



Alec in Wonderland

(Rainbow Tales #1)

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Category: LGBT+

Description: When Alec falls down a hole in a Portland park, he lands in another world. Although strange, it's also familiar, and he realizes he's been there before. Alec was a child then, and Wonderland was a peaceful, happy place. Not anymore. The Queen of Hearts has conquered the Card Kingdoms and has now declared war on the Chess Kingdoms. A prophecy has foretold that Alec will conquer the Queen's greatest weapon and save them all. To do that, Alec must find the Vorpall Sword. But the sword is hidden in the Hearts Fortress.

Cheshire, a spy in the Hearts Court, brings Alec to the fortress disguised as his cousin. Alec is intent on finding the Vorpall Sword and saving Wonderland, but things become complicated when he meets the Knave of Hearts. The longer Alec is in Wonderland, the more he remembers about it, and his most precious memories include the Knave. With history and passion drawing them together, Alec must decide what's more important to him—Wonderland or the Knave's heart.

Alec in Wonderland is the first book in a gay retold fairy tales series. Rediscover the fairy tales you loved with a gay romantic twist.

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Alec Hashimoto hunched forward and drew his knit cap lower on his head. It wasn't a great defense against the rain, but he was a Portland native and he could take it. Layers of knitwear insulated him beneath his raincoat, and his boots were weatherproof. It was winter, which meant rain in Oregon. A lot of rain. In Portland, it also meant biting wind coming off the water. Thus, layers covered in a weatherproof coat. The tourists, who didn't know the proper dressing protocol, were miserable, making Alec grin as he passed a few. Their fault for not googling that shit.

“Don't visit Portland in February,” he muttered. “Go to Hawaii. It's only another six hours away. Hell, maybe I should go to Hawaii.”

“Hiya, Alec!”

Alec nodded at Iris, the owner of Sassy Fries, a food truck in the same pod as the one he owned with his best friend, Kevin. She lifted her chin at him. That was practically a hug in this weather. Up ahead was Bento Brothers, his truck. They had a great spot near the entrance of the lot, and it filled him with pride every time he saw the glossy black truck with its kawaii images of dancing sushi. It had taken hard work, money, and talent to get there. Then it took more hard work, money, and perseverance to become successful.

Kevin was already inside the truck and grunted a greeting at Alec when he opened the side door, the braid of his dark beard bobbing. Alec chuckled every time he saw that braid. It was Kevin's way of putting the customers at ease. No one wanted beard hair in their food.

Beards were common in Portland. Alec often wished he could grow one as thick and

long as Kevin's. If for no other reason than to keep his face warm. However, his Caucasian blood wasn't strong enough to overcome the Japanese genes he got from his dad. The only facial hair he could manage to grow came in sparse and poky. Just sad. Sad facial hair. And that was worse than a braided beard.

“Hey,” Alec said to Kevin as he peeled off his layers.

The truck wasn't too warm yet, but it would get there, thanks to the fryers they used for the tempura and deep-fried sushi. The grill would help as well, but they didn't use it as often. People love fried food. Especially Portlandians.

Alec finally got down to his T-shirt—one advertising the truck, of course—and got to work on prep. Soon, Kevin and he were working in blissful harmony. They'd been navigating the confines of their food truck for three years now and had it down to a dance. They were ready fifteen minutes ahead of time. Enough for a cup of coffee.

Alec and Kevin took their mugs outside and sat under the pavilion where gas fire pits were already running, warming the space for the customers soon to come. Portlandians loved their food trucks and would brave any kind of weather for them. And with their pod having such a great location in the middle of downtown, they also got the employees coming out on their lunch breaks.

“Hey, guys,” Ishan from India Bites said and sat down beside them. He had a giant metal mug in his hands and took a sip before asking, “Did you hear about the earthquake?”

“In California?” Alec asked. “I swear, God has it out for that state. It's going to pull an Atlantis and fall off one of these days.”

“No, man. Here. They're saying it originated just beneath Marquam.”

“What? The park?” Alec looked at Kevin. “That's near my place.”

“You didn't feel it this morning?” Ishan asked.

“Nope.”

Kevin snorted. “Alec can sleep through anything.”

“Yeah, I can,” Alec admitted, smoothing back his hair even though the thick, black length laid slick against his head, tight in a ponytail that hung to mid-back on him. His hair got him nearly as much dick as his green eyes. An Asian with green eyes is even better than a black guy with green eyes. That shit is rare. And Alec knew how to work it.

“Tell him about the sex you slept through,” Kevin said.

Alec glared at him. “That's not cool.”

“What?!” Ishan asked in horrified glee.

“Some guy thought it would be sexy to wake Alec up with a little oral,” Kevin started.

“Kev,” Alec growled.

“All right, all right.” Kevin held up a hand. “Sorry. Not my deeply private and humiliating sex story to share.”

“Well, it's too late now,” Ishan said. “You've already given up the goods. I can figure out the rest.” He chuckled. “You slept through a blow job?”

“I woke up at the end,” Alec muttered.

Ishan and Kevin burst out laughing.

“Well, the earthquake wasn't all that impressive as far as earthquakes go. But you know how people are, what with the city being built over a 'seismically active area.’” Ishan made air quotes to go with the last bit. “Everyone's freaking the fuck out.”

“Yeah, it's been a while since we had one.” Alec took a drink of his coffee, enjoying the warmth and the caffeine, then stood up. “All right, I see some people coming. We'd better get to the trucks.”

“Why don't I ever see you working the window?” Ishan asked Kevin.

“You think people want to buy sushi from a white guy?” Kevin asked. “I need Alec to sell the authenticity. If only he'd do the accent.”

“I'm not faking a Japanese accent.” Alec walked away. “I won't be your little dancing monkey.”

“Aw come on,” Kevin teased as he followed. “An accent with that pretty face of yours? We'd be rollin' in it.”

“Yeah, rollin' in bullshit.”

Kevin snorted and slapped Alec on the back. “That's gross, man. Gross. But I would like to see you dance like a monkey.” He bent his arms under and started jumping around, making monkey sounds.

Alec rolled his eyes, ignored his partner's idiocy, and got in the truck to do some last-minute prep. With that done, the only thing to do was wait. Kevin put something on

his kindle, the thing clamped in one of those long-arm devices you use if you're too lazy to hold the damn thing. The metal piece gripped one of the metal shelves and hung over the grill.

Alec glanced at the kindle as Kevin scrolled down YouTube, then looked out the window. A flash of white caught his eye. There, just outside the lot entrance, stood a man with blond hair so pale that it was practically white. On top of that, he wore white, down to his boots. The only pop of color came from a pink satin vest.

If they were anywhere else, Alec might have assumed the man was gay. But in Portland, where weirdness abounded, that wasn't a safe bet. That being said, even the oddballs knew better than to wear all white in downtown Portland. In the rain. This guy was either a tourist or nuts.

Then Alec noticed that the man was staring at him.

When he met the man's stare, the guy nodded as if he'd been waiting for the acknowledgment. Then he pulled a pocket watch out of his shiny vest. He checked the time, met Alec's stare once more, and tapped the watch.

Alec frowned at the man.

He tapped the watch again.

“What the fuck?”

“What's that?” Kevin asked.

“Huh?” Alec looked over. “Oh, there's a freak out there, looking at me while he taps his pocket watch.”

“What? A pocket watch? That is freaky.” Kevin snorted a laugh.

“I’m serious. This guy is giving me the creeps.”

Kevin came over and leaned out the window. “Where?”

“Right there.” Alec motioned, but then realized that the man was gone. “Huh. He was right there.”

“Fucking Portland,” Kevin muttered and went back to his kindle.

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It was still light out when Alec scored a great parking space outside the dojo. He'd been practicing Judo since he was little, something his father insisted upon. Alec's dad had never been a violent man. To the contrary, he always said that you learned to fight so that you didn't have to. Plus, he believed that Judo had more to offer than defensive skills and increased strength. It also gave you confidence, made you more respectful of others, and enhanced your social skills. All Alec knew was that it made him feel safer to know that despite his smaller size, he could take down anyone who came at him.

In his layers once more, Alec hurried from his car to the dojo's door. As he opened it, he glanced to the side. Then froze. That blond was standing a few shops down. Staring at him.

“What the . . .” Alec let his words trail off as he watched the man bring out that watch again and tap it. “This is fucking bizarre. Yeah, okay, man. It's time for something. Got it.” Alec nodded at the guy and went inside.

Throughout his session, Alec kept thinking about the blond man. He couldn't figure out why the guy bothered him so much. It wasn't until he was leaving the dojo that he realized what it was. The guy had followed him. Either that or he already knew Alec's routine. And that was some crazy stalker shit.

As Alec drove home, he considered calling the police. But what would they say? He couldn't imagine them sending an officer out to watch him. The most they would do was note the complaint. Then, if the guy attacked him, Alec would have cause to defend himself as he saw fit.

He grimaced as he headed for his apartment. If not for the food truck, Alec would own a house, but he had sunk everything into his dream and he didn't regret it. He wasn't one for material things. Well, he could be, but for now, the truck's success was more important. So, Alec lived like a monk—sleeping on a futon and eating his meals at a fold-out table.

Halfway to his building, he saw the blond again. He was standing a block down on the sidewalk. And he fucking tapped his watch again.

“That's it!” Alec, who rarely got angry, stomped down the sidewalk after the man.

The man turned and walked away.

“Oh, hell no.” Alec put on speed.

Although the man didn't appear to speed up, he kept ahead of Alec. Frustrated, Alec started to run. Despite the continuance of his sedate walk, the blond remained out of reach. The oddness of this started to occur to Alec just as he reached the park. Marquam Nature Park—the very one Ishan had mentioned that morning.

Alec came to a stop at the park's entrance, bent over and huffing. He kept his head lifted, his stare locked on the blond. And the blond stopped as well. He turned, met Alec's stare, and did that annoying pocket watch tap again!

“Dude, what's your problem?” Alec called to him.

That's when the guy turned into a rabbit. A cute little fluffy white bunny.

“What the fuck?” Alec whispered as the white rabbit hopped into the park. “What the actual fuck?!”

Alec ran after the rabbit.

He knew it was insane, but nothing could have stopped him from chasing that rabbit. Not after Alec saw it transform like something out of a sci-fi movie. What he saw wasn't possible. He knew that. And yet, he had seen it. Alec wasn't a man to doubt his own eyes. He had seen something. He just wasn't sure what it was. There had to be a logical explanation, and Alec wasn't leaving the park until he found it. At the very least, that bunny was coming home with him.

The rabbit went off the trail.

Alec cursed as he blundered into a clump of wet ferns that came to waist-high on him.

The rabbit veered.

Alec's foot slipped and he smacked into the mossy trunk of a tree. Moss was everywhere—the ground, the trees, the rocks. It was damn dangerous. On top of the moss and the monstrous ferns, stuff dangled from the trees, hindering his sight. Through the overhang, he caught a flash of white. Alec twisted around and raced off in another direction.

Then he lost sight of the rabbit.

“Son of a bitch!” Alec turned around and realized that he was so far off the trail, he couldn't see the way back. “No. Fuck. I'm a damn idiot. And I'm lost. What is wrong with me?!”

A rustling came to his left and against all reason, Alec spun toward it. There it was—the bunny. It stared at him as if egging him on, then hopped away.

“Oh, it's gonna be rabbit stew for dinner!” Alec snarled and ran after the rabbit.

He made it two steps before the ground gave way beneath his feet. Shouting and clawing at the disintegrating earth, Alec fell backward into a chasm. Roots whipped him as debris came at him from both above and below. Alec prepared himself for a rough landing.

A minute later—which is quite a long time when you're falling into a ravine—Alec was still falling. He twisted about to look below. At first, there was only darkness, but then he saw a light. Fear lashed through him. His brain couldn't process what was happening. Above him, a tiny patch of gray light was getting smaller and smaller. He kept falling.

Around Alec, the walls of the chasm changed. They smoothed out, and then objects appeared among the rocks and packed soil. Little ones at first—a plate, a book, a teacup. And then the objects got larger, protruding from the wall. Alec passed a desk, a floor lamp, and a rocking horse. Then he knocked into a spindly wooden chair.

With a grunt, he spun. His feet ended up where his head had been. Panicked, Alec fought to right himself. Hitting the ground with his head, especially from that height, would mean instant death. But before he could turn the other way, his fall slowed.

Like a leaf, Alec glided downward. No. It wasn't downward anymore. His sense of gravity shifted, telling him that up was now down. When Alec came to a stop, he found himself hovering over a hole. Just as he started to fall back toward where he'd come from, he took a step forward—onto solid ground.

“Holy shit,” Alec whispered as he turned to peer down into the hole and saw a garage sale's worth of crap lining its walls. “What the hell just happened?”

He stood on a tiled floor of white and black squares, the surface glossy and perfect

except where the hole was. There, things got jagged, revealing the dirt beneath the tiles. Alec walked away from the hole to inspect the room he'd arrived in. Not a cave as one might expect to find at the bottom of a forest chasm, but a decorated room. It had a round table in the center but no chairs. The wall—a single wall since it was a round room—boasted lengths of black velvet curtains and portraits in golden frames. Peeking out from behind the pulled-back curtains were several doors of differing sizes.

A portrait moved. Alec shrieked and jumped back. Then he realized they weren't portraits at all. They were mirrors. And he looked freaked out in every one of them. Panting, he turned in a circle.

The rabbit sat before a door that matched its height perfectly. The door was also open.

“Rabbit!” Alec pointed at the animal. “You and I need to talk.”

The bunny hopped through the door.

“Damn it!” Alec jumped for the rabbit and hit the floor right in front of the little door. “Rabbit!” He reached through the door, but the critter was gone. All he got was a handful of plants. “Fuck!” Alec sat up, brushed off his hands, and glared at the door. “This is insane.”

Rubbing his forehead, Alec sat on the floor cross-legged for several minutes. He was hoping he'd wake up, that it was all a dream. Or maybe something would happen to give him some direction. If you sit by the river long enough, the bodies of your enemies will float by. Yeah, that line is about revenge, but Alec often applied it to anything that required patience. Or when he didn't know what to do. Sometimes a good bout of quiet reflection is all that's needed.

But Sun Tzu had never fallen down a gravity-defying chasm and come out on the other side of the world. Into a room of doors. Patience did not help Alec. Nothing happened as he sat there in contemplation. Nothing beyond him coming to the obvious conclusion—open another door.

Alec tried the doors he could fit through. Locked—every last one. He yanked on their handles, pounded his fist on them, and even kicked them, but they didn't budge.

That's when he saw the bottle. Made of clear, blue glass and stoppered with cork instead of a cap, the bottle waited in the center of the table. A paper scrap hung from it, tied to it with string. Feeling as if he were walking through cotton candy—sort of dazed and fuzzy—Alec went to the table and picked up the bottle.

“Drink me,” he read the tag aloud. Then he snorted. “Right. Like I'm going to drink some random liquid that I found at the bottom—or maybe the top—of a hole.”

Then Alec looked at the hole. He realized he had two options. He could either drink the stuff and see what happened or he could jump back in the hole and hope it took him home.

Alec thought about home. He thought about Kevin and his other friends. He thought about his parents and their dog, Connor. He thought about judo and sushi. When was the last time he had sex? Or fun of any sort? When was the last time he drank something crazy without worrying about it? Running the food truck consumed him. It took up most of his time and a good portion of his thoughts too. Maybe a sip from a random hole-bottle was exactly what he needed.

“Fuck it,” Alec muttered and uncorked the bottle.

The scent of strawberries wafted up to him, making him smile. It wasn't a fake strawberry scent but one of freshly picked and sugared berries. He lifted the bottle to

his nose and inhaled deeper.

“Oh, wow,” Alec whispered. “That smells incredible.”

He pressed the bottle to his lips and tasted the drink. The flavor of sweet strawberries burst across his tongue. It was heaven. Rapturous. But before he could take a larger sip, he started to tremble.

“Shit.” Alec hurried to cork the bottle before he spilled it everywhere. “What the hell?” He stared at his shaking hands. “Even if it was toxic, it shouldn't hit me this fast.”

Then Alec gaped at the floor. Because the floor was coming at him. He cried out as the world shifted around him, things growing in size rapidly. Just as he raised his arms to protect his face, everything stopped. Alec opened his eyes and found himself standing before an open door. It didn't register at first that it was the rabbit's door. Because it wasn't a rabbit door anymore. It was an Alec door.

Alec looked up and then jerked back. The table was enormous, soaring over him like a skyscraper. Stumbling, he fell into some curtains. With the bottle still firmly in hand, Alec flailed in the fabric, bounced off the wall, then fell onto his face. Groaning, he shoved himself up. As he got up, he saw the view through the Alec doorway.

“Fuck me,” Alec whispered as he pocketed the bottle. “Where am I?”

Alec crawled to the doorway and leaned out. Enormous plants loomed around the exit—ferns, broad-leafed grass, and flowers. He got to his feet and stepped through the arches passage. The ground was dirt, but even that was strange. It was like walking over pebbles. A look up gave him glimpses of a pale blue sky, sunlight streaming past the canopy of plants to warm him. He pulled off his knit cap and

tucked it into his jacket.

Flower stalks the size of tree trunks bent under the weight of monstrous bloom, the vibrant petals exuding exotic fragrances. Even the smells were large, his nose overwhelmed by the layered perfume of nature. Alec walked in a daze, running his hand over blades of grass the size of palm trees and gaping at mushrooms bigger than his apartment.

Then he saw that fucking rabbit.

It was waiting for him in a clearing. The white rabbit stared at Alec and then, in the blink of an eye, it became the blond man. The man towered over Alec—a giant out of a children's story. He felt like Jack or one of the Lilliputians. But the blond found none of this strange. He drew out his pocket watch again and tapped it.

“Well?” the blond demanded, his voice booming in Alec's ears. “Hurry up, Alec! They're waiting for us!”

“What?” Alec gaped up at the giant. “Who's waiting for us?”

“Don't be impudent!” The blond crouched to better stare at him. “Now, where's the cake?”

“What cake?”

“The cake!” the blond huffed and waved back the way Alec had come. “Didn't you take the cake?”

“This takes the cake,” Alec muttered.

“For goodness' sake!” The blond brushed back his wild bangs and shook his head.

“Did I even bring any? Oh, I must have.” He patted his pockets, then, with a huff of relief, brought forth a tiny cake—one of those petite fours Alec's mother always bought at Christmas. “Here.” The rabbit-man set the cake on the ground before Alec.

For Alec, the cake was the size of a steamer trunk. He looked up at the blond and asked, “What do I do with this?”

“What do you think you do with it? It's cake.” He shook his head again. “I swear, it's like you don't remember a thing.”

“About you?” Alec asked. “I don't know you, man.”

“I knew it! I told them so! But would they listen? Oh, no. 'Fetch Alec,' they said. 'He's the only one who can help us,' they said. 'The Caterpillar,' they said. And when I told them it had been too long, that children forget things when they grow up in your world, they called me foolish. Foolish! And here you are.” He waved at Alec. “Forgetful Alec. Now, who's the fool?”

“Uh.” Alec scowled from the cake to the blond. “They are?”

“Precisely!” the blond said. “Now, eat your cake, Alec. There's a good boy. And just a tiny bite. We don't want you to grow too much.”

“A tiny bite will make me grow?”

“Stop playing around and eat the cake!”

“Yes, sir.”

“I am Valcazan of the House of Rabbits,” the blond said. “But you may call me Val.”

“Uh-huh.” Alec took a tiny bite of the enormous cake. It was vanilla, but a good vanilla.

And then the world did its crazy dance again.

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“There you are.” Val waved at Alec. “The proper Alec size again.” He brushed off Alec's shoulders. “It's a bit warm for all that, don't you think?”

Alec looked down at his coat. “Uh. Yeah.” He shrugged out of it and then the sweater he wore beneath. Folding them over his arm, he asked, “Now, can you tell me where I am?”

“Ah, yes. No memories at all.” Val shook his head, frowning at the sushi cartoon on Alec's shirt. “Just as I suspected.”

“Yes, we've already determined that you know me, but I don't know you. I don't know where I am, why I'm here, or how the hell you turned from a man into a rabbit and back again. Now, how about you fill me in?”

Val grimaced. “Very well. This is Wonderland. You have been here before, but that was when you were a child. You seem to have forgotten us. Not surprising, as I said, but still hurtful.”

Alec looked around, feeling a strange sense of déjà vu. He should have been freaking out. In a panic. Or a dead faint. He had freaked out a little, but not as much as he should have. A man had turned into a rabbit and then Alec had fallen down a hole that spun him and everything else around and spat him out into this place. Where nothing made sense. And yet it did. Somewhere inside him, it made sense.

“This feels familiar.” Alec breathed in the fresh scents—much smaller now, and stared at the odd trees. Their branches couldn't seem to decide which way to grow.

“Well, at least there's that,” Val muttered. “Maybe the rest will come back to you. For now, all you need to know is that you have friends here and those friends are in trouble. The Queen of Hearts has declared war on the White Chess Queen. She has already conquered every card kingdom and now has her sights set on the Chess Kingdoms. We don't know when she'll attack, but the White Kingdom is closest to the Kingdom of Hearts, so we assume she'll attack us first. We need you to fulfill your destiny, Alec.”

“My destiny?”

“The Jabberwocky, Alec! The evil creature the Caterpillar warned us about. It's here! The Queen of Hearts summoned it. We need you, Alec. We can handle her card soldiers and even her Jubjubs, but not that gigantic flying beast.”

“A flying beast?” Alec gaped at Val. “And you want me to do what to this beast?”

“Well, the prophecy is rather vague about that. It says you will conquer the Jabberwocky. How you go about it is up to you.”

“Great. A prophecy.” Alec rolled his eyes. “Those always turn out well.”

“Come now. They're waiting for us. We're going to be late.”

“Who?”

“Who, what?”

“Who's waiting for us?”

“Everyone, of course. Come along!” With that, Val turned and strode down a path. “And don't forget the cake!”

Alec, still feeling that sense of déjà vu, picked up the cake, tucked it in his coat, and followed the rabbit-man. Again.

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“Halt!” Someone stepped into their path.

Alec and Val had been walking for over an hour. The time had passed quickly, gobbled up by the strange sights that lined the path. Extraordinary plants, some of which appeared to be sentient, grew in abundance, and even stranger wildlife roamed among those plants. Even the insects were bizarre. A rocking horse the size of his thumb flew by him on dragonfly wings, neighing while swaying back and forth. Then there was the bread-and-butterfly, its sliced bread wings tinted a bright buttery yellow. Fluffy dandelions growled at him, vines crept over the trees like snakes, and bushes whipped anything that came too close.

Still, Alec didn't panic. He kept following Val through tunnels of twisted branches and thickets full of yellow eyes that watched him from the darkness. At least Val had stopped tapping that damn pocket watch. That is until now.

“Oh, do step aside!” Val said as he pulled out the watch and tapped it. “The time, you idiot! We're late!”

“Oh, it's you,” the brawny man said as he looked Val over.

“Who's you?” an identical man asked as he joined the first.

Beyond their impressive height and girth, the men were rather average. With brown hair cut in a military style, brown eyes, and brownish skin, they were sort of bland and monochrome. Alec couldn't tell what ethnicity they were. Something mixed. But those muscles—wow. They formed a wall across the path by merely standing there.

“He's you,” the first man said.

“No, I'm me,” the second man said.

“Enough!” Val screeched. “Get out of the way, Andee! You know who I am and you know who I'm bringing to the war council!”

“Is that him?” Andee asked.

“I thought he was you?” the second man chimed in.

“Do, shut up, Adum!” Val snapped at the second man. “And move aside, both of you!”

“Yes, sir!” Andee and Adum snapped to attention, saluting Val in unison. But they didn't move off the path.

“Step. Aside. Now!”

“Oh! Yes, we'll move.” Andee shoved Adum. “You heard Val! Move to the side!”

Adum teetered, his enormous arms waving about like a cartoon character's. Andee grabbed Adum's shirt to steady him, but it wasn't enough to stop the momentum of such a large man. Adum's shirt tore, and both men tumbled into the ferns. The ferns screamed, jumped out of the ground, and scuttled away.

“Finally.” Val strode past them.

Alec watched the men roll about as they tried to get up. One accidentally hit the other, progressing things into a fistfight.

“Just leave them.” Val waved loftily.

“Uh, okay.” Alec followed Val past the grunting, grappling men, out of the forest, and into a huge clearing.

Well, a huge field. It wasn't at all clear. The field was full of tents and people. As Val led him along a central path, those people stopped what they were doing to stare at Alec. Alec stared back, searching for someone who might jog his memory. If he had been there before, and his gut told him he had, he wanted to know what had happened. How had he gotten there the last time? How had he gotten home? And he just wanted to remember. His visit must have been magical, especially if he'd been a child. How could he have forgotten?

None of the men and women were familiar to Alec. But they seemed to know him. Their eyes filled with hope when they spotted him, some of them even stood up and bowed. Alec just nodded and smiled, albeit tightly. The further he got into the camp, the more nervous he felt. This wasn't just any camp. The men and women were polishing armor, sharpening swords, and repairing shields. This was a war camp, and those people were soldiers. The rational part of Alec's brain told him to turn around and run back to that hole. He may be adept in judo, but he wasn't a soldier. He didn't know how to use a sword or defend himself with a shield. And that jabber-thing sounded ferocious. Three kingdoms had fallen because of it. But he was supposed to conquer the creature? How?

And yet, he kept following the rabbit-man.

“Here we are.” Val huffed out a sigh and motioned at a tent.

It was the largest tent in the camp and a pair of men stood outside it, to either side of the entrance. The men bowed to Val as they pulled the fabric panels back for him, and Val strode in. Alec went forward with more hesitation, glancing at the guards

before stepping inside. Then he stopped.

Before Alec stretched a long, rectangular table. A motley assortment of people sat there, including a lanky man with shaggy brown hair, a little mousy lady, a sharp-faced guy, and then, at the head of the table, there sat a very attractive man wearing a purple top hat that caught Alec's eye. In addition to its vibrant color, the hat had thin blades tucked into its leather band, fanned out for easy retrieval. But it wasn't the hat's color or accessories that froze Alec in place. It was the hat itself. And the man who wore it.

The sight triggered a memory—Alec sitting at a table similar to this one, drinking a cup of tea with that man, wearing that hat. Both hat and man were the same except for one thing—the blades. In Alec's memory, there was a fan of feathers instead of blades. Colorful feathers and a playing card—the Knave of Diamonds.

“You,” Alec whispered.

Val looked back and forth between Alec and the man in the hat. “Well, it's about time you remembered something.”

“He doesn't remember anything?” Top Hat asked as he stood up.

“No,” Val said, then smirked and lifted his chin. “Not a thing. Just as I warned.”

Top Hat came around the table and stood before Alec. “But you know me?” He grinned, and the world got brighter. “Of course, you do. How could you forget your friend, Quinlen, eh?” He clapped Alec's shoulder. “We had cake and tea, and then we played games until it was tea time again. You had marvelous adventures here before you had to go home. But now, you're all grown up and you can stay as long as you like. Maybe even forever.”

“Uh, I don't know what's going on,” Alec said. “This whole place is strange.” He eyed Alec's blades. “What happened to the feathers? And the playing card?”

Quinlen lost his smile. “It's been a long time since I stuck feathers in my hat. And the card—” He slid his hand into his vest and pulled out the card that Alec remembered. “I keep it closer to my heart now. It's all I have left of him.”

“It's all you have left of him?”

“Yes. He died defending his king.” Quinlen slid the card back into his vest. “A lot of card soldiers died that day. They call it the Decimation of Diamonds.”

Alec swayed.

“Whoa now.” Quinlen steadied him. “I think you could use a strong cup of tea. Come with me.”

Quinlen helped Alec to the table, sitting him beside the sharp-faced man. The man jerked his head toward Alec, cocking it oddly, and Alec drew back. The man drew back as well, blinking eyes that were as black as his hair. Fully black.

“This is Cranvor of the House of Ravens, Captain of the White Flock,” Quinlen said.

Cranvor nodded, the movement just as quick as the others he'd made.

“Uh-huh,” Alec murmured. “Nice to meet you.”

After he got Alec seated, Quinlen resumed his seat at the head of the table on Alec's left. Val sat down a little further down. Steam rose from the teacup set before Alec as Val poured a deep amber tea into it. The warm cloud rose around Alec, a familiar scent tugging more memories free.

“Fresh cup! Fresh cup!” Finbri declared.

Everyone stood up and moved a seat down at the enormous table. Or maybe it only seemed enormous because Alec was so little. Seven-year-old Alec laughed and bounced over to the next chair—a chair unlike its neighbor. All the chairs were different, as were the cutlery, dinnerware, and teacups. As unique as the people who used them. In the center of the table, towering displays of sweets and savories threatened to tumble over at any second, but every time something fell, a hand reached out to catch it.

“You're Finbri,” Alec said to the man with shaggy brown hair sitting across from him.

Finbri grinned broadly. “Aye. Well done, Alec.” He lifted his teacup in a toast. “And welcome back. It's grand to see you.”

“You . . .” Alec trailed off, his memory shocking him. But then he realized how unshocking it was. “You transformed into a rabbit. Just like Val.”

“I beg your pardon!” Val gripped his armrests as if the chair might take off.

Meanwhile, Finbri burst out laughing.

“What's so funny?” Alec asked.

Quinlen leaned in to whisper, “Valcazan is a white rabbit, from an elite family within the House of Rabbits. Finbri is from the House of Hares. They, uh, are different breeds.”

“Different what?”

“Breeds,” Cranvor said crisply. “Different houses. As I am of the House of Ravens and would not appreciate being confused with, say, a Peacock. Birds of a feather, you see?”

Alec looked from Cranvor to the affronted Val. “Uh. Sorry.”

Val sniffed and looked away.

Finbri laughed harder. “Oh-ho! Look at you. Can't stand to be associated with a lowly hare? You fucking breedist prick.”

“Breedist?!” Val drew himself up straight in his seat. “I am the first son of the first son from a long line of White Rabbits! I am not a breedist just because I am proud of my breeding.”

“That's exactly what a breedist would say. Breedism is spreading across this land and it's a crock of horse crap. Animal houses thinking they're better than others because of their pure blood. Ha! Ridiculous. And breedist or not, you're definitely an elitist asshole.”

“Watch your tongue! I am the White Queen's emissary!”

Finbri's good humor vanished like the wind. An ill wind. He narrowed his eyes at Val and spoke through his teeth, “And I am the March Hare. Bishop of the March Legion. I actually fight beside my soldiers. What the fuck do you do? Talk?”

The table went silent.

The rabbits faced off. Or rather, the rabbit and the hare faced off.

Then the mousy lady started cackling. She slapped the table, her nose twitching.

“And we're supposed to be the goodies! Ha!” She laughed harder. “Can't even reach peace amongst ourselves! We're all rodents, you fools! Rodents, the lot of us!”

“Almai, please,” Quinlen said. “All of you. Enough. This is not the time for nonsense.” He looked at his wristwatch. “We have an hour yet.”

“An hour yet?” Alec asked.

“Before noon,” Quinlen said as if it were obvious.

“That's the best time for nonsense,” Almai said. She ran dainty, clawed fingers through her short hair and blinked her large, brown eyes at him. “Do you remember me, Alec? I cut my hair. Got bangs.”

Alec frowned at her. “Almai . . . oh! You're a mouse!”

Almai clapped her hands excitedly. “I am! I am! Almai of the House of Mice. I'm Bishop of the Door Legion now.”

“Bishop,” Alec murmured. “Are you all religious?”

Everyone laughed at that, leaving Alec glowering.

“Sorry, Alec.” Quinlen smacked his back. “That was just too funny. Religion in Wonderland?” He snorted. “We can get a little crazy here, but we're not fools.”

Alec gaped at him.

“Oh, dear me. Are you religious?” Quinlen looked as if he'd eaten something sour. “Do you—” He waved his hand upwards. “—pray to an invisible being who lives in the sky?” He leaned closer to whisper, “No one lives in the Wonderland sky.”

“No, I don't believe that,” Alec said. “But I wouldn't call those who do foolish.”

“Yes, yes, whatever.” Quinlen rolled his eyes. “Bishops are military titles. I am the Commander of the White Chess Army. Below me are the Bishops. They each command a legion of ten thousand soldiers formed of . . . oh, damn. I'm going in the wrong direction. Let me start from the bottom. Individual soldiers in the Chess Army are called Pawns. Knights command a centuria of a hundred pawns. Rooks command a cohort of ten centuria—that's one thousand pawns. Then the Bishops command a legion of ten cohorts or ten thousand pawns. I command them all, and the White Queen commands me. Understand?”

“That sounds very Roman to me.” Alec tried to remember learning about the Roman army in school. One thing was certain—they didn't have bishops in charge of anything.

“Never heard of him.” Quinlen plucked a blade from his hat and spun it around his fingers. “Now, moving on.”

“Fresh cup!” Finbri jumped up.

“Not the time, Finbri!” Quinlen threw the blade, impaling the scone on Finri's plate.

“Scone.” Finbri narrowed his eyes at his pierced pastry and sat down. He removed the blade and flung it back at Quin. “But you said to move along.”

Quinlen caught the blade and put it back in his hat band. “I meant in the conversation, not physically.” Quinlen sighed, then looked at Alec. “Drink your tea, Alec.”

Alec sipped his tea and found it delicious, much sweeter than expected, and also flavorful. Breathing it in, he took another sip, then another.

“Do you remember the Queen of Hearts?” Quinlen asked.

Alec choked on his tea.

Those words—that name—suddenly struck a chord that conjured frightening images in Alec's head:

Roses everywhere. But they were the wrong color. Alec stood with a group of anxious men, staring at the white roses. One of them handed him a bottle of red dye.

“Hurry!” he said. “She could appear at any second.”

And then he was carefully applying drops of red dye to each white petal. Tedious, but it worked. The stain spread, leaving the roses looking as if they'd been red all along.

The stain spread to cover Alec's memory, then retreated to reveal another part of the vast gardens around Hearts Fortress. Alec held a mallet that was almost as tall as he was and watched as a statuesque woman with crimson hair topped by a pointy crown, hit a ball with a matching mallet, driving it toward a few flamingos. The skirts of her ballgown swished as she leaned forward, onto her mallet, and glared at the birds. The flamingos went all aflutter, flapping about until they were in the path of the ball. Then they bent their long necks to the grass, forming arches for the ball to pass through.

A crowd of odd people cheered.

Pink feathers covered Alec's sight and again, the image shifted to another memory. Alec stood beside a voluptuous woman holding a pig swaddled like a baby. She was feeding the pig from a bottle as she argued with the red-haired woman in a crown. Just behind the Queen, a red-haired man wrung his hands. He wore a crown as well, though it was smaller than the Queen's.

“Off with her head!” the Queen of Hearts screeched.

Alec drew back in fear, smacking into his friend, Gryphon.

“Steady now.” Gryphon grabbed his arm and winked. “It's all her fancy. You'll see. They never execute nobody, you know?”

The Queen glided away in a swirl of rustling silk, leaving the scent of roses in her wake . . . and her husband. Even as the card soldiers closed in on the woman with the pig, the King stepped between them.

“I hereby pardon Duchess Lellia of the House of Pigs,” the King whispered.

The soldiers stepped back and bowed to their king, their expressions carefully blank.

“The Queen of Hearts,” Alec gasped as he surfaced from his memories. “Yeah, I remember her. What a bitch.”

Everyone stared at him for a second before they all burst into laughter. Even Val joined in.

When the laughter died down, Quinlen said, “Indeed she was. But she's become far worse than that. Now she's a merciless, murderess bitch.”

“Murderous?” Alec recalled those fearsome words. “Off with her head.”

“Yes,” Finbri said. “That used to be a joke in the Hearts Fortress. Not anymore.”

“The King stopped pardoning people?”

“The King of Hearts died in the Card Wars.” Quinlen removed his hat.

Everyone bent their heads and murmured, “May death be his greatest adventure.”

Alec frowned, searching the somber faces. “What's the Card Wars?”

Quin's face twitched.

Val took one look at Quin and launched into an explanation. “Ruling the Hearts Kingdom didn't satisfy the Queen. She wanted all the Card Kingdoms.”

“All the Card Kingdoms,” Alec murmured, remembering something about the Queen raging about the Queen of Spades. “Yeah, I can see that. So, she went to war with them?”

“Yes,” Quinlen said. “At great cost to all the Card Kingdoms. The Hearts Army crushed Spades, then Clubs. At last, it was down to Diamonds. The Diamonds Royals gathered their forces. Many soldiers from Clubs and Spades offered their swords to Diamonds to help end the Hearts' tyranny. The Diamond Army grew to epic proportions. It looked as if they'd win.” Quinlen bent his head. “He was so sure they'd win. So fucking confident. My beautiful knave.”

Alec looked from Quin to Val, who shook his head.

“They might have won.” Finbri lifted his teacup and pointed it at Alec. “But then the King of Diamonds killed the King of Hearts.”

“It drove the Queen of Hearts mad,” Almai whispered. “And not in a good way. She lost more than her mind. She lost herself. Whatever tiny piece of goodness there was inside her died with her husband. She called upon dark forces—magic so evil that only the most depraved even knew it existed. And in that dark magic, the Jabberwocky was born.”

Shivers ran up Alec's arms. "That's the monster you mentioned." He looked at Val. "The one you said I'm supposed to kill."

Val nodded. "It's a thing of nightmares. A creature so twisted and wicked, nothing from our world can stop it."

"So we sent for you—someone from another world. And you must defeat the Jabberwocky, Alec," Finbri said. "Because the Queen of Hearts has now turned her eye toward the Chess Kingdoms."

"We need you, Alec." Quinlen put his hat back on and tapped the flat top. "The Hearts Kingdom borders the White Chess Kingdom. Scouting parties of card soldiers have already started creeping through Tulgeren Woods, testing our diligence."

"We can't be certain that Alec is still the one we need," Almai said. "He's been gone a long time, he received that prophecy when he was a child, and the future is ever-changing. He needs to be reread."

"Reread?" Alec asked.

"Eat your cake, Alec." Quinlen plucked several little cakes from their precarious positions on propped porcelain and plopped them on Alec's plate. "Bishop Almai is right. You need to see the Caterpillar."

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Baxenvir, Knave of Hearts, strode down the echoing hallway, chin lifted. Not in pride. Well, not entirely. He didn't want to see the adoring looks on the faces of the courtiers. He didn't think he deserved them. And he was too proud to be proud of something he didn't deserve. Pride was a tricky, two-headed beast, and both heads were biting him.

War hero. That's what they called him. The Queen's Champion. The Knave of Hearts. But Bax didn't feel like a hero. He hated war. There was nothing heroic about it. Especially the Queen's brand of war. Plus, blood made him squeamish. But he'd trained from a young age to fight for his kingdom, and that's what he did. His job. His duty. He never sought glory or relished killing those he fought. It made Baxenvir sick to think about the lives he'd taken. Often, during a battle, he went into a sort of trance, pushing aside his fear and disgust so he could do what he needed to do—become a cold-blooded killer.

And they praised him for it.

Just looking at the starry-eyed faces of the courtiers who vied for his attention made Bax sick to his stomach. They knew nothing of war. To them, it was sexy. Anything dangerous was sexy to a courtier. Perhaps it was the Queen's fault. She made danger fashionable. The Queen of Hearts set the standard for everything in the Card Kingdoms, sex appeal included. So it shouldn't have surprised Bax that he was so sought after. Next to the Queen, he had the second-highest kill count.

No. That wasn't true. The Jabberwocky had killed more than Bax and the Queen combined.

“But you don't see any of them seducing the monster,” Bax muttered. “Maybe it's because no one knows where she keeps him.” He chuckled to himself as the image of a pack of ass-kissing courtiers fawning over the Jabberwocky filled his head. “I wonder if they'd ask it about all the battles it had fought.”

On the rare occasion that Baxenvir took someone to bed, just to relieve the loneliness and see to his needs, he had to listen to them prattle on about his prowess and then evade the stupid questions they asked. War wasn't sexy. Talking about it made sex nearly impossible for him. Sometimes, he simply ignored everything they said, did what he had to do, and got out of there. Much as he did in battle.

The only thing that kept Bax fighting was his queen. He could still remember the horrific battle that changed everything, sealing the fate of the Card Kingdoms and launching him into hero status. He'd been fighting for his life, certain that this was the battle that would end the Queen's bid for supremacy, when screams filled the air. Her screams. The King of Diamonds had killed the King of Hearts.

The Hearts Army, already beaten down by the overwhelming numbers of the Diamonds' forces, floundered with their King's death. And they weren't the only ones affected. The Queen fell to her knees, covered in her husband's blood. Her sorrow had mesmerized Bax. He'd never seen anyone so overcome with grief.

The image of the Queen of Hearts cradling her husband's headless body would haunt Bax forever. But at that moment, her grief gave him strength. Baxenvir pushed down his fear and pain for his queen. He fought his way to her and defended her as she wept and moaned, rocking the King's corpse. No one else had gone to her aid. The Queen of Hearts was not the most beloved of queens, and Bax knew that many of her soldiers hoped she'd die along with her husband. Bax had been one of them until the Queen's sorrow slid an arrow into his heart. Then there was nothing that could stop him from protecting her. All alone on that hilltop, Baxenvir fought off an onslaught of soldiers that outnumbered him five to one. He fought and held them back long

enough for the Queen to recover.

Baxenvir remembered the exact moment the Queen returned to herself and rallied. She touched him—laid her hand on the back of his thigh where there was a gap in his armor. He recalled raising his shield to protect them as he looked down and met her stare. Her face had been red from blood both beneath and atop her skin, but her eyes burned with power. The Queen of Hearts rose to her feet, her stare never leaving Baxenvir's, and cupped his cheek as if they were alone and had all the time in the world.

Then she spoke the words that bound Bax to her forever. “Your loyalty has won mine, soldier. Now, we will fight together, and you will be my champion.”

That's when Baxenvir, a lowly card soldier, had become the Knave of Hearts. He had fought to protect, then fought beside his queen. Together, they drove back the Diamond soldiers, but it still wasn't enough to satisfy the Queen's rage. The fury and pain rolled off her until she channeled it into dark magic.

Bax defended his queen once more as she summoned the Jabberwocky into existence. A monster. A creature of nightmares. She chained its will with hers and sent it forth to decimate the Diamonds Army. Bax could still remember the acrid smell of the monster's breath and the shine of its scales. Madness had threatened him then. It threatened anyone who dared to look upon the Jabberwocky. But that's when Bax sank into his first battle trance.

The cool numbness of that blessed oblivion crept over Bax, turning him into the killer he needed to be while simultaneously making him immune to the Jabberwocky's terrifying aura. Bax fought on while others cowered, earning the title of Queen's Champion. Luckily, the trance dulled the rest of that battle. He remembered little more than bits and pieces. He saw the Queen of Hearts pointing at the monarchs of Diamonds. Her vicious expression as they died terrible deaths. The glow in her eyes.

And that's all he could remember until he came back to himself at the end, when the Hearts Army roared in victory and their blood-drenched Queen stood beside him, her expression vacant as she stared across the wasteland that had once been Hortensia, the crown city of Diamonds.

That trance had saved Bax. If not for that mental numbness, he might have gone as mad as his queen. Yes, he knew the Queen of Hearts was insane, but he also understood why. He'd never forsake her, no matter how mad she became. Because of that battle. Because of her words. Because of the way they had fought back to back, defending each other. That kind of connection is unbreakable. Even by madness.

Back in the present, Baxenvir stopped before the Queen's door, waiting for the guards to open it. His heart still bled for his queen. Because hers had never healed. She sliced it open every day, offering her heart's blood to her dead husband. The King had been more than the Queen's greatest love. He had also been her rock. He kept her from succumbing to the darkest of her passions. When she went into a rage and sentenced someone to death, the King would quietly pardon them. He knew she just needed to release her fury. She didn't actually want anyone to die. Not back then.

Unfortunately, the Knave of Hearts was no replacement for the late king. He wished he could help the Queen combat the fury that often claimed her or talk her back into calmness. He wanted so badly to be the man she needed—the man who could support her while caging the wild parts of her nature. But Bax couldn't be that man. No one could. But he could comfort her. A little.

When the guards opened the double doors for the Queen's Champion, he stepped through into the Royal Solarium—a room awash in red. From the carved ceiling to the tiled floor, it was all shades of crimson. And there she was, almost invisible in that red sea. Only the paleness of the Queen's skin gave her away.

But the Knave was used to seeing red. He zeroed in on her immediately and went to

bow to his queen. "Your Majesty. How may I serve?"

"My knave," the Queen murmured, her stare only half focused on him.

Bax knelt beside her. "My Queen, are you unwell again? May I comfort you?" He opened his arms.

"Ah, my sweet boy. Knave of my heart." The Queen of Hearts laid her head on Bax's shoulder and sighed as his arms folded around her. "He's gone. My love is gone forever. Even the darkness can't bring him back. I've tried. I've tried so many times."

"I know, Your Majesty. We all mourn King Harver. But you avenged him. Do you remember? He would be so proud of you."

The Queen lifted her head and looked at Baxenvir. Her hand went to his cheek. "I remember. You saved me and led us to victory."

"No, Your Majesty. Do not credit me. It was you who summoned the Jabberwocky. I only guarded you until you could gather your strength."

"You were instrumental, Bax." She stroked his cheek. "My beautiful knave. The people love you as much as I do because they know you saved us."

"I'm humbled by your love, Your Majesty." He bent his head. "And I'm sure I don't deserve it. Nor do I deserve the glory you give me."

"Oh, but you do. More than you know." The Queen kissed his forehead. "It is you who has kept sorrow from swallowing me whole. Every day it threatens to pull me under, and every day, you come to me and pull me out. Thank you, Bax."

"It is my honor to serve you, Your Majesty." The loyal Knave of Hearts looked upon

his queen with adoration. “And it's my deepest hope that you will one day pull yourself out and stay here with us. We need you.”

“One day.” The Queen of Hearts stood up and turned to look toward the curving balcony. In the distance, a white castle rose, hazy on the horizon. “When I have the world at my feet. Then I'll have something to keep me from falling under.”

“Will you marry the Prince now, Your Majesty?” Bax stood up as well. “I see your strength returning. Maybe it's time to—”

“No!” the Queen roared.

The Knave of Hearts stood unflinching before her fury. He had learned that it was the only way to survive it.

When the Queen met his steady stare, her anger melted. “I'm sorry, my sweet knave. I'm not ready yet.”

“It's all right, my Queen,” Baxenvir said. “Prince Albion is secure. He'll be here, waiting for you, when you're ready.”

“Yes.” She turned back to the view. “Just a little longer. Then I will take the White Kingdom without a fight. And once White has fallen, Black will follow. All of Wonderland will be mine.” With a shifting expression, she turned back to him. “Fetch the Prince. I should like to get to know my intended better.”

“Yes, Your Majesty!” Bax bowed, hope rising in him, then hurried from the room.

It wasn't the most honorable solution—forcing the White Prince to marry the Queen of Hearts, and there was certainly no love between them. But the alliance would save thousands of lives. Hundreds of thousands. It had taken Bax weeks to convince the

Queen of Hearts to give his plan a try. Weeks of gentle coercion and plotting. He knew he had to be ready to act the second she agreed so that she couldn't back out. And he had. The Knave of Hearts had led the mission to capture the White Prince himself. Now, the Prince was theirs and through him, the Queen of Hearts would gain control of the White Chess Kingdom.

The only problem was the White Queen. Bax wasn't certain of her reaction. Would she give up control of her kingdom to save her son? Or would she sacrifice her only child to protect her people? He couldn't predict the outcome. He wasn't a seer. Or a mother. All he could do was hope that the White Queen loved her son more than her kingdom.

Of course, all of that was moot if the Queen of Hearts didn't agree to the marriage. Or if she executed her royal prisoner during one of her rages.

Bax's footsteps slowed. Maybe capturing the White Prince hadn't been such a good idea.

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Alec followed Quinlen through the dense woods, ducking under branches that seemed to have a life of their own. They kept curling into the path, reaching for him. Quinlen just brushed the branches aside, but when Alec tried to do the same, they snapped at him. He was trying not to take it personally.

It was just the two of them. The others were waiting back at camp. Quinlen was intent on their destination, striding quickly down the path. Alec was less so. The deeper they went into the woods, the more nervous Alec got. He still didn't know what being read meant. He wasn't a book. So how could anyone read him? Unless the caterpillar read his palm. An image suddenly filled Alec's mind—of Quinlen plucking a furry caterpillar off a tree and plopping it into Alec's hand to “read him.” It wouldn't have surprised Alec in the least.

“Here we are.” Quinlen motioned Alec forward as he stepped out of the woods.

Alec followed Quin into a little meadow, most of it taken up by a bright blue tent. Gold stars and butterflies glittered against the blue background and curling fingers of sweetly scented smoke wafted out of the tent's open flap. Quinlen went inside.

With one last look at the woods, Alec ducked into the tent. He stood just inside the flap, squinting to adjust to the darkness. In the center of the tent, atop a mushroom the size of a dining table, sprawled a man with long blue hair. A pile of pillows propped him up while he idly played with his hair and stared at the tent's ceiling. Slowly, as if the ceiling was far more interesting than his guests, the man dragged his gaze down to Quinlen.

“Ah, General Hatter,” the blue-haired man said. “You're early.”

“Commander Hatter,” Quinlen corrected as he walked along an aisle formed of burning incense sticks, over to the ‘shroom.

“Same difference.” The mushroom man sat up and peered at Alec. “You've gotten larger. I hope you're large enough.”

“Large enough for what?” Alec asked as he followed Quin, careful to walk the same path.

“For your fate, of course.” The man crossed his legs and cocked his head at Alec. “I see the human world has made you senseless.”

“Excuse me?” Alec huffed.

“No, I cannot.”

Quinlen motioned at the man. “This is Griel, the Caterpillar.”

“Why do they call you the Caterpillar?” Alec asked. “Can you transform into one?”

This seemed to stump Griel. He blinked his blue eyes at Alec. “More nonsense! What has happened to you?”

Alec, who didn't think he was the one talking nonsense, scowled. “Then why are you called the Caterpillar?”

“Why? Why? Why?” Griel huffed. “That, at least, has not changed.”

“You're the Caterpillar,” Quinlen said. “It's your duty to answer questions.”

“Not the foolish ones!” Griel snapped.

Quinlen removed his hat and bent his head.

Griel sighed, though it was more of a huff. “Very well. Come forward, Alec of the human world.”

Alec stepped closer to the mushroom.

“I am called the Caterpillar because I can see through the weave of time and unravel the cocoon of fate. With my help, people may transform, as a caterpillar does into a butterfly. Do you want my help?”

“Um.” Alec looked at Quinlen.

Quinlen stared back, expressionless.

“Yes?” Alec said.

Griel chuckled. “Still the same. Come closer.”

Alec stepped closer until he was leaning against the spongy side of the mushroom cap. It was the same shade of blue as the tent, with bright yellow spots. Alec wondered if the coloring meant it was a poisonous mushroom, but he decided against asking Griel. Then he looked up and met Griel's gaze. Alec couldn't look away. Smoke started pouring from the nearest incense sticks until a cloud of the stuff enveloped Alec. Everything but Griel disappeared. And then Griel went hazy too, only his eyes remaining in focus.

Something grabbed Alec through the smoke. He couldn't look down to see what it was, but out of the corner of his eye, the shape looked like a hand. Not just a hand. Several hands at the end of several arms, all attached to Griel. But that was silly. Griel only had two arms.

“Let me see you,” Griel said. “Let me read your fate.”

The words swirled with the smoke, invading Alec's mind. He breathed them in and swayed, but the hands held him upright. Images appeared, layered over the Caterpillar's eyes. He saw a red castle, roses, the Queen of Hearts, and a dragon with red scales. Fear lanced through Alec as the dragon roared.

And then Alec's mind cleared along with the smoke. He blinked as Griel released him both mentally and physically.

“Alec?” Quinlen grabbed Alec's shoulder.

“I'm fine,” Alec said, still staring at Griel. “Was that the Jabberwocky?”

“Yes,” Griel said. “And it is still your destiny. You are the key to Wonderland's survival, Alec. Commander Hatter here will tell you it's up to you—your decision. He wants you to feel as if you have some control over your part in this. You do not. You lost all control when you followed the white rabbit into that human forest. Now, your fate is sealed. You will face the Jabberwocky and you will conquer it, Alec. If you do not, we will all perish.”

Alec gaped at the Caterpillar.

“Great fuck, Griel!” Quinlen snapped. “Have some tact.”

“Tact is for tacticians,” Griel said. “I'm the Caterpillar. I only speak the absolute truth. You know what you must do, Commander. Do it now. Time is folding inward and if Alec doesn't step into play soon, Wonderland will fold in upon itself too. Every second is precious.” Griel waved his hand and the incense smoke enveloped him.

With another curse, Quinlen grabbed Alec's hand and drew him from the tent. Smoke followed them, billowing out as if showing them the door.

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“He said that you know what to do. Do you?” Alec asked as they headed back to the war camp.

“Yes.” Quinlen stopped to meet Alec's gaze. “There's a sword. It belonged to the King of Diamonds. The Queen of Hearts took it from his dead body after the Jabberwocky killed him and his queen.”

Alec recoiled.

“Yes, the sword has a tragic history. But Griel has foretold that you must acquire it if you are to kill the Jabberwocky. It's hidden somewhere in the Hearts Fortress.”

“The sword I need to kill the dragon is in the dragon's lair?” Alec grimaced. “That makes perfect sense.”

“What's a dragon?”

“That's what we call jabberwockies in my world.”

“You have jabberwockies in your world?! More than one?!”

“No. We have myths about dragons. But the descriptions of dragons match the Jabberwocky I saw in Griel's vision.”

“Ah.” Quinlen started walking again. “Myths. I forgot that your world is so boring. You must create stories of interesting things that never happened and fascinating creatures that never existed.”

“Quin?” Alec hurried to catch up.

“Yes?”

“Do you have any idea where the sword is? I mean, a specific location inside the fortress?”

“No. But Griel assured me you'll find the Vorpall Sword. I just need to get you into the fortress.”

“The sword has a name?”

“Of course.”

Alec rolled his eyes. “Of course.”

They left the woods, the shadows retreating to bow to the sun. Alec took a deep breath, as if he could fill himself with sunshine. He knew he should be terrified and confused, that all of this was impossible, and yet he'd never felt more alive or real. With every passing minute, the other world felt more like a dream. It was as if he'd finally woken up.

Soldiers bent their heads to Quin as he and Alec passed by. Alec looked at the men and women closer now, seeing details he hadn't noticed on his first journey through the camp. Things like helmets in the shape of chess pieces—mostly the traditional, domed and pointed tops of pawns. However, there were a few crowned by horse heads. He searched his mind for memories of the Chess Army but found none.

“Have I met the White King and Queen?”

“I don't know,” Quinlen said. “Maybe. I wasn't with you during your entire visit to

Wonderland.”

“Are they good at, well, war stuff?”

“The Queen is a brilliant tactician, but the White King is, well, uninterested in war.”

“Uninterested?”

“Yes. He refuses to believe in anything he doesn't like.”

“Okay,” Alec said.

“It's not a bad way to live. He's always happy. But because of his deliberate ignorance, it falls upon the White Queen to lead the Chess Army. She has petitioned the Black Kingdom for help, but they haven't been very, er, helpful as of yet.”

“They want to see how the White Kingdom fares before they act?” Alec asked.

Quin shrugged. “If that's their tactic, it's foolhardy. If the White Kingdom falls, they'll have no allies and will have to face a conquering army alone. But kings and queens think differently than us. Especially the Chess Royals. They're very linear in their military tactics.” He slashed his hand downward. “It's as if they have certain moves that they can't deviate from.”

“Chess moves?”

“Any moves they make are chess moves by default because they are the Chess Royals.” Quinlen frowned. “But I don't adhere to those maneuvers. That's why they call me mad. That and my bombs.” He winked.

“What bombs?”

“Oh, they're my specialty. Hatter secret recipes. You know the shit we work with is toxic. If not handled properly, it can drive you mad. I'm a professional, so the madness has never taken me.”

“Uh-huh,” Alec said. “So, you're into chemical warfare.”

Quinlen blinked and cocked his head. “Chemical warfare. Interesting. I suppose the term is applicable. Here, I just call them mad bombs. The Flock drops them for me.”

“That's Cranor's team?”

“Yes, they're my elite fighting unit. I needed flying soldiers not just to drop bombs but also to fight the Jubjubs.”

“What's a Jubjub?”

“The Jubjubs are the flying soldiers of the Card Army. Their armor is winged. Pretty, shiny, frail-looking wings, but they're fucking strong. You'll see soon enough.” Frowning, he muttered, “Like fucking insects. Buzzing about. I hate that buzzing! Bzzz, bzzz, bzzz. I had to find soldiers to stop them. Pluck them from the sky. And what better soldier to deal with a flying insect than a raven?” Abruptly, Quinlen asked, “Do you know why a raven is like a writing desk?”

“No. Why?”

“Oh.” Quinlen frowned. “I thought you might.” He entered the main tent, leaving Alec to stare after him.

“Right. He's a professional. Never went mad. Not him,” Alec muttered and followed Quin into the tent. He stopped to look at the officers of the White Chess Army and shook his head. “They're all mad here.”

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Wearing his usual expression of distaste, the Knave of Hearts strode into the dining hall. A group of knights nodded to him as he passed their table, and when one of the more handsome men stared at him longer than the others, Bax considered taking him to bed later that night. But first, he had to attend the Queen.

The Queen of Hearts sat behind the royal dining table on her red velvet throne, symbols of all the kingdoms she ruled rising from the heart-shaped back in a fan of gold. A riot of glorious ruby curls frothed atop her head, and the gown she wore fell in crimson swaths from her waist. As it was in her solarium, the dining hall matched the Queen. Red cloth covered the tables, ruby curtains draped the windows, and crimson rugs spread over the stone floor. Even the chairs had red cushions. So much red. Sometimes, Bax retreated to his suite just to get a reprieve from the color.

An assortment of savory dishes spread across the table before the Queen, but she had only sweets on her plate. Little cakes, scones, cookies, and tarts. She especially loved her berry tarts. As Bax approached, she picked one up and daintily took a bite, her sharp teeth slicing through the strawberries and flaky crust. Licking her lips, she waved him to his seat.

“Your Majesty.” The Knave of Hearts bowed before taking the chair on her right.

Not a throne, mind you. The only open throne at the table belonged to the dead king and would remain empty forever, set down at the end of the table in tribute. Even should the Queen marry the White Prince, he would never sit on that throne. Only the servants touched it and that was just to polish the wood and dust the cushions.

“My champion,” the Queen murmured as she stroked his cheek.

Baxenvir leaned into his queen's touch. He didn't desire her sexually and never would. Their bond was more like a mother and child. She held his heart as if she had born him herself.

“So beautiful.” The Queen's touch wandered up into Baxenvir's peony-pink hair. It said a lot about her love for him that she should find pink beautiful. She even justified it once, telling him that pink is just a softer red. So, it was fitting that her champion be crowned in the color. “Have a tart, my sweet.”

“Thank you, Your Majesty,” the Knave said, knowing that this too was proof of her affection for him.

The Queen didn't share her tarts with just anyone.

Bax selected a blueberry tart—the Queen's least favorite. She smiled to see that, then took a strawberry cake—her second favorite dessert—and put it on his plate. This was why many members of the court believed they were lovers, but Baxenvir didn't care what anyone thought. He only wished it would keep the courtiers away from him. Instead, it made them want him more. Everyone wanted something that belonged to the Queen.

He glanced at the knight again and licked blueberry jam from his lips. The knight grinned wickedly. Yes, maybe it was time to see to the needs the Queen could not fulfill.

Then the doors opened, and the White Prince strode into the hall, escorted by two guards. No chains hung from his wrists, but they might as well have. There was no escape from the Hearts Fortress. Still, the Prince held his chin high and kept a haughty expression locked in place. Watching him ignore the stir he caused, the Knave of Hearts wondered if that was how the court perceived him. If so, he was glad. The White Prince cut a dashing figure, looking both tragic and powerful despite

his circumstances. This was a man worthy of the Queen of Hearts. The Knave looked at his queen and hoped she saw what he did.

The Queen of Hearts was indeed staring at the White Prince as he made his way to the royal dining table. Her expression gave nothing away, but her champion knew her too well to be fooled. The Prince's charms affected her. Bax glanced at the Queen's hands. They were clenched into fists. Yes, she felt his appeal, and she didn't like it at all.

Baxenvir sighed as he stood up to bow to the White Prince. “Good evening, Your Highness.”

The White Prince nodded crisply at the Knave, then plopped into the chair on the Queen's left—a chair slightly nicer than the Knave's. He made a striking counterpart to the Queen of Hearts, with his snow-white hair and rich golden-brown skin. His indigo eyes gleamed as he sent the Queen a sharp look.

“You are wasting your time with me,” the White Prince said, deliberately leaving off the honorific.

“Whatever do you mean, Prince Albion?” the Queen purred.

Oh, the Queen of Hearts was lovely when she tried to be, her dark eyes alight with mischief and her full lips pouting. She lifted her hand to push back the Prince's hair and her skin matched the color of his hair so well that for a moment, it looked as if they had merged into one.

The White Prince jerked away. “Do not touch me!”

Oh, the Queen didn't like that. She grabbed the Prince's throat and pulled him back to her. The entire hall went silent, every courtier wary of the Queen's rage. And for good

reason. When the Queen of Hearts got in a foul mood, people lost their heads. It didn't matter who had put her into that mood, if you happened to be near, you were in jeopardy.

“You would do well to court my affection, young prince,” the Queen hissed. “You're in my care, and I do not suffer disrespect.”

Before the Prince could reply, someone approached the table. He sauntered up and struck a pose, hip cocked and arms crossed over his lean chest. Thick, silken, raven hair fell in choppy chunks around his face, rakishly covering one golden, cat eye. Cheshire of the House of Cats. Like a stray, he'd shown up one day and charmed his way into the court. Then into the Queen's bed.

Baxenvir didn't trust Cheshire. There was something too slick about the cat shifter. Cats, in general, were dangerous to trust. But the Queen of Hearts didn't care. Cheshire had been the only man to succeed in seducing her since the death of King Harver. For that alone, Bax respected him. But he didn't like him. He especially didn't like it when Cheshire impeded the Queen wooing the White Prince.

Speaking of the White Prince, when Bax glanced back at him, he found the Prince looking strangely at Cheshire. The Knave narrowed his eyes, slicing his stare back and forth between the men. But Cheshire ignored the Prince, focusing on the Queen.

“Already replaced, I see,” Cheshire drawled. “How will I survive your rejection, Your Majesty? I will have to drown myself . . . in wine! Someone bring me a bottle! I will become a drunkard. It's the Queen's will!”

The Queen of Hearts giggled and straightened in her seat. “Come here, you rascal!” She waved him around the table to her. “You won't need the wine tonight.”

Cheshire prowled over to the Queen of Hearts and leaned on the back of her throne as

he bent to kiss the royal lips. The Queen didn't notice the White Prince's reaction, but it was all that Bax could see. The Knave was an expert at reading people and Prince Albion's face declared his relief at Cheshire's diversion of the Queen's attention. And there was something else, something about the way his lips twitched that made Bax nervous.

"Why didn't you wake me, Your Majesty?" Cheshire pouted. "Was it to come here and seduce a new lover?" He slid down onto one knee beside the throne and nuzzled the Queen's neck as he whispered, "I can try harder if I'm not satisfying you."

"Shush, you delicious thing, you," the Queen chided. "You know this is about gaining control of the Chess Kingdoms, nothing more. My marriage to the White Prince, should I decide to go through with it, will be in name alone."

"The White Prince can hear us," Cheshire whispered dramatically.

The Queen of Hearts giggled. "Yes, I know. And it's good that he knows I will continue to keep you as my lover." She tapped Cheshire's nose. "Fret not. You are mine." She pressed her lips to Cheshire's.

Most would have looked away while they kissed, but Bax watched. He always watched Cheshire. The cat was good. Very slick, but he slipped up sometimes. Ah, like now. Claws popped free of the fingers on Cheshire's left hand, the tips curling in as if to wound the Queen. But then they relaxed, and the claws withdrew just before Cheshire pressed that hand onto the Queen's back.

Yes, Bax would continue to watch the Queen's lover. He'd watch and wait for him to make an even bigger mistake.

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On his way back to his chambers, after leaving the knight's bed, the Knave of Hearts caught sight of Cheshire sneaking through the fortress corridors. Narrowing his eyes, he followed the cat, keeping out of sight. Cheshire always looked suspicious to Baxenvir, but he looked especially so as he headed for the keep's main entrance. When Cheshire left the keep, Bax finally confronted him.

“Stop!” Baxenvir said as he hurried down the keep steps and into the courtyard.

Cheshire flinched but when he turned around, he wore an inviting expression. “Ah, it's the beloved Knave of Hearts! The Hero of Hearts! What can I do for you, Sir Baxenvir?”

“You can tell me where you're off to at this time of night.”

“I'm going home.”

“You're . . . you're going home?”

“Yes. I have some family matters to attend to now that I've attended to my Queen. I would not have left so late, but you know how she is.” He shrugged. “So voracious.” He grinned, his lips stretching so wide that Bax could see his fangs. “You'll have to keep her satisfied until I'm back.”

“I am not the Queen's lover!”

Cheshire chuckled. “Easy now, Knave. I know you're not. I'm probably the only one who knows. I was just teasing you.” He trailed a hand down Baxenvir's chest, claws

popping out to lightly scratch. “But you prefer to top, don't you?”

Bax grabbed Cheshire's wrist and pulled it away. “I do. But I don't prefer you.”

“Ouch!” Cheshire twirled around Bax, sliding a hand along the Knave's back and then leaning in to whisper in his ear, “Are you sure? I'm a switch in so many ways. I could be anything you want me to be. Top, bottom . . . sideways.”

Bax jerked away from Cheshire, suddenly feeling sympathy for the White Prince. Was this what it felt like when the Queen tried to seduce him? Disgust rolled through him. To be touched like that, without encouragement—nay, with obvious discouragement—felt like an attack. It was like being in a battle with no weapons.

Cheshire held up his hands. “As you like. You can't blame a man for going after something so . . . sexy.” He drew out the last word, turning it into a purr. “That hair alone. Such a rare and precious color. And your body, hardened by—”

“Off with you.” Baxenvir slashed a hand toward Cheshire. “See to your family. I will inform the Queen.”

“She already knows.” Cheshire sauntered off toward the gate. “As if I'd be foolish enough to leave without telling her. Really, Knave, you should know me better.”

The Knave of Hearts watched Cheshire pass by the gate guards and then disappear into the darkness. Family matters. He couldn't find fault in it, but it rang false with him. Something was wrong with that cat, and Bax was going to find out what it was.

A mournful howl seeped through the night air, turning Bax's head toward the bandersnatch pens. He found himself walking through the dark rows of roses, past the old croquet field, and the gardeners' sheds. There, at the edge of the fortress property, near the wall, stood the kennels.

They might have been mistaken for a stable, what with the size of the building and the pens within. But they stabled the horses on the other end of the fortress. They were too skittish to be placed anywhere near the bandersnatches.

Since he was a child, Baxenvir had an affinity for the creatures. There was something about them that tugged at his chest. Something in their eyes. He felt an affinity with them. Bax's pen might be larger and more luxurious but it was still a cage. And, just like the bandersnatches, he walked into his cage willingly.

Bax opened the kennel door and heard the restless shuffling of the four bandersnatches. A rough sound came—sniffing. Then a happy yip.

“Hey, there.” Bax touched the light panel, and a soft glow illuminated the kennels. “How are you, boys?”

He went to every pen and pet the bandersnatches, calling them by name. Freck was the one who had howled. Bax didn't know how he knew that, but he did. So, he took a little more time with him.

“Are you lonely?” He opened the iron gates on their pens. Useless, really. The dogs could jump them. But they were loyal and obedient. They didn't leave their pens without permission. “Come on out. Have a good play.”

They bounded out of their pens, convening in the center of the kennels where Bax stood. He sat down with them, the beasts towering over him in that position, and let their warmth envelop him. Closing his eyes, he hugged the animals as they rolled around, playing and rubbing against each other. It settled the Knave's heart to be with them. Things were simple there. The bandersnatches never demanded anything of him. They only wanted affection, and they gave far more than they took.

A tear formed in Bax's eye and he frowned as he felt it fall, sliding slowly down his

cheek. He couldn't fathom why he was sad. All he knew was that there was an ache in his chest—an emptiness that echoed. Like all echoes, his emptiness spread, calling out across Wonderland.

And Bax had the strangest feeling that someone answered.

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Back in the White War Camp, Alec rubbed at his chest as he stared down at the map of the Card Kingdoms. It was technically a map of the Hearts Kingdom since Hearts had conquered the others. Closest to their location in the Tulgeren Woods—named for its dense, tulgey quality, was the original Hearts Kingdom with the Fortress of the Queen of Hearts. It was there that they were sending Alec.

Alec rubbed at his chest again. There was an odd ache there. Sort of hollow and shivering. It grew stronger when he stared at the fortress. It almost felt as if the ache rang out like a bell, vibrating out of his chest to fly off like a bird. Weird. He assumed it was fear.

“So, the plan is for me to wander into this fortress and poke around until I happen to find the Vorpall Sword?” Alec asked.

“Don't be ridiculous,” Quin said.

Alec started to relax.

But then Quinlen went on. “We have someone who will sneak you in.”

“Sneak me in?”

Finbri leaned in, his hair flopping into his face like a pair of long rabbit ears, and whispered, “A spy.”

“You have a spy in the Hearts Court?” Alec asked.

“Yes, they do,” a man said as he sauntered in.

The newcomer was stunning, with tousled black hair so silky it looked polished, large almond eyes, and a trim physique that promised a limberness in bed that few could accomplish. When he got closer, Alec saw that his golden eyes had slit pupils like a cat's and long lashes that gave them a sleepy, smirking quality. The man grinned wide enough to flash a pair of delicate fangs.

“Torwen!” Quin came around the table to hug the man. “Welcome back, my friend. Your timing is impeccable as usual.”

“Thank you. You don't know how good it is to be home.” Torwen peered around Quin's shoulder at Alec. “Is that Alec? Little Alec?”

Alec frowned at Torwen. “You seem familiar. I could swear . . . your eyes. I remember them floating in the air, without the rest of you.”

“It is you!” Torwen opened his arms. “Welcome back, Alec.” He hugged Alec, then held him at arm's length to look at him. “My, my. You've grown up nicely. You know, there are similarities between us. That will work in our favor. Oh, yes. It's perfect! You're perfect. Not as handsome as I am, mind you, but close enough to pass as blood.”

“Hold on.” Alec stepped out of Torwen's grasp, ignoring his confusing rambling. “Why do I remember your eyes and not the rest of you?”

“Think harder.” Torwen winked. “Or wider, rather.”

Alec thought harder. Then wider, panning out his memory. And then it came to him, rolling into his mind as if it had been waiting for an introduction. The past took him.

The flowers were mean, Alec decided as he tromped through the woods in his new Vans sneakers that were now ruined. Flowers shouldn't be mean. They should be sweet and speak in high voices. But those towering blooms had growled at him and smacked him with their leaves. He swiped away a tear. His dad had just bought him those sneakers and those stupid flowers had gotten pollen all over them. The stain would never come out.

“Why are you crying?” someone asked.

Alec spun around, but no one was there. This wasn't surprising. Nothing made sense in Wonderland. So he answered the body-less voice. “The flowers attacked me. I want to go home. I don't like it here. Everything is mean.” He kicked a massive piece of dirt and sent it rolling.

A pair of golden cat eyes appeared in the air before him. Each eye was the size of his head. “Where is home?” the eyes asked.

“I don't know!” Alec wailed. “I can't find it.”

“Ah.” A giant disembodied cat head appeared before him, giving the eyes a place to sit. “When I can't find my way back, I go forward. Works every time.”

Alec sniffed. “Are you a cat?”

“I am a knight.”

“Cats can be knights?”

“Cats can be anything, silly boy. We are the most versatile of animals. Switches through and through.” The rest of the cat appeared, swimming through the air as if it were water.

“Now, you look like a bird.”

“And you look like a bug. You must have sipped too much of something. Yes? Don't be greedy or you'll shrink to nothing.”

“The bottle said I should drink it.” Alec chewed at his lip. “Do you know how I can get big again?”

“That depends.”

“On what?”

“If you took the cake?”

“This cake?” Alec pulled a little cake out of his pocket.

“Yes, that one. Take a bite.”

Alec opened his mouth.

“Just a nibble!” the cat head warned.

Alec took the smallest bite he could. And as soon as he swallowed, he shot upward, growing back to his normal height. The cat floated out of the way, made a happy tumble, and grinned at Alec.

“Thank you, cat-bird!” Alec reached out to pet the cat.

The cat whooshed out of reach. “Never pet a cat without permission, kid.”

“Oh. Sorry.”

“And I am not a bird. Stop pushing your beliefs onto others, kid. I'm clearly a cat. I don't need wings to fly, you see?”

“Yes, I see.” Alec did see, but he didn't understand. “But you said you're a knight. If you're a knight, are you in an army?”

“Yes, I am. I am in the Chess Army.”

“You're a Chess knight?”

“Yes. Sir Torwen of Chess.”

“A sir of Chess. Chess Sir,” Alec said.

“Chess Sir,” Torwen repeated. Then merged the words. “Cheshire. I like that. I think I'll claim it. Mine!”

“Okay. Take it then,” Alec said. “Cheshire the Cat.”

“Cheshire.” Coming out of his memory, Alec grinned at Torwen. This man was the first friend that Alec had made in Wonderland.

“There you are! I knew you were in there, kid.” Torwen pointed at Alec. “Yes, you gave me that name. And it's come in handy. I use it as my spy name.” He winked. “The fools don't suspect a thing. And it's right there in the name! They speak it every day! Cheshire, Cheshire, Cheshire. No one suspects that I am indeed a Chess Sir!” Torwen chortled. Then he stopped. “Except for that damn knave! Too smart for my own good, I say.”

“The Knave of Hearts is giving you trouble?” Quinlen asked.

“A little.” Torwen pulled out a chair and fell into it. “He's not so terrible, you know, beyond the brilliant mind thing. Too bad he's so far up the Queen's ass, he'll never see that he's fighting for the wrong side.”

“Have you tried seducing him?” Cranvor asked.

Torwen grimaced. “Yes.”

“Oh. He's a top?”

“Yes, but that's not the problem. I'm flexible. I've made that clear to him. But he's made it clear that he's not interested in my flexibility.”

Cranvor chortled.

“Stuff it, Raven,” Torwen said.

“I only laugh because I didn't think there was anyone you couldn't seduce,” Cranvor said.

Torwen smirked. “I forgive your rudeness in light of your keen intellect.”

Quin snorted and resumed his seat. “So, the Knave is out of reach and suspicious of you?”

“For now,” Torwen said. Then he looked at Alec. “Do you remember the Hearts Fortress?”

“Um, I remember bits. There were roses. And flamingos.”

Torwen nodded. “The Queen doesn't play croquet these days.” He cocked his head. “I

hope she doesn't remember you. You've changed, but I still see the little Alec in your face.” He twirled a finger around Alec's nose. “Especially there. Right there.”

“Will I meet her?” Alec sat down.

“Yes. I'll have to introduce you. You'll be my cousin, visiting from the coast.”

“Won't it be suspicious that I'm not a cat?”

Finbri chuckled. “Cats get around. They usually have cousins of assorted races.”

“If that's your way of calling me a libertine,” Torwen growled and leaned toward Finbri, “then . . . thank you very much.” His sneer shifted into another of his broad grins. He leaned back in his chair and stroked a finger along the V of his tunic.

“You see?” Finbri waved at Torwen. Then he cocked his head at Alec. “You do resemble Torwen a bit. You'll pass as a relative.”

“As I said.” Torwen rolled his eyes. “I swear, no one listens to me. Although that does help my spying.”

“We have just returned from visiting the Caterpillar,” Quin said to Torwen. “He has confirmed that Alec's fate is still on track. I'm sure he'll pass as your cousin because he must. He needs to get into the fortress and find the Vorpai.”

“And kill a monster,” Alec muttered.

“Hey, it's fate.” Torwen smacked Alec on the shoulder.

“Why do you say that as if it makes everything better?”

“Because it does. It means you can't fail. Just relax and do what feels right. As long as you don't try to change your fate, your triumph is assured.”

Alec blinked. “I hadn't thought of it like that.

“You should always think of it like that. It's the truth. And I'll be with you. I'll help you look for the sword and guide you through the court. I infiltrated it months ago and now that I'm the Queen's lover, I have free rein. I go where I please with no one questioning me.”

“What about this knave that you mentioned?”

Torwen lost his grin. “The fucking Knave of Hearts. I'll figure out a way around him. And he's only one man. We'll be fine.”

“When you return with the sword, we'll pull back to the White Castle and prepare for war,” Quinlen said. “Until then, we must wait and guard the border.”

“In other words, hurry up!” Val said as he popped out of his seat. “I've got to go as well. I must report to the White Queen.” He stopped by Torwen's seat and held out his hand. When Torwen pulled a folded paper from his jacket and set it in Val's hand, Val said, “The Queen thanks you for your service, Sir Torwen.”

“Yup,” Torwen said. “It's all in my report, but tell her that the White Prince is well. I saw him just this past night. He is unharmed and of good spirits.”

“I will tell her.” Val bowed and then hurried off, tucking the paper into his jacket with a muttered, “I'm late. I'm always fucking late.”

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Baxenvir strode across the training courtyard, the buzz of Jubjub knights going through maneuvers vibrating in his ears. The flying soldiers spun above him, their membranous wings almost invisible from the speed of their fluttering. He'd been up there with them, going through the movements he knew by heart, until he spotted that fucking cat.

Cheshire had returned. And he'd brought someone with him.

The Knave of Hearts stomped into the keep, then through the corridors toward the front entry, his heart pounding rapidly though he knew not why. There was something about the man with Cheshire. He'd only glimpsed him, but even from that distance, the man looked familiar. Bax needed to see his face. Up close.

The pound of Baxenvir's boots matched that of his heart. It felt oddly magical. As if a spell was being woven around him, the power of it compounding the closer he got to Cheshire's companion. At the main doors of the keep, Baxenvir paused to compose himself. It wouldn't do for the Knave of Hearts to be seen confronting the Queen's consort disrespectfully. And Bax wasn't sure what there was to confront. Cheshire had brought a guest to the fortress. That wasn't a crime.

Ah! But it was something that should interest the Queen's Champion as a matter of security. Yes, that was it. Security. He needed to know who was entering the fortress. It was his duty to his queen.

With that settled, the Knave of Hearts strode out of the keep and over to Cheshire.

Cheshire saw him coming and paused in his ambling. But the Knave didn't look at the

Queen's consort. His eyes were on Cheshire's companion. Hair as black as Cheshire's, eyes in the same almond shape, but smaller and more intense. And green! The man's eyes were the same color as Baxenvir's. But his eyes were the pale green of the fragile leaves that cling to a rosebud, not Bax's aggressive emerald. His cheekbones were high, his nose was like a button, and his lower lip was full while the upper was thin. The shape of his face was almost as lean as Cheshire's, but not quite the same, and the color of his skin had a yellow undertone to it. None of that individually was odd, but taken as a whole, that face seemed strange to Bax. No, not strange—familiar. The man tickled a memory, but Bax couldn't pull it forth. It was unnerving, especially when he felt the first stirrings of desire.

“Who are you?” the Knave of Hearts demanded, then bit back a curse. It was not how he wanted to start things with this man. So, he cleared his throat and tried again. “I mean, I've never seen you here before. Are you kin to Cheshire?”

“I believe it's polite to ask for an introduction from the person you're familiar with,” Cheshire drawled in his annoying way. “Rather than bluster about like a storm, demanding a name from a stranger.”

Bax glanced at Cheshire long enough to slice him with a glare, then returned to staring at the other man. He had a slim body, so graceful looking, but with his military eye, he could see the lines of muscles that could only be achieved with constant training. Training at what, though? The man didn't have the air of a soldier.

Despite his resemblance to Cheshire, Bax found him alluring. That black hair, darker than ebony, looked thick and heavy, falling in a straight line past the man's shoulders as if it couldn't bear to even consider a wave. Bax had a sudden, insane urge to run his hand through that hair. He had to clench his fists to stop himself.

Who was this person, and why did he affect the Knave of Hearts like this?

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Alec stared at the tall, broad-shouldered man with the pink hair. The color was oddly attractive on him. It should have been too feminine, especially with the man's delicate, almost fey features, but those dusky rose locks swept recklessly around his face, short and rebellious. The color complemented his acid-green eyes, enhancing the way the striations caught the light and glittered. And the look in those eyes, the way they held Alec's own with an almost ferocious dedication, made him shiver. An image suddenly filled his mind—of the man poised above him, down low on Alec's body so that his eyes had to shift up to lock with Alec's.

He would cover Alec with that big body. Sure, he was in armor, but that could only account for a percentage of his breadth. Beneath all of that metal, there had to be an amazing body. Alec envisioned it, adding more details to his fantasy. The man must have thick arms and a chest as hard as stone. Would it be sprinkled with pink curls or smooth? Pink. Wow. Combined with a body like that, the color almost felt aggressive.

The man had demanded to know who Alec was, but within that demand, Alec heard something interesting. Something more than mere curiosity. Torwen didn't seem to like it, but Alec did. He liked it very much. So as Torwen postured and prattled on about politeness, Alec answered the man.

“I'm Malecvar, Cheshire's cousin,” Alec said, using the name they'd decided upon. A name common to the coast so as not to be suspect. “But you can call me Mal.” He extended a hand. “Nice to meet you.”

The pink-haired man unclenched a fist and enveloped Alec's hand in his. He wore gloves with a metal armor piece over them. Gauntlets. That's what they're called. He

wore gauntlets, but they only covered the top of his hands, leaving the rough leather glove to come in contact with Alec's palm. Why was that so fucking sexy?

“Mal,” the man repeated. “You're from the coast?”

“Yes, that's right,” Alec said. “I live on the shore of the Crimson Sea. And you are?”

The man cleared his throat and a pair of wings—no, three pairs—shivered out from the back of his armor. The wings were delicate, like an insect's, and caught the sunlight to shine with opalescence. Seeing them made something Quin said pop into Alec's head and become clear. Insects. He'd been so right. The wings looked like they belonged to a giant dragonfly.

Before the man could answer, Alec asked, “Are you a Jubjub?”

The man straightened. “I'm—”

“Oh, this is the Jubjub,” Torwen cut him off. “Mal, meet Sir Baxenvir, Knave of Hearts. He's the Queen's Champion and commands the Jubjubs. He's their captain or whatever.”

Sir Baxenvir nodded sharply.

Alec looked down at their hands. The knight was still holding his. “Um. It's nice to meet you, Sir Baxenvir.”

“Call me Bax,” the Knave of Hearts said.

“Thank you. It's nice to meet you, Bax.”

“Nice to meet you too, Mal. Welcome to the Hearts Fortress.”

“That sounds so intimidating. The Hearts Fortress .”

“Yes, well, I suppose that's what the Queen intended.”

“And is it your intention to hold my cousin's hand all day?” Torwen drawled.

Sir Bax flinched and jerked back, pulling Alec forward before he realized he was still holding Alec's hand. He let go and steadied Alec. “My sincerest apologies. I'm fresh from training.” He motioned upward and back. “And a bit distracted.”

Alec followed the Knave's hand to see men and women in similar armor to the Knave's flying in military formations above the keep. The Jubjubs Quin had spoken of.

“So, it's your armor that has wings, not you?” Alec asked even though he knew the answer.

The Knave of Hearts smiled.

Both Alec and Torwen went still. That smile could bring kings and queens to their knees. It was so brilliant, so fucking beautiful that it sucked the air out of Alec's lungs. The Knave's attractiveness increased by a hundredfold.

“That's right,” Bax said. “And glad I am for it. I imagine wings would be troublesome. Much better to don them for battle and remove them when you're done.”

“Done slaughtering everyone,” Torwen muttered.

Alec cleared his throat. “Yeah, I can see your point. Sleeping would be difficult with wings. You'd have to curl up on your stomach like a bird.”

“Exactly,” Bax said. He leaned forward suddenly, bringing his face close to Alec's. “You look so familiar. Have we met before?”

“No, I don't think so,” Alec said. “Have you ever been to the Crimson Sea?”

The Knave frowned as he straightened. “Once. A long time ago. It was beautiful.”

“Then perhaps we ran into each other there.”

“Ran into? You have an odd way of speaking.”

“Yes, it's a coastal vernacular,” Torwen said, his stare shooting back and forth between Alec and Bax. “And the coast is exquisite indeed. Lovely place to sun yourself. Now, if you'll excuse us, Sir Baxenvir, I must introduce my cousin to the Queen. Propriety demands it. And so does she.” Torwen waved his hand about.

“Yes, she does,” Bax said. “I shall accompany you.”

Torwen's eyes went wide. “You'll what ?”

“Accompany you,” Bax said crisply. “To the Queen.”

“Ah.” Torwen glanced at Alec, then pulled himself up straighter. “We wouldn't want to keep you from your training, Sir Baxenvir.”

“I'm done training for the day. Shall we?” The Knave of Hearts motioned toward the keep.

“Very well.”

Alec pressed his lips together to keep from grinning. He hadn't known Torwen for

long, not as an adult, but he already knew that it took a lot to faze him. And Torwen was fazed. And annoyed. And baffled. It was amusing to watch. Like a cat with a piece of tape on its paw. He just couldn't shake off the knave, no matter how hard he tried.

Sir Baxenvir led the way into the towering building in the center of the fortress compound. Alec glanced back as they reached the top of the steps. Torwen and he had entered the compound through the main gate and then traversed a broad road through the Queen's gardens before they reached the smaller buildings that clustered around the keep like people around a campfire. Once past that outer ring of buildings, they entered the courtyard that separated those work buildings from the main, castle-like central keep. It was like a little city, walled and defended by card soldiers wearing white tunics emblazoned with red hearts. Sneaking out of this city-compound would be nearly impossible and searching it might take months.

The thought was sobering.

Alec looked up and up and up the side of the keep. Pale gray stone walls soared into towers capped by red cones. Climbing roses grew over those walls, their vines choking the keep like anacondas, covering so much of the stone that it changed the color from gray to green and red. The perfume of those crimson blooms was heady, so very sweet and feminine, but just before they passed through the open doorway, Alec noticed the vicious thorns on the rose vines. Like the Queen of Hearts herself, the roses were both beautiful and deadly.

In the echoing marble corridors, the sound of the Knave's boots became a drumbeat. Determined and almost warlike. But the rhythm softened after a few steps when Bax dropped back to walk beside Alec.

“Why did you decide to visit the Hearts Fortress?” Sir Baxenvir asked.

“I asked him to keep me company,” Torwen answered before Alec could. “It gets lonely for me in between the Queen's summons.” He pouted at the knight. “No one will play with me.”

The Knave of Hearts grunted and looked away. He smoothed a wild, gleaming pink lock back from his tall forehead. Then he looked back at Alec. “Do you like it? The fortress?”

“It's very beautiful here.” Alec slid his stare over the knight. “And so far, the people have been welcoming.”

The Knave of Hearts licked his lips, then rubbed them together. Alec stared, utterly fascinated.

Torwen cleared his throat. “Are you sure the Queen will approve of you appearing before her in your armor, Sir Baxenvir?”

The Knave narrowed his eyes at Torwen. “Why wouldn't she?”

“I don't know.” Torwen waved his hand about. “It may offend her nonsensibilities.”

“Her what?”

“I mean, her sensibilities.”

“She will be happy to see me. My appearance will not matter,” Bax said.

“Not as happy as she'll be to see me.”

Alec looked back and forth between the men. The Knave of Hearts. He was the man who was suspicious of Torwen. The one man Torwen couldn't seduce. Could Alec

seduce him? It felt as if he were already seducing the Knave. Or was the Queen's Champion seducing him? He didn't care. However it got done would be fine with Alec.

It startled Alec to realize how much he wanted the Knave of Hearts. He was there to steal a sword and fulfill his destiny, but this man had become a sort of sub-mission for him. A secondary mission that he could justify since Bax was the Knave of Hearts. The man closest to the Queen. That is, besides Torwen. But hadn't Torwen said they needed to find a way around the Knave? This could be it. Instead of going around him, Alec could go through him. Or Bax could go through Alec.

Yup. The Knave of Hearts was important to the war, and that made it important for Alec to get close to him. It was the right thing to do. With that settled, Alec committed himself to flirting shamelessly. Again, he didn't care who seduced who so long as it led to a bed.

“Let's not fight,” Alec drawled and hooked arms with the two men. “You are both important to the Queen. Wouldn't it be better to be allies?”

The Knave of Hearts stared at the Queen's consort who stared back. Then they both looked at Alec.

“No,” they said in unison.

Alec shook his head. “You're both being silly. Why can't you see that you're on the same side?”

“Because we aren't.” The Knave of Hearts narrowed his stare at Torwen.

“Why not?”

He looked back at Alec. “Because . . .”

“Because he doesn't enjoy sharing her.” Torwen disengaged his arm from Alec, leaving Alec to cling to the Knave.

“That's not it at all.” Bax rolled his eyes.

“Oh? Then what is it?” Torwen angled himself into Bax's sight even as he kept walking. “You think I'm going to murder her in her sleep? Huh? Or maybe I'll poison her toward you. Oh! I could replace you. Yes, I'd make a perfect Jubjub!” Torwen mimicked Bax's eye roll.

Bax leveled a hard stare at Torwen.

“Holy shit!” Alec declared. “You do think he wants to replace you. Can you seriously see Cheshire as a soldier? He wouldn't know what to do with a sword.” Alec leaned in and whispered. “I don't think he even knows what end you're supposed to hold.”

Bax snorted a laugh. “I concede that Cheshire is unsuited to military service.”

“Then what is it?”

Baxenvir shook his head and looked away.

“He just doesn't like me, cousin,” Torwen said. “I know, it's hard to imagine, but it's true.”

“You are abrasive.” Bax finally let go of Alec's arm.

“Am not!” Torwen declared. “You're a pot!”

“I’m a what?” Bax stopped walking to gape at Torwen.

“A pot! And I’m a kettle. You’re as abrasive as I am.”

“I guess you coasties do speak strangely,” Bax muttered and started off again.

“Hey!” Alec ran up beside Bax. “At least you’re both cookware!”

“Excuse me?”

“You know—pots and kettle? Cookware. You can handle some heat.” Alec wagged his brows at the knight.

“Heat, eh? What kind of heat do you have in mind?”

“Oh, is that all it takes to get you smiling, Sir Baxenvir? A little flirting and you forget all about my annoying cousin?”

“Hey!” Torwen grumbled.

“He’s very annoying.”

Alec whispered, “I know. I’m his cousin.”

Bax snorted. “Is that what you were doing?”

“What?”

“Flirting? Were you flirting with me?”

“Do you want me to?”

“Oh, absolutely,” the knight purred and leaned closer.

“Then I was absolutely not flirting with you.”

The Knave of Hearts narrowed his eyes.

“If you want me to flirt with you, it means you want to flirt with me. And I'd prefer to be flirted with than to do the flirting. So, I am absolutely not going to flirt with you, Sir Bax.”

Bax's expression shifted again, sliding into shock before settling on bemusement.

Seeing it, Alec burst into laughter and hooked his arm around Bax's again.

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That laugh. It was enchanting. Bax couldn't look away from Mal. Malecvar. The name didn't suit him. It sounded too depressing. This man should have a brighter name. Something light and uplifting. Bax looked down at the arm hooked around his. He fought the feeling it gave him—a bubbling feeling. Bax didn't want it to overcome him. If it did, he'd soon be smiling, and the Queen would get suspicious. He'd already smiled once at Mal, and Cheshire had nearly fainted to see it.

The Knave of Hearts did not go around smiling at pretty men.

Oh, but he wanted to. Baxenvir's lips twitched with the need to grin as he stared at Mal. Just looking at him brought Bax joy. He couldn't explain it and didn't want to. Explanations could ruin a thing. Better to let it be a mystery. Just walk lightly around it like a herd of sleeping mome raths. No one liked startled mome raths flitting about in fright. They got fluff everywhere.

Then Mal unwound their arms.

Bax didn't have to hide his smile anymore. A scowl came to his face. But he couldn't protest. There was no reason to continue through the corridors with linked arms. It was good that Mal had detached them. Better for no one to see him like that. Bax had a reputation to maintain.

He looked at Mal again. “I swear, I know you. Your face is so familiar.”

Mal smiled. It was a beautiful smile and one that spread smoothly over his lips, no hesitation. How nice it must be to smile like that. Those exotic eyes looked him over in a way that made things twitch down low. Bax licked his lips again. He must have

this man.

When was the last time Bax lusted so wildly for someone? He couldn't remember ever feeling so. It was strong enough to make him grateful for his armor. Without that metal codpiece, his erection would be out on display. As it was, it pulsed for attention and sent naughty thoughts up to his brain.

Tonight, he promised his cock. Tonight Mal will be mine. I will lay him out on my bed and take my time with him. I'll explore his body to my satisfaction. Then take more satisfaction from delving into him. He glanced behind Mal at the plump ass that curved beneath his thin linen pants. Oh, yes, he would delve deep and give them both satisfaction. Unless Mal wasn't a bottom.

The thought made Bax frown again. But the frown was short-lived. If that were the case, Bax would have a greater challenge to face. And the Knave of Hearts loved a challenge. He mentally smiled, pondering the ways to persuade—nay, seduce—Mal into succumbing. Perhaps Mal would even beg Bax to fill him. Oh, yes, that was a pleasant thought. Mal on his hands and knees, thick ass lifted, begging to be fucked.

Bax would rub sweet runi oil over his cock, then slide it into Mal. He'd be gentle that first time and stretch him with care. Only when he had Mal prepared would Bax go deeper. Then he'd thrust. He'd thrust and thrust and thrust until Mal looked over his shoulder and said—

“Bax?” Mal's voice jerked the Knave of Hearts out of his fantasy.

“Yes?” Baxenvir asked.

“Uh. Are you coming in to see the Queen with us?”

Bax blinked, taking in the open door and the confused stares of the guards who stood

to either side of it. The Queen's solarium waited beyond. And yet Bax couldn't remember how they'd gotten there.

Oh, this was not good.

“Yes, of course.” Bax strode into the room ahead of Cheshire and Mal, his erection withering under apprehension.

Bax led them around the heart fountain, its water tinted red, and past red velvet daybeds strewn with heart-shaped pillows. The Queen of Hearts lounged on a chaise near the bay window, eyes closed and face lifted to the sun. She looked lovely, as always, but when she opened her eyes, Bax saw the slice of insanity within them—the streak of malice that tainted her beauty.

And he didn't care.

“Your Majesty.” The Knave of Hearts bowed to his queen. “Cheshire has returned with a guest. May I present his cousin, Malecvar of the Crimson Coast?” Bax turned to motion Mal forward.

Mal went to stand before the Queen, and Bax noticed that Mal's hands trembled. The Queen of Hearts had a fearsome reputation, far worse than Baxenvir's, so Mal's fear was understandable. But Bax didn't like it. His dislike impeded his reason, and Bax set a hand on Mal's shoulder to steady him.

The Queen lifted a blood-red brow.

The Knave dropped his hand.

“It's an honor to meet you, Your Majesty.” Mal bowed and remained bent over.

“You may rise,” the Queen said, approval tinting her voice. “Come here.”

Mal went to the Queen.

Bax froze when he saw the way the Queen inspected Mal. It was similar to the way he had, except without desire.

“You look familiar, Malecvar,” the Queen announced. “Have you been to my court before?”

“No, Your Majesty,” Mal said. “This is my first time away from the coast.”

“Ah. That's right.” She held a hand out to Cheshire. “My darling kitty is from the coast.”

Cheshire hurried to the Queen and took her hand to kiss it. “Your Majesty, I have missed you every second I've been away. It's a relief to be in your presence once again.”

The Queen of Hearts focused on her lover, her expression going liquid. “I've missed you as well, Cheshire. See your cousin settled, then return to me with all haste.”

“If you wish it, I can see Malecvar settled,” Bax offered, the words pouring out of his mouth before he could consider them.

The Queen lifted her brow again. This time, a smile accompanied the look. “Why, Malecvar, I do believe you have gained the coveted interest of my champion. And within minutes of your arrival, no less. You will be the envy of my courtiers.”

Mal lifted both of his dark brows as Bax cleared his throat. He glanced at Bax, his grin turning mischievous, and said, “Ah, but I've heard stories of the Knave of Hearts.

I'm told his heart belongs only to you.” Mal leaned in to whisper, “Just like my cousin's. But don't tell him I told you.”

The Queen laughed, startling Bax and Cheshire, and motioned Mal closer. He went to kneel beside her and took the hand she offered.

“Darling boy,” she said. “I like you. You have your cousin's charm. It would please me greatly if you spread your . . . charm over my knave. I haven't seen him happy in years. And I would so like to see him smile again. Disregard the rumors. He does indeed love me, but it's with the devotion of a son, not a lover. His heart is still open for the claiming.”

The Knave of Hearts gaped at his queen. He did not know that she noticed his melancholy. It touched him that she had, and it moved him to kneel beside her, opposite Mal. “My Queen, I hope my demeanor has not upset you. The last thing I want is to sadden you.”

“You could never upset me, my champion.” The Queen released Mal to stroke Baxenvir's hair. “My sweet knave. As I have your heart, you have mine. Now, go. See to our new guest and perhaps find a reason to smile again.”

Bax bent his head to his queen before rising. “Yes, Your Majesty.” He motioned for Mal to follow. “We shall leave you with your consort.”

“Thank you for allowing my visit, Your Majesty.” Mal stood up and bowed to the Queen. This time, he didn't wait for her permission to rise. He just turned to leave with Bax.

Cheshire must have prepped Mal for court. But that shifty cat couldn't have prepared his cousin for the Knave of Hearts. Bax felt freed by the Queen's approval. He wouldn't have been able to pursue Mal as thoroughly if she had disliked him. But she

had practically pushed them together. The Knave of Hearts held the door open for Mal, then followed him out into the corridor, intent on obeying the Queen's command. It just happened to be in line with his own desires.

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Alec reminded himself for the fifth time that he wasn't there for romance. And if he was going to seduce the Knave of Hearts, he had to do so with information gathering in mind. So, as they strode through the corridors together, Alec concentrated on ways to bring up the Vorpall Sword without bringing it up. How could he get Bax to tell him where the Queen kept her most prized possession? It wasn't exactly pillow talk.

“This is the best guest suite we have.” Sir Baxenvir opened a door and ushered Alex inside. “I think you'll be comfortable here.”

Alec stepped past Bax, into the room, and looked around. It wasn't just one room but a suite, entered through a room Alec equated to a living room. It had the prerequisite couch and chairs along with a fireplace and some random tables. He went through the first room and into the bedroom beyond. The bed was something he expected to find in a castle—four posters, wood, carved, all the stuff. It even had curtains. The rest of the furniture featured a lot of hearts but, thankfully, wasn't red like most things in the fortress. The bed linens were white, very luxury-hotel.

French doors Alec him out to a balcony where the rose vines crept in from all sides. The top of the stone railing was blessedly free of plant life, so Alec could lean upon it and look out over the Card Kingdoms. Card Kingdom? He wasn't sure if they were still a plural or was now a single but he was leaning toward single. That's what happens when one country absorbs another right? Or maybe not. Ugh. Whatever the land was called, he liked the view.

To the left was the Tulgeren Woods, and somewhere within them, a branch of the White Chess Army waited for Alec to reach his full potential. Beyond that, the White Castle loomed, its spires glinting in the light. Alec thought that was unfortunate—the

enemies within sight of each other. That had to cause mental issues. But directly ahead of Alec was a patchwork of villages and farms. So peaceful and not at all what he expected to find.

“Pretty, isn't it?” Sir Baxenvir asked as he leaned a hip next to Alec.

Speaking of the unexpected.

Alec looked over to find the knight staring at him. Oh, those eyes. Like a venomous snake and yet so beautiful. He knew they were a warning. The Knave of Hearts was poisonous. That's what his eyes said. He could draw blood in an instant. But that bright stare also promised Alec things he suspected they had never promised before. Things that would make poison palatable.

“Yes. It's a lovely view.” Alec turned to look at a better one. “How long have you been the Knave of Hearts?”

Bax frowned and swallowed. “A while.”

“That long, eh?” Alec teased.

One corner of the Knave's mouth lifted, as if it were relearning how to smile.

“You love her, don't you?”

The Knave lost that tremulous smile.

“It's not a critique,” Alec said. “I think it's admirable.”

“You do?”

“Yes. She's very lucky to have earned such unwavering love and loyalty from you.”

Baxenvir stared at Alec. “She . . . she has suffered. She needs love more than others.”

“Do you mean because of her husband?”

“Yes. She watched him die.” Bax turned to face the railing, his hands spreading over the stone. “We all did. And we all mourned our king. But Queen Satana has never stopped mourning. She can't let go.”

Alec cleared his throat. “Her name is Satana?”

“Yes. You didn't know?”

“I've only heard her referred to as the Queen of Hearts.” Alec pressed his lips together to keep from laughing.

Satana? Really? Did Wonderland mimic his world? Or maybe tease it a bit? An evil queen dressed in red who went by the name Satana? Come on! And Alec had even seen some card soldiers carrying spears that looked a lot like pitchforks.

“Yes, I suppose there are few who use her given name.” Bax turned back to Alec. “You made her laugh. Thank you for that.”

Alec blinked. “She doesn't laugh?”

“No. Not genuine laughter. Sometimes she'll laugh cruelly or wickedly, but not with any real joy. Cheshire has made her laugh like that, but it's rare, and it took him a while to get her there. You, however, made her laugh within seconds of meeting her. Now, that's something I find admirable. Admirable and enviable.”

“I made you smile too.” Alec leaned in. “That was within seconds of meeting you. And I feel prouder about that.”

The Knave of Hearts focused on Alec, his chest rising and falling as his lips parted. Alec's stare dropped to those rosy lips. They looked velvet-soft. Probably the softest thing about the knight. Bax made a broken sound, tore his gaze away from Alec, and then strode into the bedroom.

Alec watched him go, wondering if that was a good sign or a bad one. He decided to find out. Striding in after the Knave, he asked, “Are you running away from me?”

The Knave froze in his tracks. The wings—Alec had a splendid view of them now and could see how they emerged from recesses in the armor—shivered again. Then Bax turned to face Alec. His eyes caught the sunlight and flashed neon green. It sent a thrill down Alec's spine, and he walked to the knight in a daze.

As soon as he was within range, the Knave struck, grabbing Alec by the chin. He turned Alec's head to the angle he desired and bent to claim him. And it was a claiming. Alec felt their kiss down to his toes. That demanding tongue lashed at his until Alec responded with a groan and wrapped his arms around the knight. He didn't care that cold metal met his questing fingers or that Bax's breastplate dug into him. He found the edge of the armor, hooked his fingers over it, and pulled harder. Drawing the Knave closer, Alec ground his sudden and startling erection against the curved metal covering Bax's crotch. No softness to be found except in those lips, just as Alec suspected. Just as he hoped.

The Knave brought his right hand to Alec's hip, holding him briefly there before sliding back. Down. And then a firm squeeze. Alec cried out into Bax's mouth. Why was that fucking leather so sexy? It was like making out with the Tin Man, but Alec loved it. And Bax sensed it. He growled in response. Slashed his mouth over Alec's. They clutched at each other. Fed from each other. Then Bax pushed Alec away.

The Knave of Hearts stared at his new obsession as he tried to find something sensible to ground himself with. But there was no sense to be found. As a child of Wonderland, this felt natural to Bax. He knew that when there was no sense, the brain could retreat and the heart take over. The problem was that the Knave had obsessed over his queen for so long that he didn't know how to let his heart take control. He thought she owned it. That she would be the only one to ever own his heart. Then this man sauntered into the fortress and suddenly, his queen was talking about Bax's heart being available for the claiming. Was it? If so, it had to be a withered, hardened thing. Would Mal even want it?

“I'll return in two hours to escort you to dinner.” Bax backed away, his hand reaching behind him to open the door. “Dress well. You'll be dining with the Queen of Hearts.” He paused, then added, “And me.” With that, he turned and left Alec's room.

“Well,” Alec said to himself. “That was interesting.”

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The Knave of Hearts wasn't as pleased by their exchange. Oh, in some ways he was delighted. Their kiss had been exceptional. But Bax already knew this wouldn't be merely a physical relationship. So, beneath that delight lurked terror. The thought of dusting off his heart, whatever portion of it remained, and giving it to Mal, scared the tumtum out of him. And the fact that he was even considering such a scenario so soon after meeting Mal scared him even more. He had given his queen his love and loyalty so long ago that he assumed he had nothing left to give. Every intimate interaction he had since then had been with cold detachment. The only feelings involved were physical.

That wasn't the case with Malecvar.

“Maybe he is aptly named after all,” Bax muttered as he strode away from the guest room he'd given Mal.

He didn't have far to go. His room was directly across the corridor.

The Knave entered his suite and shut the door quietly behind him. He didn't want Mal to hear it. Then he grimaced. Why was he hiding? He had chosen to install the man close to him. It had given him a thrill when he came up with the idea. To have Mal within reach even while he slept made his sacs clench. He could get up in the middle of the night and slip into Mal's room.

“Fuck,” Bax whispered. “Calm yourself, you fool. It's just sex. It has nothing to do with love. You cannot give away what you don't have.”

But if he didn't have a heart to give, why was the Knave so frightened to lose it? And

why had he walked away when he could have taken Mal right then? He had been willing, Bax felt his eagerness. He should have fucked Mal until he was free of him in both body and mind. He would have if the fear hadn't warned him it wouldn't work.

Was it possible to give his heart to two people? Perhaps it was. Especially if one of them was not a sexual love. Love could have many aspects, after all. He could love his queen in one way and Malecvar in another. She said so herself. So why was Bax in such a tizzy? What was truly bothering him?

He paced the length of his sitting room, wracking his brain for the answer. The Queen had bid him to seek a reason to smile. She wanted him to find love beyond the innocent affection he had for her. And why did he keep circling back to that? Why was what she thought about his heart so important?

Bax came to a stop. There it was. Her permission mattered to him. Obedience had been drilled into the Knave of Hearts from a very young age. He was a soldier through and through. He knew no other way to live. No, it wasn't love that was the problem. It was loyalty. Obedience. Bending the knee. A man cannot have two masters. And when the Knave gave his heart, his loyalty went with it. No separation between the two. Thus, he had no heart to give.

The Queen didn't understand that because she had never given her obedience to anyone but herself. She couldn't comprehend that Bax would have to compromise his loyalty to her if he fell in love with someone else. One of them would have to be his master, and that meant he couldn't truly love the other.

Bax stomped into his dressing room, working at the buckles on his armor as he went. He needed to get out of that metal cage immediately. It was suddenly stifling. And it pained him in places. He wanted to get out of it so badly that he cast the pieces aside as soon as he removed them instead of taking the time to put them on his armor rack.

Released from his armor at last, Bax untied his sweat-stained gambeson and tossed that away too. Left in thin pants and a tunic, he kicked off his boots. Everything else came off quickly after that, and then Bax was off to the bathroom—a shower mandatory.

As he stood beneath the pelting water, the Knave hung his head and stared at his erection. Baffled, he took it in hand. Was he really going to pleasure himself? He hadn't felt the need for that since he was a boy on the cusp of manhood. But as Bax gripped his shaft, images of Mal flowed into his mind, and he couldn't stop his hand from moving up and down, faster and faster. Mere seconds later, he spilled his seed on the shower floor.

With that release, the Knave of Hearts let out a sigh. It was even more freeing than getting out of the armor. He could suddenly think more clearly. His heartbeat slowed. His breathing resumed its normal rhythm. Lifting his head, he set about washing himself, expecting to slide into his usual thought processes and calm reserve as well. He did not. His mind was clear of lust, yes, but not of Malecvar. It was still full of that man. There was nothing for the Knave to do but accept it.

He must have Mal, but he couldn't love him. Fine. He would take what he needed and hold back what he couldn't give. Mentally prepared, he could achieve his goals. This was like any other campaign. He set his mind on a target, plotted out the best course of action, and completed his mission. The only difference would be the weapons he used and the type of armor he protected himself with. Especially the armor.

“Seduce him,” Torwen said.

“Excuse me?” Alec sat near the balcony but had the doors shut. The scent of roses had become too much for him—cloying and sickly.

It was over an hour since the Knave of Hearts had shown Alec to this amazing guest room, and Torwen had only just found him. He had come into the room looking like the cat who ate the canary, done a turn around the place, then made his announcement.

“You do know that his bedroom is right across the corridor?” A smirk landed on Torwen's face as he landed in the chair across from Alec.

“Excuse me?” Alec said again.

“Why do you keep asking that?” Torwen scowled. “You are a spy now, Alec. Just like me. There are no excuses. We do what we must to complete the mission. I just fucked the Queen. Many times.” He rolled his eyes. “The woman is insatiable. I hate fucking her. But it gets me wandering rights and sometimes she tells me things she doesn't tell anyone else.” He leaned in close. “Like how she's never seen her knave so enthralled with anyone before. Not that she needed to tell me that after her little, go forth and be happy speech.” He rolled his eyes. “She wants him to fuck you nearly as much as he does.”

Alec blushed. His heart was already racing, set upon its pace by Torwen's revelation that Baxenvir was across the hallway from him. Then Torwen had to mention the Queen's observation. If that wasn't proof of the knight's interest, Alec didn't know

what was. Well, there was that kiss too. That was some damn fine proof. What a fucking kiss! Toe-curling. Dick-hardening. Life changing. Alec had spent the last hour trying to convince himself that he would not fall in love with the Knave of Hearts. Nope. Not happening. He could sleep with the guy, but only if he could leave his emotions out of it. Sure, no problem. That's what he'd do.

And yet, his heart kept pounding like a scared rabbit's, calling him a liar.

“He kissed me,” Alec admitted. “We kissed.”

Torwen chuckled. “Well done. It seems you're a natural. Then I guess I can save my speech about seducing the Knave and getting as much info out of him as possible.”

“How do you do that?” Alec leaned forward. “I mean, how do you ask questions without raising their suspicions?”

“Oh, you don't ask those specific questions. You fawn over them. Feign interest in everything about them. Ask him about his childhood, his favorite food, his hobbies. Shit like that. Things will naturally lead to the information we want. But when they do, don't ask. Let him offer it to you. Let him be the one who wants to share. Then he will never suspect you.”

Alec gaped at Torwen. “You're fucking brilliant.”

Torwen grinned one of his broad grins that left no teeth out of it. “I know. But thank you for the acknowledgment.” He lost his grin to seriousness. “Now, I've brought you some clothes.” He waved at the leather bag he'd tossed on the floor upon entering. “Compliments of the Queen. It seems she's tickled red by the idea of her champion in love.” Torwen grinned again, but this time, it was vicious. “I believe it's because she's falling in love, and people in love want everyone to be in love.”

“Is she really?”

“Oh, yes. She keeps hinting at it, wanting me to say it first.”

“Have you?”

“Of course not!” Torwen’s cat eyes widened into circles. “You never give them everything! You must keep them wanting. Keep them reaching for more. Or they will move on. That's especially true with royalty.”

“Oh,” Alec whispered. The thought of starting something with Bax and then him moving on was disheartening. Which was silly since they hadn't started anything yet. Well, maybe a little start.

“Hey!” Torwen jerked forward in his seat. “You don't actually like him, do you?”

Alec cleared his throat.

“Oh, fuck.” Torwen jumped up and started pacing. “Fuckity fuck! What the fuck?!” He tossed his hands up. “You're compromised, kid. You can't do this now. Just forget it.”

“Yes, I can,” Alec said. “I can do this.”

Torwen stopped to glare at him.

“I can!” Alec declared.

Torwen narrowed his eyes.

“What option do I have?” Alec got up to face off with him. “I kissed him. Do I ignore

him now? Won't that upset him? And where will that get us?"

"Somewhere better than you falling in love with the fucking, fucked up, motherfucker known as the Knave of Hearts!"

Alec grimaced.

"I don't think you understand who you're dealing with, kid," Torwen snarled. "Let me paint the roses for you." His voice went low. Menacing. "The Knave of Hearts is beloved here. He is the hero of the kingdom. Because, just like his queen, he is feared." Torwen leaned in. "He won his title on the battlefield when the King of Hearts fell. Baxenvir tossed aside his shield and took up the sword of a fallen soldier so that he held two weapons. With those swords, he cut a swath to the Queen of Hearts, and there, upon a hill for all to see, he slaughtered the Royal Diamond Guard. He defended the Queen of Hearts until she could muster the strength to summon the Jabberwocky that killed the monarchs of the Diamonds Kingdom."

"Horrible things happen in a war," Alec murmured. "It sounds as if he was fighting to save his commander."

"Oh, yes. It's very admirable when you look at it like that. That's precisely why they call him a hero. But think of it from the perspective of the Diamonds citizens whose kingdom the Hearts invaded without cause. The people of Diamonds watched their army decimated. And that decimation came at the hands of one man—the Knave of Hearts."

"The Knave didn't choose to invade Diamonds."

"No, he just went mad with bloodlust upon seeing their army flounder. Hearts was losing the battle. It was the Knave who saved the Queen and turned the tide."

“Again, that's a—”

“Why are you defending him?” Torwen cut Alec off. “Can you hear yourself? Are you that taken with him already? Great fuck, Alec! I need to send you back.”

“No. No, I'm fine. I'm just trying to be fair.”

“Don't be fair. You can't be. We are fighting against a tyrant whose goal is to make all of Wonderland submit. Don't be fair to her. She is not fair to anyone. And neither is her champion. He is the most vicious, ferocious, merciless warrior in her army. He doesn't just fight—he slaughters. It's said that he's so fast, no one can track him in battle. He vanishes, his enemies fall, and then he reappears, covered in blood.”

Alec shuddered. It was hard to equate the man who had just kissed him with the image of the monster Torwen painted. But Torwen was right. Alec knew it in his bones. The Queen was the bad guy. He couldn't let her champion weave his masculine spell over him. That was a fool's move. But he couldn't let this opportunity pass either. He had a chance to gain the confidence of the second most powerful person in the Hearts Kingdom.

“Do you know what they call that battle?” Torwen whispered.

“The Decimation of Diamonds.”

Torwen blinked. “Yes. Yes, they call it the Decimation of Diamonds. Because there was nothing left when they were done.”

“All right. I understand. I won't let my softer emotions sway me.”

Torwen cocked his head. “You're certain you can do this?”

“Yes.”

Torwen stared a moment longer, then nodded. “Very well. Then let's get you dressed. When you're a spy, clothing becomes your armor. Sometimes, it's even a weapon.”

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 10:57 am

“What the fuck am I doing?” The Knave of Hearts stood in his dressing room, staring at his reflection.

Bax had never given his looks much thought. He didn't care about the way his hair fell or the cut of his clothes. Not usually. But tonight, he fussed. He smoothed the velvet of his tunic. He scowled at the color of his hair. Did Mal like pink? Did the color go with his green eyes? Did Bax's hair clash with his fucking eyes? Great tumtum trees! What was he going to do if his eyes didn't go with his hair? Maybe there was a potion he could take.

Magic? Really? No, that was too far. Bax gave up. He knew it was useless to criticize himself thus. As a warrior, he had to focus before a battle. If he let fear consume him, he wouldn't remember the maneuvers. And he had planned so many maneuvers for the coming battle.

“First, we send in the archers.” He turned away from the full-length mirror and left the dressing room. “A wave of arrows to test his mettle.”

The Knave of Hearts stretched his shoulders, shook out his hands, and opened his door. As if stepping onto a battlefield, he placed his boot on the stone of the corridor floor. Then the other. With a click, his door shut behind him, leaving him facing the solid wood that separated him from his quarry.

“Archers,” he muttered as he knocked on that wood.

A few seconds passed. More long, excruciating moments. Bax remained in position, one hand on the hilt of his dress sword. His heart sped up, but he deepened his

breaths and slowed it. Just like a war. Yup. Oh, fuck. What if he got so nervous that he went into a trance? No. No, he would not do that. He'd be fine.

At last, the door opened. There he was. Malecvar. The aptly named enemy of his heart. Baxenvir's breathing technique failed him and his heartbeat raced out of control. Still, he managed to retain a semblance of calm, held off his battle-trance, and inclined his head to his target. Arrows! Fire the arrows!

The Knave of Hearts went on the attack, letting his stare wander the length of his enemy. His mouth went dry as he took in the hint of a smooth chest glimpsed through the V of Mal's thin cotton tunic. It was a fine garment, with gold embroidery at the neck and wrists. But the Knave didn't wonder about its origin. He was too fascinated by what it revealed as it covered. That lightweight weave defined Mal's muscles, clinging to a pectoral, then his biceps as he moved into the hallway. It teased and tormented Bax, especially with its length. Or lack thereof.

The tunic ended at Mal's waist, hiked up by his belt. This wouldn't have been so enthralling if Mal wasn't wearing pants made of the softest leather that stuck to him as if they couldn't bear even the smallest separation from Mal's skin. They looked painted on, so tight that Bax knew the length of Mal's cock in a moment. Unless he had it tucked. Oh, fuck, maybe he had tucked it under. And if he was a grower too, that meant—

Mal turned to shut his door and gave Bax the most glorious view of his plump, pert ass. The verbal arrows Bax intended to shoot all fell short, piercing his tongue instead of Mal's cool demeanor. He must rally! The Knave tore his stare away from his enemy's ass and locked it on the back of his head. Oh, but his hair was loose and shiny. A silken length hanging to the middle of Mal's back. Bax longed to touch it. He needed to know if it really was as silky as it looked. And how heavy was it? He reached out, but just before he made contact, Mal turned around.

“Is something wrong?” Mal asked.

“What?” Bax lowered his hand.

“You look flushed and you're staring at me strangely. Are you all right?”

“Yes, of course. I'm fresh from the bath is all.” He motioned Mal down the corridor.

“Shall we?”

“Yup. I'm starving.”

They walked a bit in silence, Bax scrambling to gather his scattered arrows. What was he going to say to the man? He had it planned. Rehearsed. Something about his eyes. The words were sexy and would have disarmed his opponent. But he couldn't remember them. All Bax could think about was how beautiful Mal's eyes were. He nearly blurted it like a fool.

“You look handsome tonight,” Mal said.

Baxenvir's defenses fell in that instant. His internal armor disintegrated. He forgot all about his training and the art of war. Did he really think he could seduce Mal in the same manner that he fought a war? Perhaps romance could be a battle, but he didn't want that for them. He didn't want to guard his heart and fear for his divided loyalty. Suddenly, all the Knave of Hearts wanted was a genuine romance. Something normal. He wanted to enjoy Mal's company without worrying about the Queen. For fuck's sake, when had he last spent a day free of concern for her?

All that shit he'd just put himself through—that silly rant about loyalty and love. Hearts given and taken and cut into pieces. What was that? Where had that even come from? Why had Bax tormented himself like that? A soldier's obedience. Ha! Yes, he obeyed. He always obeyed the Queen. But he could separate that from love.

Couldn't he? He could love someone without becoming a traitor to his queen. How arrogant was it to think that he couldn't? He had panicked for nothing.

“Thank you,” Bax said, feeling the weight of war fall from his shoulders. And with that weight went all the worry of what to say or how to act. He just let the words come forth—the real words that Malecvar inspired him to say. “You're so fucking sexy that I can barely walk without stumbling.”

It was Mal's footsteps that faltered as his head jerked toward Bax. “Holy shit. You just said that. Just said it.”

They came to a halt.

“Yes, I did.” The Knave of Hearts faced his romantic interest who was definitely not his enemy. “And I meant it.” He licked his lips and looked Mal over again. “Did you wear that for me? Maybe you thought about me while you put it on?”

Mal's lips parted, his breath audible as he met Bax's stare. Pupils dilated, he said, “Yes. Yes, I did. And I'm glad you appreciate my efforts.”

With a rumbling release of breath, Bax shoved Mal against the wall and pinned him there with his body. Their lips merged in a moment, Mal stretching up to him as he went down. Softness above and hardness below. They ground their erections together, and Bax bent his knees to undulate upward, getting under that leather-covered cock to feel if his suspicions had been correct. Oh, they were. Mal tucked himself. He was longer than he looked. And growing. With that hardening and lifting came a space below that Bax could push into. A path to glory. Mal groaned into Bax's mouth and angled his hips forward, giving him better access to that path.

“Oh, fuck,” Bax murmured as he eased back from their wild kiss. His hands kneaded Mal's ass, gripping as much of that delicious flesh as he could. “I want to pull your

pants down, spin you around, and fuck you right here.”

Mal shuddered, and the Knave was sure he would give in. But then he slipped free and sauntered away, tossing a grin over his shoulder.

A grin and a saucy, “I know you do.”

Letting out a shuddering breath, the Knave of Hearts watched Mal's twitching ass for a few seconds, his heart pounding in his cock. Then he bared his teeth. No, it wasn't a smile exactly, but it was close. And he knew the real smiles were coming.

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Alec couldn't believe he was walking away from the sexiest encounter of his life. The sexiest man he'd ever kissed. The sexiest . . . everything. But Torwen's advice was ringing in his ears, guiding him. It was too soon to fuck the Knave. Too soon for kissing even, but that damage was done. So, Alec had to make the best of it and leave the knight wanting. The problem was, it left him wanting too.

Alec grinned at the Knave over his shoulder and sauntered off like he imagined Torwen would. But he had to adjust himself as he did. His cock ached, and he needed to get his erection under control quickly because those stupid leather pants Torwen insisted he wear showed everything! Every-fucking-thing. Hell, Bax could probably see the outline of the tip. Mal looked down. Yup.

Worms! Centipedes! That fucked up scene in Indiana Jones and the Temple of Doom when the woman gets covered in bugs! Oh, yeah, that did it. Down boy. Take it down. When it came to bugs, Alec had a very Ron Weasley reaction. You know, the whole spiders thing. So, they were perfect to bring down a hard-on.

He just had to keep thinking of insects and not of Bax's huge, hard body. Nope. He could not think about how much that armor had been hiding. How Bax had biceps he couldn't span with both hands and a chest as hard as the metal that had covered it. And his thighs. Oh, he could not think about the knight's thighs.

"If you think you can just leave me hard and aching, you're mistaken," a velvety voice purred in his ear.

Oh, fuck! Cockroaches! Slugs! Maggots! Alec focused on slimy things as he slid a Torwen-grin at the Knave of Hearts. "I just did." He glanced down and verified that

Bax had not lost his erection. “And if you think you can get in my leather pants that easily, Sir Baxenvir, you're mistaken. I'm worth more than a quick fuck in a corridor.”

Bax blinked and drew back. “Great tumtum trees, you're right. Forgive me, Mal. That was . . . oh, fuck. I lost myself. I'm so sorry that I disrespected you. It was that kiss earlier. I haven't stopped thinking about it. It's made me act—”

Alec's steps slowed and all the advice Torwen gave him faded. “Hey.” He took Bax's hand. “No. Stop that. I didn't mean to make you feel bad. I just want you to know that I want more from you.”

Bax looked down at their hands, wove their fingers together, then met Alec's stare. “I want more from you too. Is that crazy? We just met, but I want more. I want everything.”

Alec's breath caught. He couldn't speak. Just stared at Bax.

“That was too much. Shit.” Bax started to let go.

“No!” Alec gripped his hand tighter. “It's not too much. But it is crazy. We're mad. Bonkers. Off the top of our heads for each other. But I'll tell you a secret—all the best lovers are.”

Baxenvir smiled. A real smile. It was gentle and full of hope, not the smile of a killer. Alec tried to remind himself that this wasn't real, that he was seducing his enemy, but it was hard to focus on that with Bax staring at him.

Then the Knave of Hearts sealed their fate. “Let's go mad together.”

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The Knave of Hearts lifted his chin and chest as he walked into the dining hall, holding Mal's hand. He couldn't figure out why he was so proud. Maybe it was part of that madness he was falling into with Mal. The proper way to escort a companion was to hold their hand on his forearm, but that didn't feel right for Mal and him. Holding hands—that was them. And Bax loved holding Mal's hand in front of the entire Hearts Court.

People stared. Jaws fell. Heads turned. Cutlery clattered.

Mal didn't notice any of it. He was swinging Bax's hand as they walked, talking about candy, of all things. He had asked what Bax's favorite food was, and Bax confessed to having a sweet tooth. This launched a discussion on Mal's favorite sweets and that led to candy. Mal preferred chocolate to hard-boiled. Although, he did like to suck on things. Wink-wink.

Bax grinned—yes, another smile—amazed at how easy their interaction was now that he'd gotten past his fear and all that war nonsense. Had they just met that morning? It felt as if he'd known Mal for a lifetime. As if they'd been friends before they felt a sexual attraction. Before they knew about sex at all.

“Oh, is it all right that I sit with you?” Mal asked.

Bax followed Mal's stare to the royal dining table. It was the only rectangular table in the dining hall. The others were shaped like hearts. Dining at them was doubtless annoying and also the reason the royal table wasn't heart-shaped. The Queen liked to look out upon a hall of hearts, but she didn't want her dining experience hindered.

The Queen's table stood at the far end of the hall, against a vibrant tapestry of hearts and roses. Covered in crimson cloth and gold platters, the table was unmistakably royal. And then there was the Queen herself, sitting on her throne at the center of one long side, facing her court. No one sat on the other side of the table to impede her view. Not that it was necessary. The table was large enough to seat twenty, but the Queen rarely had over two men attend her at dinner. It used to only be Bax. But these days, the White Prince and the Queen's consort joined them.

Now, the Knave of Hearts would add another to their number.

“Yes, it will be fine, I'm sure,” Bax said to Mal. “But I'll ask permission first.” He took them to stand directly before the Queen and bowed with Mal. “Good evening, Your Majesty.”

“Ah, my knave,” the Queen said. Her red lips pressed together and lifted in a smug smile. “I see you have brought a guest to my table.”

“If it pleases you, my Queen.”

“The question is—does it please you, Bax?”

Bax grinned and bent his head. “Yes, Your Majesty.”

“A smile!” The Queen giggled and clapped her hands. “Excellent! And I see that the clothes I sent fit you perfectly, Malecvar. You look very handsome.”

“Yes, Your Majesty. Thank you so much. They're nicer than anything I've ever owned.”

Bax glanced at Mal, then at the Queen. “You gave those to him, Your Majesty?”

“Yes.” The Queen sat back and stroked Torwen's hair, her long, red nails piercing his dark locks. “It was a gift to both of you.”

“Thank you, Your Majesty,” Bax said. “He does indeed look magnificent in them. Your taste, as always, is impeccable.”

“Yes, it is. And I'm delighted to see you interested in more than warfare, my sweet knave. Come, bring your companion to my table. We shall all dine together.”

“Thank you, Your Majesty.” Bax bowed again, then led Mal to a chair beside his. He held it out for Mal, then slid it in as Mal sat. Before Bax took his seat, he kissed the Queen's cheek and whispered in her ear, “You are most generous, Your Majesty.”

The Queen of Hearts beamed at her knave as her hand continued to wander over the landscape of her lover. Torwen sat on her left, with the White Prince on his left. Bax should have been upset by that. It would have been better for the Queen to put more of an effort into seducing the Prince. But Bax was too happy to care. Let the Queen see to her own machinations for the night. He had other things to hold his interest.

The Knave of Hearts took his seat and looked from his queen to his would-be lover. A feeling of fate seeped into him. This was right. This was how it was meant to be. He could have them both. Give them both his heart and loyalty. After all, they were on the same side. Mal was a citizen of Hearts. There was no need to worry over divided loyalty. Malecvar would never ask Bax to turn on his queen. The thought was preposterous.

Proud, hopeful, and happier than he'd ever been, Baxenvir took Mal's hand once more and lifted it to his lips. Holding Mal's exotic stare, he kissed the back of his hand, then grinned when he saw the pulse in Mal's neck speed up. They were indeed mad for each other. Absolutely mad after a single day. And the thought made Bax realize it couldn't be any other way. It was madness or nothing for them.

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Alec glanced down the table at the White Prince. It astounded him that he was there, dining with them like a guest. The Prince's piercing blue gaze shifted to Torwen often. He straightened in his seat after every glance. So, he knew who Torwen was. He knew he was there to help him. The Prince looked at Alec. Alec flinched under the sharp stare. Almost imperceptibly, the White Prince nodded. Alec blinked in response.

The Prince wasn't his primary mission. Torwen had made it clear that the Vorpall Sword came first. If they could free the White Prince, they would, of course, do so. But only if they already had the sword. Because if they freed the Prince, it would be too risky to return.

Speaking of Torwen, the cat-shifter was practically purring under the Queen's attention. And she was heaping it upon Torwen—stroking his hair, face, and chest. And those were just the touches Alec could see. God knows what she was doing to Torwen under the table.

Torwen caught Alec's eye and winked.

Alec grinned and looked away, right into Bax's stare. The Knave of Hearts lifted a dark pink brow at him.

Alec leaned in and whispered, “My cousin is in love.”

Baxenvir's other brow rose to meet the first. “With the Queen?”

“Of course. Who else?”

“No, it's just . . .” He glanced at Torwen. “To be honest, I didn't think Cheshire was capable of love.”

“Everyone is capable of love.”

Bax's lips softened into a smile. “Yes, I suppose that's true. Even those who believe they're incapable of romance can succumb if given the right partner.”

A shiver ran through Alec, followed closely by an ache. Why did this man have to be so fucking beautiful and so charming? And so damn sexy? And an amazing kisser? Alec wanted this to be real.

Torwen's words came back to him then—the advice he'd given Alec as he helped him get dressed.

“I know I told you that you're compromised, but we can use this to our advantage,” Torwen said. “A perfect seduction is done with cold indifference, but the best seductions, those that bring down kingdoms, are done with a touch of truth. If you find yourself feeling something for him, commit to it at the moment. Stare into his eyes and let him see that he's not falling in love alone. Let him take you over the side with him. You can crawl out of it later. Yes, you'll be scraped and bleeding when you reach the top, but he will lie utterly broken at the bottom.”

Alec didn't want to break Baxenvir. That being said, it eased his anxiety to know that if he took a tumble, it would only help the mission. It was as if Torwen had given him permission —as if falling for Bax was now a part of his directive. It had to be done. Oh, well.

Back on track, Alec asked, “Where did you grow up?”

Bax sat back and stared at Alec.

“What's wrong?”

“Nothing. I'm just surprised by the question.”

“I want to know you,” Alec said as casually as he could. “I want to know who you are and how you became the man you are today.”

Bax sucked in a breath. “I want to know you too.”

“Well, you know where I'm from. And you know I have a sweet tooth like yours. I had a happy childhood. My parents loved me very much. What about you?”

“I . . . my childhood was . . . short.”

Alec went still. “What does that mean?”

“My father was a soldier. He decided that would be best for me as well. So, when I was five, he took me to train with the Hearts Army.”

“When you were five?!”

“It's not unusual.” Bax swallowed roughly and set his fork down. “There are barracks for children trainees here. Some are the offspring of soldiers, but most are orphans. At least I had my father to mentor me, and my mother visited a lot.”

“Holy shit, Bax,” Alec whispered and slid his hand over Bax's. “I'm so sorry.”

“Don't be.” Bax stiffened and drew his hand away.

Alec followed his lead and drew back as well. “All right.”

Bax made a huffing growl. “No, I'm sorry. I just don't like pity.”

“It wasn't pity. It was sympathy and admiration.”

The Knave shot Alec a wary stare. “You admire me for joining the Hearts Army at five?”

“No. I admire you for overcoming a tough childhood and refusing to let it define who you are. Instead, you see the good in it. You note how more fortunate you were than others. That takes fortitude.”

“But it did define me.” He looked over at the Queen. “It still defines me.”

“I don't think it does.” Alec took Bax's hand again and gripped it tightly so he couldn't slip away. “Yes, it's helped to make you who you are, but it doesn't define you. I see the child in your smile. However hard that training was, the innocence in you never succumbed to it. You protected it. That joy. It's still there.”

Baxenvir gaped at Alec. Just stared at him.

Alec leaned over and kissed the Knave's cheek. “I want to feel that joy with you. Will you share it with me?”

With a shuddering exhale, Bax leaned in to touch their foreheads together. “Malecvar of the Crimson Coast, I will share anything with you. Anything you wish to share with me.”

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The Knave of Hearts felt the enormity of his vow long after he uttered it. The food was eaten, the table cleared, and the Queen retired to her suite with her lover. The White Prince was escorted back to his cell after that. Then, only when the royal table was clear, did the Knave stand and offer Mal his hand.

Again, the courtiers watched as Bax and Mal crossed the hall. It felt to Bax as if months had passed since they first made the trip to the royal table together. Sometime during the meal, Mal had dove into Baxenvir's soul and taken hold of it. Words. Just words. And yet Mal's words had changed everything. Love had been a possibility when they entered the dining hall. Now, Bax knew it was inevitable.

When was the last time anyone had asked about his childhood? Never. Not even his bed partners had dared to get to know him beyond his body. Or cared to. But Mal wanted to know. He demanded it. And Bax found he could deny Mal nothing.

If Mal didn't want to take things further, Bax would not press him. Not that night or any other. The thought relaxed him in surprising ways. He found that as much as he wanted to take Mal to bed, he was also enjoying the other parts of their interaction—the bits he never experienced. Getting to know someone. Would the sex be better after they connected in other ways? Bax was certain it would be. And he wanted that. So, as they approached their rooms, he let go of Mal's hand.

Mal looked at him, his eyes crinkling with a smile. “Me either.”

“What does that mean?” Bax turned to face him.

“I don't want to ruin this. But I don't want the night to end either. Would you like to

come in and talk a bit more?" He waved at his door.

The Knave of Hearts stood frozen. Going into a man's room at this hour meant sex. Period. But Mal said that it didn't have to mean sex. Could they really sit near a bed and not use it? With all the lust building between them? With the way they combusted with every touch? Bax wasn't sure, but he wanted to try.

"Why don't you come into my suite instead?" Bax opened his door and waved Mal inside. "I have a bottle of Snudian rum."

"I love rum." Mal winked at Bax as he passed by.

A wave of nervousness crashed over the Knave as he closed his suite door. He was out of his depth. In unfamiliar territory. At this point, he would have been kissing his chosen partner. But they weren't doing that. So, what should he do? He just stood to the side, watching Mal—hoping the other man might offer some guidance.

Malecvar didn't notice the Knave's distress. Instead, he strolled around the sitting room, peering at the few belongings Bax had on display. He picked up a carving from Queast and inspected it before setting it back down. Then he looked over at Bax expectantly. It was the guidance he'd been waiting for.

"Oh, yes! The rum." Bax hurried over to the sideboard and poured two glasses of his best rum, imported from Snud. He brought them to Mal and handed him a tumbler. "Have you had Snudian rum before? It's sweeter than others."

"No, I haven't. Thank you." Mal hooked a lock of hair behind his ear and took a sip. He made an appreciative sound. "This is delicious."

"I'm glad you like it." Bax went to sit on the couch. At least in the sitting room, they had some distance between them and the bed.

“Do you have a balcony?” Mal leaned over to look around the half-open bedroom door.

“Oh, uh. Yes, I do.” Bax stood up and took a bracing swig. “Would you like to see the view?”

“I think I could handle an hour or so of the roses.”

“The roses?”

“Their scent is strong. You haven't noticed?”

“I've lived here so long that I've gotten used to it.”

“Nose blind.” Mal nodded and headed for the bedroom.

“Nose blind?” Bax hurried after him, hoping that the maids had come and tidied up his bed while he was at dinner. He let out a sigh of relief when he saw the immaculate room. “Uh, that's a suitable term for it. Yes, I suppose my nose is blind to the scent of roses.”

“It started giving me a headache.” Mal paused in the middle of the room, sipped his rum, and looked around. “You don't have a lot of personal things.”

“Oh.” Bax looked around. “I keep most on display in the sitting room.”

“You have nothing you like enough to keep near your bed?” Mal strolled over to him.

Baxenvir swallowed past the dryness in his throat. “I haven't had time to collect things.”

“That tracks.”

“Tracks?” Bax frowned down at Mal. “You have an odd way of speaking.”

“So you keep saying.”

“I noticed it even more during dinner. Some things you say are strange.”

Mal shrugged. “Coastal talk. Like Cheshire said.”

“Oh. Yes, I see.”

“Have you brought a lot of men here?”

“Into my bedroom?”

“Yes.”

“You're the first.”

Mal's eyes widened. “With the way people were looking at you tonight, I thought you were . . .”

“Promiscuous?”

“I was going to say, well, never mind what I was going to say. You probably wouldn't understand it anyway.”

Bax frowned at him.

“Yes, I thought you were promiscuous.”

“Oh, I am.” The Knave of Hearts grinned, enjoying the flush that spread over Mal's cheeks. “I fuck many people. I just don't like any of them enough to bring them here.”

“You got to their rooms?”

“Yes. I go, I fuck them, and I leave.” He grimaced. “I usually choose a man because they're easier to get away from when I'm done.”

“Oh. You're bi. I didn't expect that.”

“Bi?”

“Bisexual. You like both sexes.”

“You are so strange.” Bax shook his head. “Of course, I like both sexes. Everyone does.”

“Everyone?” Mal blinked.

“Yes, everyone. At least, until we settle on someone.”

“I only like men.”

Bax snorted a laugh. Then he saw that Mal was serious. “Are you jesting?”

“No. I like men. Just men. I'm not attracted to women.”

“But what if you're meant to be with a woman?”

“I'm not.”

“How do you know that? You could pass up your greatest chance at happiness.”

Mal chuckled. “I don't think so. I could never be happy with a woman.”

Bax narrowed his eyes at Mal. “What are you talking about? Love knows no sex. And desire is not a horse to be bridled. You let it run wild so that it may lead you to your greatest pleasure.”

“Well, my greatest pleasure is men.” Mal crossed his arms over his chest.

“How did you discover this? When?”

“Oh, pretty early on. I've never been attracted to women.”

“Some people prefer one sex to the other, but they remain open to the possibility of loving anyone. We are all born . . . what was it you called me?”

“Bisexual.”

“Yes. That. We're all born bisexual. Putting limitations on love is foolish. As far as I know, it is no different at the Crimson Coast. The only people who limit themselves like that are—” Bax trailed off, his thoughts running wild. The strange way Mal spoke, his unusual appearance, and now this. No, it couldn't be. Mal was from the coast. He was Cheshire's cousin.

Mal burst out laughing. “Your face!”

The Knave gaped at Mal for a moment and then puffed out a relieved laugh. “Sweet berry tarts, Mal! For a second I thought you were from the human world.”

“The what?” Mal lifted his brows, then laughed some more. “Do I really speak that

strangely?"

"Yes, you do. And you have these odd ideas."

"You need to leave the fortress more, Bax." Mal pushed at his chest. "The human world." He snorted. "Really?"

"I know. That was silly of me. No one's come over from there since . . ." Bax trailed off, staring at Mal's eyes. "Your eyes. This is going to sound even sillier, but the last human to come here from that place was a little boy. I met him. His name was Alec and I swear, he had your eyes." Bax leaned closer, the memory of that little boy sliding over Mal. It was uncanny.

Mal blinked, his expression going slack. And then he burst out laughing again. "You nearly had me!"

Bax chuckled. "No, really. I'm telling the truth. He looked a lot like you."

"What, just smaller?" Mal teased.

"Yes. He had your coloring. Your exact coloring. How strange."

"Cheshire has my coloring too," Mal said. "Does that mean he's from the human world?"

Bax thought about this. "Huh. You're right. Cheshire does resemble that boy as well."

"Bax, I think you may remember things wrong." Mal's smile softened and his tone turned hopeful, "Maybe because you liked that boy and now you like me?"

Bax shook his head. "You know, that's true. I did like him. I was just a little older

than him. I had slipped out of training that day and found him with the gardeners.”

“A human boy was here, in the fortress?” Mal scoffed. “No way.”

“Yes! I swear it!” Bax laughed and took Mal's hand to draw him out to the balcony. He sighed as the cool air hit his flushed cheeks, then stared up at the stars. “It was amazing. I knew immediately that he wasn't from Wonderland. And when I asked him, he didn't deny it. He claimed to be from a land called Oh-ray-gon.”

“Oh-ray-gon,” Mal carefully repeated the word. “What an odd name.”

“That's what I said!” Bax chuckled and slid onto an iron chair near the wall. “His name was less strange but still unusual.”

“Are you sure he was from the human world?” Mal took the chair closest to Bax. “He might have been teasing you.”

Pleased by Mal's proximity, Bax didn't answer at first. Then he cleared his throat and said, “I'm sure. The Queen came upon us, and I had to hide. I watched as she took the boy with her to play croquet. He had never played the game. The flamingos shocked him. He kept trying to pet them.”

“That must have been a long time ago. I've never heard of the Queen playing croquet.”

“Oh, yes, she did. She loved it.” Bax stared up at the stars again. “She loved all sorts of games. Of course, she was a terrible loser.” He chuckled as he looked back at Mal. “But back then, the King stopped her from doing anything too fatal when she had one of her rages.”

“His death was a great loss to the kingdom.”

“Yes, it was. He was a good man. More importantly, he made the Queen a good woman.”

Silence spread until Bax realized his mistake. He'd spoken out against his queen!

Straightening in his seat, he hurried to say, “Not that she isn't a good woman now. She's just—”

“Bax!” Mal grabbed his hand. “You don't have to guard yourself around me. I won't run off and report to the Queen that you know about her rages. We all do. But we also know why she rages, don't we?”

Bax sighed. “Yes. I know that better than most.”

“What do you mean?”

“I was there. At the battle where the King died.”

“You were there?” Mal whispered. “That must have been awful.”

“So, you've never heard of me?”

“Of you? What do you mean?”

Bax laughed, but it was scornfully and directed at himself. “I became the Knave of Hearts that day. The Hero of Hearts.”

“You don't sound pleased.” Mal squeezed his hand. “Bax, we don't have to talk about this. I don't care what you did before we met. What matters is what you do now. If you don't like your past, forget it. Let it go. Make a new past right now.”

Bax's jaw went loose. "You don't . . . so you're not, I mean, you really don't know what I did?"

"No. And I don't care. I know that whatever happened, you did what you felt was best."

"Yes," Bax whispered. "Yes, I think I did."

Mal frowned. "You think you did?"

With a grimace and a sigh, the Knave of Hearts released Mal's hand. "When I go to war, there comes a moment when I lose myself. I sort of split in two. I'm still there, but I'm functioning without thought. I lose time. When I return to myself, the battle is over."

Mal murmured, "Disassociation."

"What's that?"

"Oh, nothing. I've heard of soldiers experiencing something like that. It's more common than you think."

"You have? It's common?" Bax leaned toward Mal. "I thought I was the only one. I thought there was something wrong with me."

"No, Bax. There's nothing wrong with you. It speaks well of you that battle upsets you so much that you must separate yourself from it mentally."

"Separate myself mentally," Bax tested the words. "Yes. Yes, that's what happens. I retreat into my mind and my body takes over."

Mal nodded. "It's your mind's way of protecting you. Because it knows that you'd go mad if you had to see all those terrible things."

"Terrible things," Bax whispered and looked down. "Yes, I did terrible things. And yet, they call me a hero. The Queen made me her champion. But I know better." He looked up and held Mal's stare, suddenly needing him to know. "I'm a monster."

"No, you're not!" Mal gripped his hand again. "You're not a monster. That you have to separate yourself like that proves it. There's only one monster in the Card Army, and it isn't you."

"The Jabberwocky." Bax's free hand shook so he clenched it into a fist.

"Yes, the Jabberwocky," Mal said. "War forces everyone to do horrible things, Bax. But what makes men different from monsters is that we regret our actions. The Jabberwocky has no regrets. It knows no mercy and feels no remorse. It doesn't have to retreat into its mind because it doesn't care. But you do, Bax. You care. You don't revel in what they call you because you care so much. Any other man would be proud of those titles. But you hang your head when you list them to me." Mal slid out of his chair and knelt before Bax to take the Knave's face in his hands. "You could never be a monster."

And then Mal kissed him.

It shouldn't have been romantic, not after all that talk of monsters and blood. But it was the most romantic moment of Baxenvir's life. He pulled Mal up, into his arms and kissed him with all the tangled, boiling emotions that had risen with those words. Those kind, perceptive, life-changing words. The Knave of Hearts didn't want to fuck Malecvar anymore. He wanted to make love to him.

So, he picked Mal up and carried him to bed.

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Alec knew it was too soon. He knew he should stop Baxenvir. Just get up and walk out. But he didn't. He couldn't. Not when the Knave of Hearts touched him so gently, with hands and lips and so much more. Alec couldn't turn away from him. Even knowing that taking this step wasn't just bad for the mission. It was bad for Alec. It proved how little control he had with Bax. But when Bax lay down beside Alec on his big bed, Alec didn't care about any of that. Bax was all that mattered.

Only moonlight illuminated the room, turning Bax's hair silver, and his eyes dark. Alec reached up and touched the Knave's cheek. He saw emotions churning in those shadowed eyes that mimicked those boiling inside him. They barreled through the last of Alec's resistance, sending shrapnel shooting through Alec's chest. It should have hurt. Wounded him. Instead, it freed him. Alec pulled Bax down to him with a cry that felt soul-deep.

Their lips met as Bax rolled over Alec, pulling at his clothing. Hands clutched and nimble fingers did their work. It felt natural to Alec. As if he'd gotten undressed with Bax a thousand times before. This wasn't a target or his enemy. Baxenvir was just a man. A man caught in a web of intrigue and war. Neither of them wanted to be a soldier. Alec certainly didn't want the mantle of monster-killer. But here they were, and it felt like fate.

Why hadn't that damn caterpillar psychic seen this? Alec thought as he memorized the muscles of Bax's back. He should have foretold this affair. It was more important than that damn beast. Alec knew it in his bones. This was why he was in Wonderland. Bax was the reason he'd fallen into this world.

Alec had the sudden desire to take Bax out of Wonderland. Confess who he was and

tell Bax that he was that human boy in the garden. He was the one who fascinated Bax. The one who played croquet with the Queen, laughed at the flamingos, and dyed the roses red. How could this not be destiny? That they would meet back then and get thrust together once more was too much of a coincidence. Their attraction too passionate. Too wild to be mere lust.

“Bax,” Alec whispered. The words were on the tip of his tongue—the truth right there. He offered it to Bax in a kiss. “Bax.”

“I know,” Bax whispered back. “We should stop. I don't want to ruin this either. But I can't seem to let you go. Stop me. Please, Mal. You have to do it. If you tell me to stop, I will.”

Mal. The name drove the breath out of Alec. Just as he had gone breathless when Bax mentioned their first meeting. The Queen's Champion had remembered him for all these years. And Alec had remembered Bax. How could he forget the pink-haired boy who had thought Alec was the strange one? The boy who'd been fascinated with the way he spoke and where he was from. He'd had so many questions about the human world, but then he heard the Queen coming and hid in the bushes. Alec still remembered the way Bax's hair camouflaged him, merging with the flowers. And those green eyes mimicked the leaves. Alec hadn't lost sight of Bax. Not while he played croquet or when the Queen got riled and ordered a man's execution. He kept watching that boy until the boy had given up on waiting for the Queen to leave and ran off.

Alec had felt bereft when Bax left and didn't understand why. Now, he knew. His heart had recognized its future master.

“You're right,” Alec said. “It's too soon. But I don't care. I see you, Bax. I feel as if you've been a part of me for a long time. Call me a fool, but I refuse to give up a single night with you. I've lost too many already.”

Bax had been lying on his side, facing Alec. With those words, he moved above Alec and braced himself on his forearms. As he stared down at Alec, his gaze went liquid. So liquid that a tear slid down his cheek.

“Bax.” Alec brushed the tear away. “Tell me you feel it too. Tell me I'm not alone. That tonight is a beginning, not an end.”

“It's the start of our life together,” Bax vowed. “The beginning of everything.”

And then they were kissing again, and Bax laid his huge, sleek body over Alec's. Limbs sliding together, they kept kissing and kissing. Not that they didn't want more. They wanted it. The proof clashed in swollen glory between them. But they wanted this more—this connection. This confirmation that they both felt something powerful building between them. Building a bond.

It felt like forever that they kissed. Nevertheless, it ended too soon. But the way Baxenvir moved down Alec's throat eased the disappointment. Lips brushing his chest, then his nipple. Yes, that was good too. Alec arched into Bax's kisses and pulled him closer, clutching fistfuls of pink hair.

“Bax.” Alec lifted his hips, driving their shafts together. “Please.”

“Not yet. A little more, Mal. Give me a little more time to explore. I've been wanting this forever too. I've felt the lack of you all my life.”

Fists opened and Alec speared his fingers through Bax's hair, sighing. It was perfect. Everything about their lovemaking. Everything except the fact that Bax kept using the wrong name. Again and again, Alec opened his mouth to tell Bax the truth. But he couldn't speak the words. Instead, sweet moans and gasps left his lips. Cries for more.

“Mal, I want to be inside you.” Bax kissed his way down Alec's belly. “Will you

accept me?"

"Will I accept you?" Alec screeched in need. "I demand that you get inside me now!"

Bax chuckled, the warmth of his breath hitting Alec's cock. "Will you always be so impatient?"

"I've been very patient. I've let you kiss me for hours and lick me everywhere except for the place I want to be licked."

"Is that right?" Bax licked the length of Alec's cock. "Would that be the place?"

"Oh, fuck!" Alec arched off the bed. "Bax."

Alec had enough. His body couldn't take anymore. Bucking, he knocked the Knave of Hearts onto his back and straddled him. Gaping up at Alec, Bax sprawled in the middle of the bed, blankets bunched around him. There was a sprinkling of dusky pink hair at the top of Bax's chest. That captured Alec's attention for a moment. But he was more interested in the nest of pink curls lower down.

"I'm done waiting," Alec growled, then dove.

"Mal!" Bax roared when Alec consumed his flesh with one gulp. He stared down his body at Alec, eyes glowing in the darkness, and stroked the hair back from Alec's face. "Yes. Just like that. Get me ready to take you. Get me hard and wet. I don't keep runi oil in here, so we'll have to make do."

Alec moaned around Bax's cock, then tightened his lips to move up and down it. Just having Bax inside him in this way made Alec soar so close to completion that it forced him to think about creepy crawlies again. He didn't want to come before he rode his knight.

Once Bax's thick shaft—a beautiful piece of male flesh that was the perfect size for Alec—was wet, Alec rose and straddled the Knave again. They hadn't discussed who would top who. They didn't need to. Somehow, they'd known that their desires would match. Even if they hadn't, Bax's declaration of need would have made it clear. So it was with eager breaths that Alec mounted Bax, and the Knave gripped Alec's hips.

“I'm usually on top,” Bax said.

“Do you care?” Alec held Bax's cock and positioned himself over it.

“No. Do what you will with me.”

Grinning, Alec did what he willed.

The first penetration was slow, a steady working in and out. And then Alec's passage eased enough for him to let go of Bax and lower fully upon him. They cried out in unison, hands clutching at each other. Sparks burst behind Alec's closed eyes, the pleasure igniting fireworks in his mind. And then Alec moved, his body taking over, no instruction needed from his mind.

With palms pressed onto the Knave's belly, Alec rode faster and faster. Bax watched him, hardly blinking and never looking away. His powerful hands, used to wielding a sword, held Alec's waist and pulled him down. They both needed more. More and more. They reached for that pinnacle together, hands clawing. Bodies straining.

And then . . .

“Malecvar!” Bax locked up, hips arched up into Alec.

The eruption inside him sent Alec spinning into his own release even as that name, that terrible lie of a name, crushed a piece of his heart. At least Alec could shout the

truth.

“Baxenvir!” he cried out.

Together, they rode out their pleasure and then fell into the blessed relief that followed.

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The Knave of Hearts stared down at the sleeping man in his arms. Sunlight was just making its way across the floor, creeping into bed with them. They had stayed up for hours, making love repeatedly. Bax had taken Mal in every way he could—bent over, on his back, in his mouth. Their lust had been a ravenous beast that drove them past their exhaustion until they had both collapsed.

They'd fallen into slumber together, a tangle of limbs that refused to unwind throughout the night. Their bodies knew, even while asleep, who they needed. Who they belonged to.

A soft smile spread over Baxenvir's lips. Belonged to. Had it just been yesterday that he feared losing his heart and loyalty to someone other than his queen? Now, he couldn't imagine not giving Mal everything. Why had they worried about going too fast and ruining things? They couldn't ruin this if they tried. They were too perfect for each other. Craved each other too ferociously. Even now, after the hours they'd spent focused on desire, Bax felt his cock rising.

He stroked Mal's long hair back and rolled him onto his belly. Bax wasn't worried about Mal's reaction. He knew with absolute certainty that he would want this. And Mal was so full of Baxenvir's pleasure that he didn't have to worry about easing the way either. He slid slickly into Mal's channel with the first thrust.

Mal moaned and pushed back on him. “Bax.”

Yes, there he was. Bax knew it would be just so. Mal met his passion with his own, even as he woke. There was no wondering with Mal. It was as if they were one person. One person split in two.

“Good morning,” Bax whispered in Mal's ear, then rose onto his forearms for a deeper thrusting. “Are you hungry?”

“Starving.” Mal looked over his shoulder at Bax and licked his lips.

Chuckling, Bax sank even deeper into his lover. His lover. Yes, he'd taken a steady lover at last. After a single night together. Frankly, he was ready to ask for more than that. But he didn't want to scare Mal. He'd give it a few months before he proposed. Maybe.

The future unrolled in Bax's mind. Mal would move into his suite, and they would serve the Queen together. He wouldn't ask Mal to fight—didn't want him anywhere near a battlefield—but he could be useful around the fortress, Bax was sure. They'd find something for Mal to do while Bax trained and went to war.

And when Bax came home, Mal would be waiting. In his bed. Spread to receive him, just like this.

“Oh, fuck,” Bax moaned. “I love the way you squeeze my cock.”

“I love the way your cock fills me.”

“Mal.” Bax bent his head and nibbled Mal's neck. “Malecvar, I've never felt like this. You need to know this is special. Real.”

Mal angled his head around to kiss Bax. “I do know. Have we done it, Bax? Have we gone mad together?”

“Oh, most certainly. And isn't it sweet? Sweet, sweet madness.”

“There's nothing better.” Mal pushed up onto his hands and knees, forcing Bax to

adjust his position.

Bax only grinned, happy to oblige. He grabbed Mal by the hips and sped up, driving deep into him. “Is this what you want, lover?”

“Yes. You're exactly what I want, Bax. Don't ever take this away.”

The words sent shivers of delight through the Knave of Hearts. “You're exactly what I want too, Mal.”

Mal smirked at Bax over his shoulder. “So, have you decided on men now?”

“No, Mal. I've decided on you.”

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Alec squinted into the light, Bax's muscular but lean body just a blur of shadow against the bright window. "Bax?"

"It's after noon, Mal," Bax said. "Get out of that bed."

"I did get out of bed. I distinctly remember showering with you."

"That was yesterday."

"Yesterday?" Alec rubbed at his eyes and sat up. "How many days have we been in here?"

"Just two." Bax chuckled and disappeared into the bathroom.

Alec groaned and climbed out of bed. Two days. Torwen was probably pissed off or really worried. Alec didn't care. It had been the best two days of his life. Had he learned the whereabouts of the Vorpall Sword? Nope. Again, he didn't care. That was probably a bad thing.

With a sigh, Alec steadied his resolve. He would find the sword. He had to. Alec needed that thing to survive his fight with the Jabberwocky. It wasn't about loyalty or sex or even love. It was survival. His. That thought summoned others. Traitorous thoughts. Thoughts of abandoning the war and everyone who was counting on him. Would Bax leave with Alec if he asked him to?

That was the problem, wasn't it? Even if Alec confessed and offered to take Bax back to Oregon with him, Bax might not want to go. They'd only spent two days together.

Of course, Bax wouldn't go. He wouldn't abandon the Queen of Hearts. That's not the kind of man he was. No, the Knave of Hearts would feel honor-bound to arrest Alec.

Images of Bax on his knees beside the Queen filled Alec's mind. It turned his stomach. Baxenvir was her lap dog. He adored her like a puppy loved its mistress. Alec thought Bax was too good a man for that shit, but after hearing about Bax's childhood, he understood it. The Queen had even said it herself—Bax loved her like a son loved his mother. That bitch knew the hold she had on her knave. She knew, and she worked that shit.

Could Alec break their bond? Could he take the Queen's place in Bax's heart? Maybe with some time. But not two days. Even if Bax wanted to leave with Alec, he wouldn't. Not with that bitch holding his leash. Fuck, it made Alec furious. The Queen of Hearts was a master manipulator. All those touches, that petting she did with Bax. The way she spoke to him. She treated him like a child because she knew he craved it. Denied such affection when he was a child, Bax was desperate for it as an adult. The Queen used his need to bond Bax to her. And that kind of bond was hard to break.

“This is doomed,” Alec whispered, his heart sinking. “We're doomed.”

“You're still in bed?” Bax shook his head as he came out of the bathroom. “Must I dress you myself?”

“I'm getting up.” Alec looked away, hiding his sorrow.

Bax stepped before him. “Look at me.”

Alec froze. Oh, fuck. Did he know? How could he know? What did he know? Alec determinedly did not look at the Knave of Hearts.

“Mal, look at me.”

Mal. Okay, so he didn't know. If he knew, he'd be using Alec's real name. So Alec looked up at Bax. And he nearly cursed. Bax stared at him with the most beautiful, tender expression. He had been shut down when they met. Closed off from everyone but the Queen. According to everyone, including Bax, the Knave never smiled. But Alec had got him smiling. And that had only been the beginning. Bax opened to him like a flower in the sun. And he held nothing back. He'd gone from cold indifference to fiery dedication. All in a few days. And Alec had fed this beautiful, brave man lies in return.

God, that turned his stomach.

Bax cupped Alec's cheek. “Leaving this suite is not the end of us. I swear to you that I have never experienced such a profound connection with anyone. I want you to be mine, Mal. I want you to stay here. Don't go back to the coast. Please. Don't leave me.”

Alec stared up at Bax, his throat constricting and tears gathering in his eyes. Oh, fuck. Fuck! He couldn't do this. No! This man deserved so much better. He'd been tossed away by his parents, scooped up by a psychopath, and still managed to become an amazing person. He was brave, strong, and kind. Kind despite all he'd been through. Despite the fact that he had to shove that kindness into a pit and go numb to fight for his queen. He was more honorable than anyone Alec had ever met. But he wasted that honor on a mad queen.

What could Alec do? How could he save Bax? And he had to save the Knave. It was the only way to come through this sane and whole. If he destroyed Baxenvir with this mission, he'd destroy himself too. Alec had to find a way to save them both.

“That was too much to lay on you this soon,” Bax went on, his hand falling away.

“But you looked worried. I thought you might . . . forget that I said that. I'm sorry if I misread things. We can take it slower. Don't feel pressured. I—”

“Bax.” Alec stood up and cupped Bax's cheeks. “I want to stay.”

“You do?”

“I want to be yours.”

Baxenvir grinned. “You do?”

“I am.” Alec knew it was the truth. He also knew he was fucked because of it. Oh, well. In for a penny. “Are you mine?”

“I am.” Bax yanked Alec into his arms and kissed him thoroughly. So passionately that Alec could feel fate tangling them again. When Bax eased back, he was looking at Alec in that beautiful way again. “I am absolutely yours.”

Alec knew this wasn't true. Oh, Bax might believe it, but he was fooling himself. He was not absolutely Alec's. Bax was as much his as he was Bax's. But maybe that could change. Maybe they could come together and defy both sides of the war. Shed their chains and chain themselves to each other. A couple of protesters with flowers in their hair. Make love not war. Or maybe they'd go up in flames. Either way, Alec couldn't stop it now. Blossom or burn, he was committed.

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“There you are!” Torwen declared.

Alec spun to see him come striding up to Bax and him.

“Cheshire, stay where you are!” Bax hissed.

“Oh, I don't think so, Knave,” Torwen growled. “I've had enough of your snide looks and scorn. I'm the Queen's consort, and you will—”

“Stop!” Bax's eyes had gone wide. He held out a hand to ward Torwen off.

But it was too late.

Neither Alec nor Torwen understood the danger they were in. They didn't know where they were. Not exactly. But Alec saw the terror on Bax's face and heard the truth in his voice. He realized before Torwen that Bax hadn't meant to keep Torwen and Alec apart. Nor was it scorn that drove his command.

It was the hounds.

They came bursting through a wall—enormous beasts with long, mottled fur that flapped like the flags of war. Teeth the length of Alec's middle finger glinted in the sunlight. Eyes as dark as midnight locked on Torwen. They snarled, the sound low in their broad throats, and jumped.

Four of them. Alec wasn't sure what type of creature they were, but he was suddenly sure that they weren't your average dogs. He only assumed they were canines because

Bax had been giving him a tour and mentioned that the kennels were near. But these couldn't be dogs. They were too large. Too ferocious. Too fucking terrifying.

Alec backpedaled, his throat locked up with terror, unable to even shout. As he fell into the dirt, he saw Bax bash aside one beast while he dove between the last three and Torwen. Torwen could have vanished, but he didn't. He kept in character even as he jumped onto a bench. Not that any height would have saved him. He was going to die, and Alec knew it. Instead of vanishing to save himself, Torwen was going to play his role to the end.

But he didn't die. Bax had all three of the creatures focused on him now. Beasts covered him—a pile of snarling teeth, fur, and Bax. Seeing that, something clicked in Alec. With a roar, he launched himself through the air on a collision course with the monsters. He landed on one of them and wrapped his arms around its neck. Bax was below, bashing his fist into the face of a second animal, and he looked up in shock, then terror.

“Get back, Mal!” Bax shouted. “Let me handle this.”

“The fuck I will!” Alec punched the beast in his arms, then executed a perfect sumi-otoshi, tossing the creature through the air to bash into the remains of the kennel wall.

Torwen and Bax gaped at him.

Alec immediately locked on another animal, adjusting a hiza guruma by hitting the beast's back knee and using the momentum to toss him into his buddy, who was just getting up.

Bax still wrestled with the last creature, fists flying along with blood. It had his arm in its jaws. Alec punched that animal in the face until it howled and let go of the Knave. Bax jumped to his feet, his eyes glowing. Alec paused to see that.

“Mal!” Torwen shouted.

Alec had just enough time to turn toward the two beasts he had tossed. They were working as a team now, spread out to come at him from two sides. Jaws open, saliva dripping, and heads thrashing, they ran for him. Centering himself and silently thanking his father for getting him into Judo, Alec settled into a right stance, with his right foot forward.

A blur crossed his vision.

Baxenvir took one beast down, rolling with it. Then he was up, his body bending and jerking through rapid movements that Alec couldn't track. But the beasts did. The second one abandoned Alec to help its buddy. Launching itself at Bax, it opened its jaws.

“Oh, I don't fucking think so.” Alec pounced, knocking into the creature in midair.

They went down. Alec gave up on the tossing shit. He had to knock the beast out. First, a kirioroshi—a downward blow with a “knife” hand. He followed that with an empi-uchi, an elbow to the thing's head. Without a sound, the creature went limp. Alec jumped to his feet, bouncing on his toes, and turned toward the last fight.

That fight had turned savage, Bax and the creature moving too fast for Alec to track, much less help. Blood sprayed. Bax made a horrible sound. Alec searched for an opening. Just as he was about to leap into the fray, the beast went sailing through the air.

Alec ran after the thing to make sure it was down. It wasn't dead, its chest still rising and falling, but it was out cold. A quick search showed him that the other three lay in the same condition. Only then, with the enemy down, did Alec run to Bax.

Alec's hands started to shake when he saw the state of the Knave of Hearts. Blood soaked his clothing, terrible slashes showing through the torn fabric. Arms, chest, and thighs were all wounded. He looked as if a bear had mauled him. And still, the Hero of Hearts was standing. He was standing and staring at Alec. When he saw that Alec was alive, he crumpled.

“Bax!” Alec cried and lurched forward to catch him. “Damn it all. Bax? Oh, fuck. Bax?” He eased him down to the ground.

“I’ll get help,” Torwen said.

Alec looked up and their stares met. He saw the conflict in Torwen's gaze. The hesitation. Alec widened his eyes at Torwen, and Tor grimaced. Then he ran off.

Cradling Bax, Alec prayed that Torwen didn't take his time in getting that help. The cat-man wanted to. It would be a huge win for their side if Bax died. But Alec knew that Torwen now felt indebted to Bax. Because the Knave of Hearts had just saved his life. He had even tried to warn Torwen. The attack was kind of Torwen's fault. And Torwen would want that debt paid immediately. He couldn't allow it to confuse their mission—a mission that Alec had just majorly confused by helping the enemy.

“Bax, hold on.” Alec pressed a hand over the worst of the wounds—the one in Baxenvir's chest. “Fuck, Bax. Please, baby, stay with me.”

Bax looked up and smiled even as blood dripped from his lips. “Are those tears in your eyes, Mal? For me?”

Tears? Alec blinked and felt liquid roll down his cheeks. Holy shit, he was crying.

“Yes, they're for you,” he snapped. “Who else? My fucking dumb ass cousin is fine.”

Bax chuckled, and it turned into a wheeze.

“Shh,” Alec pressed harder on the wound. “You're bleeding too much.”

“You're bleeding too.” Bax's gaze traveled over Alec's face. “You helped me. And you did it well. I'm fucking impressed, Mal. What was that? Those moves—I've never seen anything like them.”

“Stop talking!” Alec growled. “Fuck! You're gonna kill yourself with words. Just fucking be quiet.”

“I'm harder to kill than you think. Don't worry about me, sweetheart.”

“Don't worry?! Are you fucking insane? You're bleeding out. Oh, fuck. Oh, fuck! Don't die, baby. Please, don't die.”

“Move aside!” The Queen of Hearts came striding up to them, her eyes full of murder. “Now!”

Alec gently laid Bax down and moved out of the way.

“Leave us!”

“I'm not leaving, Your Majesty,” Alec said. “I can't.”

“Mal, go,” Bax said. “I'll be fine.” He winced as the Queen pressed her hand to his chest. “She'll help me. But she needs privacy to do it. Go.”

“I'm not—”

“Guards!” the Queen shouted.

A pair of soldiers grabbed Alec by his upper arms and carried him away from his bloody lover and the groaning piles of fur.

“Fine! Put me down!” Alec shouted. “I’m going. Just put me down.” He let himself hang, surprising the guards into dropping him, then prepared to toss them.

“I’ll take him, boys.” Torwen pulled Alec up and away from the guards before Alec could lay them out.

“Tor—”

Torwen hissed, cutting Alec off, and dragged him away into the gardens.

“Sorry,” Alec muttered as he shot a glance around. “I was upset. I forgot. No one’s listening.”

“Still. You have to remember who you are.” Torwen widened his eyes. “At all times. No matter what happens. Remember or we die.”

“You would have died to protect the lie, wouldn’t you?”

“Yes, of course.” Torwen glanced back toward the kennels. “If I had saved myself, Baxenvir would have known who I was.”

“How? Just from you—”

“Don’t say it!” Torwen hissed. “And yes. Only I have that ability. Just me in all of Wonderland.”

“Oh.” Alec swayed.

“Mal!” Torwen steadied him.

“Damn, you're good,” Alec said, his voice as weak as his knees. “Even now, you remember.”

“Get it together!” Torwen shook Alec.

“I'm fine.” Alec pushed him away. “I'm fine now.” He turned to look back and saw a wall of card soldiers barring the way to the Queen and her knave, their boxy tunics filling any holes there might have been. “Will she really save him?”

“I don't know.” Torwen sighed. “I hope so. Fuck, the idiot jumped between me and a pack of bandersnatches. And you—”

“Bandersnatches?”

“Those beasts.” Torwen nodded toward the kennels. “They're war dogs. Bred to kill.” He grimaced. “And they hate cats.”

“That's why he told you to stop.”

“Yes. I realize now that he wasn't being churlish.”

“Churlish?!”

“I thought he was trying to keep you to himself! It annoyed me. I didn't notice the smell of bandersnatches until it was too late.” He shook his head. “You were amazing. How did you do that? I didn't think you were a warrior.”

“I'm not.”

“Yes, you are! Destiny has chosen well. You are amazing.”

“It's called Judo. It's a Japanese martial art.”

“Martial art,” Torwen tried out the words. “Judo.” He shook his head. “It's wondrous. The way you tossed those bandersnatches as if they were puppies. Great boojums! A martial art indeed. It was pure magic.”

“For fuck's sake.” Alec crumpled onto the grass.

That's when he realized they were in the garden. By the roses. The damn flowers were everywhere.

With a shuddering sob, Alec bent over and wept.

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 10:57 am

When Alec saw Bax come striding up to him with the Queen, he shot to his feet, then swayed. The Knave of Hearts was whole and hale despite looking as if he'd taken a dip in a pool of blood. His forearm was bent and lifted, the Queen's delicate hand placed on his bloody sleeve, and she was smiling at him as if they were walking into a ballroom.

“What the fuck?” Alec whispered.

“She has dark magic, remember?” Torwen whispered back just before he rushed forward to the Queen. “Your Majesty! Your power knows no bounds! I'm in awe. Utter awe!” Torwen dropped to his knees and lifted his arms to her. “You are glorious!”

The Queen giggled. “Enough of that, my little cat. Get up. You can show your admiration later. In private.”

Torwen grinned broadly and jumped to his feet to take the Queen's hand and kiss it. “I intend to, Your Majesty.” Then he bowed to Bax. “Thank you, Sir Baxenvir. Truly, you have my most humble and deepest gratitude. You saved my life. I mean, with my cousin's help, but still. You didn't have to do that.”

Bax nodded at Torwen, but his stare was on Alec.

“Bax,” Alec whispered.

“I told you I'd be fine,” Bax said.

“Holy fuck.” Alec toppled.

“Mal!” Bax rushed forward to catch him before he fell. Then he eased Alec down to the grass. “Are you hurt? Your Majesty!”

“Easy, my champion.” The Queen joined them, her skirts brushing Alec's cheek. “Your lover is fine. None of his wounds are grievous. He's just in shock. And I believe he's relieved. For you. Isn't that right, Malecvar?”

Alec was staring at Bax. Couldn't stop. He lifted his hand to Bax's face. “Yes, Your Majesty.”

“You see? He's fine.” She waved a pale hand.

“Bax?” Alec brushed the knight's lips. “How are you healed?”

“The Queen has great magic,” Bax said.

Alec tore his gaze away from Bax to look at the Queen. The Queen was smiling down at him, Torwen standing just to her left.

“My knave has told me that you came to his aid, Malecvar,” the Queen said. “Against four bandersnatches, no less. That was incredibly brave of you.”

“Or stupid,” Torwen added.

The Queen chuckled and sent her consort a chiding look.

“My cousin is lucky he didn't get himself killed, Your Majesty,” Torwen said. “He's never encountered a bandersnatch.”

“Lucky? He was magnificent.” Bax shot a look at Torwen, who grimaced and looked away. Then he helped Alec to his feet. “Mal, you moved like the wind. It was beautiful and effective. Who taught you that?”

“My father,” Alec lied, adding it to the list of lies he'd already told Bax. “He developed the technique as a means of self-defense. He never wanted me to use it to hurt anyone. Only defend. It's a last resort.”

“From what I've heard, it should be a first resort. I must thank you for assisting my champion.” The Queen laid her hand on Alec's shoulder. “And for not hurting any of my little pups. Not fatally at least. I do adore them. And Bax says you could have easily killed them.”

“Your pups, Your Majesty?” Alec blinked from her to Bax and back.

“My little baby bandersnatchies,” she cooed and waved her hand back toward the kennels. “Come. Attend me while I see them settled. It will do you good to see that they aren't always so frisky.”

“Frisky,” Alec whispered as Bax took his arm and escorted him after the Queen.

“Cheshire, stay!” The Queen pointed at Torwen.

“Oh, I will never go within fifty feet of your little puppies again, Your Majesty,” Torwen vowed. “I've learned my lesson.”

The Queen grunted and sashayed on, past the line of card soldiers guarding the area. Alec's steps faltered when he saw the monsters sitting in the little courtyard before the kennel. The kennel wall was nothing more than hanging debris. Beyond it, Alec saw the pens. He prepared himself for another attack, but the bandersnatches only yipped happily when they saw their mistress and bounded over to her.

“My babies!” The Queen bent to stroke them, although she didn't have to bend far—the beasts came to chest-high on her.

Pink tongues escaped ferocious jaws to lick at the Queen's hands and cheeks. She giggled and hugged them, giving attention to each one. Then she looked over at Alec and Bax. “You see? They're sweet when you don't tease them with pussycats. Come, I'll introduce you.”

Alec looked at Bax.

“It will be fine,” Bax whispered. “I'm here. Just keep calm as you did when you fought them. Don't let them see your fear.”

Alec let out a breath and nodded.

They went to the Queen and her puppies together.

The bandersnatches went still and focused on the two of them.

“Sit!” The Queen straightened and pointed at the dogs.

They sat, wagging their long tails.

She went down the line of them. “This is Raelis, Vanar, Freck, and Jossen. Boys, this is Malecvar.” She drew Alec closer. “Friend. Do not hurt Malecvar.” She took Alec's hand and put it before each wet nose. “Friend.”

The Queen's little baby bandersnatchies sniffed Alec, then panted happily, sharp teeth displayed by their lifted lips. Alec gaped at them.

“And never attack Baxenvir again!” She wagged her finger at them. “You know

better. If he comes between you and anything, you sit!”

The bandersnatches whimpered.

“I know. I know. You smelled a cat. But you must learn to control yourselves.” She stroked their faces. “My sweet boys. Bax and Mal had to hurt you, and Mommy doesn't like you getting hurt.”

They yipped and panted harder.

Alec stepped back when he had the chance. He may be confident in his ability to defend himself, but he didn't want to test the beasts again. Bax winked at him and went forward, taking Alec's place. With a grateful look at his lover, Alec retreated further. He watched the Queen and her champion pet the monsters, his heart finally settling down, then looked over at the wall the beasts had decimated. A fucking wall. And they just bashed through it. Why bother with a kennel at all? He wandered closer to see that the pens had iron gates across them, but they were only waist-high. Ridiculous. Like everything in Wonderland. No sense to them.

Then he saw it.

Up on a wall, something glinted and caught Alec's attention. He looked closer, sidling up to the hole as if inspecting the damage. At that angle, he got a clear view of one of the back stalls. The glint revealed itself to be a sword. A curved blade, wide like a scimitar but spiraled at the tip. Words ran along the edge, but Alec couldn't make them out. In the hilt, a blue gem glittered.

“Holy shit,” Alec whispered.

“Get this repaired immediately,” the Queen said.

Alec jerked away from the hole and hurried back to the Queen and the Knave of Hearts. They didn't seem to have noticed his interest in the kennels. Still, Alec's heart was back to racing. If he was right, he wouldn't have to coerce Bax into giving up the location of the Vorpall Sword. His racing heart sank as he realized what that meant.

The mission was over.

All Alec had to do was retrieve the sword, and he could leave. Would he ever see Bax again? Yes, of course he would. On the battlefield. Right before he fought a monster.

“Mal?” Bax took his hand. “Are you sure you're not injured?”

“Yes. I'm fine.” Alec forced a smile to his face. “Still a little shaky, but that's all.”

“Was that your first battle?” the Queen asked as she motioned to the puppies.

The bandersnatches went running into the kennel and jumped over the iron gates to curl up in the straw.

Alec gaped at them and then looked back at the Queen. “Uh, yes, Your Majesty. I've only trained with friendly opponents, never with . . . uh, puppies.”

The Queen smiled and cupped his cheek. “You're adorable. I'm so glad you came to court, Malecvar. I want you to stay. You shall live here now.”

“Oh. Thank you, Your Majesty.”

Bax's eyes went wide.

Alec looked from Bax to the Queen. “I should like that.”

“Good.” She clapped once. “That's decided!” She took a deep breath and stared out at her gardens. “I feel like playing a game!”

“You do, Your Majesty?” Bax asked. “What game would you care to play?”

“Croquet!” The Queen spun back to Alec. “Do you play croquet?”

Alec blinked, hesitating just a moment before saying, “Yes, Your Majesty. Though poorly.”

“Perfect!” She twirled away. “Come along, boys!”

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 10:57 am

The Knave of Hearts leaned on his croquet mallet and tried to contain his joy. He couldn't. It spread across his face every time he looked at Malecvar.

Could their relationship proceed any smoother? Mal had proven his loyalty to Bax, shown a startling skill at combat, and won the respect of the Queen. He'd also shown incredible bravery. Bax would never forget the sight of Mal above him, arms locked around Freck's neck. Mal thought he was fighting monsters, but he didn't waver. Bax supposed they had been fighting monsters. Bandersnatches get so riled by the scent of cats. They lose all control and slide into their battle-selves. He knew he had to knock the beasts out and then they'd be fine, but Mal hadn't known that. Yet, the slim, fragile-looking man had remained calm as he tossed the beasts through the air as if they weighed nothing. The power to kill lived in him, but he held back. He hurt only as much as he had to.

And then he cried. Mal had cried for Bax.

The Knave of Hearts shivered as his heart flew out of his chest. To Malecvar of the Crimson Coast. No longer of the Crimson Coast. The Queen herself had ordered him to stay, and Mal had bent to her will. As all must.

Bax grinned. Perfect. Everything was so perfect. The Queen was even playing croquet again! That was the effect Mal had on people. Just being around him summoned joy. Bax sighed as he watched the Queen strike her ball and the flamingos go running to arch over its path. The courtiers who had gathered to watch cheered, and Mal cheered loudest.

Oh, yes. He knew the procedure. Mal sent every ball he hit off course, but just a few

inches, so it wouldn't be obvious that he was letting the Queen win. So smart, his Mal. The Queen must win, but she must also believe that she won fairly. If not, heads would roll.

But so far, the Queen remained pleased. She even clapped her hands like a girl and kissed Mal's cheek. It was as if the King was alive again, so light was the ambiance. Light enough to float upon.

“Bax!” the Queen called. “It's your turn.”

“Yes, my Queen!” Bax hurried forward. “Uh, yes. This one is mine, correct?”

The Queen giggled. “Stop teasing. You know you're the blue.”

“Are you sure I'm not red?”

Red, of course, was the Queen's ball. She laughed gaily. “No cheating, Knave!”

He bowed deeply. “Then I'll have no chance of winning, I'm afraid.”

“Oh, just hit the ball.” Cheshire inspected his nails, then grimaced at Bax.

But Bax saw a softening in the cat too. Cheshire owed him now. Oh, it was a frabjous day indeed. It simply couldn't get any better. The Knave hit his ball, “accidentally” sending it into the bushes, and pretended to throw a fit that concluded with him tossing his mallet into the rosebushes and had the Queen shrieking with laughter. When he caught Mal watching, he winked at him.

Then he froze. Mal was wearing the strangest expression on his face. Bax couldn't dissect it, but it darkened his joy. Trying to appear casual, Bax sauntered over to his lover and knocked shoulders with him.

“Are you tired?” Bax asked.

Mal sighed. “A little. But I'll be all right. I don't want to ruin the Queen's fun. She looks so happy.”

So that was it. Bax breathed out in relief. “She'll get bored soon. Then we can go back to my room and rest.”

“I don't think I'll rest much in your room.”

Bax leaned down and nuzzled Mal's cheek. “I'll make sure you do. Then I'll wake you and exhaust you all over again.”

As Bax pulled back, Mal turned toward him and brushed a kiss across Bax's lips. “I need to be alone with you. Soon. I need to touch you so my body can understand that you're all right.”

The Knave of Hearts went still, staring at his lover. He could hardly believe how far they'd gone in so short a time. Was it truly only four days? His heart was at Mal's feet. He had to tell him. Mal deserved the chance to pick it up.

Or step on it.

Bax opened his mouth to confess his love, but the words lodged in his throat, packed down by fear. Not yet. It was too soon. Not yet. Their joy was fragile. One misstep could shatter it. Bax needed to walk softly for a while.

So, instead of confessing, he said, “I need that too.”

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 10:57 am

Alec stared down at Bax's hand. The hand he held as they walked through the corridors of the Hearts Fortress. On their way to bed. This would be goodbye. Alec knew he had to leave as soon as possible. If he didn't, he'd never go. Wonderland would fall to the Queen of Hearts and her dark magic would spread evil through the lovely, beautiful, mad place.

But her dark magic had also saved Baxenvir's life. How bad could it be?

Aha! There it was. Alec was already trying to reason away the mission. He couldn't do that. He couldn't . . .

Alec's thoughts trailed off as he looked up at Bax. How was the man so fucking beautiful? And why did it make such a difference? It shouldn't. There were a lot of beautiful people in both worlds. But Alec had fallen in love with this one. There. He admitted it. He loved the Knave of Hearts. And he had to betray that love.

He had to betray Baxenvir.

He didn't have the time to save them both as he wanted to. Not now that he knew the sword's location. He had to tell Torwen, and once Torwen knew, he'd insist on them stealing the sword and leaving. No time. There was just no time to break the hold the Queen had on Bax.

What would Alec's betrayal do to the Knave of Hearts? Would it destroy him? Maybe Alec was being too arrogant. Maybe he didn't matter that much to Bax. No, that was a foolish non-hope. They had shared so much in such a short time. Alec knew Bax, really knew him, and so he knew Bax was as deep into this relationship as Alec was.

If Alec left, it would crush him.

Alec didn't want to see Bax hurt. But he also knew that Baxenvir was on the wrong side of the war. He knew people had suffered under the Queen of Heart's reign. Now, she threatened to spread that suffering to two more kingdoms. Thousands of lives were at stake. Maybe more than that. This was about more than one human heart. Or even two hearts beating as one.

Were they that close? Did Bax love Alec in return? Alec couldn't be sure. Maybe it was better to be that way.

“Mal,” Bax growled as soon as the door shut. He pulled Alec into his arms and kissed him.

That kiss blanked out Alec's thoughts. He forgot about the war, the sword, and even the poor captive prince. All that mattered was Bax. Sir Baxenvir of Hearts. The Queen's Champion. The Knave of Alec's heart.

Bloody, torn clothes fell away under their eager hands. And yes, Bax had played croquet in those stained garments. The Queen hadn't cared, and neither had he. Bax only cared about the Queen's pleasure. His comfort always came second.

The thought gave Alec pause. Was that still true? Bax certainly seemed to be interested in Alec's pleasure at the moment. But how long would that last? They were doomed. Perhaps in any future. No matter what they chose, Bax and Alec weren't meant to be. Simple.

So Alec took what he could get. He took as much as he could, grasping Bax with both hands, his strong thighs, and his heart. He led him to bed and fell upon the mattress with him.

“Never put yourself in danger like that again.” Bax cupped Alec's cheek, then leaned down to kiss him. “You were magnificent, and I can't believe you did that for me, but please, never do it again. You're well-trained, but not as a soldier.”

“All right.” Alec pulled Bax down beside him so that they faced each other and then stroked the knight's sculpted chest. “If you never endanger yourself again.”

Bax grimaced.

Alec chuckled. “You can't ask me to keep myself safe if you will not give me the same courtesy. Do you think it was pleasant for me to see you torn apart by those beasts?”

“No, of course, I don't think that. But now you know that I can defend myself, and the Queen will always patch me up. If something threatens us again, allow me to handle it.” He nuzzled their foreheads together. “I will protect you, my love.”

Alec went still.

Bax made a growling sound of irritation. “That just came out. It was an endearment, not a declaration. I—”

“I love you too,” Alec blurted.

Bax went still. “You do?”

“I do.”

“You don't think it's too soon?”

“I think it's not soon enough. I think time goes by faster than we think, especially

when we're happy. Even here, where people can live forever, we might not have as much of it as we hope.”

“What does that mean?”

“It means we shouldn't waste any time, Bax.” Alec stroked the Knave's cheek. “I don't want to play games with you. I want to be honest. I want to grab onto what we have and absorb every ounce of joy I can with you.”

Honest. The word twisted Alec's heart. But it wasn't a lie. He did want to be honest with Bax. He just couldn't. Not with words. But maybe he could be honest with his body and heart.

“I want that too.” Bax covered Alec's mouth with his, his hot tongue slicing past Alec's lips.

Alec groaned and arched into Bax, aligning their bodies. Cocks slid together, chests rubbing nipple-to-nipple. Shivers of ecstasy ran down Alec's spine.

Bax drew back and fetched a bottle from the bedside table. He called it runi oil. It arrived with their breakfast the morning after they first made love. Bax loved the stuff, and he'd made Alec a convert. The oil was slick and thin, giving a better glide than any lubricant back in the human world. And it was sweet too. So, if Alec wanted to coat Bax's cock in it, then suck on him a bit, he could.

Grinning, Alec watched Bax pour some of the golden oil into his palm, and then coat his shaft with it. “Rub yourself some more for me.” Alec pushed up onto his forearms to watch the Knave stroke himself. “Fuck, that's hot.”

Bax licked his lips as his stare roamed Alec's body. “I want you to put your ass in the air for me and spread those plump cheeks. Show me where you want me.”

Alec groaned, the knight's words sending a sexy thrill through him. "How can I refuse?" He turned onto his stomach, then got his knees under him, lifting his ass while keeping his chest pressed to the bed. Head turned to the side and angled to look back at Bax, Alec reached up and behind to spread himself. He grinned when he saw Bax's reaction.

The Knave of Hearts shuddered, his hand clenching on his cock, then leaned forward to nuzzle his face between Alec's cheeks. A hot tongue flicked over his entrance and then another soft nuzzle came.

"Oh, fuck," Alec murmured, his hair sliding over his face. "Please, Bax."

"You're always so impatient," Bax's voice was muffled by Alec's ass. He drew back and gripped the base of his shaft to slide it over Alec's hole. "Is this what you need, my love?" Bax pushed the tip in gently.

"Yes!" Alec cried. "More! Give me all of it!"

"You shall have it all." Bax slid out, then in again, deeper.

Out, then in. Out, then in. He worked Alec open even though the oil made it unnecessary. With it slicking his cock, Bax could have given Alec exactly what he wanted with a single thrust. Instead, he kept teasing Alec. In and out. Until Alec let go of his cheeks, set his hands on the mattress, and rose to shove back on Bax's cock.

Bax started to laugh, but it quickly changed into a groan. His hands went to Alec's waist, holding him loosely—letting Alec do the work. "Take what you need then, Mal. Take it all."

Alec looked over his shoulder, tossing his long hair out of the way to see Bax's eyes close in bliss, his big body arching forward in offering. Moaning, Alec pushed back,

impaling himself faster. Bax filled him perfectly. Not too wide. Not too long. That slick flesh prodded Alec in all the right places, summoning rapture that twisted through his body and brainwashed him into believing that this was his destiny. He had to stay a little longer. It was too soon to leave. Yes, maybe if he stayed, he could save them both as he planned. He just needed a little more time.

The Vorpall Sword was secure. It would be waiting for Alec when he was ready. He didn't have to tell Torwen he had found it. And maybe he could use this time to not only break the hold the Queen had on Bax but to also figure out a way to free the White Prince. The more Alec thought about it, the more he realized that either theft would end Torwen's spying—the sword or the royal captive. So, they really should take both at the same time.

Yes, that's why Alec would stay. That's why he wouldn't tell Torwen about the sword. Not yet. For the White Prince. For the White Queen, who was doubtless worried about him. For Wonderland. Yes, for all of Wonderland, Alec had to stay. And for Bax. To save him along with everyone else.

Alec cried out in relief and release, spilling his cum across the Knave of Heart's bed as if marking his territory. This man belonged to Alec. He'd break the Queen's hold on Bax and then they'd leave the Hearts Kingdom together.

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 10:57 am

Alec leaned back on the iron bench and stared up at the Jubbys, going through their military maneuvers. He was waiting for Bax. That was his excuse to watch them so closely. But he was also committing to mind the way they dove and spun. Quin would want to know. It might help the Ravens. And Alec desperately needed to focus on his mission.

“Fuck,” Alec muttered when Bax—easily recognizable by the horned captain helmet he wore—spun in the air, his wings glittering and his armor shining in the sunlight. “Why is he so damn good at everything?”

“Who is good at everything?”

Alec jerked upright and looked toward the sound of the voice.

A man stood on his left, wearing a somber brown suit that matched his expression. The long face was familiar, as was the voice, but Alec couldn't place him. That suit also set him apart. Most people at court wore medieval-inspired clothing that Alec had dubbed castlecore. But this guy was wearing a Victorian suit, complete with a cravat. He looked more like Val than a Hearts courtier.

“The Knave of Hearts.” Alec waved up at the Jubbys. “He's good at everything.”

“Ah.” The man looked up. “Yes, Baxenvir has always been a quick learner. An apt pupil.”

“Your pupil?”

“What about my pupils?” The man touched his temple. “Are they too large?”

“No, you said that the Knave was an apt pupil.”

“Ah, yes. I taught him when he trained here as a boy.” The man bowed. “I am Munde, the Tortoise.”

“You're a tortoise?”

“No, don't be ridiculous!” The man sat on the bench beside Alec. “I'm a sea turtle.”

“Then why did you introduce yourself as the Tortoise?”

“That's what my students call me.”

“I don't understand.”

“Well, they say they call me the Tortoise because, and I quote, 'You taught us.'”

“Taught us,” Alec murmured, feeling a sense of déjà vu. “Did you teach other turtles? Perhaps un-turtles?”

“You mean mock turtles?” Munde lifted a thick brow. “Yes. I assume you've met more of my students. I mean, the turtle pupils, not them.” He waved at the Jubjubs. “We are both from the coast. It's why I sought you out. It's nice to speak with a fellow coasty. Although, I'm more of the Crimson Sea than the shore.”

“Do you know a gryphon?” Alec scowled as memories surfaced in his mind. There was a song. What was it? Something about clams? No—oysters.

“Oh, yes. Yes. I know a few gryphons. I do miss the coast. They like to nest near

water, you know?” He looked up again. “How about you?”

“Not so much,” Alec murmured as he went back to watching Bax.

“Not so much what? You don't like to nest near water, you don't know any gryphons, or you don't miss the coast?”

Alec blinked. “Uh, I don't miss the coast.”

Munde chuckled. “I understand. Young love. Ah, to be a spry turtle again! Lounging in the sun and eating oysters. I miss the seafood most.”

“Yeah, I do like seafood.” There it went again, that oyster song, spinning through his head as the Jubjubs spun through the air. How did it go? It was catchy.

“Well, of course you do! No child of the coast prefers red meat.” Munde cleared his throat. “Not that there's anything wrong with anything red.” His stare shot side-to-side.

Alec met his stare. “It's only us here, my friend. Don't worry.”

Munde sighed. “Life has gotten tricky these days.”

“Yes. Since the King . . .”

“Yes, since then.” He leaned closer. “So, you are Cheshire's cousin?”

“That's right.”

Munde nodded. “I haven't been able to find that cat lately. I believe the Queen has collared him. He's deep in her bowl of cream, if you understand my meaning.”

Alec chuckled. "I certainly do."

"Could you pass a message on for me?"

"Of course."

"Tell Cheshire that he can find the piece he's looking for in the wine cellars."

Alec blinked. "All right."

"Repeat it back to me, if you please."

"He can find the piece he's after in the wine cellars."

"No, no! The piece he's looking for."

"Oh. Sorry. Yes. He can find the piece he's looking for in the wine cellars."

"Very good." Munde patted Alec's cheek. "Well done, lad. Now, I will be off. I have students to teach." He groaned to his feet and tottered away.

That was when Alec saw the turtle shell poking through the back of his jacket.

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Blood pumped violently through the Knave's veins, sped along by the tactical maneuvers he practiced with his Jubbys. Training always brought a flush to his face, but knowing Mal was in the garden, watching him, made that flush travel downward. When they finally finished flying through the many formations they used in war, and Bax landed before Mal, he desired a different kind of physical activity.

“I like you watching me.” Bax pulled Mal into his arms, fascinated by the way the sunlight turned Mal's eyes into jewels against the velvet backdrop of his golden-brown skin and raven hair. Everything about him was precious and rare.

Mal didn't seem to mind the press of hot armor or the buzz of the wings settling into their cases. He only lifted his face for a kiss. Bax decided he could get used to this. He could get used to Malecvar in every way. Especially the way his lips molded to Bax's. The way Mal's tongue bent to his will. The way his body arched into him, even when he wore this unrelenting armor.

“I need to get out of this armor,” Bax said breathlessly.

Mal searched his eyes and concluded, “You want to fuck me in the garden.”

The Knave of Hearts grinned wickedly. “I do. Will you let me?”

“If you can catch me!” With that, Mal pushed Bax away and ran.

Laughing, his heart light even though his armor weighed him down, Bax ran after his prey. He yanked pieces of metal plate from his body as he went, casting them into the grass without a care. He'd get them later. Or not. Maybe he'd just live in the gardens

with Mal forever. They could stay naked all the time. That would make his armor unnecessary.

A teasing breeze cooled the flushed skin Bax revealed even as it brought Mal's scent to him and spurred him on. He breathed in deeply, cast off his breastplate, and put on speed. Up ahead, Mal rounded a corner, entering the garden's maze. Bax grinned at his lover's wisdom. With its high hedges, secret nooks, and sudden ends, the maze was the perfect place for a tryst.

As a warning to anyone who might think to enter the maze after him, Bax left his gauntlets in the middle of the entrance. Then he strode forward more slowly, savoring the chase, secure in the knowledge that his quarry was cornered. Well, maybe not cornered exactly, but there was no escape for Mal. Not with his scent leading Baxenvir through the twists and turns. And the only way out was behind him.

Bax paused at the corner of a hedge cut with the shape of hearts and scented the air. Blinking, he wondered when he'd gained the ability to track someone by scent. Was it just Mal whose smell he knew so intimately? That must be it. And the thought brought another grin to his face. They were getting so close. Bax knew Mal's scent, the sound of his heart, and the way he slept. He knew what drink Mal preferred in the crisp morning, what meals he liked best in the afternoon, and what dessert he enjoyed after dinner—both in and out of public. The Knave even knew what temperature his lover preferred his bath water. And it all felt so natural.

After kicking off his boots, Bax continued on barefoot, digging his toes into the cool grass. His shirt went next, then his belt. His breeches. Last to go were his undershorts. And then the Knave of Hearts prowled the maze naked like a beast. Breathing deeply, Bax slid his hand over his chest, down to cup his heavy sacs, then up along his swollen shaft. Another deep breath filled him with Mal's fresh, masculine scent, and he sighed it out.

Trailing a hand over the crisp line of hedges, the Knave crept forward, his footsteps silent. But Mal hadn't bothered to remove his boots, so Bax could hear him up ahead. Then he found Mal's shirt. He picked it up and held it to his nose. Delicious. Bax let his head fall back and eyes close as he rubbed Mal's shirt over his chest, merging their scents. He brought it down to stroke his cock with it.

Another few feet ahead brought a belt, and then a pair of leather shoes. At last, Bax found Mal's pants. He had enough of hunting by then and cast aside the shirt with a growl. He ran his lover to ground seconds later, literally taking him down to the grass, then pinning him there while he plundered Mal's mouth.

Mal still had his shorts on so Bax ground himself against the fabric. Then he pushed back and rose onto his knees. "I've caught you," Bax said. "What's my reward?"

Licking his lips, Mal got to his knees as well, but only to bend over and kiss the tip of Bax's cock. The whole of it jerked, as shocked by the pleasure as the rest of him was. And then Mal's hot mouth was on him, moving up and down his length. Mal made delighted moans as he sucked and twirled his tongue, one hand going to Bax's balls to massage them.

Bax looked down at the sleek, black hair that fell around Mal's face and parted it, pushing some back so he could watch his lover pleasure him. Mal angled his stare up, his eyes catching the light to gleam green beneath the heavy slashes of his brows. The look was so sexy, so fucking beautiful, that Bax couldn't breathe for a few seconds. His hand clenched on Mal's scalp, and he pumped into his mouth, the movement impossible to stop.

But Mal jerked away with a teasing grin. "I don't want you to come in my mouth."

A shudder ran through Bax as he looked from his lover to his dripping shaft. "Then what do you want?"

“You know what I want, Bax. You always know.” Mal laid on his back, grabbed his knees, and pulled his legs out until his ass lifted from the grass. It put everything on display—his jutting shaft, clenching balls, and the puckered place beneath.

With a groan, Bax got into position between Mal's legs and guided himself to his lover's opening. A few thrusts of his wet cock were all it took to open Mal, and then they were groaning through the start of their mating.

“You're glorious.” Bax slid his hands up Mal's warm, inner thighs, and then hooked Mal's knees over his arms. Leaning forward, he took the weight of Mal's legs, lifting him even higher, then drove himself deeper. A groan left Bax as Mal's channel milked him. “Look at you. I love seeing you in the sunshine.”

Mal slid his legs onto Bax's shoulders, nearly bending in two. It freed Bax's hands, and he lifted one from the ground, propping himself on the other so he could sink his fingers in Mal's silken hair. Bax stretched them, then clenched. Then he pulled.

Mal cried out as his head twisted, the expression on his lifted face one of utter bliss.

“You like that, huh?” Bax pulled harder and plunged his cock deeper. “You like your hair pulled?”

“Yeah, I do.” Mal met Bax's stare as if daring him to do more.

Bax pulled again. “What else do you like?”

“That's for you to figure out, Knave. I'm not going to make it easy for you.”

Laughing brightly, pleasure and sunshine infusing him, the Knave of Hearts lifted his face to the light. When he opened his eyes again, he found his lover watching him, his expression full of something Bax didn't dare to name.

“Mal,” Bax murmured. “You know you're the only one, right?”

“Yeah, babe. I know.”

“Mal!” Bax growled.

Mal laughed as brightly as Bax had.

“Malecvar!” Bax shoved his cock even deeper.

“What is it you want me to say, Bax baby?” Mal's eyes twinkled and his bottom lip pouted.

“You know what I want. Just as I know what you want.”

Suddenly, Mal's expression went serious. “Then you also know that you're the only one for me. I love you, Baxenvir.”

The words sent such a rush of pleasure through the Knave of Hearts that he locked up against Mal, his hand releasing Mal's hair to slam onto the ground, and came. He came hard, his cry an echoing roar that startled birds into flight. And when the Queen's Champion looked down at his lover, it was to find him shuddering through his own release, Mal's channel clenched around Bax's spent cock and hot seed burst up like a fountain between them.

Bax kept himself inside Mal until Mal's orgasm ran its course, then slipped free, gently lowered Mal's legs, and crumpled to the grass. Mal sighed and rolled over to snuggle in against Bax. Naked, satisfied, and blissfully happy, the men lay entwined together and stared up at the clear, blue, Wonderland sky.

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Alec's heart rate slowed as he lay within the Knave of Heart's arms. It had been beating rapidly up until then, pounding with something similar to fear but far more delicious. It was the hunt. Being chased. It felt real enough to stimulate the primal part of his brain and make him run faster. But Alec also wanted to be caught. So, he had left his lover breadcrumbs of clothing.

He just hadn't expected Bax to find those crumbs so quickly. It was as if he hadn't needed them at all.

“How did you catch me so fast?” Alec asked.

Bax cracked open an eye and peered at him. “What do you mean?”

“I could have taken several other turns, but you never went the wrong way. You were right on my heels the whole time. How?”

Bax grinned.

“Baxenvir!” Mal smacked his lover's belly.

“I just know where you are, Mal.” He leaned over and kissed Alec's cheek.

Mal. How he hated that name. Mal, as in the Latin for bad or evil. How perfect. Yes, it was a proper name for Alec. He felt as if he were both things. Bad and evil. Especially when Bax smiled at him like that. And now this? What was this crap about him knowing where Alec was?

“How?” Alec persisted.

Bax rolled to loom over Alec, his pink bangs falling into his face. “Can't you just accept that we're linked?”

Alec gaped at him. Linked? Did that mean the Knave of Hearts could track him into the Chess Kingdoms? No, no fucking way. This was just romantic talk.

“Look at you!” Bax chortled. “Are you scared?” Then he lost his grin. “Holy shit, you are scared. You're scared of me.” He sat up.

“No, I'm not!” Alec hurried to sit up too. He pushed at Bax's shoulder. “How could I be afraid of you? You snore.”

“I do not!”

“Uh-huh.” Alec pressed his lips together to keep from laughing.

“I don't.”

“Why can't you just accept it?” Alec lifted a brow at him.

“You're a fluffy borogove!”

“ You're a fluffy borogove that snores !” Alec shot back, not knowing what the fuck a borogove was, but pretty sure he didn't want to be one.

Bax burst out laughing, then launched himself at Alec, taking him down to the grass again.

“Ugh! No! Up!” Alec cried.

“What is it?” Bax lurched back.

“I just laid on some cum!” Alec made yucky sounds as he shifted against the hedge to scratch the cum off his back.

All while Bax roared with laughter.

“Yeah, laugh it up, Mr, Chuckles,” Alec said.

“Come here.” Bax pushed at Alec's shoulder. “Let me help.”

“How? Are you gonna wipe it off with your hand?”

“Why not?”

“Ugh gross!”

“It's your cum. Why is it gross?” Then Bax frowned. “What's gross?”

“My cum.”

“No. I mean, what is that word? I assume it means disgusting, but I've never heard it before.”

“Oh. Coasty lingo.” Alec said and looked away.

“Ah.” He swiped at Alec's back, then wiped his hand on the grass. “Better?”

“Yeah, I guess. Thanks.”

“You're welcome.” Bax leaned back on a hand and peered at Alec. “I saw you with

the Tortoise earlier.”

“Yeah, he's from the coast too.”

“I know. He was my old teacher.”

“He mentioned that. He also said you were an apt pupil.”

“Oh? And what else did the Tortoise tell you?”

Alec smirked. “That he missed the seafood.”

“Do you?”

“I could go for some fresh fish, but I have other things to satisfy my appetite.”

“Do you now?”

“I love your smile,” Alec said, his stare locked on Bax's face. “And your eyes. And your everything.”

“I love pretty much everything about you too.”

“Thanks.” Then Alec blinked. “Hold on. What do you mean, 'pretty much?'”

“I mean pretty much. As in nearly.”

“That means there are things you don't like about me!”

“Yup.”

“What?!” Alec shot to his feet and set his fists on his hips. “What don't you like? I'm totally and completely likable!”

Bax lifted a brow at the long, languid piece of flesh directly in his line of sight, then stood up as well. “I don't like that you haven't moved into my room yet.”

“What?” Alec dropped his hands.

“You heard me.” Bax claimed one of those discarded hands and used it to pull Alec closer. “And I don't like the thought that you might leave someday.”

“Oh.”

“Yes, oh.”

Alec licked his lips. “Was that your way of asking me to move into your suite?”

“It was. Yes.”

Alec looked up at Bax and shook his head. “That was real smooth, baby.”

“Thank you. I assume that's a good thing?”

“Yes. It means that you're charming.”

“Ah. One of these days, I will get used to your coastal vernacular.”

“Why bother? Don't you like me keeping you guessing?”

“No, Mal. That is yet another thing I distinctly don't like about you.”

Alec burst out laughing.

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The next day, Torwen grabbed Alec in the corridor and yanked him into his bedroom. It was the middle of the day and Bax was off training, flying above the keep. Alec had thought to grab a shower and a power nap before he got done.

“You get anything yet?” Torwen asked as he shut the door.

“No,” Alec said. “Oh, wait! I almost forgot. Shit! I spoke to the Tortoise yesterday, and he wanted me to give you a message.”

“And you waited until now to deliver it?”

“I was a little busy.”

Torwen snorted. “Yeah. Fine. I get it. I was busy too. What did Munde say?”

“Okay, hold on. He wanted me to repeat it word for word. He said, 'Tell Cheshire that he will find the piece he's looking for in the wine cellars.'”

“The wine cellars,” Torwen murmured. “Of course!”

“What piece is he talking about? Is he a spy too?”

“He's an ally. And the piece he's talking about is the White Prince.”

“A chess piece,” Alec said in revelation.

“Yes, precisely. The Queen of Hearts stowed her royal captive somewhere secret in

case of a rescue attempt. I haven't been able to find him, and Prince Albion has never had the opportunity to whisper it to me at dinner.”

“So, he's in the wine cellars.”

“It seems so. I'll go look.” Torwen vanished.

“Tor!”

He reappeared.

“Um, what should I be doing? You know, other than the Knave?”

Torwen snorted. “Just keep an eye out and your ears open, kid. You never know what someone might let slip. Especially the someone you're fucking. And by the way, well done with that. You're a natural spy.”

Torwen vanished again.

“Thanks,” Alec muttered.

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A knock came at Bax's door while Alec was getting dressed. Alec pulled on his tunic and opened the door to find Torwen there.

The cat-shifter lifted his brows. "I knocked on your door and no one answered, so I tried this one." He snorted. "Are you sleeping here every night?"

"Baxenvir asked me to move in yesterday," Alec admitted.

"You're living together?"

"Do you want to come in, cousin ?" Alec smiled at a maid as she passed by.

Torwen cleared his throat. "Thank you. Yes."

Torwen stepped into the living room, and Alec closed the door. They both listened for the maid's footsteps to fade, then went to sit down.

"Did you find . . . the piece?" Alec asked.

"Yes, I did." Torwen grinned big and with all his teeth. "He's down there. Only one guard and he's posted at the top of the cellar steps. The cell itself is hidden behind a false wall."

"How did you find it?"

"Cat senses." Torwen tapped his nose.

“Cat senses.” Alec frowned, something tugging at his memory. “You mean you have a cat's sense of smell in this body?”

“Yes, of course. All shapeshifters have enhanced senses. And with my nose, it wasn't difficult to find a living scent amid all that glass and wood.”

“Where exactly is he? Just in case I need to free him and you can't.”

Torwen stared at Alec a moment, then said, “Two shelves down, fourteen bottles in. There's a lever hidden behind the bottle. Pull it, and the shelf swings out.”

“Okay. I'm glad you found him. Poor guy. Does he at least have a window?”

“No. He's got a lamp and books, but no window. No fresh air. Nonetheless, he hasn't lost hope. The bitch hasn't broken him.” Torwen made an impressed sound. “Fuck, sometimes I think she's broken me. I'm a damn house cat that curls up on her lap and purrs when she pets me.”

“No, you're not.” Alec clasped Torwen's shoulder. “No one can tame the greatest knight of the White Kingdom.”

Torwen chuckled. “Well, at least you know how to stroke some fur.” He smacked Alec's knee. “Thanks for that. But I have to say that being with her every night is slowly killing me.”

“She's being rather nice these days, isn't she?”

“Oh, yes. She's pleased with herself. You know she takes credit for getting you and Baxenvir together.”

“She does? Why?”

“Because of the clothes she sent you that first night. She thinks they played a huge part in the Knave's seduction.”

Alec snorted. “Well, if it keeps her happy.”

“That's the thing. This joy of hers is worse than her fury in some ways. Her rages were predictable. But this.” Torwen shook his head. “I don't know what to expect anymore. I'm constantly on edge, waiting for the peace to end.”

“The calm before the storm. That's what we call it.”

“That has a nice ring to it.”

“What does?” a new voice asked.

Torwen and Alec flinched in unison as Bax came into the room.

He looked at them, then asked, “Is this a private conversation?”

“Oh, we were just talking about you.” Torwen waved a hand as he leaned back and crossed one leg over the other. “My cousin tells me he's moved in here.”

“That's right. Just yesterday.” Bax looked at Alec to add, “I need to put my armor away and shower.”

“Sure. I'll join you in a minute.”

“Well, that put a grin on your face, Sir Baxenvir,” Torwen drawled. “I suppose that's my cue to leave.” He stood up and nodded at Alec. “I'll talk to you later, cousin. Congratulations on the, uh, new living arrangements.”

“Thanks,” Alec said. “I’ll see you at dinner.”

Torwen left, and Alec got up to lock the door behind him.

“Locking the door.” Bax pulled off his gauntlets and grinned. “Must be serious.”

“Oh, it is.” Alec set his stare on Bax. “I seriously need to fuck you while you’re still sweaty from training.”

“You like me covered in sweat?”

“You smell incredible.” Alec leaned in and breathed deeply. “I swear, it’s as if you sweat sugar. I just want to lick you up.”

Bax chuckled as he headed to his dressing room, but Alec saw him bend his head to subtly smell himself. Alec smothered his laugh with a hand and hurried to the bed, casting off clothing as he went. He had never lived with a man before. He liked it. He liked knowing that his clothes hung beside Bax’s. And he liked not having to worry about overstaying his welcome. He had really enjoyed answering Bax’s door as if it were his home.

Home. Alec paused, his hand on the waistband of his pants. This wasn’t his home. Not even if he stayed in Wonderland. Which he wouldn’t. He couldn’t. Could he? He’d have to at least return to tell his parents. And what would he say to them? That he was moving to a world that was only accessible through a gravity-defying hole?

“Oh, my God,” Alec whispered. “What if I can’t get back?”

“What was that?” Bax asked as he emerged from the dressing room.

“Huh?” Alec turned to find his lover naked and sweaty, just as he’d been in the maze

the day before. “Oh, yeah. There's my sweaty sugarplum.”

“What the fuck is a sugarplum?”

“It's a treat.” Alec grinned. “Just like you. Now come here and satisfy my sweet tooth, lover.”

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Bax breathed in and scowled. What was it that Mal had called it? Breathing blindly? No. Nose blindness. He didn't smell the roses because he'd gotten used to them. Except that now he did.

Staring at the crimson, perfumed blooms, Bax couldn't understand what had changed. Why had he suddenly become aware of the odor? And yes, it had become an odor. Something sickening. Mal was right; the scent was enough to make a man dizzy. Yet, instead of heading inside to the safety of a rose-free bedroom, Bax leaned onto the stone railing of his balcony and stared off toward the White Castle.

The Queen of Hearts hadn't mentioned the war since Mal's arrival. How strange that those things would coincide, but there it was. His presence seemed to calm everyone. The last thing Bax wanted to do was remind his queen of her obsession with ruling Wonderland, but the White Prince still awaited her decision, down in his hidden prison. And the Queen didn't even send for him at meals anymore.

Bax didn't like it. He didn't like the war, having a captive prince, or the fact that the White Prince was there because of him. Bax had turned a prince into a pawn. It should have ended the war without bloodshed. That had been his goal. But now, his queen languished in the arms of her lover, forgetting all about the husband Bax had brought her at swordpoint. Was Bax any better? He had just left the arms of his own lover, the cousin of the Queen's consort, and it had taken great strength of will to get out of that bed.

All Bax wanted to do was return to Mal and forget about the war, just as his queen had. But he couldn't leave the Prince down among the wine to sour. The Queen forgetting about her war would be wonderful. If only she didn't have the White

Prince.

“It's treason,” Bax whispered to the roses. “And yet, she wouldn't have him without me. I brought him to her. It's only right that I release him.” He looked up at the ponderous moon and sighed. “Well? Do I release the Prince and end the war? The very reason I took him was to put a peaceful end to this. Now, I must free him to accomplish the same goal. Dare I? And what will happen if I don't? Maybe the White Queen will come to us. Maybe her love for her son will outweigh any fear she has of the darkness that lurks here.”

Bax breathed in again. Darkness. Evil. Was that what he was smelling? Was it a sweet rot? Putrefaction? Was the Hearts Kingdom dying from the inside out? The answer rang through him, setting his bones to vibrating while imparting an urge to weep. How could he serve a queen who tainted her kingdom with evil? But how could he abandon her when she needed him the most?

Then the thought of the Queen's cheer returned to him. Could this be a sign of healing? Maybe that damn cat was good for her. Maybe the healing touch ran in the family—an ability to love and be loved with a power that could overcome even the darkest of magic. Did Cheshire really have that kind of power? Or was the Queen simply ready to move on, and he was a convenient balm for her healing heart?

It didn't matter. Bax wanted to believe that the Queen of Hearts forgetting about the war was a good sign. Even the scent of roses affecting him must be good. It was proof that he was waking up along with his queen. The two of them were healing together. Seeing things more clearly.

The question was; should Bax let the wounds heal naturally or should he help them along?

He drew something out of his pocket and set it on the stone railing. It was the

strangest thing he owned and also the most precious. That little boy from the human world had given it to him, and Bax had kept it for all these, hiding it from everyone he knew. Whenever he was troubled, he'd bring it out and roll it under his fingers. It soothed him. Back and forth. Back and forth. Side to side. It moved on tiny wheels, a metal contraption the size of his thumb. That boy, Alec, had called it a toy, but it was unlike any toy Bax had owned. Not that he had owned many toys, even when he was a child.

Bax looked down at the thing. It was purple, with a long front and doors on the sides. Alec called it something else. A car. He said it was a miniature version of things that people rode inside in his world. He said the large models moved on their own, though they are not alive. Bax picked the car up and turned it over. There was strange writing on the bottom.

“Hot Wheels,” Bax read and shook his head, smiling. “Wheels that heat up. Humans are so odd.”

He set the toy down again, stared up at the moon, and went back to rolling it over the stone. Why was he thinking about that boy so much these days? Had his thoughts of Alec made him see similarities in Mal? Or was it the other way around? Had being with Mal reminded him of Alec? Maybe it was happiness that summoned memories of the little boy. With a start, Bax realized that the short time he had spent with Alec had been the happiest moments of his youth. An hour, maybe less, but in that time, he had heard wondrous stories, played with a toy from another world, laughed without hesitation, and made a friendship that sustained him into adulthood. Looking down at the toy, he recalled how Alec had pressed it into his hand.

“You keep it,” Alec said. “You're the best friend I've made here, Bax. I want you to have it. Maybe when you're older, you'll still remember me. I'll always remember you.”

“Fuck.” Bax swiped at his eyes in shock. “Tears? Ridiculous.”

But Baxenvir knew why the memory had made him so emotional. That little boy had been so open, so kind without motive, just a boy who wanted a friend. There had been no one like Alec in Bax's life. All the children in the training program were quickly hardened, any kindness wiped out. They were taught to be ambitious, not to make friends.

“I do remember you,” Bax whispered into the night. “I will always remember you, my first and best friend.”

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Alec rolled over into a spot of warmth. His hand stretched out to touch Bax and then went flat, rubbing around. Searching. He opened his eyes. Bax wasn't in bed.

Frowning into the darkness, Alec peered around the room. No Bax. He yawned, stretched, and slipped out of bed. A shiver ran down his spine with the slap of the cool air. He grabbed the velvet robe he had tossed on the bench at the foot of the bed earlier that night. Pulling it on, he kept looking around the room as if Bax might magically appear.

Then he did.

Well, Bax didn't pop into existence. Alec just noticed the open balcony door and peered around it. He saw the looming shape of his lover, dark against the moon. Smiling to himself, he padded out to the balcony. Then stopped in the doorway.

Bax was sliding something over the low wall of the railing. It was silver in the moonlight, but Alec knew it was purple. A memory rushed back as he watched Bax roll the little car back and forth.

The little boy with the pink hair laughed as he rolled Alec's new Hot Wheels over the low wall of a flower bed. Alec grinned at him. Bax. He was so pretty and kept staring at Alec as if he was the most amazing thing he'd ever seen. Alec felt the same way about Bax. He was the most wonderful boy Alec had ever met. And Alec was overjoyed to finally meet someone his age in Wonderland.

They played together while the gardeners smiled at them, still dying the white roses red. And although they had just met, Alec felt a connection form between Bax and

him. As a child, he didn't realize that this was unusual. Children make friends so much faster than adults. It felt natural for Alec to love his new friend.

Then he leaned over and kissed Bax on the cheek.

Bax didn't pull away or stare at Alec strangely. He smiled. He smiled as if the kiss was the best gift he'd ever had.

“Let's be friends forever,” Bax said.

“Okay!” Alec readily agreed. Then he gave Bax the little car. He felt as if it was important to give his new friend something. Something more than a kiss.

Coming out of the memory, Alec had to swipe at his eyes. Bax still had that toy. He'd kept it. And he was playing with it just as he had when they were little. What did it mean? Again, Alec thought it must be destiny, and he wondered why that blue-haired psychic hadn't seen this. Why hadn't he warned Alec of what awaited him at the Hearts Fortress?

Maybe it wasn't fate. Or maybe the Caterpillar didn't think this romance mattered. It wasn't as important as saving Wonderland from the Queen of Hearts. But it was important to Alec. Bax was important. He had been the first boy Alec loved. A love so pure and innocent that Alec hadn't realized what it presaged. He'd forgotten all about it. But now he knew it was the moment he formed his sexuality. Bax had awakened love in him. Romantic love. And that first love had sunk into Alec's mind, secretly sabotaging every love that followed.

Because no one could hold a candle to Bax.

Quickly composing himself, Alec took a deep breath, blinked away any remaining tears, and stepped forward as he also stepped back into his past. It felt like coming

full circle. He'd been searching for Bax ever since he left Wonderland, never knowing that he waited for Alec here. Just a tumble away.

“Hey, you.” Alec stepped out onto the balcony beside Bax. “What you got there?”

Bax flinched, then looked over at Alec, and smiled. He held the toy up. “I forgot about this. I should have shown it to you the other day when we were talking about Alec. You know, that boy from the human world.”

“Oh, yeah. What about him?” Alec tried to be as casual as possible as he reached for the toy, but his hand shook as he took it. “What is this thing?”

Bax put an arm around Alec and leaned his chin on Alec's shoulder to stare at the car with him. “It's a toy from the human world. Alec and I played with it while he was here. Then he gave it to me.” Bax nuzzled Alec's cheek. “I've just remembered what else he gave me.”

“Oh? What?” Alec turned to look at him.

“A kiss,” Bax's voice dropped to a seductive purr. “I think he liked me. But we were so young. Too young to understand such things.”

“I'm sure he did like you. How could he not?” Alec turned to face Bax and brushed their lips together. “Should I be jealous? Was he your first love?”

Bax blinked and looked to the side. “I've never thought of that, but I believe he was.” He looked back at Alec. “We barely knew each other. We didn't even have a full day together. But he awakened my heart. I think you were right, Mal. That's why you remind me of him. I have loved no one since him.” He tapped the toy. “I've held onto this like a talisman. Whenever I got lonely or sad or when I needed to clear my head . . .” He lifted his stare to the dark sky. “I held this piece of him and remembered. It

has always comforted me.”

Alec pressed his lips together to stop their trembling and blinked rapidly to keep from crying. But then he sniffed, and Bax looked back at him.

“Are you crying, Mal?”

“It's just so sweet,” Alec whispered and brushed away his tears. “I know he thinks about you too, Bax. That little boy grew up, and he's out there, looking at a different moon, wishing that it was the same one you're looking at right now.”

Bax's smile went tender. “You are such a romantic.”

Alec sniffed and held up the Hot Wheels. “You still haven't told me what this is.”

“Oh, uh, he called it a car. Alec said it's a tiny model of the immense machines that humans ride inside. Like a carriage, but it moves on its own.”

“On its own?” Alec tried to sound skeptical.

“Yes, I know it sounds mad. Maybe he was teasing me. But look at it.” Bax tapped the car. “The wheels. The tiny doors. Look, I think this panel here is a window so the humans can see where they're going.”

Alec stared at Bax instead of the car. “I think you're right. What a wondrous little toy. Human children must have all sorts of strange things to play with.”

“Indeed.” Bax looked up at Alec. “I believe they do. This was just one that he carried in his pocket. Can you imagine? They carry toys in their pockets in case they get a sudden urge to play. How incredible.” He shook his head and looked off into the distance again. But as he did, he wrapped his hand around the toy car and put it in his

pocket. “To have such freedom. Such joy that it randomly comes forth and inspires them to play wherever they are.” He looked back at Alec. “That's how you make me feel. I burst with joy when I'm with you. I get urges to play.”

He picked Alec up and spun him around until they were both laughing. Then he set Alec on his feet and kissed him. Alec poured all his love into that kiss—the love that he'd been hoarding for Bax since he was a child. He had no idea there was a hidden hoard inside his heart, waiting for this man. But there it was, opened with a kiss, and claimed with no awareness.

Alec eased back from Baxenvir's lips. “I have an urge to play too.” He bit his lower lip and took Bax's hand. “Will you play with me?”

Bax went still, staring at Alec strangely, and he suddenly knew why. One last memory came to him, as it must have come to Bax. Little Alec asking the very same thing.

But Bax recovered, blinking away the past. “Oh, yes. I want to play with you. I want to play with you all night.” And then he picked Alec up and ran back to bed with him.

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A month passed. A month of utter bliss. Baxenvir had never been so happy. He was in love! Him. The Queen's Champion. And the Queen was still in her blissful state, enthralled by her consort and utterly unaware of the executioner's ax currently gathering dust in the dungeon. War seemed less and less likely.

Fate. It had to be fate. Destiny had brought Malecvar to him. Bax could even admit that it had brought Mal's cousin to the Queen first. The two men had changed everything. Most importantly, they had changed the Queen of Hearts and her Knave. If Bax could have met his old self, he was certain that man wouldn't recognize him. He felt free. Happy. Hopeful. And it was all because of Mal.

Malecvar was the man Bax had been waiting his entire life for. The man he wanted to spend the rest of his life with.

The Knave of Hearts slipped a hand into his pocket and tapped the ring he had hidden there. He had commissioned the ring's creation from the royal jeweler with the Queen's permission. It was a simple band of gold, but a little cabochon jewel nestled within the gold, its green shade a mix of his eyes and Mal's. When he'd seen the swirling jewel, he'd known it was meant for Mal. It was a representation of them both. Of them merged. It couldn't be more perfect.

And everything was perfect these days.

Grinning, as he usually was these days, Bax escorted Mal into the Queen's pavilion. The crimson tent billowed like a breathing beast as a breeze blew through. The wind carried the scent of roses and the Queen's laughter. Clustered around heart tables, the courtiers eyed his lover. Bax lifted his chin, his grin turning into a smirk. Mal wore

yet another fine outfit given to him by their generous queen. The maroon velvet looked smashing on him, enhancing his dark hair and bright eyes. Bax had also dressed well for the Queen's tea. He had his finest green tapestry tunic on and a pair of black linen pants. He'd even worn his dress sword. But it wasn't to impress the Hearts Court, not even its queen.

Bax navigated his lover around the smaller tables, taking him to the largest heart in the tent. For once, the Queen had given up comfort for beauty, choosing a heart-shaped table to reign at during her garden tea party instead of a square. She sat in the middle of the heart's top, right in the valley of the rounded bits. This gave her places to either side to set all her little plates of sweets. Sitting beside her, at one curve, was Cheshire. The White Prince should have sat at the other. But the Queen had forgotten about her royal prisoner. All that mattered was Cheshire. And Bax could hardly fault her obsession.

"There are my beautiful boys!" the Queen declared. She waved at the other rounded table edge on her left. "Join us."

"Thank you, Your Majesty." Bax bowed along with Mal. "But if I could beg your patience for a moment, there's something I need to ask Malecvar. I'd like for you to witness this."

The Queen, whose permission had already been sought by her knave and given, grinned with smug satisfaction. "You may proceed, my champion."

Throat suddenly dry, Bax swallowed and reached for the ring. Mal frowned as he went down on one knee. Then his green eyes widened. They locked on the ring Bax lifted. Mal's lips parted. Shuddered. He trembled. Bax almost put the ring back in his pocket. Something told him this was not an appropriate reaction. But the Knave of Hearts was made of braver stuff than that and lifted his chin. The act was already upon him. He couldn't turn back now.

“Malecvar of the Crimson Coast.” Bax met Mal's stare and held it, almost defiantly. “Your love has brought me to this.” He waved at his position. “Kneeling on the ground at your feet. I cannot face the future without knowing you will be standing beside me.” He lifted the ring higher. “Will you marry me?” Then he whispered, “Go mad with me forever, my love.”

Mal's eyes overflowed, tears turning his cheeks into waterfalls. His hand shook as he reached out. Not for the ring, but for Bax. For his cheek. He cupped Bax's cheek and continued to weep.

“For fuck's sake, cousin!” Cheshire called out. “Stop tormenting the man and answer him. You two are so in love it makes my teeth ache.”

Malecvar flinched, glancing at his cousin before reclaiming Bax's gaze. He lowered his hand, then held it out, straightening his fingers. It was still trembling, but Mal's voice came strong and steady, “Yes. I will marry you. I'll let the madness take me.”

Bax let out a relieved puff of air and quickly slid the ring onto Mal's finger, ignoring the oddness of the tail end of Mal's reply. With a whoop, he shot to his feet and scooped up his betrothed. Spinning Mal in a circle, Bax felt as if he could fly without armor. Just go soaring away with Mal in his arms.

The Knave of Hearts settled to a stop, took Mal's face in his hands, and kissed him before the cheering queen and her court. Yes, life was perfect.

“More tarts!” the Queen exclaimed. “And strawberry cake for my boys. My betrothed boys!”

Something shivered inside Bax at the sound of the Queen's voice, dulling a little of his joy. For a moment, his fantasy of flying away with Mal included flying away from the Queen and the Hearts Kingdom entirely. He wanted to run away, something

he'd never do, but he'd never had a future so magnificent before. Bax wanted to protect it from anything that might harm it. Even the Queen herself.

Shaking his head free of such traitorous thoughts, Bax determinedly smiled at his queen. She loved him. She was happy for him. He didn't have to protect himself from her in any way. And yet, when he looked back at his intended, a sliver of fear pricked him like a rose thorn, lodging under his skin to annoy him.

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“Great fuck!” Torwen hissed as he jerked Alec into an alcove.

It was later that night and the celebration had moved from the garden pavilion to the dining hall. The Queen of Hearts was intent on wringing every ounce of joy from the day. She hadn't stopped smiling. Neither had Bax. Alec, however, felt as if his smile was glass, ready to shatter at any second.

“You've fucked things up good.” Torwen leaned in, putting his arm around Alec as if he were congratulating him.

“What am I going to do?” Alec whispered.

“We haven't found the sword yet. So I guess you'll have to marry him.”

“What?!” Alec rubbed at the ache in his chest. The guilt was consuming him—guilt for deceiving both Bax and Torwen.

“It's not as if it will last,” Torwen said. “Shit, you almost said no, didn't you? If I hadn't said anything, you would have told the fucking Knave of Hearts no, right there, in front of the Queen and the entire fucking court!”

“I don't know. Maybe. I don't like this, Torwen. I don't want—”

“Cheshire!” Torwen hissed.

“Cheshire, if anyone is listening to us, the last thing we have to worry about is them hearing your name.”

Torwen grimaced. “Yes, very well. You have a point.”

“We need to leave,” Alec said. “This has gone too far. I never should have gotten involved with him.” Again, he rubbed at his chest, but this time, it wasn't guilt that pained him.

“We can't leave without the sword. That is our first mission.”

“I think I may know where it is.”

“What?” Torwen growled. “How long have you known?”

“I don't know for sure. And I only learned it was a possibility a few nights ago. Bax mutters in his sleep.”

Oh, the lies. They were growing. Morphing into monsters.

“What did he say?” Torwen demanded.

“Something about war dogs guarding an even bigger weapon.” Alec shook his head. “It could be nothing. Maybe he was just dreaming.”

“Or maybe the weapon bigger than dogs of war is the Vorpall Sword!” Torwen smacked Alec's shoulder in delighted emphasis. “Can you sneak out tonight?”

“Me?”

“Well, I can't go. War dogs have to mean bandersnatches and if those fuckers get one whiff of me, they'll tear me apart. But you're friends with them, aren't you, Mal? They like you.”

Alec sighed. “Yes. I think so. But I can't go tonight.” He glanced over his shoulder to see Bax lifting his glass to click with the Queen's. “He'll want to celebrate privately.”

“Then celebrate. Celebrate the fuck out of him until he passes out.”

Alec nodded. “Yes. Okay. Maybe that will work.”

“It will. And I'll be performing a similar duty for the Queen. I'll slip away once she's asleep. If you find the sword, bring it to my room.”

“What about the Prince?”

Torwen considered this. “This might be the perfect night to free him. Everyone is celebrating the Knave's engagement. The Queen has even sent libations to the guards on duty. All of them.”

“So, the man guarding the White Prince will be drunk.”

“Maybe. Maybe not. Either way, he'll be less vigilant.” Torwen hugged Alec. “I'll think more about it. Hopefully, I'll have a plan by the time you reach my room.”

“And hopefully, I'll have the sword.”

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“Engaged,” Alec whispered as he watched Bax come striding over, crossing the dining hall like he ruled, not the Queen. “I’m fucking engaged.” He pasted on a grin just in time.

“Hello, my betrothed.” Bax swooped in for a kiss. He made a sound of delight as he drew back. “You are delicious. Indulging in some chocolate, are we?”

“I’m celebrating.”

“We are celebrating.” Bax took Alec's hand and pulled him out to a dancing area in the center of the hall.

Torwen was already out there with the Queen in his arms, Her Majesty beaming at her lover as he swirled her around in crazy circles. Torwen shot Alec a look, and Alec grinned brightly. It shouldn't have been fake, that grin. This should have been a joyous night for Alec. Part of him did rejoice to know that Bax loved him enough to marry him. But it was a small part of him and was quickly getting mashed under the heel of responsibility and betrayal. When Alec had accepted this mission—something he felt he had little choice in—he never thought he'd have to sacrifice his own heart for it.

As Bax led him through dance steps he didn't know, Alec stared at the man he loved. The man he'd do anything for. He might even betray all of Wonderland for Bax. The thought sent a horrible thrill through him. But then he remembered the Queen's wrath. He remembered the White Prince, imprisoned somewhere in the fortress. He remembered the tea parties with Quin, Finbri, and Almai. Memories that had been repressed for all this time returned suddenly, as if they knew he was buckling and

needed their help.

Alec heard his friends' laughter. Saw them smiling at him. And he saw Bax too. The little, scared boy he'd been. Bax had left out the part about how thin he'd been as a child, worked to the point of gauntness. Alec hadn't even realized it then. It took him looking back, as an adult, to see that Bax's lankiness hadn't been genetics but a lack of care or maybe even abuse. Had Bax blocked out the tragedy of his childhood? Maybe all he remembered was that the Queen elevated him. That he had triumphed in the end. Maybe that's all that mattered to him.

But Alec remembered now. He remembered all those good moments as well as the bad. The laughter. The way they played in the grass. And also the terror in the eyes of those poor gardeners as they stained white roses with drops of liquid dye, carefully applying the stain like blood onto the blooms. The Queen had come, and while Bax hid in the plants, the gardeners tried to hide the dye. They tried and failed.

That's when the Queen sentenced them to die. Guards hauled the gardeners away while the Queen whisked Alec off to play Croquet. He'd been so worried about those men, but then Gryphon told him how the King pardoned everyone, and Alec saw the King motioning at the guards. But the King wasn't around to hand out pardons anymore.

There were so many signs of psychosis. The authorities would have locked up the Queen of Hearts in Alec's world. She'd be institutionalized. Hopefully. Either that, or she'd be a serial killer leaving fucked up clues at her crime scenes. Maybe red roses.

Fuck me! Alec thought. Get your shit together! You truly are going mad.

But the memories had done their job. Alec knew what side he was on. And he knew he couldn't betray that side for anyone. Not even the man he had loved since he was a child.

God, he wanted to marry him. Alec wanted nothing more than to make vows to Bax that he intended to keep. No betrayal. No lies. But he couldn't do that. So, he couldn't stay long enough to marry his greatest love. That would compound the cruelty. Too much for either of them to bear. No, Alec had to leave that very night.

“Let's retire, my love,” Bax said as he led Alec away from the dancers. Instead of heading for the royal table, he went in the opposite direction, toward the door.

Alec didn't protest. The quicker he could get Bax to bed, the quicker he could get this over with. Oh, what an ache that set in his heart. Alec rubbed at his chest with his free hand. He had a feeling he'd be doing that for the rest of his life. Maybe he'd rub through his skin and bones one day and put an end to the ache.

Completely unaware of Alec's tragic thoughts, Bax was glowing with happiness, his stare often trailing down to the ring on Alec's finger. Alec wanted to throw up.

When they finally reached the sanctuary of their suite, Bax locked the door behind them and drew Alec into the bedroom. Alec went like a man sentenced to death, every step taking him closer to his doom. And hadn't he foretold this for himself? He was a better psychic than that dumb Caterpillar. He'd known from the start that Baxenvir would destroy him. But then Bax was stripping him, his warm hands stirring things that Alec thought would be impossible to rouse. At least in the mood he was in.

Alec had worried about it, about not responding to Bax's touch. He shouldn't have. No amount of fear or sadness or even pain could stop his body from giving Bax exactly what he wanted. Alec knew then that he would never make love again. He'd never feel this for anyone else, and he could never settle for less than Bax. That meant he'd be alone forever. Unless the Jabberwocky killed him.

A man could hope.

“My love, why do you look so sad?” Bax turned Alec's head toward him. “Aren't you happy?”

“Of course I am,” Alec said. “I'm just worried about the war.”

“What war?” Bax grinned.

Alec went still. “The war. The one the Queen has started with the Chess Kingdoms. You'll be fighting in it, won't you? I hate the thought of you out there. You're immortal but not invulnerable. You could die, Bax.”

Bax took Alec's face in his hands. “Thoughts of war have vanished from the Queen's head. I think she's finally moving past King Haver's death. And so am I, Mal. You did that for me. You brought me out of darkness and held me up to the sun. I'm warm because of your love. I have a future because you're wearing my ring.”

Alec's throat locked up. His eyes filled with tears.

“Don't cry, love.” Bax kissed the tears away, but more came to replace them. He chuckled. “You silly thing. Your tears will form a pool if you're not careful.” He tapped Alec's nose. “And your pool of tears will lead to the Crimson Sea. So, you must stop crying or you'll sail away upon them, and I will be forced to swim after you.”

“Such nonsense,” Alec whispered.

“Yes, indeed. It's the best kind of sense.” Bax finished undressing him, then picked Alec up and carried him to bed. “Show me my prize. Give me all I've claimed today.”

“You kill me, Bax. You slay me dead with your words and your eyes and your hands upon me.”

Baxenvir scowled. “Most times, I like your funny coastal speech, but those words gave me a chill, Mal. Don't talk about death in our bed.”

“I'm sorry.” Mal opened his arms. “Come here, my love. Have I told you how much you've changed my life?”

Bax grinned. “You have not. And you really should. It's only polite, after all I've confessed to you.”

“Ah. Yes, you're right. How rude I've been. How cruel.” Alec tried to stop his tears, but another escaped.

Bax immediately claimed the salty drop with his lips. “You are so sentimental tonight, my betrothed. Who would have guessed that you'd weep to wear my ring?”

“Not me,” Alec murmured. “I would have never guessed this would happen. At least, not before I met you.”

Bax spread out beside Mal and pulled him close. “Neither would I. Not the old me who you met when you first arrived.”

“You mean the growling man who demanded to know who I was?” Alec teased.

“Yes, precisely. If any slaying has been done, it was me by you. That man is dead. You have revived me with your kiss, and brought me back a better man.”

Alec chuckled. “And you say I'm the sentimental one. You've become a poet tonight.”

“Maybe.” Bax stretched out, tucking Alec in against him, and stared at the bed canopy. “I'm just so fucking happy.” He bent to kiss Alec's head. “Thank you.”

“I love you, Bax. Remember that. Always remember that. No matter what happens, I love you forever.”

“I love you too, Mal. Forever.”

It crushed Alec's heart to hear those words dedicated to a man who didn't exist. But that's what he deserved, and it helped to focus him. Bax didn't love Alec. Sir Baxenvir didn't even know Alec. He might kill Alec should he ever discover him. This love was one-sided. Always had been. Bax had fallen in love with a story—a fictional character Alec had been forced to play. And now it was time to exit stage left.

Soon enough, Bax tired of his poetry and moved on to more physical expressions of love. As he moved inside Alec, Alec held on tightly and stared up into the eyes that would never look at him the same way again. Not after this terrible night. The next time he saw Bax, those eyes would hold only hatred for him. And yet, Alec couldn't bring himself to regret anything. Not a single fucking moment.

When Bax locked up against Alec and filled him with desire, Alec was right there with him, shouting Bax's name for the last time. At least in passion.

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Alec stared down at the sleeping Knave of Hearts. Then he looked at his engagement ring. He reached for it but couldn't bring himself to remove it. No. It was his. The only thing he'd take from Bax. He leaned over and kissed Bax's forehead, pulling back before the tears came again. He was turning into a damn pussy.

Swallowing his sorrow, Alec hurried out of the bedroom, then out of the suite. The fortress echoed with the sounds of revelry, though it was more muted than it had been when he'd retired with Bax hours earlier. Their celebration was winding down. The dining hall was probably empty. All that would remain would be the guards on duty. And that would work out well for Alec and Torwen.

Looking as nonchalant as possible, Alec strode down the corridor. Every instinct he had told him to creep about, but if someone came upon him like that, it would be far more suspicious than the Knave's betrothed out for some fresh air. Better to look as if he was innocent.

And Alec's luck held. The guards that he passed were so inebriated that they didn't even recognize him. They just lifted their mugs to him and slurred something. Alex waved and kept walking. It wasn't until he reached the kennels that he slowed his steps.

There, far from the keep, it was silent. The only sounds were of sleeping dogs, and Alec wanted nothing more than to let them lie. But he couldn't. He crept into the kennel and made his way to the back wall. There, upon the wall of the pen on the left, hung the Vorpall Sword.

Alec opened the iron gate.

The squeak it made woke the bandersnatches. All of them. They came to the gates and barked once, then sniffed the air. After that deep inhale—during which Alec remained motionless—the monstrous dogs yipped.

“Good doggies,” Alec said. “Very good boys.”

They yipped again.

Alec didn't know which one of them stood before him, so he kept using those general terms. “Good boy.” He ventured a pat on the bandersnatch's head.

It panted happily, a long pink tongue lolling out of its mouth.

“Yes, you're sweet, aren't you?” Alec said in surprise. “Did her magic make you mean?” He stroked the long fur back from the bandersnatch's face, revealing more of its eyes. Then he froze. “Your eyes. They're so familiar. They're not the eyes of an animal.”

The bandersnatch yipped again and licked Alec's face.

Alec fell backward as the memory hit him, sending him into the wall of the pen. The bandersnatch followed, nuzzling Alec as if to help him up. Alec stroked the long muzzle even as horror collected in his belly. What were those names? The names of the bandersnatches. Alec had thought they sounded familiar when the Queen had introduced the dogs. And now he knew why.

“Freck? Are you Freck?” Alex asked.

The bandersnatch yipped.

“You were a gardener, weren't you? You tended the roses.”

Freck yipped again.

“Holy fuck. Oh, great fuck! What did she do to you?” Alec stroked Freck's face. “Oh, God. It is you, isn't it? You're one of the gardeners I met years ago when I was a child. You were dying the roses. Do you remember? Was that really you?”

Freck didn't yip again. He just stared at Alec solemnly.

“Can you understand me at all?” Alec asked.

Something happened as Alec spoke to the bandersnatch. Something shivered in its eyes. Was it magic? It couldn't have been. Alec didn't have magic. And yet, something freed Freck enough for a sliver of his real self to come through.

And the bandersnatch whimpered.

“You're coming with me.” Alec stood up. “You all are.” He grabbed the Vorpall Sword from the hooks on the wall and strode out of the pen.

Freck stayed where he was.

“I don't know if anyone where I'm going can help you. But at least you won't have to do her bidding.”

Another dog whined.

Alec slipped the sword into his belt, then went to the rest of the bandersnatches. He stroked them and spoke to them until he saw their true selves fill their eyes. Then he opened the pen doors.

“Go to the edge of the woods and wait there for me.” Alec pointed. “Go quietly.

Don't let anyone see you if you can help it.”

The bandersnatches stared at him.

“It's your choice. You can stay here and serve her or you can take your chances with me. I promise you, I won't hurt you.”

The bandersnatches crept past Alec and headed toward the fortress wall, staying in the shadows.

Alec lifted his chin and headed back to the keep. At least he could do one good thing tonight.

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Before he made it across the gardens, Alec ran into Torwen.

“There you are!” Torwen hissed. Then he saw the sword. “Thank all that's good in Wonderland!” Torwen exclaimed. “You found it.”

“Yes,” Alec said. “It was where I thought it would be. What about the Prince?”

“He's gone.”

“What do you mean?”

“Just what I said!” Torwen waved his arms about. “He's gone. I opened the secret wall and there was no White Prince. The bed was there. The books. But no prince.”

“She moved him?”

“I don't know. It looked odd. And there was still a guard on duty. Oh! And there were trays of rotting food all over the floor.”

“What the fuck?”

“I don't know!”

“All right! Calm down. We've tried our best. We have to go. Hopefully, the White Prince escaped on his own. Maybe he's on his way back to the White Kingdom right now.”

“Hopefully.” Torwen glanced over his shoulder at the keep, then motioned at the wall. “Let's go before we lose our chance.”

Alec looked back too. In his mind, he saw Bax sleeping in their bed, utterly secure in the knowledge of their love. He said that Alec had changed his life. Well, that was about to change again. When Bax woke up in the morning, he'd discover Alec's perfidy at last. And it would destroy any chance of Bax ever trusting another person. His heart would close for good. Forever Alec's, just as Bax had vowed, just not in the way he thought.

“Alec!” Torwen shook him.

“Yeah. Let's go.” Alec ran for the gate before he lost his nerve.

Halfway there, Torwen vanished. Alec opened his mouth to curse, but then he saw the gate guards wander off. With a grin, he ran through the open gate with no one noticing. About ten feet into the woods, bandersnatches surrounded him.

“Stay still,” Torwen whispered in Alec's ear, still invisible. “I'll take care of them.”

“No!” Alec shrieked. “They're with me.”

“What?!” Torwen's head appeared, floating several feet above the ground.

Instead of barking, the bandersnatches stared solemnly at him.

“They're with me,” Alec repeated. “They need help, Tor. These are the Queen's old gardeners.”

“What?!” Torwen glared at the beasts. Then his expression cleared and the rest of him appeared. “They're not attacking me.”

“Because I got through to them. Somehow, I found the men inside the monsters. They're aware now. Enough to control themselves.”

“Holy shit, Alec.” Torwen looked from the bandersnatches to him. “Do you know what this means?”

“Yeah. The Queen is capable of more terrible things than we thought.”

“Yes, indeed. But I was thinking more positively. You are capable of more wondrous things than we thought.” Torwen clasped Alec's shoulder. “You freed their minds, Alec.”

“No, I just spoke to them and helped them remember. I don't have magic.”

“I think you do. I think you've always had magic. I think it's how you wound up here when you were a little boy. The magic sank into you, hiding itself when you went back to the human world. But when you returned, so did your magic.”

“Yeah, right.” Alec started heading away from the Hearts Fortress and the heart he left inside it—his. “Come on, guys. Let's get the fuck out of crazy town. I'm so sick of smelling roses.”

The bandersnatches followed him.

“Alec, you do have magic.” Torwen floated beside him, legs stretched out as if he were lying on a chaise lounge. “If you didn't, Wonderland wouldn't need you. It's so obvious to me now.”

“Whatever, Sir Torwen. You can tell it to Commander Quinlen when we get back. But we need to get as far away from this freak show as soon as possible.” Alec stomped harder through the woods, not knowing why he was so angry. Maybe

because it was easier than being sad.

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First, there was shock over the bandersnatches. Then came the cheering. Torwen and Alec were both declared heroes and made the rounds through the camp, carried aloft by celebrating soldiers who touched the Vorpall Sword reverently, like it was a holy relic. But Commander Quinlen didn't allow more celebrating than that. One round, that was it. Even though it was dark, he ordered the soldiers to pack up. They were heading for Marmoreal and the safety of the White Castle.

“But I thought we were here to fight?” Alec asked as he watched Quinlen pack a trunk. “I thought this is where we were going to make our stand.”

“Fuck, no. The Queen of Hearts would have the advantage here. We need to get back to the castle, where we have walls to defend us if necessary. And the White Queen's healing magic. We were only here to watch the border and defend it in the event of a sudden attack. Then we could have held off the Card Army while we sent word to the White Queen.” Quinlen frowned, removed his hat, stuck more blades in the band, then put it back on. “Now, we know the Card Army will be coming. What with the White Prince safe at home and you taking the—”

“The White Prince is here?” Torwen interrupted before Alec could.

“No. I just said he's at home. That would be the White Castle at Marmoreal.” Quinlen frowned at them. “Didn't you two free him?”

“No, we didn't,” Alec said. “He said we did?”

“No. Prince Albion said something too ridiculous to be true. I assumed he'd gone a little mad. No shame in it. Happens to the best of us.”

“What did he say?!” Torwen shouted.

“Easy, cat.” Quinlen held up his hands.

Around them, the tent shuddered. Fabric fell on their heads. Torwen hissed.

“We're still in here!” Quin shouted.

“Sorry, Hatter!” someone shouted back.

The tent billowed back into place.

Quinlen sighed and shook his head. “Can't blame them for being out of sorts.”

“What did the White Prince say?!” Alec demanded.

“Oh. Oh, yes. Uh, something about the Knave of Hearts.”

“What about him?” Alec grabbed Quin's wrist. “What did the Knave of Hearts do?”

“Well, he freed the White Prince, of course.”

“The Knave of Hearts?” Torwen scoffed. “The Knave is the one who captured the White Prince in the first place.”

“Yes. As I said, it sounded ridiculous. Normally, I appreciate a good bout of silliness, but I didn't give it credence. I just nodded politely, gave the Prince some tea, and sent him off to his mother with a unit of soldiers.”

“He freed him.” Alec swayed on his feet.

“Alec!” Quinlen steadied him. “What's wrong?”

“He freed the White Prince.” Alec slipped through Quin's grasp and crumpled to the tent floor. “He told me the war was over, but I didn't believe him.”

“What?” Torwen crouched before him. “What did you say?”

“Bax told me there was no war anymore. He said the Queen was happy. She'd forgotten about war.” Alec made a sound that was sort of a sob. “Because of you. And he was happy because of me. We had the most powerful people in the Hearts Kingdom in the palms of our hands. We were making them forget about fighting. And then cast them aside. And with them, we cast away any chance of ending the war peacefully.”

“We? Fuck, Alec! You could have told me that before we left!”

“Would you have stayed? If it meant ending the war, would you have stayed there and remained her consort?”

Quin looked back and forth between the men, his eyes gone wide.

Torwen growled and stood up. “No. No, I wouldn't have believed it. And I couldn't stay with her forever. It would have killed me.”

“I could have stayed with him,” Alec whispered. “Forever. I wanted to.”

“Who?” Quin crouched before Alec. “Who has you wound up like a top, Alec?”

“The Knave of Hearts,” Alec said hollowly. “My betrothed.”

Quin fell onto his ass.

Alec, however, popped up to his feet. "I'm going back!"

"You can't go back!" Quin gaped up at him.

"Yes, I can. Maybe he won't have noticed that I left." Alec headed for the tent flap. "If I hurry, I could get back before he wakes up."

Torwen grabbed Alec's arm and pulled him into a hug. Alec went rigid for a few seconds, but then he collapsed and let out all the tears he'd been holding back.

"It's over, kid. That's what happens when you get involved with a target. You'll learn. You won't make that mistake again."

"Again?!" Alec pushed out of Torwen's arms. "This is to end the war. We won't be spying on anyone again." He looked from Torwen to Quinlen. "Right?"

"Right," Quinlen said. "You're absolutely right, Alec. Absolutely. Once the Jabberwocky is dead, the war is over. We'll be able to end the rule of the Queen of Hearts."

"I never saw the monster." Alec looked at Torwen. "Did you? Did you ever see the Jabberwocky?"

"No." Torwen sighed and stared out the tent flap at where the bandersnatches sat, only a few feet away, waiting for Alec. "No, I never saw it. And the Queen never talked about it. I think she has it hidden somewhere. Like she hid the Prince."

"The Prince." Alec swayed.

"Hey, now!" Torwen grabbed Alec and shook him. "Don't start that shit again. You made a mistake. This is on you, Alec. But you will recover. Trust me."

Alec stared at Torwen. “I love him, Tor.”

“I know you do, kid. I knew all along. I was just hoping you'd get over it.”

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Bax woke with a smile on his face, sighed, and stretched out an arm to his betrothed.

Mal's side of the bed was empty.

Frowning, he sat up and peered around the room. “Mal?” The Knave climbed out of bed, yawning, and scratched his belly. “Mal?”

He went into the bathroom, then the dressing room. Finally, he ventured across the hall to Mal's old bedroom. It was empty too. All of Mal's clothes were in Bax's dressing room. He went back inside to stare at them, a strange feeling rising in his chest.

Then he saw the scrap of paper tucked into the mirror's frame. It had his name written on it.

With dread unfurling in his belly, Bax snatched the note and opened it. The words made little sense and not in a good way. He read the thing twice. It was from Mal and it was a love letter. But it was also a hate letter. Mal said he didn't mean to fall in love, but he did. He didn't want to lie, but he did. He didn't want to leave, but he did. Mal said his real name was . . .

“Alec,” Bax whispered as memories assaulted him. “Alec. Oh fuck. He's Alec. My Alec!” He shook his head. “No. But yes. I saw it. I knew it. I fucking felt it! But I couldn't let it be true. Because if it was true, everything else wasn't.” His stare went to the toy car, sitting on a shelf beside his hairbrush. Bax picked it up, his chest seeming to compact in upon itself. That little boy who gave him his first kiss. It was Mal. All along. It had always been Mal. No, Alec. And he was on the wrong side. He had

come to the fortress again, this time brought by—

“That fucking cat! He's a spy! They're both . . .” Bax's hand trembled too much to hold the toy. It fell from his shaking fingers to land with a clatter on the hardwood floor. But he still held that awful letter. He stared at it. More words. Alec was always so good with words. His words had saved Bax but only to drop him from a higher perch so the fall would crush him. “They're both spies. He made me believe. He made me want . . .” A broken cry split his lips, and Bax's knees buckled. Fury kept him standing. He'd shove Alec's words down his traitorous throat! Alec. His Alec. Not his. Forever had turned into never.

Running out to the balcony, the Knave crushed the horrible letter in his fist and roared, “Alec!”

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Alec shivered and looked over his shoulder. They were marching to the White Castle, but Alec had a spot on one of the carts. It wouldn't do for the wielder of the Vorpall Sword to walk. But the man they pinned their hopes on was going mad. Losing his damn mind. Because Alec could have sworn he heard Baxenvir shouting his name.

“Don't be an idiot.” Alec faced forward and laid his hand on the hilt of the Vorpall Sword.

A soldier had fastened some leather around the blade for him. It also strapped the thing to his belt, so the destined monster-killing weapon didn't have to hang precariously between his belt and waist. It was pretty. Strange too, with its twirled tip. Which made perfect sense. Or perfect nonsense since it was a Wonderland weapon. But Alec hated carrying it. It felt like a symbol of his betrayal.

A bandersnatch whined, and Alec looked over at him, where he was walking beside the cart. When he had Alec's attention, he yipped.

“We're going to get you help soon.” Alec motioned ahead. “Quin says the White Queen can break curses. And I'm pretty sure you guys are cursed.”

The bandersnatches yipped in unison.

“Yeah, that'll be great. I hope she can heal you.” Alec looked behind him again. Then he did a double take. Because there, just above the trees, flew a formation of Jubjubs, and in the lead was the Knave of Hearts, wearing his horned helmet. “Holy shit.” He stood up and pointed. “Incoming!”

Soldiers scrambled and pulled their swords, but Alec just stood there on the cart, body swaying as the driver reined in the horses, and watched as the Jubjubs circled the army above.

“Alec!” Bax shouted. “I want to talk to Alec! Bring him forth!”

Trembling, Alec called out, “Hold! No one fire anything at them!” He jumped down from the cart and went to stand below Bax. The bandersnatches went with him, then sat on either side of Alec, staring up at the Jubjubs.

“You took them too?” Bax glared at Alec. “How? Why?!”

“They're cursed, Bax.” Alec waved at the bandersnatches. “Fuck.” He shook his head. “Did you read my letter? Shit. Of course, you read it. You know my real name.”

“And I know who you are.” Wings buzzing, Bax floated down to land before Alec, utterly unafraid of the men and women who aimed arrows and swords at him. “I was right. That time I suspected you were from the other world. I was right. The similarities. I knew you were him. I just refused to admit it to myself.”

“Yes, you were right. I'm that kid. I gave you that car. And that kiss.” Alec lifted a hand, then dropped it. “Bax, the love was real. It still is. We're just stuck on opposite sides of this thing. But I know about the White Prince. I know you freed him. I know you want to do the right—”

“I thought the war was over!” Bax waved at the army. “I didn't know you were plotting to end it another way.”

“I know. I betrayed you. I hate myself for it. But I had to. The Queen has hurt so many people. She's threatening my friends. I had to help.”

“The Queen lost her husband. She—”

“How long are you going to use that to excuse what she's done? Look at them, Bax.” Alec waved at the bandersnatches. “Look at them. Do you remember the men I was with when we first met?”

“The gardeners?” Bax looked at the animals. “What about them?”

“That's them!” Alec reached for Bax, but the Knave stepped back, just out of reach. “Okay. I'm sorry I tried to touch you. I understand that you're hurt.” He held up his hands. “But look closely. Look at their eyes. Those are not dogs, Bax. Those are not animal eyes.”

“Stop calling me Bax as if we're friends.”

“We're more than friends.” Alec held up his hand to show the ring he still wore. “And I think that's been true since we first met as children. My heart decided on you way back then, and it has waited for you. I think we were destined to love each other.”

“Give that back! How dare you take that ring!” Bax snatched at Alec, but Alec evaded him.

“No, Bax! I won't ever give it back. You gave it to me because you love me. I know you still love me. And I love you. Leaving you was the hardest thing I've ever had to do. But you came after me. You followed me with just your soldiers. That tells me you're still mine. And I'm telling you I'm still yours. Forever. Stay with me. Please, Bax. Come with me to Marmoreal. The Queen of Hearts doesn't really love you, but I do. Come with us. We can be together and stop this war. You can finally fight for the side of good.”

Bax shook his head. “You're as mad as she is. There's no love between us anymore

and good is all in perspective. Were you good when you seduced and betrayed me? I gave you all I had, and all you gave me were lies. I never even knew your name! I would have married a nonexistent man!"

"You would have married me . I'm me no matter what name I go by. I'm still me. And I love you. I fell in love with you despite who you are. Because that doesn't matter. This is real, Bax." Alec motioned back and forth between them. "I swear it's real. I truly love you. It's always been you. And you love me."

"No, I don't." Bax narrowed his eyes at Alec.

"Then why are you here?"

"To give you an ultimatum. It comes directly from the Queen of Hearts." Bax stepped back while above him, his Jubbys aimed arrows at the soldiers who threatened their commander. "Hand over the Vorpal Sword and give yourself into my custody. You and that fucking cat! Surrender yourselves, and the Queen of Hearts will not obliterate the White Chess Kingdom and every living thing in it. Refuse, and all who live there will pay for your perfidy."

Soldiers gasped. Alec swayed on his feet.

Then Torwen appeared between Bax and Alec. "Tell that fucking bitch that the Chess-Sir Torwen of the White Kingdom says to take her fucking ultimatum and stick it up her slithy ass! Oh, and tell her that she's the worst fuck I've ever had. I had to think about old lovers just to get it up."

Bax blinked, then his expression shifted into rage. "I will kill you, Torwen of the White Kingdom. Slowly. Then I will mount your cat head on my wall!"

Arrows flew, but Bax was already moving upward.

“Stop!” Alec shouted. “Don't shoot!”

“I'll give the Queen of Hearts your answer,” Bax spoke directly to Alec. “And when I see you next, lover , my sword will do the kissing.”

And then the Knave of Hearts flew away with his group of stupid-named warriors.

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Bax's bedroom looked as if something exploded inside it. The furniture was little more than debris—shards, chips, splinters. Glass was everywhere. Nowhere safe to step. Even the walls hadn't gone unscathed. They were gouged by the detonated bomb known as the Knave of Hearts—a bomb that could go off again. At any time.

The scene suited Baxenvir. He stood amid the wreckage—chest rising and falling rapidly, hands curled into claws and bloody—and stared at the damage he'd wrought. It was enough. He wanted Mal's—no, not Mal! His name was Alec. Mal was the man Bax loved. Alec was the bastard who betrayed him. It helped for Bax to separate them. Two different people. One to love and one to hate. And it was Alec's body Bax wanted to see, broken and bloody among the remains of his shattered life.

With a sob, Bax fell to his knees, his hands covering his face and streaking it with blood. Broad shoulders bent and buckled under the strain of his breaking heart. No, not breaking. Broken. The damage was done. Bax refused to let it go any further. He stood up and narrowed his eyes at the place he had been happy for a short time. Had he really believed that mome rath crap—that someone could love him? He should have known better. Happiness and love weren't for warriors like him. He was better off bitter. Alone. It kept him sharp. Like a sword.

“Alec,” Bax whispered the name.

Then he heard his ex-lover's voice and saw him again in his mind. “Look at their eyes. Those are not dogs, Bax.”

“Not dogs,” Bax murmured. “Their eyes.” A jolt ran through him as he saw those eyes in his memory. They belonged to a man, not an animal. Was Alec right? The

bandersnatches had gone with him peacefully. They had stood there, even as Bax argued with Alec. No sign of distress, no animal behavior at all. They had acted like people. People who knew him. They had recognized him. “No.” Bax swayed on his feet. “No, she wouldn’t. How would she even do that?” But even as he spoke the denial, he saw those person-eyes again, and his mind spun back even further, to the day he had met Alec. “The gardeners. Oh, fuck. No. No, she couldn’t. The King was still alive then. He wouldn’t have allowed it. I heard him pardon them.”

Bax stared blankly ahead as thoughts spun in his mind. Thoughts of his queen and how easily she had summoned the dark magic on that battlefield. How quickly it came to her call. Bax had assumed it was pain and desperation that had brought the darkness to her like a pet. But maybe that wasn’t it at all. Maybe it came so eagerly because it had been summoned before. Because it knew her.

“But the King,” Bax murmured. “King Harver never would have allowed it.” He paused, mind spinning out. Further and further out. Testing new thoughts. “Unless the King didn’t know.” Bax crumpled onto the shards of wood and glass, uncaring for the safety of his skin, and let out a shuddering breath. “He didn’t know. All those people he pardoned. Had any of them truly been pardoned?”

Bax tried to remember them—all the people the Queen of Hearts had sentenced to die. On a whim. In a rage. The same people who her husband would secretly pardon. Bax had grown up around the Hearts court. He’d seen it all. It had made him laugh. Because he thought it was harmless. The Queen had a tantrum, but she was all talk. Her husband had the true power, and he wielded it gently. Quietly. But looking back, Bax couldn’t remember seeing any of those pardoned people after the King had pardoned them.

“They disappeared.” Bax looked down at his hands. Hands that had killed for his kingdom and queen. No, it was all for her. He loved her. He would have done anything for her. “Would have?” he asked himself aloud. “Has something changed?”

With the perfect timing of a tortured mind, the memory of Alec begging him to stay popped up.

“—I love you. Leaving you was the hardest thing I've ever had to do. But you came after me with just your soldiers. That tells me you're still mine. And I'm telling you I'm still yours. Forever. Stay with me. Please, Bax. Come to Marmoreal with me. The Queen of Hearts doesn't really love you, but I do.”

“It's too late,” Bax said to both Alec and Mal. “It's too late, my love.”

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“Alec?! That was Alec?! Alec of Humanland?”

The Queen of Hearts was in a rage. She had already ordered two executions. She flung things about, aiming at the servants, and stomped her feet. As he watched her go red-faced and wild-eyed, Bax wondered if this was how he had looked during his tantrum. Yeah, he had a tantrum. Bax admitted that to himself. But it had been necessary. He needed to let out the pain like steam from a tea kettle. And at least Bax had confined his rage to his bedroom. The Queen's fury was seeping out into her fortress. By nightfall, it would spread through Hearts. And then it would stretch its skeletal fingers toward the White Chess Kingdom.

And Alec.

“Alec?!” the Queen screeched again. “That child? That little, fragile human boy? That's who deceived us?” She spun to face Bax. “That same brat who snuck into my fortress years ago and played croquet with me?”

“Yes, Your Majesty,” Bax said tonelessly. He noted she didn't place any blame at Cheshire's feet. Only Alec. That was interesting.

“And he took my Vorpal Sword!”

“Yes, Your Majesty.”

“And all my bandersnatches!” She threw her curled hands up into the air. “My little baby bandersnatches!”

“Yes, Your Majesty.”

The Queen of Hearts threw a vase at a servant. He ducked, his expression blank, and quickly straightened.

The Queen screamed. No words, no vows of revenge, just a deadly scream. Everyone in the room winced, but no one dared to cover their ears. And absolutely no one tried to quell her rage. Not even Bax.

Then the Knave's beloved queen strode up to him and backhanded him.

Bax's head spun with the blow. Blood dripped from his split lip. He stared to the side for a second, collecting himself, then brought his head forward to stare at her. He licked his lip. The taste of blood helped to focus him. So had the blow, for that matter. It felt freeing.

The Queen's expression instantly crumpled. “Oh, my sweet boy!” She took Bax's face in her hands and chanted something under her breath.

All of Baxenvir's wounds, not just the one on his face, healed, tingling with her magic. Well, most of them. She'd healed all the cuts he'd gotten when he demolished his bedroom. Just not the slice that Alec had given him. That one went too deep for even the Queen's magic to reach.

“I'm sorry, my Knave.” The Queen kissed his cheek. “You are my only trustworthy companion, and I've struck you in anger. I'm so sorry. Forgive me.”

“There is nothing to forgive, my Queen. I understand. I have just released my own rage upon my bedroom. Strike me again if it eases you. I can take it.”

“Oh, my sweet champion!” The Queen kissed his cheek again. “He betrayed you too.

And I was the one who pushed that traitor into your arms.”

“No, Your Majesty. He seduced me, and I succumbed. That is my fault, not yours. I believed that someone could love me. But no one can love a monster.”

The Queen's face crumpled and tears gathered in her eyes. But those tears didn't fall. She had too much control for that. “You are loved, Bax. I love you dearly. You are the son I never birthed. I love you as if you were the blood of my heart.”

“And I love you, my Queen.” Bax's voice was hollow. The words said by rote. He didn't know if he meant them anymore.

“Then we have each other. And together, we will get our revenge. We will tear down the White Kingdom until nothing stands, then rebuild it into whatever we wish. I will give it to you, my sweet. You will rule in my stead. We shall call it the Red Kingdom.”

“Thank you, Your Majesty. But don't send me away. I need to be with you.”

A tear finally escaped her rigid control, making its desperate flight down her cheek. “Oh, my boy. My sweet boy. I'll never send you away. But I want to give you the world.”

“We will take it together.”

The Queen took a deep breath and smiled. That grin sealed the fate of the White Kingdom. “Yes, Knave. We ride for Marmoreal at dawn.”

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The White Chess Castle rose in delicate towers, adorned with faceted crystals that caught the light and made the whole of it shine like a beacon of hope. The high walls standing guard around the grounds were just as bright, with a silver gate so fanciful that it looked incapable of holding anything out. That gate opened as their party approached, and a unit of soldiers marched out, the one in the lead wearing a conical helmet topped with a square cross.

“Commander Quinlen, welcome home.” The man in the helmet bowed.

“Thank you, Bishop Kuserin.” Quinlen stepped forward and shook the man's hand. “You've prepared the Army?”

“Yes, sir! We've remained prepared, training daily as usual, but when the Prince returned, we upped our training schedule and posted guards further out.”

“Good.” Then Quin noticed the direction of the Bishop's stare. “Ah, yes. This is Alec.” He motioned Alec forward. “Alec, this is Bishop Kuserin.”

“Hello, Bishop.” Alec nodded.

“Call me Kuserin, sir. Bishop is only my military title.”

“Ah. Yes. Right. Like Finbri and Almai.”

“Yes, they are my fellows.”

Torwen sauntered up and smirked at the Bishop. “Hello, Kus. You're looking . . .

pointy.”

“Welcome home, Sir Torwen.” The Bishop bowed. “The White Prince has told us of the sacrifices you've made. Thank you for your service. I'm deeply honored to be the one to welcome you home.”

Torwen blinked, swallowed, then cleared his throat. “Yes, well. Uh, anything for the good of Wonderland. And for our queen, of course.”

“The White Queen requests that you attend her immediately.” Bishop Kuserin nodded at Quin, Torwen, and Alec. Then his gaze locked on something behind Alec. “Uh. Could someone tell me why there are bandersnatches with you?”

Alec motioned the bandersnatches forward. “They're cursed. We need to take them to the Queen.”

“Cursed?” The Bishop stared at the beasts, then nodded as if that were perfectly normal. “Yes, of course. She's in the kitchen. I'm sure she'll help them.”

“Wonderful. Thank you, Bishop Kuserin.” Quin turned and addressed the army. “Settle in, everyone. And get some rest.” As the army filed past, he said to the Bishop, “Close the gates, Kuserin. And call your sentries back.”

“Call them back? But we need to know when the Cards approach.”

“They're coming now,” Quinlen said. “I don't want any soldier out there alone. Double the watch on the walls and warn everyone that the Cards are on the move.”

“Yes, sir!”

With that, Quinlen strode to the sparkling castle keep, Torwen sauntering after him.

Alec paused, looking around the gleaming courtyard. To either side of the main road, gardens stretched out, similar to the Hearts Fortress. But there, the gardens boasted a multitude of different flora, the beds overflowing so that they didn't look completely contained. Among the flowers were fragrant herbs, vegetables, and fruit trees. It was a garden that could sustain life, not just entertain. White marble statues of chess pieces spotted the greenery, but that was the only nod to the kingdom. Unlike the Hearts Fortress, where everything was branded with the Queen's symbol.

Alec waved at the bandersnatches. "It's time to get you back to yourselves. Come on." He nodded at the Bishop and followed Torwen and Quinlen to a silver door in the keep, the bandersnatches marching after him in a line.

They entered a bright corridor with a ceiling so high that it caught their footsteps and tossed the sound back at them. It was lovely and peaceful, but Alec didn't think that was the reason Torwen exhaled and let his shoulders fall with it. This was home for Tor. That's what Kuserin had said. He had welcomed them home.

Alec stepped up beside Torwen. "How long were you spying on the Queen?"

Torwen glanced at him. "Oh, years. Or maybe a few months. I can't recall."

Alec scowled. "Why is getting a straight answer out of you always so difficult?"

"I don't think straightly. Do you?" Torwen cocked his head at Alec. "Linear thinking is best left to the White Queen. Spies must think outside the chessboard."

"As commanders do," Quin tossed over his shoulder.

Alec shook his head. "Never mind."

"Never mind?" Torwen considered this. "Never mind. No, thank you. I prefer an

always mind.”

“Oh, for fuck's sake,” Alec muttered and stepped back. “The bandersnatches make more sense.”

Vanar looked at Alec and yipped.

Yeah, Alec had learned their names on the way to Marmoreal. Not that the bandersnatches had told him with words. Alec remembered their names, then spoke them aloud for each beast to acknowledge.

Alec could tell that the bandersnatches were excited. He was excited for them. Soon, they would learn if the Queen could break their curse. But Alec was also terrified. For himself, that is. The closer he got to the White Queen, the closer he came to his destiny—killing the Jabberwocky. It felt less like his destiny and more like a responsibility. But either way, it was what Alec had come to Wonderland to do.

The Vorpal Sword hung at Alec's hip like a banner proclaiming his willingness. The White Queen would assume that he was there to do his duty. Despite what anyone thought, it wasn't his responsibility. It wasn't even his world, much less his kingdom. Still, Alec would fight. He knew he would. He couldn't let his friends down. Not now, after all he'd done to get there.

After who he had betrayed.

Shining rooms done in white glinted in the corner of Alec's eye as they passed through several corridors, going deeper and deeper into the castle. At last, the scent of baking bread came to them, then the sound of high, tinkling laughter.

“Sweet, silly boy!” a woman said. “Oh, how I love you!”

They entered a vast kitchen, its vaulted ceiling hung with silver chains that ended just above their heads. Pots, pans, and other types of cookware dangled from the chains along with tools such as cleavers and meat hooks. The latter had Alec blinking.

Beneath this beautiful and deadly array of cooking implements, three extraordinarily long worktables stood, topped with expanses of white marble veined in gold. Around the edges of the room, counters abutted the walls and cabinets loomed above, their tops shooting up into Gothic peaks. Everything was white, which Alec thought was a bad idea for a kitchen. Especially this kitchen.

There was stuff everywhere. Pots inexplicably boiled atop the marble, books lay propped open, spoons stirred the contents of bowls without a hand to guide them, and trays of freshly baked bread, pastries, and confectioneries crowded around the ingredients that created them. Alec's mouth watered.

Raelis yipped.

There were two people in this enormous space, just two. They stood in the center of the chaos, sleeves tied up and aprons around their waists. One was the White Prince and the other was the most beautiful woman Alec had ever seen. She was tall, willowy, and so pale that she could have been mistaken for an albino. But within the snowy landscape of her face, a pair of brilliant blue eyes burned and the white of her skin flushed a lovely pink. Atop her head, pure white curls perched precariously, threatening to fall at any moment, and her delicate hands applied frosting to a batch of cupcakes with the precision of a surgeon.

The woman looked up with an expression of delight. "My hatter!"

"My Queen!" Quin went forward and bowed.

The White Queen swirled around her son, skirts swishing, and danced up to her

commander. "I've missed you, Quin." She took his face in her hands and kissed both cheeks. "Welcome home."

"Thank you, Your Majesty."

"And there is my favorite cat!" She opened her arms and Torwen went into them.

Alec heard him sigh before saying, "I'm home."

"Yes, Tor, you're home." The Queen looked over his shoulder at Alec. "And you've brought me a champion."

"Yes, Your Majesty." Torwen stepped back and subtly swiped at his eyes. "Alec of the Human World."

Alec knew that was his cue. He stepped up to the Queen and bowed. "Hello, Your Majesty."

"Hello, Alec." The White Queen clasped her hands together as if she didn't trust them to not reach for him. "It's been a very long time."

"Have we already met, Your Majesty?"

"Oh, yes. You came here after escaping the Queen of Hearts. You don't remember?"

Alec frowned. "I remember . . ." His stare happened upon the White Prince. "You! I remember you."

The White Prince grinned and joined them, his deep, golden skin looking even darker when set against his mother's complexion. "We played together. I'm so pleased that you remember me."

“Alby!” Alec grinned back.

“Alec!” The White Prince opened his arms.

Alec laughed as he hugged his childhood playmate. So, there had been two boys who he'd met in Wonderland. How fascinating that the little soldier boy had won his heart in an hour while Alec had only felt friendship for the stunning prince who he had several days with. They say that the heart wants what it wants. Alec's hadn't wasted any time on making its choice. Then it stuck to it.

“Oh, my sweet boys,” the Queen said. She laid a hand on them both. “Welcome back, Alec. We're so grateful to you for coming to our aid after all this time.”

Alec swallowed roughly and eased out of Albion's embrace. “I'd be lying if I said I'm not scared, Your Majesty.”

“Well, of course, you're scared. We're all terrified. The Queen of Hearts has dark magic and a monster on her side.” Her gaze wandered to the bandersnatches. “But I see that her monsters are not what they appear. They're not monstrous at all. Come here, you poor things. Let me look at you.”

The bandersnatches looked at Alec. Alec nodded and motioned them over. They stepped up to the Queen, then sat on their haunches.

The Queen bent to stare each animal in the eye. Then, nodding, she stood. “This is wickedness at its worst. I suspected Satana was experimenting with transformation magic, but I had hoped it wasn't successful.” She twirled about and then lost all semblance of grace when she stomped over to a counter along the wall. Her hands moved with more power then, sparks flying around her.

The small gathering stepped back. Only the bandersnatches remained where they

were, heads cocked and human eyes focused on the Queen.

Muttering to herself, or perhaps chanting, the White Queen gathered items in a glass bowl. She poured, sprinkled, and stirred. And then she made a sound of satisfaction. Alec looked around and saw looks of relief on Albion, Quin, and Torwen. He didn't want to know what horror they had just averted, but he made a mental note to stay out of the kitchen while visiting the White Castle.

“Here we are!” The Queen held a vial of sparkling white liquid aloft. “Don't you worry, my friends. Breaking the curse will hurt immensely.”

Alec frowned at that.

Then the Queen went on, “But this potion will dull the pain. You shouldn't feel a thing.” She tapped Vanar's nose. “Open up!”

Vanar obediently opened his enormous mouth, exposing all of his sharp teeth, and the Queen poured a drop of liquid onto his tongue. Instantly, Vanar's eyes rolled back in his head, and he crumpled to the marble floor. Freck was up next. He whimpered and looked at Alec.

“It's so you won't feel the pain,” Alec said. “I think it's best that you get knocked out, buddy.”

Freck opened his mouth.

The White Queen administered the potion to all four beasts, then set the vial in a holder she found among the baking detritus. Alec assumed the Queen would have to create another potion to break the curse, but she didn't return to her magic-making counter. Instead, she crouched before Vanar, her white skirts billowing around her so that she resembled one of her cupcakes.

Just as the White Queen reached for Vanar, a man came into the kitchen. He was tall, muscular, deeply tanned, blond, exceedingly handsome, and wore a crown. He went up to the Queen and asked, “My dearest, have you seen my crown?”

The White Queen answered without looking up. “It is upon your head, my love.”

“Oh!” The man tapped the top of his head, felt the points of his crown, and grinned. “Well, that's a relief. Now I can do away with it.” He pulled the golden thing off and tossed it on a counter. “What are you up to now, my darling?”

“Healing evil curses, my sweet.”

“Ah, yes. Very good. Have you made hirisk cakes?”

“On the counter, dearest.”

“Lovely! Oh, hello, Son.” He patted the White Prince's shoulder. “So good to have you home, my boy! Oh, how I missed you while you were off on your trip.”

“Hello, Father. Thank you. It's good to be home.”

The White King made a delighted sound, hurried past his son, and picked up a cupcake. “My favorite.” He munched on the treat and leaned against the counter to watch his wife.

The White Queen was already doing her thing, although Alec couldn't tell what exactly that thing was. She simply held Vanar's face and stared at him. But as she stared, his big, furry body went blurry. Within the haze, the shape morphed, condensing and darkening. When everything went clear again, a naked man lay on the floor.

“Oh, well done, my dearest!” The King set his cake down and applauded. “Well done! That was the most splendid thing I've seen all week!”

“Thank you, my love.” The Queen stood and went to Freck.

“Uh?” Alec lifted a hand.

“I'll summon a servant to fetch some clothes,” Albion said to Alec.

“Oh, okay. Thanks.”

The White Prince nodded and strode to the doorway. As he called for clothing, his mother did her staring thing again with Freck, even though the beast's eyes were closed. Within five minutes, four sets of clothing had arrived, just in time to cover the sleeping men.

“Dress them, please.” The White Queen said to the servants. “Then help them to some guest rooms. They've been through a lot, so be gentle.”

“Yes, Your Majesty!” The servants bowed and then went about their work.

“You are a wonder, my dearest!” the King declared.

The White Queen patted a bead of sweat on her temple and smiled at her husband. “Thank you, my love. We're off to discuss the war now. Eat all the cakes you wish. I made them for you.”

“Ah, excellent! Thank you for the sweets, my sweet. And good luck with the war plans.”

“Thank you, my love.” The White Queen waved Quin, Torwen, Alec, and her son

into the corridor.

Alec looked back at the ex-bandersnatches. They were indeed the gardeners he'd met as a child. The ones who'd been dying the roses red. Those who the Queen of Hearts had sentenced to death.

“They'll be fine, Alec.” The Queen motioned him out, then lifted her hand expectantly.

Alec hurried to offer her his forearm.

The Queen laid her hand on Alec's forearm and glided down the corridor beside him. “You are a healer, Alec Hashimoto.”

“You know my entire name.”

“I know everything about you.” She winked at him. “Who do you think brought you here all those years ago?”

“You? Why?”

“Because I could sense your spirit. It was born in the wrong world. Not only that. It's special. We needed you here. I thought one visit might do the trick, but it only sped things up. You belong in Wonderland, Alec. You need it as much as it needs you.”

“But I have a business to run. I have a partner who's probably going crazy right now. And my parents. They'll miss—”

“This will sound harsh,” she cut him off. “But they will forget you. You will vanish from their minds, their lives condensing to push out every remnant of your existence.”

“What?!”

The White Queen nodded. “It is always the case with alien souls.”

“I'm not an alien!”

“Yes, you are. Your soul went to the wrong world, making you an outsider—an alien. Trust me, Alec. It's better that you never return.”

“But my family,” he whispered.

“I know it hurts. They love you. They won't forget easily. And you love them. That can't be taken away from you. But you will make a new family here. You will find new love.” She met his stare. “Or rather, an old love renewed.”

Alec grimaced. “Yeah. I found it in the worst possible person and then betrayed it. I broke his heart.”

“It was fated to be broken. Only then could it become big enough to love you.”

Alec's throat constricted on a sudden wave of longing. “If only that were true.”

“Have faith, Alec. You did what you were meant to do. All will be well.”

“I don't know about that.” His hand went to the hilt of the Vorpall Sword. “And I don't know how to use this thing either. I don't know if I should be your champion.”

The White Queen smiled serenely at Alec. “You already are my champion. And you've proven yourself in many ways. One of which was healing those men.”

“What men?”

“The men you brought with you, of course. The ones hidden inside beasts.”

“But you healed those men.”

“I finished their healing, Alec. You started it.”

Torwen, walking behind them with Quin and Albion, chuckled. Alec heard the I-told-you-so in that laugh, so he frowned at Tor over his shoulder, then at the Queen.

She giggled. “I know. You don't know. So much to learn! I will teach you. I'm a good teacher. Just ask Alby.”

Alec looked back at the White Prince, and he nodded. Looking at the Queen again, Alec asked, “Teach me what?”

“Why, how to use your magic, of course.”

“What magic?” Alec nearly screeched.

“The magic that's right here.” She tapped Alec's chest. “And here.” She tapped his forehead. “Healing magic. You are a healer like me. You are my champion in so many ways.”

“A healer?” Alec whispered. “And yet, all I've done is hurt the one I love most.”

The White Queen smiled again. “Great pain often accompanies a healing.”

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 10:57 am

Alec worried over the Queen's words all the way to the war room. Then his eyes went wide, focusing on the massive 3D map that stretched across the table in the center of the room. The White Queen flitted away over to that map and started pointing at areas as she spoke to Quinlen. Torwen joined them, but their voices became background noise for Alec. All he could do was stare at the little model version of the Hearts Fortress. Somewhere across Wonderland, in the real thing, the man he loved was plotting Alec's demise. Probably creatively.

“It's a lot to accept.” Prince Albion crossed his arms and stared at the map with Alec. “But she's right. You're a healer. I felt the magic in you that first night I saw you at dinner in Hearts.”

Alec turned to look at him. “We were planning on freeing you, you know?”

“Oh, yes. I know. Torwen came to me while I was imprisoned. He told me about the plan. But then the Knave of Hearts showed up.”

The title tore into Alec's chest. The Knave of Hearts. That's who Bax was to him now. Not Bax. Not even Baxenvir. And certainly not his betrothed. He was the Knave. The Queen's Champion. Alec's enemy. Oh, fuck. What if Alec had to face him before he reached the Jabberwocky? What if it came down to Bax or him? Could he hurt Bax even if it was in self-defense? But if it came to that and Alec died, all of this would be for nothing.

His stomach turned. Killing Bax? No. No, he couldn't. Maybe he could knock him out or something like that. If he was even good enough to beat the Knave of Hearts. Shit. Were judo and a pretty sword going to give Alec an edge? He decided to run if

Bax came at him. He'd run away and find the monster. That was his main objective.

"I thought he was taunting me," Albion went on, pulling Alec out of his dark thoughts. "That maybe he would take me out of my cell, give me a glimpse of escape, and then put me back. But then I saw his eyes." Albion looked at Alec. "He was different. I mean utterly different from the man who had captured me. That man had been cold. Merciless. But this man . . . there was hope in his eyes. The warrior had been vanquished. By you, Alec. Love conquered him."

"Conquered," Alec whispered, a memory teasing him. "No, I only tamed him for a little while."

"You saved him, Alec. You opened his eyes and poured hope into them. And he, in return, saved me. He told me he wanted the war to be over and he'd do everything in his power to ensure that the Queen remained happy and continued to forget about her desire to rule Wonderland."

"Can we not speak about the Knave of Hearts?"

"Certainly. I understand. Just know that he's not lost to you."

"Oh, yes, he is. I betrayed him. And that brought the Knave back. The man you glimpsed, the one who freed you, is gone."

"No, Alec. A love like that is never lost. It's always right where you left it. You just have to circle back."

"Circle back," Alec muttered. "Sure. I'll do that."

"Alec," the Queen called. "If you please, darling. You need to see where you'll be on the battlefield."

Alec grimaced at the White Prince. “It's going to be difficult to circle back to love when the man I left it with is intent on killing me.”

Albion chuckled. “We'll see.”

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 10:57 am

Quin started training Alec in swordplay that very afternoon even though they both hadn't slept in over a day. He went to bed exhausted, but grateful for it. Without that extreme weariness, he didn't think he'd have been able to sleep. As it was, his dreams were full of a pink-haired lover who kissed him, then held a blade to his throat.

Alec woke up in a sweat, panting. And erect.

“Oh, fuck me,” Alec muttered as he climbed out of his new bed and padded across thick rugs to the bathroom. “Why is it so bright everywhere? Fucking white. At least in Hearts, the red stopped at the bedroom doors.” He squinted his way to the toilet, did his stuff, and then showered.

By the time he was done, his erection had vanished. He got dressed in clothes that were too pale for his liking and went downstairs. After asking a servant for help, he found the dining hall where the White Chess Royals ate at a long, rectangular table with Commander Quinlen. It was all shades of white in there too. They may not have chess symbols plastered everywhere, but they still had a theme going on in the aptly named White Castle.

Even though he liked the monarchs of the White Kingdom, Alec couldn't deal with royal bullshit that early in the day. He slid onto a bench at a table near the door and braced himself on his forearms. A servant brought him a mug of coffee and asked him if he'd like some food. He nodded. While the servant was gone, four familiar men sat down on the bench across the table from him.

With a start, Alec realized they were the ex-bandersnatches. “Oh. Hey, guys. You're looking good.”

“It's all thanks to you, Sir Alec,” one of them said. Freck. The guy with the chocolate-brown hair and blue eyes was Freck.

And that blond one was Raelis. The other brunette was Jossen. And Vanar had red hair.

“Nah. I only helped.” Alec waved it away. “And I'm so glad that I could do that for you. Fuck, man. I can't even imagine what it was like for you.”

“You did more than help,” Vanar said. “We were lost in the minds of beasts, Alec. And then you found us. Your stare hooked our souls and pulled us up into consciousness. Without you, we never would have left that horrible place. We would have been loyal and obedient to that monster-queen until we died. You saved us and then you thought to bring us with you. Thank you.” He took Alec's hand and squeezed it. “Your kindness is why we're here. Thank you, Sir Alec.”

“We're all so grateful,” Jossen said.

“Who would have known that the little boy who once tried to help us would grow up and return to set us free?” Raelis shook his head. “You have always been a savior.”

“Aw, come on, guys. You're gonna make me cry.” Alec sniffed. “I'm glad you're better.”

“We are too.” Freck looked at the others, then said, “We've joined the White Army.”

“Do you even know how to fight?”

“Do you?” Vanar shot back. “We do what we must. And this is what we must do.”

Alec nodded and glanced up the hall at the White Queen. She was staring at him. As

she held his gaze, she stood up, then started toward him.

Alec sighed. "I think I'm about to do some of that must-stuff right now."

Raelis followed Alec's stare to the Queen, then shot to his feet. The other men got up as well, Alec standing last. They bowed to the Queen as she stopped beside them.

"Thank you for healing us, Your Majesty!" the gardeners, or ex-gardeners and current soldiers, said in unison.

"You are so very welcome in every way. Thank you for joining our cause. We fight for the good of all of Wonderland, and every soldier has worth."

"We are your men now, Your Majesty," Freck said. "We will fight for you."

"I accept your offer of loyalty and formally declare you to be subjects of the White Chess Kingdom." She inclined her head. "Now, I must speak with Alec."

Just then, the servant brought Alec's breakfast. Alec looked at the steaming plate of food, and then at the Queen.

"Bring it with you." She waved at the plate.

"Yes, Your Majesty." Alec picked up his plate and mug, then followed her out of the dining hall while the other men bowed again.

"I'm sorry to interrupt your breakfast, but we don't have much time." The Queen put on speed as soon as they were out of the dining hall. Her expression went grave. "I sense the Queen of Hearts. Or rather, her dark magic. It precedes her like a storm. She is near."

Alec straightened. “Oh, crap. I hoped for a little more time.”

“Yes. I as well.”

The Queen led him to the kitchen, and Alec was surprised to find that it was still empty.

Seeing his look, she said, “This is my private kitchen. Our cooks have another facility.”

“Oh.” Alec found a clear spot at a worktable, set his plate and mug down, then pulled up a silver stool. He started shoving food into his mouth. Something told him she wouldn’t allow him much time to eat.

Sure enough, the Queen set her delicate hands on the tabletop before him and squared her shoulders. “You need to learn the fundamentals of healing.”

He looked up.

“I can't make you a master in the time we have, but I can at least give you a feeling for it. Sometimes, feelings are more important than technique. Do you understand?”

“Yes, I think I do, Your Majesty.”

“Good. I know Quin wanted to teach you swordwork, but I sense that strengthening your magic will be more important. The sword wants to be wielded by you. It will guide you. But the magic inside you is wild. You need to collar it. Today. Now, listen closely.”

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 10:57 am

Alec stood atop the castle wall, staring at the Card Army that ranged across the open plain before the White Castle walls. Card soldiers stood in neat rows that formed orderly squares, spears and swords at the ready. Several groups of archers were further back, then there were mounted knights. And then, behind everyone, stood the Queen of Hearts on a grand war carriage fit with a viewing platform that elevated her several feet.

But Alec's stare went even higher—to the sky.

Because there, hovering above the Queen of Hearts, waiting upon her command, were the Jubjubs. Their commander was front and center, wearing his horned helmet. Bax had his sword at the ready and when he noticed Alec's attention, he pointed the weapon at him.

“I'm so fucking doomed,” Alec muttered.

He held a sword too. The sword. The Vorpall blade was in a special sheath made to accommodate its weird tip. It hung from a new belt that was buckled around Alec's shiny new armor. The White Queen's champion had to wear the best stuff even if he didn't know a damn thing about battle. The only combat he knew wouldn't be possible in this getup. Judo in armor? Nope, not a thing.

Alec looked up again, one champion eyeing another. But Bax wasn't his target.

As if the thought summoned the beast, a roar rent the air. Alec's body responded immediately, sending a jolt of fear down his spine. He nearly peed his metal pants. Because even though he couldn't see the creature, Alec knew what had made that

terrifying sound.

The Jabberwocky.

And there it was. A dragon. A fucking red dragon large enough to cast a shadow over half the Card Army. And it was a huge army. The monster undulated across the sky, flying over the Jubjubs, who raised their swords to the beast in salute.

Alec frowned at that. Saluting a monster? Well, he supposed there were stranger things done in Wonderland. And the beast didn't attack the card soldiers. They might think it was one of them, loyal to their queen. But Alec knew it was dark magic that held the dragon's leash. Evil commanded it.

Dragons had always fascinated Alec. He loved them. Whenever he saw them in movies, he sympathized with them, even if they were the bad guys. He always thought that animals, no matter what their size, shouldn't be judged by the standards of people. They only did what instinct told them to do. But this dragon wasn't a mere animal. It wasn't coming for Alec because Alec had blundered into its lair and threatened its young. This wasn't a dragon at all. It was the Jabberwocky. A true monster.

Alec's mind spun off, trying to distract him so he wouldn't run away screaming. He did run. He did move, however. Alec's body seemed to know exactly what to do. His hand pulled the Vorpal Sword free of its sheath and held it down along his thigh as he rapidly descended the stairs into the courtyard.

“Open the gates!” Alec called. There would be no hiding for him. Nor would he stand back and watch the battle from a safe spot like the Queen of Hearts. The time was at hand. Destiny awaited and all that hero crap. Alec just wanted this shit done.

Instead of obeying Alec, the guards at the gate looked at the White Queen for

instruction. She sat astride a white horse, wearing a fucking ballgown under her delicate silver armor. Beside her was her son, looking a bit more appropriately dressed. The White Prince had his sword out too, and he used it to salute Alec. Where the fucking King was, Alec had no idea.

“Open the gates!” the White Queen called. “And follow my champion! We will not cower behind walls. Today, we drive the Cards back to whence they came!”

Soldiers roared and moved forward in formation as Alec kept walking. He didn't pause on his way to the silver gates. He knew they'd open. And they did, just as he passed through.

The White Queen's Champion walked in a daze, something guiding his feet forward. Something lifting his hand. The one holding the Vorpall Sword. Alec felt destiny breathing down his neck. And he kept walking anyway. There was no fear anymore. Just a sense of relief that it would soon be over. Either dead or victorious—by the end of the day, Alec would be at peace.

“Bishops!” the White Queen shouted.

“Rooks to Field Five!” someone answered.

“Knights to Field Nine!”

“Pawns at the ready! Archers!”

And then Quin shouted, “Ravens to the sky!”

As black-winged men launched from the castle walls, the fighting began on the ground. Orderly rows clashed, battle cries rang out, and metal clanged. It should have distracted Alec. At the very least, he should have been concerned about someone

attacking him. But he knew they'd leave him to the Jabberwocky. He knew it because it was his destiny.

Sir Alec of the White Kingdom lifted his stare to the sky once more. Fate descended on crimson wings. Talons the size of a car opened. Teeth the length of his arm dripped saliva. A tail the length of a sycamore lashed at the air. Alec braced himself. The Vorpall Sword vibrated.

Snick-snack , it went. Snickity-snack.

Alec clutched it loosely, letting the blade sing and guide him. It was hungry.

The beast struck. Air whooshed out of Alec's lungs as claws closed around his body. The ground fell away. His vision filled with red scales. It didn't matter. The sword knew what to do.

The Jabberwocky had his chance. Then it was Alec's turn. He moved with the sword and sliced at the Jabberwocky's foot. The Vorpall cried, Snick-snack! Alec thrust it upward.

The beast screamed.

Falling. Tumbling to the ground. The horizon turned. Then Alec hit. The landing wasn't so bad. He hadn't been that far up. But hitting the ground winded him, and it took him a moment to gain his feet. That moment was all the Jabberwocky needed to reclaim him.

Roaring in fury, the Jabberwocky flew higher and higher with Alec in its grasp. Too high for Alec to risk another stab. Then the beast left the battle. Alec stared back at the fighting armies through a cage of claws. In particular, his stare went to the group of flying Jubjubs who were engaged in combat with a flock of Ravens. The Ravens

had already dropped their mad bombs, and card soldiers flung themselves about below, leaving formation to attack each other. But Alec couldn't have cared less about the madness. He locked his stare on the horned Jubjub. Bax dominated the sky, every swing sending a Raven hurtling to the ground.

But the Jabberwocky descended, and Alec had his own battle to focus on.

The monster had flown him behind enemy lines, up to a hill that overlooked the war. The Queen of Hearts pointed at them. They were even higher than her. Everyone could see them. She shouted something, but Alec couldn't make it out. Not that he cared. But the Jabberwocky did. It tossed Alec onto the grass, landed beside him, and extended its wings to shriek back at its mistress.

“Dumb beast,” Alec growled and swung.

The Vorpal Sword sliced into the Jabberwocky's belly. SNICK!

The Jabberwocky roared and knocked Alec onto his back. The fall sent the sword flying. It landed several feet away, still vibrating. Alec reached for it. As he turned, the beast tore his breastplate away. It went tumbling down the hill.

Opened like a can of tuna, Alec gaped up at the dragon. His senses returned in that instant, telling him that he'd been living in a fantasy. Fate? What the fuck was he thinking? That fucking caterpillar and his stupid vision were going to get Alec killed.

The monster lowered its head. Blood dripped down its belly, but it didn't seem to notice. It had one objective—to kill Alec. Jaws big enough to swallow Alec whole opened.

Alec did the only thing he could think of—he punched the monster in its scaly, red nose. The Jabberwocky reeled back and shook his head. Alec rolled away. He

scrambled for the sword. His finger clawed at the jeweled hilt. Off to the left, the barbed tip of the Jabberwocky's tail slammed onto the ground, sending clods of grass flying.

Then the monster yanked Alec away from the sword.

Digging into the grass, Alec tried to stop his momentum. But the beast had a hold of his leg and lifted him with it. Dangling upside down before the Jabberwocky, Alec floundered. He bent and swung, trying to hit the monster. He couldn't reach it. At last, he gave up and went still. Well, still-ish. He swung from the beast's talon, staring at its ferocious face. Side-to-side, that face went, taunting Alec. Then the motion stopped, leaving Alec focused on the Jabberwocky's eye. A single eye locked on him.

A very familiar green eye.

A chill rushed through Alec. His whole being, his entire soul, vibrated with fear and denial. His throat closed up. His heart raced. Sweat dripped up his spine instead of down. Up was down. Everything got turned around. Topsy turvy. That wasn't an animal's eye.

“Bax?” Alec whispered.

The Jabberwocky cocked its head and peered closer at Alec. It leaned in. Then roared.

Alec covered his ears but wouldn't look away. The White Queen's words spun through his mind. Her rapid lesson. More important than swordwork.

See the one you want to heal. Look. Search with your heart, not your mind. Find them there. Buried beneath pain. And remind them of what it is to be whole. That's all healing is—reminding the body to be what it should be.

But Alec was too shocked. Too broken. He could only stare into his lover's eyes and weep. Tears gathered under his brows, little salty pools, then overflowed down his forehead. His body bowed with pain and a sob burst out of him.

“Bax!” Alec cried. “My Bax! No!”

The Jabberwocky shrieked, lifting its head to the sky. Above them, the Jubjubs circled, keeping the Ravens away. Their commander, the one with the horned helmet, looked down and met Alec's stare. He was close enough now that Alec could see that it wasn't Bax in that helmet. No, it couldn't be, could it? Because Bax was the Jabberwocky. The very monster Alec was fated to kill.

No. Wait. Not kill. Conquer. That had been the Caterpillar's word. Conquer.

“I love you.” Alec reached for the beast. “No matter what. Remember, Bax? No matter what. I am still me no matter what name I use, and you are still you no matter what body you're in.”

And then Alec felt the White Queen's presence with him. Guiding him. He remembered her words again. Her lesson sank in. Mixed with the words of the Caterpillar. Destiny. Maybe it wasn't a load of bullshit after all. Maybe the fantasy was real.

“I love you, Bax. That's who you are. My Bax. My love. You belong to me!” Alec swung forward and grabbed the Jabberwocky's jaw. He wrapped his fist around an enormous tooth and held on. Angling his head upright, he met the Jabberwocky's stare and flung himself down, into it.

The battle vanished, sound dulling into silence. Alec sank into darkness. Falling as if into a deep lake. But sparks flashed in the inky black. Explosions. Pink and green.

“Bax!” Alec called.

He kept falling.

“Baxenvir! You come to me right now! You said you could find me anywhere. Here I am. Come and find me, baby!”

“Alec,” Bax whispered, the voice surrounding him, caressing him. “Traitor.”

“Yeah, yeah. I know. I fucked up. Let it go. You know you're on the wrong side.”

“The Queen of Hearts.”

“She did this to you, Bax. She's been conducting experiments on people. Transforming them with evil. She cursed those men and made them bandersnatches. And she made you, her champion, into the Jabberwocky.”

“I am a monster.”

The words sounded like a memory. Alec did recall them. Bax had said that before. Now it made more sense.

“No, baby,” Alec said. “She is the monster. You are her victim. All you wanted to do was to help her. Love her. But she made you into this. This is what her love does. It twists things. Taints them. Kills.”

“No!” Bax roared. “No!”

Alec went tumbling to the ground, his vision returning to the outside world. To the battle. It raged on, soldiers screaming in fury and pain. Madness running rampant. Shouts of tactical movements. The Queen of Hearts was laughing. The White Queen

rallied her army. But everyone knew that the only fight that mattered was on that hill.

And the rules of that fight had just changed.

“Bax!” Alec shouted. “Baxenvir! That's who you are. You're a man, not a monster. Come on, my love. Remember who you are!” Alec ran for the Jabberwocky.

It bashed him aside. Right next to the Vorpall Sword. Alec looked down at the gleaming vibrating blade. Was this it? Did he have to kill the man he loved to save Wonderland? No. No, he couldn't do it. Leaving Bax had been hard enough. To kill him after discovering how the Queen had used and abused him? That he was the greatest victim of all? No, Alec would not do it.

The Vorpall Sword went, snick-snack.

“Fuck you, sword!” Alec grabbed the thing and lifted it for the Jabberwocky to see.

Bax's eyes focused on the blade. He still bled from his belly, but the wound was sealing, the scales pulling inward. Those beloved eyes looked down at the closing wound, then up at Alec. The Jabberwocky's arms lowered and his head lifted. Those terrible wings, the wings Bax never wanted, fell in acceptance.

Alec went still. Everything did. All of Wonderland held its breath as the Jabberwocky, the most fearsome creature in the world, gave its life for love.

The Vorpall sang its hungry song. It vibrated, urging its wielder to sink it deep into the wound it had already created. Push it up, into the monster's heart. End this!

“Never!” Alec shouted, his voice echoing across the battle. He tossed the sword aside and opened his arms. “I am yours. You are mine. No matter the name or body we take. I will never hurt you, Bax.”

“Kill him!” The Queen of Hearts shrieked. “Kill Alec!”

The Jabberwocky roared and launched itself at its prey. The great head came down, the body undulating forward, and Alec went under. Soldiers cried out. The Queen of Hearts was back to laughing. But Alec lay protected in a cocoon of scales and claws, the war blocked from view. His vision held only the face of his lover.

“Bax.” Alec set his palms on the scales below one giant eye.

Magic rose between them—a great, sparkling thing. Powerful and determined. Alec sent it into Bax, and then he followed it. Not with his mind. There was no need for that now. He'd already found Bax. No, he followed the magic with his lips.

Alec, Champion of the White Kingdom, kissed Baxenvir, Champion of the Hearts Kingdom, on his vast cheek. Just a press of lips against scales, but within that kiss was the magic of two worlds and a love that united them.

An explosion of crimson sparks burst outward from Alec and the Jabberwocky. It rained out and down over the battling armies. The fighting stopped. All stared up at the erupting hill. Arms lifted to shade eyes. But no one looked away. Even the monarchs gave their full attention to the lovers. All would be affected by their fate.

Alec's body shuddered from the rapid-fire magic. He fell to his knees. And still, he held on to the Jabberwocky. He didn't look away. That great green eye shrunk as Alec watched. The scales beneath his palms retracted. Skin rose to replace them. The beat of a wild heart came through this fresh flesh. Muscular arms circled Alec and pulled him close. Lips met lips.

And the explosion settled into a fall of sparks. They hit the grass and sizzled. Fireworks dying before doing any damage. But neither man paid them any heed. Love had a hold of them. And magic. But then, love is the greatest magic. Alec knew

it wasn't his healing magic that brought Bax back. It was his kiss. The fairy tales had it right. A kiss could break curses. But only if it was backed by a love that defied all magic. A love that could always be circled back to.

Alec eased away from Bax and cupped the Knave's face in his hands. No, not the Knave. Bax would never be the Knave of Hearts again. That man had died with the Jabberwocky.

“Conquered,” Alec whispered.

“What's that, my love?” Bax leaned in, his eyes filling with tears.

“The prophecy. It foretold that I would conquer the Jabberwocky. Not kill it.”

Bax's grin went as wide as one of Torwen's. “Then you fulfilled your destiny, Alec. You conquered the monster and saved the man.”

“I guess we're even now.” Alec winked.

Bax burst out laughing and then yanked Alec into another kiss.

That's when the Queen of Hearts started screaming.

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“Kill them!” the Queen of Hearts shouted. “Kill them all!”

No one moved.

“I said, attack! Kill them all! We will raise this kingdom to the ground!”

The Jubbys circled the hill above their commander, coming down to a landing. Bax stood up, helping Alec to his feet. Baxenvir's body felt different. His mind. Everything was clearer. Sharper. More in focus. He looked over the heads of the card soldiers and met his queen's stare. No, not his queen. She had cursed him.

Images returned to Bax. Still-shots of battle. He was above the soldiers but not in his armor. He flew on wings of leather and snatched soldiers from the ground with great claws. Blood coated his tongue. He knew only lust for it. More and more. Kill. Kill for her. His mistress. The Jabberwocky had loyalty for one woman. That was all. The woman who created it.

Bax took Alec's hand and started for the Queen. But one of his Jubbys stepped into his path. He met the man's stare. It was Driss, his next in line. Then Driss bowed and pulled off the horned helm that Bax usually wore. Next came his armor. He cast aside his breastplate, gauntlets, and belt.

“Driss, get out of my way,” Bax said.

“I would never stand in your way, Commander.” Driss removed his tunic and handed it over. “I just don't want you facing that bitch naked.”

Bax looked down at himself, then chuckled. “I didn't even notice.” He took the tunic and pulled it on. “Thank you.”

“We are with you, Commander,” someone else said.

Then the Jubjubs took their marching formation behind Bax and Alec.

Bax looked at Alec.

“Nobody likes her, babe,” Alec said in that strange way of his. That human world way. “Only you.”

“Not me.” Bax headed down the hill with Alec. “Not anymore.”

The Card Army parted, the Queen going silent at last, and all watched as the Queen's Champion—both of them—strode across the battlefield and up to the Queen of Hearts' war carriage. She was in red leather, head to toe, with matching armor over her clothes. Atop her head was the Hearts Crown—a pointed band holding a crimson heart aloft at the center. She had added the other card symbols—two on one side and one on the other, leaving points for chess pieces. Bax would make sure that the crown never got completed.

“Baxenvir, my knave.” The Queen came down from her perch and strode up to Bax.

The ex-Knave of Hearts hauled back his fist and punched his old queen in the face.

Stumbling back, the Queen of Hearts gaped at her champion. “Bax, what are you doing?”

“You dare to ask that after Alec broke the curse you laid upon me?” Bax snarled and released Alec's hand. “Years! It's been years since I could think without your voice in

my head. Years since I didn't lose myself on the battlefield and come back, wondering what had happened. I thought I was broken. I thought my actions were so horrendous that my mind couldn't accept them. That I just blocked it out. But that wasn't it at all. I remembered nothing because I did nothing. Nothing but become your monster!"

Bax grabbed the Queen by the throat and squeezed. She clawed at him, scoring his skin with her long nails until he bled, but he didn't care. He kept squeezing.

Darkness burst from the Queen of Hearts, exploding out from her in a cloud that sent Bax tumbling. Alec tried to catch him but ended up on the ground with him. People shouted. Jubjubs gave their battle cry and formed a line between Bax and the Queen. They held that line for two seconds. And then the darkness tossed them aside too.

Bax shot to his feet as the Queen of Hearts stalked over to him, every step incinerating the vibrant green grass beneath her. Black fog seeped from her fingers and trailed off her hair. Her skin, hair, and eyes went black, evil staining her to her core. She had become the darkness.

"Oh, fuck," Alec said.

Bax glanced at the man who had betrayed him, then saved him. The love of his life. Alec had pulled Bax out of the pit the Queen had thrown him in, using love like a ladder. And that makes a bond that nothing can break. His loyalty wouldn't be divided. It was all Alec. From that day forward.

And there was no way that Bax would ever let evil touch his Alec.

With a roar, Bax ran for the Queen. She flicked her hand, and his feet left the ground. He floated upward, darkness twirling around him. And then the darkness constricted. Bax cried out, then wheezed, the air strangled from his lungs.

“Bax!” Alec ran forward. And then he was rising to join Bax.

Bax couldn't even protest. All he could do was reach for his lover—push a hand through the weave of evil to clasp Alec's. Alec reached back, and they gripped each other, their stares meeting through the fog.

The Queen laughed. “How sweet. Yes, die together. Two traitors. You deserve each other. I will laugh as—”

Bax shifted his stare back to the Queen. She wasn't there. He looked left, then right, and found her under a roaring pile of card soldiers. Spears lifted and descended. Sword struck. Daggers dug into flesh. More soldiers piled on as those beneath rolled away.

Bax gasped as he fell to the ground, still holding Alec's hand. Alec crawled to him, and they clutched each other as they watched the darkness try to devour those who attacked the Queen.

But there were too many. Soldiers went flying back only to be replaced by more. Even Bax's Jubbys got their strikes in, flying in to stab at the Queen from above. Battle cries rose, but not for Hearts. The soldiers cried out his name.

“Baxenvir!” they shouted. “For Baxenvir!”

Bax got to his feet, helping Alec up and then tucking him in against his side. He lifted his chin and refused to look away, even when tears streamed down his cheeks. This was justice. And justice is best witnessed by those who were wronged.

“Baxenvir!” another soldier shouted and brought down his sword.

“Baxenvir!”

On and on it went. Impossibly long. So long that the darkness had to concede. The trailing snakes of black mist shriveled and then vanished altogether. Only then was the Queen's body revealed, the pile of soldiers folding back like pages in a book. But the strikes didn't cease. The soldiers kept coming, stabbing and slicing at the Queen with nothing hindering them. Alec flinched to see the bloody mess of the body they hacked at. But Bax only focused harder. He burned the image of the dead queen into his mind, hoping that it would balance all the bad he'd done. Fill in the gaps. Ease his conscience.

At last, when every soldier in the Card Army had taken a turn, the attack stopped. The body lay in a black ring of burned grass, the soil turned to mud by blood. The Queen stared sightlessly up at the sky, arms out to the sides, hands open. She had a look of surprise on her face, as if she couldn't believe that anyone could hate her this much. The darkness still stained her, but that was beneath a layer of blood. She was dead. The Queen of Hearts was dead.

Alec handed Bax the Vorpall Sword.

Bax lifted a brow at Alec as he took it.

“Monsters never die easily,” Alec said. “Off with her head!”

“Off with her head!” a soldier repeated the cry.

And then everyone chanted it, “Off with her head! Off with her head!”

Bax strode barefoot over to the dead queen, his toes squishing in her blood, and stood at her side. He looked down at her, pitying her for just a moment. What a terrible end she had come to. So much animosity aimed at her. At least she was coated in her favorite color. Bax lifted the Vorpall Sword.

Everyone went quiet. The chanting stopped.

The blade vibrated. “Snick-snack,” it said. “Snickity-snack. Give me the head of the woman in black.”

Alec gasped. He could hear the voice too! Bax looked at his great love and remembered the blade's song. It had sung these words earlier, and Alec thought the sword hungered for Bax. He had tossed it aside in denial. But it wasn't Bax who the blade wanted. The reason the Queen of Hearts had guarded the sword so diligently was because she knew. She knew it hungered for her. For the darkness inside her.

“Snick-snack.” The blade was impatient. “Snick-a-snack. Give her a whack. Take the dark and send it back!”

Bax brought the sword down.

The silver blade sliced through flesh and bone with ease, but that wasn't its purpose. While in her throat, the blade glowed. That glow dulled a little as darkness seeped from the Queen's corpse and into the sword. But as the evil entered that shining silver, the blade vibrated and gulped. The jewel in its hilt came to life, glowing like a miniature sun. Snick-snack sounds came again, and Bax realized it was a mimicry of eating. The Vorpal consumed the darkness.

Bax let go of the sword and stepped back. The hilt fell, but the blade remained embedded in the Queen. Sucking, eating, devouring. He pressed his lips together and pushed down the sourness in his stomach. Bax was the wielder and witness—he wouldn't look away. He had a feeling that he'd need these memories. Especially late at night, when the wind howled, and the darkness threatened to come alive. He'd need to remember that the Queen of Hearts was dead.

Alec took Bax's hand.

Bax finally looked away from the Queen. And when he met Alec's stare, he knew he'd never look back. It was forward from this moment on. Monsters and madness lay behind him. Love and light called him forward. He turned away from the past with Alec, and they walked away from the dead queen to the living one. The White Chess Queen waited for them, a serene smile on her face despite the blood that stained her white dress.

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Alec leaned into Bax as they sat together on a delicate white couch across from the Royals of the White Chess Kingdom. They'd been talking about land and people and shit like that. Alec only half listened. He was too drained. Too fucking relieved. Too astounded.

Shit had gotten real. And really weird. But, sitting there with Bax, with it all behind them, he could only feel grateful.

“Do you accept?” the White Queen asked.

Alec blinked and refocused. “What? Sorry, what is he accepting?”

The White Prince chuckled until his mother shot him a chiding look.

“Alec is still in shock.” The White Queen shook her head at her son. “He's performed his first magnificent feat of magic today. And it was amazing, Alec. Well done. You are an apt pupil.”

“Yes, well done, Alec!” the White King declared.

“Uh, thank you, Your Majesties,” Alec said. “But what's going on?”

“The Card Army has chosen representatives. They came to us and announced that they've decided upon a new ruler.” The White Queen looked at Bax.

“Bax?” Alec looked at Bax too. “They want you to be king?”

“It appears so,” Bax murmured, his forehead folding down into a frown.

“What do you want?” Alec asked.

Bax's expression went blank. His lips parted as he met Alec's stare. “Me?”

“Yes, you, babe. This is your decision. Do you want to rule the Card Kingdoms?”

“No,” Bax said immediately. “I think the kingdoms should be given back to their rightful rulers. At least, those who are still alive. Those without living monarchs should select their own.”

“I'm all for democracy.”

“I believe that's what they've done,” the White Queen said.

“He doesn't want it,” Alec said. “And he's done doing shit for everyone else. It's time Bax lived for himself.”

The White Queen chuckled. “You have a staunch protector there, Baxenvir.”

Bax grinned at Alec. “It goes both ways.”

Alec nodded. “That's right, baby.”

“But I wasn't trying to pressure your Bax,” the White Queen said. “You two would make wonderful kings. With Baxenvir's charisma and your magic, you could make the Hearts Kingdom into a place where people want to live. And it could be only Hearts that you rule.” She lifted her pale brows. “It doesn't have to be all the Card Kingdoms. I agree they need to be divided back into what they were and ruled individually.”

Alec looked at Bax. “What do you want to do, baby?”

“I want to marry you.”

Alec held up his hand, showing off his ring. “Done deal. That's happening. You just tell me when and where. But what about after that? Do you want to live in Hearts?”

Bax frowned and looked down at his lap. “If we . . . we would have to change . . . everything.”

“Total gut job.” Alec nodded. Then he saw Bax's confusion and explained, “Take it all out and start fresh. Scoop the guts out of that castle.”

“Yes.” Bax's expression went pensive. “I could eliminate the youth program and turn the barracks into a real orphanage. I could hire people to properly care for the children—people who actually like children. The orphans would have love.” He grinned at Alec. “And toys. Happiness.”

“And no children would ever get taken from their families.”

“No. Never again.” Bax leaned closer to Alec. “And I could reorganize the army. I could find all the people she hurt and—”

“Whoa.” Alec grabbed Bax's hand. “You do not have to right her wrongs. Just be you. If you want to do this, I will help you. I will support you. But it has to be for you, Bax. Not for her. Not even to avenge those she wronged. That's done already. The army took their pound of flesh and then you finished it. Now is the time for a new beginning. And you don't have to be the one who changes things. Someone else can do that. We could build a little cottage in the Tulgeren Woods and live a simple life. We could be happy there.”

Bax smiled, the future shining in his eyes. Alec could see their life together. Bax chopping wood while Alec was in the garden harvesting vegetables. Alec would give up his old life for this one. His business that he had worked so hard for, his friends, and even his family. All for Bax. Let his memory fade from their minds. An eternity with the man he loved was worth it. There, in Wonderland, they'd live forever. Hell, if they got tired of living simply, they could change it up.

“It doesn't have to be forever,” Alec gave voice to his thoughts. “We can live in the woods awhile, then move to the coast. We can do whatever we want to do.”

“That sounds amazing,” Bax whispered.

Alec stared at him. Then he laughed.

“You know what I'm going to say, don't you?” Bax asked.

“Yeah, babe. I know you.” Alec leaned in and kissed Bax. “Why live a simple life in the woods when you could be a king?”

“I like the thought of destroying everything she built and starting again.” He lifted his chin at Alec. “What did you call it?”

“A gut job. We need to gut the fortress.”

“The fortress, the army, all of it. It will be a lot of work.”

“Yup. But we can do it together.” Alec wove his fingers with Bax's. “So, it's to be the fortress instead of the woods, Your Majesty?”

Bax laughed. “I think the Kingdom of Hearts could use two kings.”

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Two weeks after the Battle of Chess, Alec strode down an aisle in the freshly decorated throne room of the Hearts Fortress toward his waiting groom. Baxenvir wore white and Alec wore black, but both had pink hearts embroidered over their tunics. It was the new, softer symbol of the Hearts Kingdom. Pink hearts instead of red.

Bax stood on the royal dais before their matching thrones, the backs topped by only hearts. The crowning would come later, after they were married. Bax insisted on that order. But it was just a formality. The entire kingdom knew who their kings were—the men who had brought joy and peace back to Wonderland.

Alec nodded at the newly crowned kings and queens of Spades, Clubs, and Diamonds. The old monarchs of Spades and Clubs had been in hiding. Their people welcomed them back, happy to have the rightful rulers in charge again. However, the citizens of Diamonds had to choose their new rulers. Elected monarchs—it was a new day in Wonderland.

Alec had met all the monarchs for the first time the day before, when they had arrived for the wedding. They seemed like nice people. As long as they weren't murderous psychopaths hellbent on ruling all of Wonderland, he'd be happy.

Alec's stare met that of his groom and he amended his last thought. As long as Baxenvir loved him, he'd be happy. He was done putting anything before Bax. From that day forward, his husband would come first. Even if it meant all of Wonderland suffered.

It probably wouldn't come to that. Not with Bax in charge. Sure, Alec would be King

too, but they both knew it would be Bax giving the commands. Alec would focus on his magical studies. He was done cooking food for people. Now, he wanted to learn a new type of cookery—the delicate art of potion making. He wanted to embrace the magic he never knew he had. Alec was a healer.

Despite the residents being immortal, there was a surprising need for healers in Wonderland. Immortal didn't mean invulnerable. Alec had witnessed that firsthand. For a moment, he saw the beheaded body of Queen Satana. Then he shoved the image away, refusing to allow her to touch his joy in any way.

The Queen was dead. Long live the Kings. The Kingdom of Hearts rejoiced in the new regime. So many residents had come to the fortress for the wedding that tents had to be erected in the freshly planted gardens. Oh, yeah, the roses were gone, even the vines that had coated the keep. All gone. And a good washing revealed that the stone walls beneath those roses weren't gray at all, but a creamy yellow. Alec felt as if he could breathe again. In so many ways.

But the day was bittersweet. His family and friends in the human world were already forgetting him. He would soon be like a dream to them—someone glimpsed when half-awake. But he would remember them forever. Maybe that was enough.

Looking at Bax, Alec knew it was. It was more than enough. He was damn lucky. He got to live forever in a world without war with the man he loved. And they even lived in a palace. Could it get any better? No. No, it couldn't. Alec pushed aside his pain and focused on the pleasure. There would be so much of it that day. And especially that night. He grinned as he strode up the steps to his groom.

Bax grinned back as he took Alec's hand. Then they turned to face the White Chess Queen.

She had become Alec's mentor, teacher, and dear friend. It seemed natural that the

White Queen be the one to unite Bax and Alec in marriage. As usual, she looked resplendent in a white gown with hints of silver glinting in the fabric and her coiled hair. Diamonds glittered at her throat, but they were pink diamonds in the shape of hearts—a tribute to her friends.

“Welcome, everyone.” Queen Lucinda of the White Chess Kingdom spread her arms wide. “What a frabjous day this is!”

The assemblage of royals, courtiers, soldiers, and even an ex-spy applauded and cheered.

“I’m delighted and honored to perform this special ceremony,” the Queen went on. “Alec and Baxenvir have become so dear to me. Their happiness is my happiness, and their love is something special to behold.” She clasped her hands to her chest. “They have gone through so much to be together, crossing worlds, kingdoms, and the barriers of betrayal. They have fought each other and fought beside each other. They have been cursed, blessed, and redeemed. They are warriors, heroes, and kings.”

More cheering came.

“But today, they are only two people in love. And they stand here, before the people who matter most to them, to share this love with us and honor it. Please, join me in paying tribute to the greatest power in all of Wonderland—love.”

No applauding came at that. Instead, people sighed and smiled or leaned over to kiss their loved ones. The moment was a quiet one of appreciation and contemplation. Bax and Alec weren’t the only ones who had suffered and survived.

“Alec comes from a world that differs from ours in many ways,” the White Queen said. “But it is also very similar. One of those similarities is marriage. In particular, the wedding ceremony. In the human world, people in love do what Alec and

Baxenvir are doing now. They stand in a special place, before witnesses, and they make vows to each other. Those vows may be different in Alec's world than they are here, but the sentiment is the same. The goal is the same. It's meant to unite two people forever.”

Alec smiled, thinking that forever in Wonderland was different too. It was truly forever. He looked at Bax and thanked fate for that. One human lifetime wouldn't have been enough for them.

“And so, they will make their vows to each other now. Here. Before you special witnesses. In their revived kingdom. Baxenvir?” The White Queen motioned at Bax. “Claim your beloved.”

Bax took both of Alec's hands and met his gaze. “I thought my first sight of you was from a distance. I saw your arrival at the Hearts Fortress and even from hundreds of feet away, I knew you were special. I knew you'd be special to me. What I didn't realize was that we had met each other long before that day. You crossed worlds twice, and both times brought us together. What greater proof of destiny can there be?” Bax lifted Alec's hands and kissed them both over his knuckles. “Sure, you betrayed me heartlessly.” Bax smirked.

A shocked laughter spread through the room.

“But I know now that it was necessary. The pain was a purging. It removed the poison from my blood and cleared my vision. And then, when I was lost inside a monster, you called me home. To you. You saved me with a kiss. Today, I ask for one more kiss, my love. Another kiss to save my life. Because I cannot live without you by my side.”

“Bax,” Alec whispered.

“I love you, Alec. I vow to love you forever. No matter what happens. As you once vowed to me. I will never toss your love away again. I will never abuse it or dishonor it. I swear to be faithful to you and our love forever. If you will take me as your husband.”

“I will,” Alec said immediately. “I’ve already taken you, babe. You’re mine. It’s done.”

Bax chuckled. “This is part of the ceremony, Alec.”

“Yeah, I know. I just wanted to be clear.”

“Alec, perhaps you’d like to make your vows now?” Queen Lucinda suggested, her lips curling up.

Alec smiled from her to his groom. “Baxenvir. My Bax. The last person I should have fallen in love with was you. I was warned against it, my own mind doing most of that warning. But you can’t stop a love like ours. It’s a force of nature. Like the tide or the breeze.”

“You’re more like a storm, my love.” Bax winked.

“We are like a storm,” Alec corrected. “We came together violently, then parted with as much ferocity. But when the bluster died down, we were left lying in each other’s arms. And there is no better place for me to be. I love you, Bax. Always have. Call it destiny. Call it whatever you will. I don’t care what brought us together. All that matters is that we stay this way. So, today, tomorrow, and every day that follows, I vow to do whatever I must to keep us together. I swear that you will be my priority now and forever. No one and nothing will ever come before you. Not friends, family, or entire worlds. You come first. I vow to treasure you, support you, and listen to you, even when you whine.”

“I do not whine!”

“Uh, yeah you do.” Alec stretched up on his toes to kiss Bax's cheek. “But it's adorable.”

“Well, in that case. Go on.”

“I vow to bake you sweets when you crave them and sing you back to sleep if you have a nightmare. I vow to always think about your needs, not only mine. And I swear that wherever you are, that's where my home will be. If you will take me as your husband.”

“I will.” Baxenvir yanked Alec into his arms and, amid deafening cheers, sealed their vows with a kiss.

When the kissing and cheering finally ceased, the Kings of Hearts faced the gathering, hands held and hearts united.

The White Chess Queen stood behind them and spread her arms once more. “I present to you the newly married Baxenvir and Alec of the Hearts Kingdom!”

And then the Kings of Hearts walked down the aisle together, going forth into a future that had surpassed fate. They were now beyond the prophecy, in open waters where anything was possible. And wasn't that even better than destiny?

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“My love. My husband.” Bax rolled into Alec's arms and pulled him close.

Their lips met, united, and vibrated with passion. Tongues slid together, as did their bodies. Their naked, powerful bodies. Echoes of the celebration came to them through the open balcony doors, but Bax paid the sound no mind. He was focused on his husband, writhing with Alec in their marriage bed—a new, solid piece carved with hearts. But the symbol didn't remind Bax of her anymore. They had claimed it, he and Alec, and made it their own.

“I love you so much,” Alec murmured as he gently pumped against Bax. “I can't believe I get to have you forever.”

“We deserve forever, Alec.” Bax nibbled his way down Alec's throat, then pushed him onto his back so he could suck on a dusky nipple.

“Oh, fuck! Bax!” Alec gripped Bax's hair.

Bax groaned around the pert bud in his mouth, then cried out when Alec's hand wrapped around his cock. Always so impatient, his lover. No, his husband. They were joined in so many ways now. Hearts, souls, bodies, all of it. They truly belonged to each other. And Alec needed to unite their bodies more fully. It made Bax grin against his husband's flesh. Because he needed it too. But first, more kissing!

With a growl, Bax rolled on top of Alec and claimed his mouth again. Alec still had his cock in his grip, stroking it. So, Bax reached between them and pumped Alec. They groaned and writhed together, tongues softening as passion rose. The wet, strong, hot muscles in their mouths fascinated Bax. He could twine his tongue with

his husband's for hours.

This man had given up so much for Bax. Alec didn't speak of it, but Bax knew. He knew Alec had a life in that other world. Friends. A family. He wished he could meet them. Maybe one day, he would. As monarchs of Wonderland, they had the right to travel between worlds. And Alec was training with the White Chess Queen. She could teach him the art of opening the path.

Bax eased back and stared at Alec. He knew that his husband's memory would vanish from the minds of those he left behind. Maybe it was better to let them forget instead of drawing it out. But they could still visit, and Alec could check on the people he loved.

Alec moaned and pumped up into Bax's fist, drawing his thoughts away from the other world. He needed to focus on the now. The here. His love. The love that had begun innocently, in two little boys, then blossomed into something beautiful and mature. Something very sexy.

“My Alec,” Bax said, removing his hand from Alec's shaft. “Hold yourself open for me, my love. I want to taste you.”

With a groan, Alec pulled back his legs, holding them by the knees, and spread himself. Bax rose to his knees and stared down at the beauty before him. Lean thighs wide, golden skin sprinkled with dark hair, a nest of curls at the base of that huge cock. It all pleased Bax. Made his mouth water.

Getting into position, Bax glanced at his husband and grinned. “You have the biggest cock I've ever seen. I want to choke on it.”

Alec gaped at him. “Holy shit, you're nasty! I fucking love it.” He wriggled. “Choke on me, baby!”

Chuckling, Bax went down on his elbows, then down on his husband, sucking first on the plum-shaped tip of that thick rod. He moaned as the salty taste awakened his tongue, then flicked the tip of his tongue into the slit on that delicious head.

“Bax!” Alec shouted.

Reveling in the rally cry, Bax gulped, going down as far as he could, then relaxing his throat. He pushed further. Choked. Shuddered in delight at the feeling. That constriction was thrilling. He drew back, then went down again.

Alec started pumping up, pulling back on his legs and undulating his hips. “Oh, fuck! Oh, fuck, yes! Fucking suck that cock! Choke on me.”

Bax had to pull back to laugh.

“Hey! This is serious nasty talk!” Alec glowered at Bax. “Get back to it, husband!”

“Yes, my love.” But Bax was still grinning when he sucked his husband into his mouth again.

Up and down, the girth of that cock stretching his lips, Bax worked his husband in a haze of bliss. And when he eased back at last, he saw that Alec floundered in the same haze, his head rolling from side to side and jaw hanging open. Using Alec's distraction, Bax grabbed the bottle of runi oil from the bedside table and coated himself. He corked the bottle and put it aside, then lifted Alec's balls with one hand and stroked the remains of the oil over his entrance.

Alec's eyes popped open, and he yanked back further on his legs so that his ass left the bed and his hole angled up. “Bax. Now!”

“Easy, sweetheart.” Bax slipped his finger into his husband and gently prodded.

“Let's get you open for me.”

“I'm good! Just fuck me!”

“Enough with the nasty talk,” Bax said. “I want to hear words of love when I take my husband for the first time.”

Alec blinked, then met Bax's stare. “Bax.”

“Alec,” Bax put strength into his tone.

“I love you, Bax. Husband. Make love to me.”

“That's better.” Bax grinned and circled his finger, stretching Alec more. “Does this feel good?”

“Oh, yeah.” Alec licked his lips and pulled his legs out to the sides until they were nearly on the bed. “More, baby.”

“How about this?” Bax bent and laved Alec's hole.

“Baxenvir!” Alec shuddered. “Oh, fucking God!”

“Don't come yet, love,” Bax murmured against Alec, then slipped his tongue in.

“What?!” Alec screeched. “I can't control that. Oh, Bax. You gotta get in me. Please!”

Baxenvir finally succumbed to his husband's pleas. He gave Alec's entrance one last kiss, then got on his knees. Cock in hand, he stared at Alec's face, memorizing every line, every nuance. Then he focused on those striking eyes.

“I love you, Alec.” Bax made them one.

“I love you!” Alec shouted back.

“Say it again.” Bax started thrusting. “Open your eyes and say it to me. Call me your husband. Tell me who you belong to.”

Alec opened his eyes, met Baxenvir's stare, and said, “I belong to you, my love. My husband. My . . . Bax!” He came with Bax's name on his lips, roaring it to Wonderland.

And Bax shuddered with the clenching of Alec's channel, his body and mind filled with pleasure but his heart full of love. He thrust through Alec's orgasm, then kept going, making love to his husband until he brought him full circle, back into arousal.

With a cry, Alec rose off the bed and shoved Bax onto his back. Overtaken by desire, he rode Bax, his hair thrashing about him wildly and his cock bouncing on Bax's belly. Bax grinned, his hands going to Alec's hips, and let his love ride him. He waited until he was close to coming, the passion pulling up his sacs, and then drove himself over the edge with four words.

“I love you, husband.”

The words were like a spell, enchanting Alec as well, and the Kings of Hearts merged in love and vows, came together in lust as well. Their cries of completion echoed out of the Hearts Fortress and across Wonderland.

Somewhere in the fortress below, a Chess Sir Cat smiled.

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 10:57 am

Cries of “Callooh!” and “Callay!” came on the frabjous day of the crowning of the Kings of Hearts.

All of the kingdom celebrated and no one missed their old monarch.

The scent of sweets filled the fortress, replacing the cloying odor of roses, and the courtiers laughed freely without fear of reprisal—or beheading.

The Kings were as resplendent as they were upon their wedding day, greeting their people on the fortress wall in their golden crowns topped only with pink tourmaline hearts.

The citizens of the Hearts Kingdom didn't have to hope that the Kings would be good for them.

They had already changed things for the better in the weeks leading up to their crowning.

The cloud of terror that had oppressed all the Card Kingdoms was gone, each kingdom returned to their rightful rulers so they could be looked after properly.

Even the Chess Kingdoms shared in the peace and joy, their citizens freed of the threat of war.

Things only got better from that day forward.

The reign of King Baxenvir and King Alec of Hearts became the greatest of all reigns

in the Card Kingdoms' history.

With Baxenvir's wisdom and Alec's kindness, the people prospered and languished in their peaceful paradise.

The borogroves were mimsy and the mome raths outgrabled.

No one galumphed about and there were no frumious beasts with the eyes of men.

All the Animal Houses agreed that there had never been and never would be such wondrous kings as these.

In short, Wonderland became the world it was meant to be.

All thanks to the hidden magic of one little boy who fell down a hole and then in love.