The Hatter / 1487 words

Someone once said that every adventure requires a first step, but I’ve always imagined it would require quite a bit more than that.

I imagined my fingers were making a journey across treacherous new lands as I sewed ivory lace to the hem of a skirt. My fingers knew their way across seams and stitches, thread and tulle and bolts of silk. The needle glided effortlessly through the fabric the way a dolphin skips through the ocean’s surface.

Distantly I heard the bell at the front of the store jingle, and my mother’s voice welcoming in a new customer. I made my last stitch and, cutting the thread, allowed myself to sit back and admire my work.

The skirt had turned out even better than I could’ve imagined. The wine red base peeked out from behind strips of purple fabric. The bottom ballooned out, the lace tied the whole piece together. Red suspenders with golden buckles would go over my blouse when I wore it to my eighteenth Unbirthday party the next day.

A swell of panic rose in my chest, but I pushed it down, down, down, like I usually did.

After my eighteenth Unbirthday I would take over my parent’s shop, Hatter’s Boutique and Haberdashery. I loved the shop but the fear just kept coming back.

*Push it down.*

Two furry paws covered my eyes suddenly.

“Guess who,” singsonged a familiar voice.

“March,” I giggled, temporarily forgetting my troubles.

I turned around in my chair to find the March Hare, my best friend and crush for four years standing behind me. He held a bouquet of laughing daffodils around which two bread and butterflies were fluttering.

“Happy Unbirthday, Hattie,” he said, his hare’s mouth curling in a smile.

I smacked the flowers down to hide them. The bread and butterflies scattered.

“Not yet, and don’t remind me!”

“Don’t you like them?” March Hare asked, and he sounded genuinely hurt. My heart softened a bit.

“I love them, but my Unbirthday is tomorrow and I really would like to delay it for as long as possible.”

“You made a hat to match, didn’t you?” March asked, running his claws along the edge of the skirt.

“Of course I did.”

“May I see it?”

I wanted to say no, but I could hardly resist March’s sweet pleading eyes. He made feathers fly in my chest and I wished I didn’t like it.

“Okay,” I surrendered. I climbed onto my chair to reach a maroon hat box on the shelf above my workbench. March set down his flowers as I placed the box on the table and took the lid off.

March reached his paws into the box and gently took out a plum purple top hat accented with quail feathers and a red ribbon with a golden belt buckle.

“Oh, Hattie, it’s beautiful.”

“Well at least it’ll match the skirt,” I said sheepishly.

“You don’t give yourself enough credit.”

“I just don’t want to make a big deal out of it, that’s all.”

March turned his attention from the hat to me, big black eyes full of concern. “Nervous?” he asked.

“Why would I be nervous?”

“Well, you’ll be taking over the shop, for one.”

He was getting too close to the truth for my comfort.

“I’m excited to be in charge! I love the shop!” The words tasted as false as they felt.

“If you insist.” March lowered the hat back into its box. I swallowed a lump in my throat.

My mother appeared then around the corner, her frizzy orange hair escaping its braid. “Hattie, dear! I need you to fetch me some things from the shops for this new order,” she said. “Cream colored lace, star speckled tulle, midnight blue thread, you know. I have the list here.” She handed me a slip of lavender paper with the fabric order in her familiar loopy scrawl.

“I’ll get it,” I replied, grateful for a distraction.

“Thank you, dear. Be safe and watch out for Aliceses,” she said the last part in a hushed tone, as though an Alice might be hiding in a nearby hat box listening to us talk about fabrics.

“I know, Mom.” I was getting too old to believe in things like Aliceses that fell out of rabbit holes from another world, but my mother insisted that I keep an eye out anyway and always carry a sachet of herbs to keep Aliceses at bay. I followed her instructions, if only to make her happy.

I stuffed the shopping list into the pocket of my dress and donned my emerald green top hat. My mom handed me a basket and a wad of purple bills. March helped me into my coat, which was entirely unnecessary, but I appreciated it anyway. If my cheeks grew a bit warm when his paws grazed my shoulders, who could tell?

When I closed our shop door behind me I was decidedly not thinking about my Unbirthday, or the way March Hare made me feel, or the growing pressure in my stomach that hurt more and more everyday as I pushed all my fear and doubt into it.

My mother’s hands were clasped over my eyes as she led me into the garden. I could smell but not see the lilacs and pansies and carnivorous roses, along with other scents, tea and sugary cakes, burning candles. The panic that had fluttered in my stomach all day was escaping my stomach, bubbling up into my chest and filling my head with air until I felt I might float away.

We stopped. My toes curled and uncurled themselves in my pointy little boots. I fidgeted with my new party skirt, fraying the ribbons.

*I don’t want this.*

It was a revelation that only heightened my panicked state. I was picking at the hole in my gloves, the one in the pinky finger, biting my lip to keep from crying. The pain did not ground me.

*I’m not ready.*

My mom’s hands left my eyes, and I was hit with the bright sky and the world and all my hatter family around me. My mom, dad and aunt, little cousins running around in their suits and dresses. My grandparents were seated at a table laden with tea and cakes, judgmental looks on their faces, as though they and they alone could smell my terror over the cloying sugar. March Hare was there, so was the White Rabbit and the sleepy Dormouse. I saw them all, and their pretty little hats, in turquoise and scarlet and inky black, satin chocolate hats with red and white flowers or plumes of peacock feathers. I thought I could see each individual stitch in their clothing.

A large banner hung from the trees, leering over the party like a great spider, mulberry lettering spelling out the very words I dreaded most.

“*Happy Unbirthday, Hattie!*” they shouted all at once.

I was gone, run, run, running away. I had no clue where I was going, but one moment I could hear their voices behind me and the next I was lost amongst the trees. I had taken my first step and could not go back now. My adventure had begun. Perhaps a first step really was the only requirement. A first step and a bit of fear.

I don’t know how long I ran, but my legs eventually gave out. I collapsed onto the forest floor and leaned back against a tree. My hair frizzed around my face like the mane of a lion, my stockings were torn. I buried my face in my hands and wept.

I wept until my gloves were soaked. I wept until I was very thirsty.

My tears finally stopped, and I looked around to my dismay. I was entirely lost. Not a single giant toadstool or fern looked familiar to me. The air was pink and orange with the setting sun, though it had only been noon when I had arrived at my party. Little rocking-horse flies drifted through the air like motes of dust.

Then I heard something. The sound was like the rattling of a rat in a drainpipe, or the wailing of a lost elephant. I looked around for the noise, shaky and startled, with salt drying on my cheeks.

I noticed the rabbit hole a moment before a human boy tumbled out of it onto his bottom. He groaned and rubbed his backside, not appearing to notice me. He looked as beat up as I was, dirt marring his chin, trousers torn up. He wore an odd garment with a hood and sloppy seams that would make any Hatter cry.

I grasped for my sachet of protective herbs as I realized what he must be. “A-are you an Alice?” I choked out.

“A what?” he snapped, then his face froze. He took in his surroundings slowly, his face dawning with realization.

“Where on earth are we?”