**Looking-Glass World**

The doctor sat calmly, horns protruding from his thinning brown hair and smoke billowing from his nostrils.

“Alison,” he droned, “Alison, where are you?”

*I’m here of course,* I thought, and that’s what I told him.

He chuckled, and a bit of flame burst from his lips. At first I used to flinch when this happened, but I was used to it by now. “I meant mentally,” he explained. “What are you thinking about?”

“Nothing.”

“Come now, Alison, the whole point of these sessions is for you to open up. Your parents think you need someone to talk to.”

*No, my parents think I need someone to fix me.* *I talk just fine to Michael.*

“Why don’t we discuss the hallucinations you’ve been having?”

*How ‘bout not? They aren’t hallucinations anyway.*

The doctor clicked his pen. I wondered how he managed to hold it with talons protruding from his cuticles. Of course, in his mind, the talons didn’t exist; nor did his horns or the rings of smoke that he puffed every time he exhaled. In the doctor’s mind, he was just as ordinary as I was.

“Alison.”

“Hmm?”

His exasperation was thinly veiled as he said, “You’ve successfully managed to avoid all of my questions once again. Your hour is up.”

I jumped up from my seat in glee. The doctor’s lair was a rather drab place, full of “colorful” and “cheerful” paintings I had come to despise.

Outside, my mother was waiting to take me home. She glowed like a lighthouse in a storm, and her delicate translucent wings fluttered happily when I emerged.

“Same time next week?” she asked the doctor.

“Yes,” he replied grudgingly.

Once in the safety of our car, I smiled at Mother.

She glanced at me in confusion. “What is it?”

“You’re just beautiful,” I answered. I wished I had her pale mermaid hair that sparkled under the sun and her violet, almond-shaped eyes. Mine were brown, like Mother *insisted* hers were.

“…thank you, Alison.”

She was never quite sure how to take my compliments.

“So have you made any progress with Dr. Morton?” she questioned.

I shook my head. And after that, the void between us grew. Every week it was the same. I pressed my cheek against the cool glass of the window and watched the bizarre array of creatures mingling in the streets. A gargoyle, with his scaled, bubbly hide pressed a gnarled hand to the back of a delicate bird-lady. From the mundane gas station a sphinx-headed lady emerged, her lion tail flicking in annoyance as she stumbled on a crack in the pavement.

We neared our house and I saw the neighbor twins playing hopscotch on their driveway. Their snowy wings burst with light as they laughed. Mother pulled my gaze away from them as the car jerked to a halt in front of our large suburban home. A stiflingly dull garden of daisies lined the path to our porch, mocking me with their normalness as I walked past.

My father—yellow eyes slanted in observation and gray ears perked in high alert—stood at the door. He smiled his usual wolfish smile and ushered us into the house quickly. For some reason, my parents didn’t want me outside much. They didn’t let me talk to the neighbor kids either.

I settled onto a stool at the kitchen counter and looked at my parents. The wolf-man and the faerie. Beauty and the Beast.

“Mother, why do you think it’s so strange the way I see things?” I asked.

“It’s not normal, dear,” she said sweetly.

I pouted. “What’s all the hullaballoo about being ‘normal’?”

Father laughed heartily. “I’ve been wondering that myself, Ali.”

Mother leaned forward and urgently whispered something in his ear that made his lip curl and his sharp fangs show. “Ali, why don’t you go find Queenie?” he suggested harshly.

I nodded and leapt from my perch. Queenie was lounging on her mat by the back door, licking her paws in a lavish fashion. My parents thought the cat was the best thing that had ever happened to me; apparently I saw her just as they did, and that meant I must be making progress.

Queenie purred under my touch and as I absentmindedly stroked her tawny fur, there was a faint knock on the screen. It was Michael, as usual, and I pushed open the door quietly.

“They’re fighting,” I whispered to him, “come on.”

We stopped briefly at the doorway of the kitchen. My mother’s wings were flittering anxiously and Father’s ears twitched in anger.

“We’re not going to do that,” Father hissed.

“But Ralph, this could make her better—“

“*No.* She’s not hurting anyone, there is no point…”

I pulled Michael away.

“How was your session with Doctor Dragon?” he asked with a smirk.

I grinned. “Oh, you know, *very* productive.”

We entered my room—a large yet dark space (I liked to keep the blinds drawn)—and Michael took his usual seat on the edge of my bed. I never turned on the ceiling lights, preferring to illuminate the room with a series of melancholy, blue-shaded lamps. His eyes scanned my sketch-covered walls and he smiled as he spotted a cluster of scribbles that held his likeness. I also had drawings of Mother and Father and the neighbor kids, and the doctor, and everyone else who I found particularly interesting. I’d stopped showing them to anyone a while back—no one understood; no one but Michael.

“This one’s new,” Michael said, pointing to a close-up portrait of his face.

I blushed. The drawing focused on every detail—from his gorgeous thick-lashed eyes to the rusty barbed halo that sat atop his nest of blonde hair.

“I like it.” he announced. “Makes me look very alluring.”

*I find you very alluring.* “Um…thanks?”

His broken wings struggled to extend. They were pure white in some spots, and a burnt ash-gray in others. Around the edges where they were ripped, they were black and stained with red. Looking at them made my chest tighten.

“What is it?” he asked curiously.

“Aren’t you in pain?” I whispered.

His golden eyes widened.

“So you are? Can you feel it?”

“Feel what?”

“Your wings,” I said. “Your wings are getting worse.” I plucked a drawing off the wall. It was one of my better sketches and was a pretty accurate representation of how he looked to me. I pointed to his wings—in the drawing they were just tinged in red and black and hung limply at his sides. “They look completely mangled now,” I explained. “I wish you could see them.”

Michael was like my parents in the sense that he was “normal.” He was definitely the only one who didn’t question me about it though. “No, I can’t feel my…wings.”

I nodded sadly. “The doctor is annoyed with me, I think.”

“Why?”

“At first I wouldn’t admit there was something wrong. Now, I won’t even talk.”

“I’m glad to hear you’re not going soft.”

“I’m glad to hear that you’re happy about it.”

A door slammed somewhere in the house, making my bones clatter and my heart leap to my throat.

“Should I be going?” Michael asked.

“No, it’s fine. They’re fighting about me again.” As always, I hoped that my father would prevail. I couldn’t count the times when Mother had pressured the doctor to prescribe pills and my parents had fought viciously about it.

“You think your mother is going to get anywhere this time?”

I shrugged. “She might with Father, but I won’t give in.”

Michael pointed toward a particularly gruesome depiction of a ‘normal’-looking girl whose heart was being torn from her chest by a dragon shrouded in smoke rings. “That’s what this is about, isn’t it?”

“It was a nightmare I had. The dragon ripped my heart out and then…I couldn’t see things the way I do. And I was so sad…” I shook my head, sending the memories retreating to the recesses of my mind. “It doesn’t matter. It’s not going to happen.”

I flinched as my father yelled across the house.

“I’ll be back in an hour!” he snarled, the front door crashing behind him.

They told me multiple times that it wasn’t my fault when they fought. It wasn’t me, it was my *condition*. That didn’t do much to help; my condition *was* me.

“Hey.” Michael tapped my shoulder.

I turned my eyes away from the barrier between me and the rest of the household, and back to Michael. His wings radiated with a dark glow that cast shadows on my already gloomy décor. Besides my drawings, there wasn’t much else of interest to my allotted space: a few lamps, a minimalistic desk, a small double bed with crisp white sheets, and a stark dresser that had belonged to my grandmother’s grandmother. But whenever Michael was here, I saw everything differently. My world twisted from a grainy Polaroid to one of the fancy photographs that were displayed in art museums—the kind where you noticed the outline of *every single* piece of grass.

“Do you think that if I let them try to fix me, they’d stop fighting?” I mused. Saying it made me want to drag my nails over my skin until it looked just as wretched as his wings. I wouldn’t meet his eyes, instead focusing on a series of shallow scrapes on the bottom of my dresser where Queenie had tried to use it as a scratching post.

“It’s not your fault.”

I nodded and admitted defeat to make him drop the subject. On the inside, I knew I would never quite forgive myself for every fight my parents had.

“They’ll come around,” he assured me. “Someday they’ll realize you don’t need to be cured.”

A smile spread on my face as I thought of it:

*“No, Dr. Morton, my daughter is perfectly fine,*” Mother would say, to which the doctor would let out a particularly long sigh.

*“She has hallucinations. I know I’ve said I don’t know what exactly is wrong with her, but there* is *something wrong,”* he would answer.

And then Mother would whisk me away, and we’d never go back and she’d never question what I saw again.

“I hope so,” I murmured, jolting in surprise as the downy fur of my cat pressed against my leg. “Queenie! How did you get in…?”

Whenever I knew I’d been caught—either snatching extra cookies without permission or trying to sneak outside in the dead of night—my stomach would perform acrobatic feats to make me nauseous and my skin would crawl and I got this terrible feeling that my blood would turn cold and I would surely freeze to death. All of these sensations crashed over me as I lifted my eyes to the door.

My mother stood in the hallway, pursing her lips unhappily. “Who’s this?” Those violet eyes of hers were reduced to angry slits as she surveyed the scene.

Michael gulped. “Um, hi.”

Mother was in no mood for pleasantries. “Alison! You know you’re not allowed to have guests.” She gave an apologetic look at Michael. “I’m so sorry for whatever she said; she’s a bit…different.”

I gaped. “Mother! He knows!” My guilt was quickly washed over by hurt-driven fury. “He knows and he doesn’t care!”

Michael coughed uncomfortably and rose from the bed, his wings dripping liquid roses onto my carpet. If Mother noticed, she didn’t show it. When Michael tried to leave, I caught his arm.

“Mother, I can prove to you that it’s real!” I said frantically. “I know you can’t see what I do, but I’m not hallucinating!” I reached toward one of Michael’s shimmering wings. He gave me a strange look—was it pity?—but I ignored it and brought the tips of my fingers to a bloodied gray feather. As my hand sunk into it, I felt…nothing. There was nothing. In a panic I plunged my entire arm into his wing; it went straight through.

My lips formed a silent “O” of shock. “No,” I breathed. “No.”

I attempted to drag my palm across the barbed halo that levitated just above his head, bracing myself for the sting of wire slicing to the bone. All I felt was a slight cold when the air rushed past my skin.

“No, no, no. You don’t understand. It’s real. It’s there. Tell her Michael. Tell her about your halo. Tell her about your wings,” I begged.

Pain contorted my mother’s usually delicate features. “Alison, dear, you’re sick. You need help.”

“I don’t,” I cried.

“Yes, you do.” She moved toward me slowly, like a dogcatcher approaches a feral mutt—like I would give her rabies if she didn’t stay cautious.

And then I saw it—a transparent orange vial with a white cap, filled with dozens of little poison pills. I backed away. “Don’t give me those!” I warned.

Michael wriggled free of my grasp. “I should be going now,” he murmured.

And as much as I didn’t want him to go, my attention was on the vial in Mother’s hand.

“Just try them,” she pleaded. “Please, it will make you better. You could go to school and make friends, and you’d be so much happier.”

“No!”

“Please!”

“No!”

“Don’t make me force you.”

“You wouldn’t!”

“They’ll make you better!”

“Mother, stop! Stop—I don’t want them!”

“Alison, you’ll be fine. Soon you’ll feel a lot better.”

“I don’t want to feel better. I don’t want to—mmph!”

Mother forced the pill into my mouth. I spit it out. She tried again, and I jerked my head back violently, forgetting that my wall was less than an inch away. As my skull connected with the drywall, all of my fear and anger faded away.

“Ow,” I whimpered, slamming my eyes shut. My mind went numb. I felt….I…felt…

The pill vial sounded like a rattlesnake rattle as it hit the floor.

“Alison, I….”

I opened my eyes.

There was a woman with limp, mousy hair and chocolate-milk eyes staring at me.

I screamed.

“Alison. Alison.”

She kept repeating my name. She sounded like Mother.

I pushed the woman away. My head throbbed and I nearly fell as I stumbled out of my room. I knew I wasn’t thinking straight, but I sprinted from our house nevertheless, ignoring the woman who sounded like my mother’s calls for me to come back.

Michael.

I had to find Michael.

The outside air stung my skin yet I continued my journey to Michael’s house. It was only three driveways down…

Disoriented, I tripped on his porch and barely managed to catch myself before hitting my skull once again. I hadn’t had time to stand before the door swung open.

“Alison?”

I sighed at his voice.

“Alison!”

I looked up. The boy staring down at me was my Michael. He had his voice and his honey-colored hair and his defined jaw. But…he *wasn’t* Michael. Where was his barbed-wire halo? Where were his tortured gray wings? And where were his rich, golden-plated eyes? This Michael had blue irises.

He wasn’t my angel. I stood slowly, wobbling on my unsteady legs.

“Michael, what’s happening to me?” I asked. I hadn’t taken the medicine. Nothing should have changed…

His eyebrows knitted together in confusion.

“You’re different,” I whispered, my words hitching in my throat. “No…” A sharp jab in my brain made me begin to realize why my world was steadily flipping upside down. “What color are your eyes?” I demanded.

“Gold,” he answered hesitantly.

“No, they’re not! You’re lying. What are they really?” I pressed my palms to my head in an attempt to quell the ache.

He didn’t answer me.

“*Tell me!*” I screeched.

“Blue.”

I nodded sadly. “So Mother was right.”

“What do you mean, Alison?”

“I’m crazy.”

“No, you’re not—“

“Shut up! Shut up, shut up, shut up!” I covered my eyes and opened them. Blue-eyed Michael was still there. I did it again. “The doctor doesn’t have horns or claws, does he? Father doesn’t have wolf-ears and the neighbor kids aren’t angels, are they?”

He dipped his head and wouldn’t meet my eyes.

“Michael…”

I suddenly found myself wishing that I’d hit my head harder on the wall. Maybe then I wouldn’t have had to open my eyes to the truth. The looking-glass I’d been living in had shattered, and its perfect silvery pieces were digging deep into my flesh.