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The Real Alice

by Keri Brauner

Alice stepped through the door. Before her lay a world of wonder, and wildly brilliant color. The vastness of the forest lay before her, and the glittering city could be seen above the forest in the mountains far away. The forest looked sinister, Alice turned around, afraid to go into the forest alone, but she found she was standing on the edge of a cliff overlooking a turbulent river and some not so pleasant looking black rocks at the bottom. She looked back the way she had come and saw nothing but a black void with slight shimmers here and there; there was nowhere to go but forward. Alice stepped into the forest. There was a clear-cut path, but she was still unsure of going in alone. The last time she was here, Charlie had been with her, but they had come down before they could get too far into the forest. She began to walk along the path, she had an insatiable curiosity that the forest and what lay beyond promised to satiate.

A few hours later Alice was in the most densely growing part of the forest. She had not strayed from the path, but the trees grew tighter together the further she walked, this was far beyond where she and Charlie had already explored. The closely packed trees leaned over her, branches growing longer and wider, blocking out the sunlight. Now in semi-darkness Alice found herself wishing for the comfort of Charlie's house, his den lit by candles, casting shadows on the walls, which she would pretend scared her so Charlie would pretend to protect her. She shook her head, shaking the memory of that night out of her head, and continued along the path.

The sun was setting by the time she made it out of the forest. She was sure it had been night when she left, but time was different here. She was close enough to the city to see the glittering spires and giant billboards, although she couldn't yet read them at this distance. Before her was a pasture of pink flowers filled with...cows?

Alice was almost positive cows weren't supposed to be purple, or have blue spots. They matched her dress, but they stood out against the land, and what she had mistaken for a field of flowers was actually pink grass. It was a kaleidoscope of weirdness she didn't know existed in her brain.

Through the grass came a large white rabbit in a twill coat, carrying a red-gold pocket watch. He hopped right past Alice, then nose up sniffing, turned around and hopped up to be level with her.

"Who are you?"

"I'm...um...Alice...What's up with the cows?"

"Yes, quite irregular. They've been illegally modified. Purple is illegal in Wonderland."

"Wonderland?"

"Yes, of course. Naturally." He looked at her as if deciding whether she was dumb or just insane. "You're in Wonderland. And you're wearing purple. Only thieves and prostitutes wear purple. Are you a prostitute?"

"No. I just didn't know purple was illegal here. Do you have something I could change into? I really don't want to offend anyone, I'm not sure what they'll do, I've never been to Wonderland before."

"Hmmm...never been here before, yet you are here, and you do look familiar. Are you sure you've never been here before?"

"Of course I am."

"Hmmm...you best change quickly, we don't want to be late."

"I don't have anything else."

The rabbit looked at her, wiggling its nose in what appeared to be annoyance. "Very well, my house is just over the hill. I suppose I could lend you something to cover up that offensive outfit."

Alice followed the rabbit to a little cottage in a tree by the edge of the forest. She had to duck to fit through the door and by the time she looked up the rabbit had disappeared into his home. She heard him rummaging about.

"No...no...that won't do. Ah, here we are." He reemerged holding a red twill coat and a pair of white pants.

"Are you sure those will fit Mr. Rabbit?"

“Yes, yes. If they don’t drink this,” he said, holding up a small flask of red liquid.

Alice pulled on the pants, which fit, surprisingly. Then pulled her dress over her head, revealing her White Stripes tee shirt. She quickly pulled the red twill jacket over her shirt, it was a little tight around her sides.

“Here. Drink.”

She took a quick sip, felt a burst of warmth and then heard a ‘pop’ and the jacket formed to her shape.

“Come on. We’re going to be late!”

He still hadn’t let go of his pocket watch, and he ushered her out of his house so quickly she hit her head on the door frame. He was really pushy, and he never stopped muttering about needing to report the cows to the Queen.

“Come on, come on. We don’t want to miss it.” He bounded ahead.

“Miss what?” but the rabbit was too far ahead to hear. Alice hurried to catch up.

They entered the city through a pair of wrought iron gates painted a violent red. Then, following the rabbit, Alice went through a positive maze of streets and alleys, until the rabbit stopped.

“Here, the event.” The rabbit gestured for her to go through, and then hurried off in the opposite direction tapping his pocket watch and muttering.

Where she emerged looked a lot like the MetLife Stadium back home, with the massing crowd, the peddlers selling food, drinks, and foam fingers in blue or red, which had the words Cheshire or Hatter written across the foam in white letters. Alice found a seat near the front of section B and sat next to an oversized blue caterpillar smoking a hookah.

“And who are you?” the caterpillar asked through puffs of smoke.

“Alice.”

“Hmmm. The Alice?”

“Umm...sure?”

“Who are you betting on? My bet’s on Ches, he’s been really turning it out this season.”

“Oh. I don’t know. I’ve only just got here you see.”

“Of course, I see. I’ve got eyes you know. Right in the front of my head.”

A loud round of applause brought Alice’s attention away from the caterpillar and back to the arena. A large walrus waddled his way to the center, and a microphone descended from above. He took it in one flipper and announced, “Today’s fight is between the unparalleled season champion Cheshire Cat,” a round of applause came from the mass of blue around the stadium, “and the Crazy Mad Hatter!” The red foam fingers cheered, and the stadium went wild.

Apparently, the Hatter was a real spectacle. Alice clapped politely with the increasingly frenzied crowd. The walrus attempted to continue his speech, but was drowned out by the din. So he gestured with a flipper and the gates on either side of the arena opened and what Alice could only assume were the contestants walked out.

With them walked out a dozen scantily clad women in what could only be described as gypsy garb. They began to dance as the crowd got louder and more violent, turning on each other, using their fists, drinks, and anything or anyone in reach to bash each other. Alice shifted in her seat, tapping her index fingers against the brick red plastic.

“I see the fighting is starting early. It’s to be expected for the season finale.”

Alice turned to the caterpillar, whose gaze was fixed on her in an annoyingly knowing look. “What’s happening? This is worse than the Super Bowl.”

“I don’t know what a superbowl is.” He tilted his head to her tapping fingers. “That’s quite annoying you know.”

“Sorry, I’ll stop.”

“Nothing to worry about yet ‘Alice’. It’s when the prize fight is over that one must be worried.”

This did not make her feel better; but as there was no reason to run quite yet, Alice settled back into her seat. The crowd’s tumultuous noise cut out and the dancing girls bolted to the side lines. The fight began.

It was unlike anything Alice had ever seen, definitely not Super Bowlesque. The Hatter’s top hat flattened into a giant spinning blade, and his opponent Ches, a fat blue cat with an infuriating grin, simply vanished and appeared wherever he chose to in the arena.

“Duck.”

Alice dived under her seat, kicking the man sitting next to her in the face, as the Hatter’s top hat blade cut the air where her head had been before. Ches laughed, and vanished with a ‘pop’, leaving a lingering image of his grin in the air above her seat. Alice picked herself off the ground and dusted herself off before settling back into her seat. Her vision blurred and everything swayed for a moment; she felt in danger of falling into the arena, then everything focused again.

“Time to go Alice.”

She turned her head so fast she nearly got whiplash. She found the source of the voice just as he faded and vanished again.

“He’s right you know,” said the caterpillar.

“What?” Alice turned to him, rubbing her neck.

“It’s time to go. End of days and all that.” And then the caterpillar vanished in a puff of smoke that blew directly into her face, making her cough.

Alice’s attention was brought back to the stadium where violent fights had broken out among the spectators. A pair of wresting men dressed as a spade and a two of hearts fell over the railing and down into the field. The gypsies ran to the center and started dancing again, trying to distract the angry crowd, but it only made the frenzy more hectic. One of the gypsies caught Alice’s eye, the one in the center with the sea blue eyes. Her eyes. Is that me? Am I having an out of body experience? Charlie told me that happens sometimes. The man Alice had kicked in the face grabbed at her and she took off running, kicking behind her and making contact with his chest, knocking the air out of him.

Adrenaline took over and she managed to retrace her way through the maze of streets and alleys much faster than the rabbit had made her go. As she reached the gate her vision blurred again and the gate seemed to bend and twist like metal turned to liquid. She closed her eyes and put her arms out in front of her to push the gate open. Her arms met no resistance and she ran straight through the gate. She turned to look back and the gate had completely vanished, the crowd had spilled into the streets and charged at her. She bolted for the forest.

The tree branches whipped her in the face as she forced her way through them. The whole world seemed to tilt and she struggled to keep her balance. She broke out of the trees and tried to stop as she remembered the cliff. Her momentum was briefly impeded by an invisible wall but it carried her through and over the edge.

She flailed about mid-air, and her hands caught the rocky ledge. She managed to grab on and hoist herself back over and onto solid ground, but then the ground tilted again and she slid over the edge. Her shoes flew off with the g-force and she landed in the water hard, knocking the breath out and the rocks slicing up her feet. She fought to make it back to the surface as the turbulence tried actively to drown her. When she broke the surface, she took a huge breath and opened her eyes.

She was no longer in Wonderland. The street in front of her was entirely unfamiliar, but the street sign read Boerum St. How the hell did I get all the way to Brooklyn? She looked behind her. The window of the shop behind her read Shalom Antiques, but the second pane was missing. Looking down Alice saw the glass shards and realized she was standing in the broken glass from the window she had just run through. The sound of a police siren brought her attention back to the street, where a police car pulled up to the curb and an officer got out. The side of the car read Harrison Police and the officer looked a lot like the guy she had kicked in the arena.

“Alice Hannigan?”

Alice nodded.

“I’ve been following you since your friend Charlie’s house. You weren’t making a lot of sense. You kicked me when I tried to stop you. I’m afraid you’re going to have to come back to the station with me.”

She nodded again. Coming down was debilitating and painful so it would be good to have somewhere to lay down while she detoxed, even if that place was a holding cell. The officer cuffed her and helped her into the back of his car. Charlie was already sitting in the back of the car, cuffed and looking way spaced-out. She sat down hard, her jacket swinging into her and whacking her side. There was something heavy in her pocket. She managed to twist her hands enough to reach the corner of her coat, and she shook the objects out. A gold pocket watch and a miniature hookah fell out onto the seat beside her. Weird. Her coat was red. Weirder. She was still wearing the purple dress with black lace she had worn to Charlie’s party. “Offensive. Purple is offensive.”

“What?” The officer was staring at her.

“Nothing.”