. Standing hunched, rubbing her hands together, she clicked her teeth in excited chatter.

She had been the first. She would be the last.

After a lifetime of vigilance, I lowered my lashes and looked away.

I was laughing louder than the Madman of Cheshire as her feet pattered straight in my direction.

"Sweet Alice."

My laughter turned to weeping at the first dulcet sing-song of the Hatter's hello. Face turned into the floor, eyes screwed shut to block out the intrusive, never ending electric light, I sobbed, "Make it stop."

The smile in his voice, the gentle teasing, it was cruel. "And why should I? This was all your doing."

"I know."

A light chuckle decorated his voice. “Ungrateful child... all I’d wanted was a single kiss. Was it worth it, these long years without my company?”

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The padding under me shifted, and I imagined that he crouched, knees up like a cricket, right beside my buried head.

I was right. His breath ran over my ear. “Will you not look at me, Alice?”

No, I would not. How could I? “Please go away... bring the Red Queen back.” My voice broke and the sobs came all the harder. “I want to die.”

My hair had not been washed or properly combed in weeks, it was clumped and frizzy, a perfect shield over my face. The Hatter caught it up, tucking bits behind my ear. “Oh no, the dregs sent here don’t die. They will keep you alive well past old age. The only thing that will die will be your mind, piece by piece, until you are a shell for them to claim they’ve cured. They will carve my sweet Alice up for her own good. I’ve always appreciated the evils of a good nut house.”

A ring of truth ruined the softness in which the Hatter spoke. Whether he was mocking me or cautioning me, it mattered little. I got the point: I was to receive no mercy. Turning my wet nose from the floor, breath shaking, I let the Hatter see what I had become.

The familiar sharp lines of his face, the bizarre yellow glow of his eyes, his manic smile inches from my tear streaked cheeks, he giggled. Crouched over me like a spider on its prey, my body wrapped in the straightjacket and pinned to the floor, I may as well have been spun in his silk—a snack saved for later in a web of padded white.

The brightness of the room’s bare bulb haloed around the Hatter’s head, casting an

angelic glow. Had I the capacity to laugh, I would have. “Maybe none of it is real. Perhaps I am still a little girl, tucked into bed, having one long, bad dream.”

Dusty knuckles smoothed over my cheek. “Your suffering is as real as anything.”

“Was I not a good girl?”

The Hatter looked at me as if he loved me. “Mommy and Daddy, do you still think they will come for you? His greed, her vanity... acquiring their souls was child’s play. What they offered for loveliness, success in business, what they are willing to give without even knowing what I take, a beauty in itself. But you, you would not take my pennies for your tooth. At your essence you would never esteem riches. Exquisiteness was bestowed on you in spades, yet it’s only value in your eyes is how it might please your parents. Still you love them, though they sent you here and will leave you to rot. Who has ever cared for you but I?”

I had nothing and no one. “You promised to torment me.”

“And I have. The Devil owes me a great debt, and I chose to collect upon it in acquiring you. But he cannot bestow upon me what isn’t his to give. You are pure as much as you are insane. As fun as it has been teasing and tricking you into giving me what I desire, I’ve grown impatient. Games, tea, drying your tears on my sleeve, what did I get for it? To hold your hand and kiss your cheek? You deserve all they do to you for thinking to deny me.” With that he bent lower, laying his cold lips on the corner of my mouth, a whisper following. “The Devil will have his due and so will I. It can all end, sweet Alice, if you would just give yourself to me of your own free will. Have you had enough? Let me take you home.”

I longed to go home to my nursery with the broken furniture and tattered wallpaper. I longed to see my parents, even if all my presence earned from them was frowns. “You would get me out of here?”

His mouth lingered over mine, the Hatter's breath filling my nostrils as he hissed, "Oh, yessssssss."

Heart racing at the thought of freedom, there was no question on my part. Stretching my neck, I gave him the kiss I'd denied him all those years ago, and felt him chuckle at the innocent press of my lips to his.

I counted to three before drawing back, and his laughter came all the louder.

The Hatter was positively cackling. "You would think that was a kiss, wouldn't you?"

He fell upon me before I might try again, his mouth sucking the air from my lungs. His tongue drove in, his lips slid over mine, and I felt the kiss a man might give a woman. It was a shocking thing, and all I could fathom in that instance was a single repetitive question: why would a man put his tongue in my mouth?

Is this why he had pulsed his fingers in and out of my lips when feeling my loose teeth? All these years had he been angling to lick at my tongue?

Why?

He was still laughing, his body seizing and shaking in mirth. No, that wasn't laughter, it was another noise. It was an extended groan, racking moans, and I could feel them vibrate in my chest—just as that machine had vibrated between my thighs.

There was a twinge, a reason I felt a dire need to press my legs closed. Head driven back upon the padded floor, I angled my jaw away. Sucking in a breath, I felt the Hatter's tongue lick at my lips while he allowed me a brief offering of air.

Though his fingers were spread, hands braced on either side of my head, though his

body hovered over mine, at no place did we touch. He still could not, and I knew to mock him for it, for the way he scuttled to angle for my mouth, that I would be abandoned for another set of years to decay in this hell.

Warning and threats black as sin, burned hot in his unforgiving eyes.

If

I were left in this padded cell for even one more day, I truly would go mad. “You’ll save me from the examinations, from pinching fingers? They strap me down and I cannot get away... They spin me around until I vomit. All the water is ice.” Sickness was twisting in my gut, there was buzzing, my muscles tensing to the point I tremored. “I long for tea. Please, make it stop!”

The Hatter’s head cocked and he seemed for a moment transfixed. “Say the words, Alice. Give yourself to me.”

Nodding, frantic to be out of the confines of the straightjacket, out of the blaring light of that room, out of the asylum, I swore to him, “I’m yours.”

With a smile blooming from the deepest parts of his evil heart, the Hatter sealed our deal. “My pleasure.”

His hands were on my shoulders, my relief palpable when he helped me to sit up. But he was not angling for the straps at my back. With force, I was twisted, my belly slamming into the ground. Yanked back until my knees parted, my legs crooked like a frog, he lay full upon my prone figure. The skirt of my hospital gown no longer brushed my thighs, and I was as bare as I had been on the table day in and day out.

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Something hotter than a brand notched against the lower lips where day in and day out I'd tolerated pelvic massage. I heard a cackle of glee, felt the Hatter lunge behind me.

And then I was on fire.

Every last one of my screams was lost in the pillowed floor, the Hatter's long-fingered grip encasing my skull, pressing my face down.

There was no way to breathe, the world of pain fading away from my grasp as my body was split in half. Parts of him were inside of me, his jerking on my back frantic.

His grunts crept inside my ears. "I'll cut the orderly's fingers off, Alice. I'll let you watch me devour his soul. The doctor can be made into your newest toy. Do what you will with him. Inflict the pain he deserves."

The Hatter was blocking my airway, crushing me into nonexistence. Lungs screaming for air, I forgot the pain between my legs, how my thighs cramped from the force of his hips on my joints.

His body strained, bucked, and he threw back his head, shouting in tongues.

I lay beneath him, empty, even while crammed completely full.

"You were delicious," he sighed, tasting the shell of my ear when my body gave out and vision blurred into nothingness. "What games we will play. What degradations you will adore me for."

Come morning, I was found sprawled on my back, my legs spread wide, tied parted to the rings in the floor. Blood and fluids matted my pubic hair. Pupils pinpoint, I was oblivious to all that went on around, but I grasped flashes of Sir Rothfield, and I saw alarm when he was summoned to look upon me.

He barked at the orderly who'd opened my cell. "Who has done this?"

"One of the inmates escaped the men's ward. He bashed Calvin's fingers with the gate until they split from his hand. The bastard stole his keys."

"She could be with child. Do you have an idea who her parents are?" Sir Rothfield's anger was not for my state, but for his potential complications. "We would be ruined should her belly grow."

I felt nothing. There was no shame that the world might see me splayed and oozing. No ice bath was called for to calm hysteria. There was no hysteria. And when I was deemed full awake, there was no talk of a white rabbit, or forced pelvic massage... Nothing was said at all.

In fact, in their fever to rid themselves of a potentially catastrophic problem, I think they forgot about me.

Empty, hollow, just as the Hatter had promised. I was free. When he came to me each night, I smiled to see him and let him do to me what he will. The more he played with me, the more I found I enjoyed it.

In a matter of days, my parents sat in the twin chairs before Sir Rothfield's desk—the same desk where I had been forced to spread the evening of my arrival. I was led before them, unblemished of scratches, fattened up on rabbit stew, with not a single

mark anywhere on my body.

Beyond the tender place between my legs, the true mark was on my soul.

I smiled at them as if all were well, and took a seat to the side when Sir Rothfield broke the great news. “Your daughter has been cured and the root of her malady discovered.”

Taken with the glow of health in my cheeks, with the sheen of my crimped hair, my mother practically gawked. Meanwhile, my father was too busy eyeballing my physician to do more than sneer. “Considering the cost, she should have been cured months ago.”

The charmer who’d once sat in my parents’ dayroom came forth, no trace of the clinical physician in the smoothness of the old man’s countenance. “Alice’s troubles lie in her need for a husband’s attention. She is of age and should be married immediately... with a daughter of such rare beauty, I’m sure there is some young man you’ve had in mind.”

My mother was the first to speak up, setting her gloved fingertips on my father’s sleeve. “Look at her, Charles. Should the Franklin’s boy get one eye of this face, his papa will have no choice but to invest in our interests. I’d wager I could arrange their marriage by the end of the month.”

“The sooner the better.” Sir Rothfield added, smile tight.

My parents could not be so stupid, but I was made to marvel at how easily Rothfield had sold them on such a slapdash scheme.

It was settled, I would marry, and I was to leave the asylum at once. Just as abruptly as I had been thrust into Rothfield’s power, I was taken from it.

On the ride home, I did not look out the window. There was nothing out there for me.

What is in a wedding day? There was cake. There were flowers. I was halted by a tight corset and laced into a gown so white even Queen Victoria would approve. Conversation was not a thing anyone in attendance found necessary of the bride. Not a soul asked me about my time spent in Italy.

I was to stand smiling beside my new husband, a man whose father had great wealth.

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When the small party had ended, a lady's maid chosen specifically to serve me removed my gown, brushed out my hair, and left me waiting in a bed of clean linen.

My new boudoir was finer than any room in my parents' brownstone.

Pliant and submissive I lay beneath my husband when he arrived to claim his right. I think I must have pleased him, for he smiled a great deal.

When he flopped over to catch his breath, I waited for the clock to strike. Booming louder than ever before, the walls shook, my lips curved, and silence crashed through the house.

The Hatter stole in, the slippery place between my thighs tight and twitchy.

Happy to sit up and let him watch the lace peignoir slip from my shoulder, I said hello.

His grin, the absolute mirth in his yellow eyes, made my heart sing. "What is this I see? What have you done, Alice?"

What had I done?

Why was my pretty gown spattered and stained red?

My bridal bed's linens were wet with warmth, blood pooling... blood everywhere.

At my side, eyes flat and unblinking, the man who was my husband lay, dozens of

slices open and oozing... as if he'd been carved by a knife.

It had been a knife, for I found it cradled in my palm. The same frosting crusted knife we had used to cut the wedding cake

Confusion drew me to say, "The Red Queen must have been here."

"Oh, my love." Already the Hatter was crawling over my body, a creeping long-limbed spider ready to devour its meal. "What trouble you are."

The feel of a kiss, of a foul tongue and of wicked hands tearing lace from my breasts, drew a sigh from my lips. He had a way of touching me everywhere at once, his fingers dancing in the remnants of my late husband's moment of bliss.

Knees bent, thighs parting of their own accord, I took a deep breath of the grave. "I could use a cup of tea."

All bones and hard knots under his hideous clothes, I explored the body of the one who owned me. Where a thick stalk of flesh jutted from his groin, I let my fingers li

nger, working up and down that veined shaft, eager to drive the Hatter mad.

Desire is a strange kind of demon. It knows how to gnaw a soul into shapes for its pleasure, but it also must be fed.

He was mine as much as I was his. I knew it when he tore my fist from his cock. I relished it when my knees were forced to my ears. And I screamed for him when he began to fuck me so hard the headboard banged a tick-tock against the wall.

Unlike when the corpse at my side had let loose its lust upon me, I rocked my hips and found breathing unnecessary to raw pleasure.

These things my Hatter had taught me. These things I gave him so that the white padded walls might never surround me again.

When he told me to ride him, I bounced on his lap. When he hissed his desire to hump me like a dog takes a bitch, I braced on hands and knees. When the fire came, when I begged for him to end the torment, I knew why hell was so much more glorious than the deceit of heaven and its deaf god.

Gouging the back of my lover deeper than the twins had ever clawed me, I came apart splendidly.

Epilogue

“Poor, sweet, baby.” The child trembling in his bed raised huge brown eyes to take in the sweet-voiced lady sitting prim across the nursery. “Did that dust-laden Hatter scare you?”

Wedding gown pure and glimmering, veil draped atop golden hair artfully arranged on her head, sat a girl on the cusp of womanhood. Blue eyes forlorn and equally resolved, a teacup and saucer resting atop her unblemished skirt, she said, “You don’t need to be afraid of him. He cannot touch you unless you touch him first or give him permission. Trust me when I tell you, never speak to him. Do not heed a single word he says.”

Blinking, sleep crusting the child’s eyes, the little one asked, “Why?”

“Madder than a march hare, that one. The Hatter, he’s a pure devil. A true psychopath. Do you know that word, dear child?”

A stunted shake of the head came before a babe hardly out of the cradle began to wail. “Why won’t they leave me alone?”

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The apparition spoke on. “The twins might seem the scariest in the lot, but they grow bored easily. Don’t give them cause to find their entertainment in you. The Red Queen is a tiring nuisance; keep an eye always glued to her. The laughing man of Cheshire, a kitten compared to the one who moves the pieces across the board. The Hatter will call me his White Queen, but I’ll tell you a secret. My true name is Alice, and I’m not as mad as they say. Now, calm yourself. Come here and share my tea.” The bride lifted a cup from her lap, steam rising from the chipped china. “I can keep the rest away for tonight. I will not let them in.”

Whining, little face puffed and red with exhaustion, the boy hiccupped. “Madam, I don’t want tea. I am so tired... I only want to sleep.”

“Then lay back, shut your eyes, sweet boy.” Tea cup and saucer dropped, their contents left to splash and stain the carpet as the bride glided forward like a ghoul. “I’ll stand over you and watch.”

Thank you for reading THE WHITE QUEEN.

I hope you enjoyed the raw horror. Are you ready for more? How about a taste of bestselling Dark Romance?

He will have her.

Even if he must crush empires. Even if he must harm her for her own good.

Even if he must share her with his brothers.

Sigil will be his.

Turn the page for an excerpt of SIGIL: IRDESI EMPIRE BOOK 1...

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Now, please enjoy an extended excerpt of SIGIL: IRDESI EMPIRE BOOK 1...

SIGIL

Part One of the Irdesi Empire Series

Arden observed a drip of perspiration fall between the nearest collared human's cleavage. The enslaved female offered a tray topped with a cool, extravagant beverage, she had offered a smile, and she had offered stillness so he might inspect

her. One sip from the silver cup, and the tartness faintly reminded him of old-Earth lemons. The smell reminded him of something a bit more carnal. Looking pointedly over the cup's rim, he smiled at his hostess, the Tessian lounging on her couch, and the emissary sipped again. Wry expression confirmed their mutual understanding. The Mistress of Pax was aware there had been no scan of the goblet for poison. The offering of good faith made the inky eyes of the smirking ruler narrow in approval.

"He has quite offered you up, hasn't he?" Drinta teased, taking a sip of her own frosty cup.

A deep breath of humid air, a pleased, practiced smile, and the guest genuflected. "Quite."

A low extended hum vibrated from the Tessian, her green scaled skin expanding and contracting to maintain the rattle. "Sovereign thinks to persuade me with gifts... and a silver-tongued emissary."

Golden head bowed subtly, he replied, "I have yet to offer gifts."

"But you will." Her brow ridges, with their small shapely spikes, rose in a very human gesture.

Arden pulled another breath of air that was too moist, too warm to be comfortable, running a quick appraisal over the grand view his seat allowed.

Two words: backspace shithole.

From the sly curve of scaled lips, it was clear the Mistress of Pax agreed. Pressing back into the plush couch, facing the man seated across from her, the tip of her tail swished and all pretense ended. "There are things I want."

“Sovereign will provide them,” the envoy of the human Irdesian Empire assured her.
“In exchange for absolute access to your byway.”

“I don’t deal in”—Drinta cocked her head, quick-moving lids shuttering around the black of her eyes— “absolutes.”

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Crossing an ankle over his knee, Arden played his role to perfection. “This is where you tell me, Mistress Drinta, how you wish to be treated in this interaction. Do I grovel? Is aggression more interesting to you? Threats? Negotiation could be amusing... for us both.”

Drinta sat tranquilly, mirroring a predator’s stillness. “The Tessian Authority finds your empire’s growth in power unsettling. Offering access to a warmongering species might complicate my comfort.”

“Your sisters have labeled you as an intergalactic felon, pretty Drinta. Your former piracy gave you an intriguing reputation. But decimating and systematically destroying the Uresa Quadrant...” Arden smiled, a beautiful thing on a face created to attract. “Now, the Tessian Authority wants your head in a box.”

“Perhaps I was a bit overzealous in my younger days.” Green shoulders shrugged, scales catching a trace of distant flashing light.

“And now you keep court here,” Arden agreed, fully aware of her blood-soaked history and the purposelessness of her previous violence. She had killed for the pleasure, simply because she could, taunting intergalactic governments to rise up and stop her. But it had turned out to be more trouble than it was worth. With age came wisdom. Stealing Pax Station from the previous overseers had been her last great conquest. She would never give it up—not like the planets she’d brought to their knees and let slip away once she became bored. Here she was a god, controlling one of the most valuable resources in the galaxy—the byway—and its access that could slice across space in a matter of minutes.

Tolls made her rich, but she did not reinvest the money into her dilapidated space station. Arden could see she liked her mire just as it was.

For Drinta, it had never been a question of wealth; it was a desire for power. Pax was her trading floor—import, export, slaves, intelligence, contraband—everything was allowed so long as one paid the proper monetary homage.

“How many planets does he have now?” The hiss in her voice, how it stretched the words, was musical.

“Many...”

She smiled back, sharp teeth on display. “And your ships?”

“Are legion.”

“Legion.” The word rolled off Drinta’s tongue. “Pretty expression.”

Standing from his overly cushioned seat, Arden moved toward the energy barrier separating the Mistress’s plush balcony from the dingy venue. Club Swelter, the perfect example of the ancient human idea of sin, functioned as the nucleus of Pax. Far more than an entertainment spot, the hollowed out hive was infested: Dregs fondled the dancers as they made their trade. Smugglers, stocking up on whatever illicit item could be found, amused themselves as they negotiated. Unsavory mercenaries for hire drank, and fought, and pissed in the corners. Junkers came for the coin of hauling off garbage and dragging back the second-hand parts required to maintain the station’s life-support. The room was full of shouting voices who bartered and barked for what they were owed. But the most powerful in the station’s den of iniquity were the slavers. They were always there; they were always abundant, delivering or purchasing new stock and raking in the profits.

Pax slaves, though illegal in many cultures, were coveted—considered to be broken perfectly. The best.

How fantastic the livestock was, considering the venue.

Drinta neglected the upkeep of the station; decks clung by a tether. On a regular basis, pieces of Pax fell off, floating away to orbit amidst a disturbing asteroid belt of garbage. Everything was dim and dank... yet the slaves were lovely. Every species, every gender, anything one might want in the form of living pleasure made available for the right price—always tempting, always on display.

Throughout Swelter, exotic creatures danced, writhing on their platforms, some available for patrons to touch and handle as they pleased, shadowed just enough to make fucking appear somewhat mysterious. Enticing.

Drinta's well-guarded balcony sat where she could easily enjoy the show—where her subjects could see her and never forget who was in charge. From the vantage, Arden took in the levels, surveying the debauchery. But it was not the nearest pleasure slaves, posing once they saw a guest of the Mistress look their way, who caught his attention. Golden eyes were drawn to one twisting her body in a distant swath of hanging red silk.

Painted limbs twirled, lean muscle manipulating her net in complicated figures.

The p

erformer climbed dangerously high on that crimson drape, the slave suspended over her audience where one slip up would culminate in a messy fall to her death. Yet, she projected serenity, power, the daring acrobat spinning so fast the world from her eyes must have been only a blur.

And down she went, a river of flesh rippling over blood red silk, spinning, falling, torsion mangling her showcase.

It was beautiful, her figures promising fulfillment or ruination in that frantic descent. A breath from the floor she froze, toes pointed, limbs free, holding on to the fabric with nothing but one coiled leg.

Drinta eased beside the high-ranking human, eager to see what might pique the interest of the Imperial emissary. She too found the swath of red silk and the frozen spider tangled in it.

Ahh, yes... a human female. How ordinary.

Each passing flash of light and the observers took what they needed from the scene: the sheen of sweat when the performer shifted, slipping out of her drape to display nudity save a few scraps of black and her collar. Tranquility radiated from her, the slave smoothing plum colored hair from her face.

Without warning, the slave stopped preening and leapt from her platform to race through the leering crowd. Her target, a mountain of muscular Axirlan, stood stolid awaiting her approach, arms crossed over his bare chest.

Like others of his species, the huge male did not emote. He did not return her exuberance or expression. Humanoid, skin silvery white, larger than all around him, he exuded innate strength—his peoples' defining feature, something they broadcasted with little more than a ripple of movement.

The slave seemed undisturbed by the Axirlan's mass, his cold expression, or the fact he could break her in half with little more than a flick of his wrist. She looked only to adore, falling to her knees at his feet, eager, glowing, and ready to please.

“How sweet. The female is offering affection to her keeper.” A small, amused curl came to sculpted angular lips, Drinta’s eyes shining at the display. “Just watch and see how well our slaves are trained.”

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Without prompting, the human's nimble fingers undid the fastenings of the male's lower covering, pulling out a studded member already thickening and growing hard in her hands.

Decorated with a series of metal rods pierced horizontally, her keeper's cock caught the flashing lights until it disappeared into the human woman's mouth.

She smiled up into his eyes as she took his girth down her throat, serene as she carried out the sex act—as if only the two of them stood in the arena. All the while, her hands lovingly caressed hips, muscled buttocks, and even from a distance, Arden could see she swallowed to accommodate her keeper with every excited thrust the male pressed between her willing lips.

The way the giant stroked that mane of dark purple hair and watched her perform was so unlike an Axirlan. He was fond of his pet, to the extent an emotionless race could be.

Arden imagined he heard the groan as the beast threw his head back and climaxed, the burst of noise harmonizing with the blaring music. Watching the slave take that cock all the way into the recess of her mouth, the female gulping down silver ejaculate as it burst against the back of her throat, seeing her struggle to not spill a drop... excited the emissary.

When it was done, the Axirlan's massive, pierced organ popped from her lips. Her keeper swiped his thumb over them, brushing away the single drip that had escaped, silently praising her performance with his attention.

The woman sat back on her heels, panting and clearly contented, the shine of saliva smeared over her chin.

Arden studied her profile in the dark, the flawless symmetry of her features.

Though his face was impassive, he couldn't look away—not when she sought an embrace from her master and was gifted with more. The Axirlan cradled her to his chest and carried his pet to his table. After he sat, draped in pale human, her keeper conversed with others of his own kind.

And again, affection from the male: the brute toyed with her hair as she relaxed, was gentle with her.

Arden cut his gaze away, unsettled by what he sensed in the outlying corner. The woman was falling asleep in a very dangerous place, feeling safe in the arms of an oversized Axirlan she did not belong to.

No slave collar changed facts. If that was who he thought it was, she belonged to him.

After the endless chase—all the years—his Sovereign had never been able to corner her. And there she was, sucking off some alien for the entire crowd in that sleazy club on Pax to see, before napping like a spoiled cat.

Mistress Drinta turned her head just enough to let the light play across her fetching Tessian features. “If you like what you see, another with similar qualities could be arranged for you... as my gift.”

The golden quality of Arden's expression matched the dulcet tenor of his question. “What of that one?”

A hand stretched out, flicking toward one of her guards so the underling might

produce a data screen. Navigating livestock information, Drinta hummed. “I am afraid she is listed as private. I can’t fault her keeper for that—not when she seems so very skilled and attentive.”

Fingers snapped and Drinta commanded her guard, “Bring my guest a human pleasure slave. A pretty one with dark hair.”

A beauty appeared so quickly it was apparent several were kept nearby, available should Drinta offer.

The Tessian’s black lateral pupils darted back to the human delegate sent by Sovereign himself as she ordered the slave to, “Suck his cock.”

There was no hesitation in the submissive young woman to fall to her knees and perform.

Arden’s hand rested on the back of the girl’s head, setting a pace as he envisioned the distant sleeping female, imagining another’s lips and tongue working him well. He came quickly, sighing when he released into a stranger’s mouth.

“Now that we’ve taken the edge off, let us continue negotiation.” Drinta’s voice was once again laced with her brand of enticement, the most dangerous criminal in the quadrant smiling broadly. “Your Sovereign and the empire he rules, what can they do for me?”

Drinta’s choice of words was not lost on the emissary. What could Sovereign do for her? No, it was quite the other way around. Yet the man smiled richly, expressing his purpose on Pax. “The Irdesian Empire can offer you anything you desire.” Leering, turning to face the showy female with her flicking tail, Arden neared. “Is there something you would like to have conquered? Old enemies you wish to see tormented?”

Her gaze drew deadly. “Yes. And he will deliver what I wish, or access to the byway will never be granted to his fleet for whatever little war you are waging now.”

“I was ordered your wish is my command.” And though his golden eyes glowed, his thoughts were gravely amused that the criminal queen actually believed she might deny his empire anything.

“I demand the entirety of the Ran 7 colony to be exterminated. Not converted, not enslaved; slaughtered.”

“Consider it done.”

She looked at him, a pleased mischievous dragon as she cooed, “There’s more.”

When dealing with that quality of lifeform, there was always more. Arden, Herald of the Irdesian Empire, smiled beautifully, promising the treacherous Mistress of Pax her heart’s every desire.

Her heart was quite black.

Chapter 2

Stretching, purring with each pop of her spine, Quinn wriggled beneath the reclining giant's arm. Enjoying the familiar weight of the bulging appendage and the way the mattress dipped from Que's weight, she rolled and found he was awake, watching—expressionless.

Silver eyes set in a face white as snow, his features strongly angled and broad. "When you wake you always wish for me to fuck you."

Quinn's fingers slipped forward to trace from the hollow of his throat, between the mass of pectorals, and down the definition of a torso three times the size of hers. "You were gone for seventeen cycles."

"Do you desire to be fucked now?" The Axirlan queried

again, ignoring her words as they had no real meaning, no point beyond stating facts.

She didn't answer, continuing to touch, contemplating a body almost as strong as hers.

"Speak, slave girl."

His taunt drew a wicked laugh from the human.

It had taken years to teach an Axirlan the nuances of sarcasm and humor. Though he may not understand the way another species' minds emoted, Que did make an effort

to play to her nature.

Hand dipping lower, Quinn lifted the weight of his pierced erection. “I believe it might be quite the other way around.”

Before she might blink, he pounced, Axirlan mass grinding caught prey against the bowing mattress. The deep, almost robotic base of his voice rumbled, vibrating through her skin as he said, “I think what you desire is a fight.”

The dyed lavender of her eyes went languid. “I love when you fight me.”

Burrowing his face in her neck, the broad flat of Que’s tongue tasted the soft skin of his momentarily tame paramour. “You are a monster.”

“I know,” she sighed to the ceiling, enjoying the way his teeth found her throat, how he scraped her flesh just enough to sting.

It was her moan that enticed him to claw the softer places of her body, to dig nails in and break skin. Pain subdued her for an instant—long enough for Que to force the woman’s legs apart.

Without preamble, he jammed the beauty of his cock balls deep before the slippery human might try to evade. Rooted, stretching her mercilessly, he left her neck to gnaw a nipple raw.

Crushed under the onslaught, Quinn grinned.

It was more than the rough handling and smell of blood. It was who was hurting her and why.

With strength that would have broken another, the Axirlan growled at the slick

milking pull of her cunt greedily devouring his cock despite his aggression. Lost in the craze that made fucking an Axirlan so dangerous for one so small, he roared. Taking her by the neck, muscled arms bunched, the alien reared to watch every last sensation play over her face.

Bliss.

He could see it ripple under her skin, little shockwaves each time one of his piercings breached the slippery flesh of her pussy.

“You will wear my semen tonight when you dance.” It was his right to demand such a thing, and he did so brutishly.

Dyed eyes rolled back into her skull.

He shifted with speed unique to his kind and placed a finger on the metal bar decorating the hood of her clitoris. His mark. One she had accepted years ago. “And I desire to penetrate you where all can see, your legs spread open over my lap, your piercing on display so Swelter might recognize what’s mine.”

She was so close, the whisperings of oblivion crackling like lightning in her bones.

The instant a building climax stole her breath, the female grew vicious.

Grinding joints, she overpowered the large male, manipulating Que’s mass under her violence in a twist of limbs. The savagery in her expression, the abject threat as she began to sink down upon his aching member would have warned any other male to be still and obedient.

That was not Que’s way. That is not what they were.

Muscles shaking in an attempt to indulge his human, he brutally bucked against her hold in search of his own release.

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As pleasure peaked, she took his throat between her hands. Squeezing tendon and bone, damaging him, she drew out the dangerous male's first silvery spray of come.

Muscles shaking from the extreme effort required to draw her hips down, Que fought to hold her in place. She resisted, fluid seeped between them, scented the air, and Quinn cried out in those last hypnotic moments of completion.

When it was over, her fingers loosened about his abused throat, and she sagged onto the barrel of his chest. "For that fine performance I will submit any way you want, anywhere you wish."

Large fingers carded through a tangled length of plum hair. "That would please me, slave."

Snickering, she bit his nipple, sucking it hard before flicking the flesh with her tongue.

Under her gentler caress, the male grew pensive. "Do you long for more human interaction? Shall I tell you I love you?"

Placing her chin to his chest, Quinn smiled. "You are incapable of feeling such an emotion, my friend. There is no need to offer that expression."

A meaty hand gripped the back of her skull and pulled her upward until they were face to face. "If I could love you, I am certain I would."

Her heart grew warm. Yes, he had learned much. Pressing her forehead to his, she

poured feeling into her words. “A beautiful thing to say.”

“Then I have done well.” A rich, unemotional rumble bade, “Now lie back. I am going to paint you. And then I wish to taste between your legs.”

Obedient, Quinn slid off his torso and spread out on the smoothness of their sheets. “Yes, master.”