

Wonderland

—James Zhao

You writhe around helplessly in the air, your body stuck in freefall for what seems like two entire days. It feels as if your descent will never end, that you will be doomed to fall from this cliff for all eternity, when space begins to distort right in front of your eyes, creating a kaleidoscope of colours that shoot randomly around your face before converging into a dazzling vortex, sucking you in with astronomical force. Melbourne's complete detessellation must be closer than you thought.

The spinning continues endlessly, and you see nothing but a thick haze of mist around you. As the fog slowly dissipates, you can see that you are suspended in the air above the ruins of a castle in the middle of a silt-laden valley. You become aware that you are moving, slowly at first but gaining speed as the mist fades away; passing over a brown desert plain, then a blackened wasteland of shattered tree stumps, floating along an abandoned railway line dotted with dilapidated stations, before slowing down and finally stopping right back where all the havoc began. Hovering in the air above the Richard Berry Building, you discover to your horror that the walls have again been torn down, Theatre A is once more without a ceiling, and running up and down the stairs carrying a very prominent small scrap of paper is the familiar figure of Fiona Volkas.

A sharp jolt of electricity brings you back into reality from your vision of impending doom. You find yourself in what appears to be a small cavern, walled in by dirt and entangled roots. An innocent, fluffy little bunny peers at you with large, hazel eyes in the dim light that filters through an opening above. You hastily scramble out of the rabbit hole and poke your head out behind a small cherry tree, glad to have finally escaped your prolonged confinement. Scanning your surroundings, you seem to be in a dry, barren wilderness, the few remaining plants withered and broken. Two white towers can be seen not far from here, rising up into the sky, the battlements clearly visible, though no archers can be seen.

Two columns of foot soldiers in shining white platemail march perfectly in time from between the towers, then come to a halt, as if waiting for someone important to arrive. Two horsemen, none other than Chan and White, dressed in white priestly robes, ride out between them and gallop off into the distance, seemingly failing to notice you. Just as you breathe a sigh of relief, you hear a shrill, high-pitched scream, resembling the words "Off with his head!" The Queen of Hearts appears in her full majesty, her distinctive costume somewhat whiter than usual, on top of the battlements of one of the towers, and the foot soldiers charge towards you, the parched ground trembling as they close upon you, still stuck halfway down the burrow.

Panicking, you spring out of the hole, fleeing as fast as your aching legs can carry you. Unfortunately, only a few steps later, a cliff materialises from nowhere, and unable to stop, you tumble over the precipice. You can almost feel the fabric of reality straining beneath you as you fall through the sky; your mind grasps at reason as you struggle to fathom whether all of this is really happening, or if it is merely a dream. Looking up, you see Lord John reaching out from the cliff face, his hand stretching incredibly to follow you down, but never quite able to reach you. He seems to mouth the words "Find my coin!" before he disappears behind an outcropping of rock. Then, without so much as a splash, you plunge headfirst into the deep blue sea.

As you sink beneath the waves, shoals of lively herring swim around you, eyeing you curiously and glowing bright crimson in the shimmering sunlight. A small, plain bottle drifts idly by, a label around its neck with the words "Drink me" beautifully printed in large letters, but dances away as you reach to grasp it. Empty oyster shells and tattered black and white insignia float about in the water, reminding you of the utter destruction on shore. Somehow, you don't seem to notice the lack of air. This must be a dream after all. Eventually, you sink to the sea floor, landing gracefully next to a large, ancient turtle. It twirls around playfully on its hind flippers, as if mocking your lack of mobility, then jumps and swims up towards the surface, revealing the giant clam that was resting behind it. You reel in shock as you realise that trapped inside is a man, a lifeless arm limply protruding from the shell, grasping what appears to be a birth certificate, but just as you manage to read the name — "Weinstein" — you feel yourself lifted by the deep sea current.

Your mind drifts into a fantasy world, slowly separating from your tired, beaten body, and you begin to give up the struggle against the twisting current. An image forms before your eyes; a page neatly ripped from a calendar, dated Sunday 11th, fluttering before your face before gliding along. Brightly coloured fish dart about, gnawing at the page, but suddenly scatter as a deep, rumbling voice, sounding almost as if it were the sea itself, booms in your ear: "First five five plus five five firsts." You wonder what all this could mean as the current drags you further and further into the ocean.