



Alice Beyond the Garden

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Read at Storytails on 31st January 2010

The cords of rope tightened, twisting together... ever closer – shredding under the strain. Rubbing. Ripping. Ruined.

A machine wound the rope relentlessly. And within the fraying cords lay Alice's ravaged wrists, nearly free of their arms – except for bone.

Beneath her, ran mice of pure white delightedly foraging in amongst the debris of damp cord, for droplets of blood, and fragments of bite-size flesh.

A pawless tabby cat lay discarded nearby. Punished like her, and for the same sin.

Illusory visions danced before Alice's hysterical eyes, and she imagined the skin peel cleanly from her wrists like a satin glove, exposing skeleton hands to match the tabby cats'. And as the glove-shaped skin fell to the floor, it became reanimated with parasites crawling in and out of the tunnels that had once protected her bony fingers.

Alice had given up straining against the cords many hours ago... Or was it days? Surely not! Perhaps it's only been 15 minutes? It doesn't matter anyway. There's no clock in here, and she can't possibly ask anyone now that what's left of her tongue has been gnawed away, so it'll have to remain a mystery.

Heavy footsteps on the floor above her dislodged dust from the ceiling that fell into her eyes, pricking them with shining specks. The steps travelled down the length of her little body, beyond her feet and over to the far corner, beyond her blurred field of vision where there was a doorway.

The clogged feet of the Queen of Hearts thudded onto each hollow step, sending the frightened mice and gnats scurrying to the corners of the room. Her haggard shadow darkened the candlelight as she drew closer to Alice, and the stench of gin on her thickly stained breath dampened Alice’s rosy cheeks.

“Still curious Missy?”

Alice scrunched her eyes closed with her last remnants of energy, attempting to avoid the hag’s wagging purple tongue that mockingly brushed the tip of her nose.

Alice had never liked to listen to anybody but Sylvester, the scraggy tabby cat that followed her faithfully wherever she went. (And as you know, felines rarely follow anything at all, except their minds – and mice of course.) Sometimes she would have to pretend to listen to some people – teachers and parents... that sort of thing, and very occasionally, as much as she hated it desperately, she would listen very seriously to things she wished she’d never have heard her whole life long. Yet, what a silly thing to wish for! Overhearing words really shouldn’t be such a dangerous thing to do (Alice didn’t really believe you could “do” overhearing actually, considering the only thing she’d “done” in order to overhear in the first place was have ears. And she wasn’t even sure that was her fault).

Nevertheless, after listening so hard that she could even feel her ears swelling and turning bright pink, so everyone would be able to see what she’d done, she wished those panicked words had never crept into her ears at all.

“I need that blood. None other shines so scarlet and bright. She will know the difference and punish us both if it doesn’t match.”

From behind the heavy splintered door an elderly male’s high-pitched voice pleaded. “But how do we get it?”

“Come with me.”

And poor Alice – she really hadn’t understood what this might mean for her at all. She was such a good girl, and couldn’t bear the thought of blood being spilt, no matter how entrancing its colour, as it would surely have to come from someone or

something that had been very seriously hurt. So even though Sylvester wasn't sure it was such a good idea, and told her he thought as much, Alice made up her mind to follow those voices behind the splintered door.

Now that she didn't have a tongue anymore, and her hands were very nearly free of her wrists altogether, she still thought that she had done the right thing. That was one of the special things about Alice. She knew perfectly well that most "normal" people (whoever they were) would probably be regretting the whole sorry incident by now, but Alice was very proud of herself for trying to help. She was ever so sad for poor darling Sylvester though. Little Alice had made an awful racket when the Queen carved his fluffy fur from his paddy paws, although over Sylvester's own terrified meows she hadn't realised, and then, before she knew it, in one swift (and by the looks of it, very well practiced) movement, the Queen swung around, plucked Alice's tongue taught out of her mouth, and in a single swipe slit it free from her gullet with the sharpest knife you've ever seen. And so, since then the hot sticky blood has been dribbling down Alice's throat. (The mice have been taking it in turns to reopen the wounds in her meaty tongue with their teeth as soon as the blood begins to congeal.)

Her tears stopped some time ago, as there's only so much liquid that can flow from a body at any one time – which she'd never realised before, but it's quite true. Without having drunk any water for at least a month, or an hour, Alice was quite sure her tears would be blood if she'd been able to cry now anyway.

Meanwhile, beyond the doors and corridors, and many floors above where Alice now lay, the Queen of Hearts sat tall upon her golden throne. The freshly decapitated head of the Mad March Hare lay in her cupped palm like an orb, blood dripping from it into a metal bucket at her feet.

And in front of her the formerly Mad Hatter sobbed, clinging to the drained body of his old friend, and begging forgiveness from the Queen. Now sane after witnessing the horror of the Hare's death, the Hatter spoke breathlessly as he gasped for air between painful expulsions of tears.

"Your Majesty, I can never atone for what I have done, but I beg of you, please let me go."

"Go? After this disrespectful display of treachery? You promised me the blood I asked for, and you bring this filth! Look at it!"

In her fury, the Queen kicked the bucket of maroon coloured blood across the room, droplets splattering the face of the Hatter.

"I believed it would be right Madam. Remember I was mad, and didn't understand the difference."

"Guards! Off with his – "

"Your Majesty! Please! I have caused the death of my best and only friend – let that be my punishment. My blood is of a darker shade yet than his, and will be of no use to you, and my face is so ugly you will not wish for it to be hung upon your wall. Let me spread my story around your kingdom instead, so that this mistake is not made again. I can be of use to you now I have my mind – I can bring you what you need."

"Very well. You will bring it tomorrow."

Wiping his nose on his sleeve, and bending so low his ill-fitting hat fell off, and his forehead scraped the floor, the Hatter murmured, "Thank you, Majesty."

Alice had never been beyond the splintered door before, and had no idea what lay beyond. Even though she and Sylvester had played in front of it many times over the years, imagining it to be a drawbridge to an enchanted castle, or the doorway into the land of fairies, or something of the sort, it had never occurred to them to go through it until now. In fact, thinking about it now, Sylvester had positively discouraged the notion whenever Alice had mentioned it.

"You must be a little bit curious to see where it leads!"

“Not in the slightest. And I would prefer it if you didn’t use that word thank you, Alice.”

Perhaps he’d always known...? Although wondering about that wasn’t going to be of much use now. Poor tabby Sylvester.

Undaunted by its huge size, spurred on by her desperation to prevent the spilling of blood, and quite a lot of curiosity, Alice convinced her scraggy friend to accompany her this one and only time.

“There are lives at stake Sylvester! We simply must go through and help.”

Giving in to his curiosity for the first time since his kitten-hood, trusting that with Alice he’d be safe, Sylvester relented, and together they heaved the door ajar.

For some reason, they’d always expected that the mysterious door would lead to a sunny place, but instead, a dank brick tunnel loomed in front of them, and Alice stepped determinedly into it. Looking back through the door to her rather dull garden with a mischievous twinkle in her eyes, Alice took a deep breath, picked up Sylvester (who was now shaking with guilt at succumbing to this most dangerous of instincts) and walked into the darkness in search of the plotters she’d overheard.

Running as quickly and silently as she could to catch up with them, Alice splashed through muddied puddles, dirtying her white socks, and ruining her brand new shoes. Sylvester urged her to slow down, as he was bumping about most uncomfortably in her arms, and really didn’t want to be down here in the first place.

“Oh Sylvester, I do wish you’d stop complaining. You’re being terribly selfish. Just think how dreadful it is that for the colour of its blood alone, a creature may die!”

“And what exactly do you know of this? Is the White Rabbit a friend of yours?”

Alice looked all about her, but in the dim light couldn’t see where the fearsomely booming voice had come from.

“The White Rabbit? Oh my!” she cried.

Suddenly, two sets of footsteps pattered towards them from deep within the tunnel, and in no time at all, the Hatter stood before Alice and Sylvester, accompanied by the Mock Turtle. Both were in dreadful disarray – the Hatter’s hat was filthy, his hair matted and dirty beneath it, and the Mock Turtle was awfully upset, and could barely breathe for all his crying. A metal bucket swung from the hand of the Turtle, and stuffed into the jacket pocket of the Hatter was a very old-looking paintbrush. They certainly didn’t look like people plotting a murder, yet when they spoke Alice knew it had been their voices she’d overheard.

“You shouldn’t be down here Miss. It’s not safe,” the Hatter twitched and trembled.

“We’ve already lost one of our own, and we’ve barely even begun,” sobbed the Mock Turtle, wringing out his dripping handkerchief.

“You shouldn’t be beginning at all! I heard you plotting to draw blood from some poor helpless creature, and I simply won’t allow it.”

“She won’t allow it – ha!” A laugh of hopeless despair burst from the turtle, and he repeated these words over and over to himself as the Hatter drew closer to Alice.

At first she backed away from his battered hand as he reached for her elbow, but when she felt his terror and gentle touch she relented and let him whisper in her ear.

“We have no choice. If the White Rabbit lives, the Queen of Hearts will bleed us all. If you’ve seen him you must tell us where he is. Please.”

Once more the booming voice rang out, shaking the air and even the walls around them, “She knows! She knows! He is her friend.”

“Dormouse! We thought you were lost to us!” The Mock Turtle dropped the bucket in surprise, and for almost two whole moments stopped his wailing, falling to his knees and feeling on the ground in the darkness for his tiny friend.

“The White Rabbit is absolutely *not* my friend. I have only seen him once or twice – he always runs away from me, and has never stopped to even pass the time of day. Nevertheless, using the blood of an innocent for goodness knows what – ”

“For the roses...” Sylvester realised aloud, as the three plotters bowed their heads in guilty confirmation.

“Well – it’s simply unforgivable, and I can’t condone his murder.”

“Very well. But it is not for you to condone.”

The Hatter’s face contorted, and he raised his hands into the air, clicking his fingers very loudly five times. A whipping sound cracked through the tunnel, and five ropes snapped around the heads and feet of the assembled group before twining around Alice’s limbs and Sylvester’s body. Each limb was soon bound, and all at once the ropes tautened, whistling Alice and Sylvester away down the tunnel, their yelps becoming smothered in seconds by darkness. Moments later they would find themselves at the mercy of the Queen of Hearts.

Now, what nobody but Alice knew was, the White Rabbit would *never* have his blood collected by the Queen of Hearts no matter who tried to catch him. You see, Alice had lied about not being friends with him, which not even Sylvester had known. In fact, she and the White Rabbit were very good friends indeed, and you could almost say that they were the same person – except she loved him even more than she did herself. (She actually felt quite nervous and rather silly admitting to anyone that she loved herself, as it seemed such a New World thing to do and not something a girl from England should be feeling, but the White Rabbit had made her realise it was perfectly alright, and quite necessary.)

Although Alice had never been through the splintered door until this day, the White Rabbit would often come back and forth, and all of two weeks ago, he’d come to her explaining that the White Roses were blooming, and would soon be ready for painting. Since that moment, she’d helped him to escape, keeping him safe in her garden, and finally smuggling him out into the forest far away from the splintered door.

You see, even though Alice was awfully special, she knew that the White Rabbit was rather precious. Wherever he went he brought joy, mystery and magic, making those who met him feel they could achieve anything they wanted. Well, as you can imagine – having her roses painted in his blood for all her subjects to come and see

would have made the Queen of Hearts even more powerful, so you can now understand why she was determined to find him. But the White Rabbit cannot be owned by a single person. Alice knew how lucky she'd been to meet him, and realised how selfish she would be to keep him all to herself.

She had smiled as she had watched him hop away into the forest, and as she lay in the cellar of the Queen of Hearts' palace, remembered that feeling as the final drop of bright scarlet blood dripped from her mouth into a metal bucket below.