

*whydoyouneedtoknow*  
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## Chapter Eleven and a Half

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Touch was the first sense to return as she awakened. No pain; for the first time in she didn't know how long, her body was free of pain. She luxuriated in the sensation for one moment before her training kicked in and she began to organize the information she was receiving.

*I'm lying on a bed, or something else soft. God, how long has it been since I slept on a bed? No covers, but I don't really need any. It's warm in here, but not too hot. Pillow under my head, edge of the mattress this way—her foot felt along it before returning to its place—and someone else lying beside me. Someone alive. She smiled. Much nicer than the alternative.*

*So much for touch. Hearing. Breathing, mine and his—it sounds like a man. She cut off her first reaction to that realization, clamping down on her racing heart and suddenly shaky limbs. I can't afford emotion now. Now is for collecting information. Emotion can wait.*

It didn't want to, but she'd had practice in controlling her feelings. She returned to her task of analysis. *Not much other sound. No traffic, so we're not likely in a city. No animals or birds, so we're either inside a large building or somewhere without many creatures. And no one else breathing. Whoever this is next to me, we're alone.*

Now, at last, carefully, she opened her eyes, a little at a time, to let them get used to the light. There was less than she'd been expecting, and it had an odd tinge to it, one that she identified after a moment as meaning sunlight through falling snow.

*Winter, then. That would account for there being no birdsong.*

The room was simple and plain enough, but surprisingly nice to see after so long... elsewhere. Wherever else she had been. *In a desert, her memories told her. Walking for hours on end, no food, no water anywhere, no life. Nothing alive except you. Mirages appearing all around, people and scenes, disappearing as soon as you touched them, or dancing just out of reach. No way to escape, no way out, not even death...*

She shook her head slightly, cutting off the flow of memories. They were not helpful here and now. She had to wake up, to figure out where she was and what was going on. And who she was lying next to...

Now, at last, she could turn her attention to the man lying beside her. It was indeed a man, she noted with pleasure—her skills might be rusty, but they hadn't all gone. His hair was mostly gray and white, but strands of the original brown remained. He wore khaki, a decent compliment to her own robe of navy blue.

A strand of white fiber intruded on her vision. She brushed it away, thinking it was a bit of spiderweb, and was surprised to feel the motion in her scalp. She reached up and pulled a hank of her hair around to where she could see it clearly.

*White. My hair is white. She frowned. That can't be right. My hair was brown. Always. I'm not nearly old enough to start graying yet...*

*How long in the desert?* whispered a voice. *You never saw yourself there. You had no mirror, no pools of water to see your own face. How long were you there?*

She set the voice aside, as firmly aside as she had set the memories. She would deal with all that in its own time. For right now, she had a few more tests to make.

She swung her legs over the edge of the bed and cautiously stood up. Her knees wobbled a moment, then held her. Carefully, she walked the few steps to the door of the room and tried the handle. It turned, and the door opened, revealing a pleasant living room beyond. She stepped out into that and tried one of the two doors there. It admitted her into a bathroom with no further exits. Closing that, she tried the other door.

This was locked. She frowned. *Locked to keep us in, or to keep others out?*

She examined the door. It could be locked or unlocked from either side with the proper key. *Or a wand, unless it's specially charmed to resist that...*

Frustrated, she stepped away from the door and turned. As she did, a glint of light on the wall caught her eye.

*Ah-ha...* From a hook on the wall she removed a key, with scrolling on its handle that matched the lock on the door. She slipped it into the lock and half turned it, feeling the weight which meant the tumblers had been engaged. This was the proper key for the door.

*But since I have no idea what's out there, and I do know what's in here, waiting seems prudent.*

She slid the key into a pocket in her robes, then turned back toward the bedroom and steeled herself.

*There is no reason to make assumptions. He could be anyone.*

But her mind insisted upon providing images of a cool, green forest and soft moss, and the face of one she had never quite been able to give up as lost, his arms around her and his voice in her ears, and she found her heart beating faster as she stepped through the door.

He roused as she entered, blinking awake in an instant as he always had, going immediately from full sleep to full awareness, and sitting up almost as quickly. His eyes were fastened on her face, and she felt her knees go shaky. She moved quickly to one of the chairs against a nearby wall and

sat down before she fell.

"Excuse me, miss," he said, his voice a bit husky as from long disuse. "I was wondering if you could help me with a problem I'm having with studying."

"A problem?" She released her control. There was no need for it now, no need to keep the smile from her face or the tears from her eyes. She still had no idea where they were, or how much time had passed between her last clear memories and now, but for this moment, it mattered nothing.

"Yes, a problem. I'm spending so much time looking at you that I can't pay attention to my books, so I was wondering if maybe I could study with you, and then I won't have so far to look when I look up at you and back down again."

*After all this time, he still remembers exactly what he said to me that day...* "You want to study with me, or study me?" she asked, conscious of her voice beginning to crack.

He smiled. "Yes."

As if they had planned it, they both stood at the same moment. Each took a step, and then they were holding one another, just as they had in the forest, and she was sobbing his name, just the way she had there, and he was whispering hers into her ear, when he wasn't kissing her. At some point, they ended up on the bed again, simply because their legs wouldn't hold them any longer.

It was like the forest once more, but better in some indefinable way. Perhaps because this time they were alone...

That thought brought her back to reality. They were alone at the moment, but they had no way of knowing where they were or with whom. This all seemed pleasant and innocent enough, but training and common sense both urged caution. It didn't seem likely that any Death Eaters could, or would, spend the money and the time on an elaborate setup like this...

*Unlikely doesn't mean impossible, Alastor Moody growled in her memory. Don't take anything on trust. Test everything.*

That was part of the reason she had been so relieved when Frank had greeted her with the exact words he had used in the Hogwarts library all those years ago. It had not been a ritual between them, or a story they told often, since it made Frank seem bold and even rude to those who didn't know him, who would take what he had said as a signal that he was certain he would succeed, not as what it had been, the desperation-gambit of a young man very much in love. He had told her many times through the years of their marriage that he didn't know what he would have done if she had turned him down.

*But I didn't. I told him to sit down. And then we dated, and then we were married. And then Neville...*

Instead of the pain and sorrow she usually felt when thinking of her son, Alice Longbottom felt a strange curiosity. Her last memories of the desert where she had spent so long involved a boy, a boy about thirteen years old. He had called himself Neville. He had claimed to be able to make plants grow. And he had a face that looked very like Alice's own, or the face she recalled herself having.

*Heaven only knows what I look like now. But if I did not imagine him, and if he is who he seems to be, then I have some rough idea of how long it has been...*

Frank kissed her once above her ear. "We have to talk," he whispered to her. "You've been over the place?"

"Yes, all through it. Three rooms, this one, a living room, and a bathroom. The living room has a door to the outside. Locked, but the key was hanging beside it." She drew it from her pocket and handed it to him.

"Interesting." Frank turned it over in his hands. "Either we're among friends who want us to know it, or we're among enemies who don't think we're a threat."

"Or enemies who want us to think they're friends."

"True enough." Frank stood carefully, rolled his shoulders, then extended a hand to her with the courtly manners she had always found irresistible. "My lady."

They entered the living room together. "Lights, please," said Frank jokingly.

Alice made a noise of surprise as the candles in the candelabra at each end of the room lit immediately, filling the space with a pleasing light. *Not many places have that kind of magic in every room. Old wizarding manors, and buildings like Hogwarts that date back to the Middle Ages, are probably the only ones. But again, that could mean anything...*

*Enough speculation. Time to discuss facts.*

They sat side by side on the sofa, and Alice began, giving her best summation of the facts, leaving her conclusions and hunches out as she'd been trained. She could see the evidence of Frank thinking, though it wasn't the hard job for him that it looked like for someone like Sirius...

A flash of anger filled her at the thought of that name. *Sirius Black, the traitor in our midst. I am ashamed to say I was his friend. More ashamed that I helped in that vile plan to make Aletha Freeman love him. She went into seclusion after he was found out and sent to Azkaban, came out of her house only to work and wouldn't speak to anyone...*

She finished her summation, and Frank began his. Surface differences aside, it was remarkably similar to her own experience, Alice thought—

being immersed in some kind of natural environment, unable to break free, having only fragmentary human contact, and being apparently independent of natural human needs. The only need she could recall suffering in the desert was for sleep—there was nothing there for her to eat or drink, and she had never truly felt the need for it.

Frank had been approached not by a boy, but by a little girl, who had called herself Meghan, and had offered to help him. She had taken his hand and closed her eyes, and within a few seconds he had been standing in the forest where Alice had seen him for the first time in...

*How long?*

“How old was she?”

“She was small, but well-spoken. Prepubescent, certainly. I’d guess nine or ten.”

*Something disturbed him about her.* “What are you not telling me?”

“Her physical appearance. What did I tell you about that?”

“Dark skin, braided hair, small but strong. Nothing else that I remember.”

“Her face was familiar, Alice. I couldn’t track it down at the time, but now I can. She was the image of Aletha Freeman.”

“A sister? Cousin?”

“Not a sister—Aletha was an only child, and her mother died before she entered the Order. And the resemblance was very close, closer than it would likely be for just a cousin. If I had to guess, I would say the girl could be her daughter.”

Alice nodded. It made the most sense of any possible explanation, but it opened a well of cold fear in her chest. *A nine-year-old child about whom we know nothing, born to a woman who was in the deepest of mourning when we were attacked. Give it a year for her to have met someone and decided to go so far with him, another year for the pregnancy, then nine for the girl to grow up...*

It tallied frighteningly well with her own observations.

“The boy who met me called himself Neville,” she said, taking comfort from Frank’s hand on her arm. *Whatever has happened, we are together now.* “I would say he was about thirteen. He could have been our son, Frank. Our Neville, grown up. He looked very like me, as I was. And he told me that he could make plants grow.”

“He told you that? Did he show you?” Frank looked intensely interested.

“I think it was his magic that created the forest where we found each other.”

Frank shook his head. “Meghan’s magic did that, by killing, or letting die, parts of the jungle.”

“Are you sure? Couldn’t Neville have done it, by making the desert bloom?” Then it hit her. “No. It was neither of them. They did it together. That’s why it worked, so abruptly, so fully. It wasn’t one person doing it, but two.”

“All right. I’ll accept that. But if it’s so—if the Neville you met can actually influence the growth of plants—then he is our son, Alice. There’s no one else he can be. And if he’s thirteen...”

*Twelve years.*

Oddly, it wasn’t the shock it could have been. It wasn’t as if she had gone to sleep one night and awakened to find the world had left her behind. She had memories to cover those years—not ones she would gladly revisit, but memories. They were not blank, nor were they missing. And it gave her time in the desert some boundaries, put a label on it that she could understand. She didn’t like it, but she could comprehend it.

“Twelve years,” Frank mused aloud. “I believe we owe Bellatrix Lestrange some payback.”

Alice nodded fiercely. “And her husband, and her brother-in-law, and that puling little brat Barty Crouch Junior.”

Frank smiled suddenly. “Of course, with our luck, I’d imagine they were caught long ago, and they’ve been in Azkaban all this time, so there’ll be nothing left for us to do.”

“Perhaps they were even caught before they could find Neville.”

“If you saw him, I would certainly tend to believe so.”

“Frank, what is the most common side effect of overexposure to the Cruciatus?” She didn’t like it, but it had to be faced. “Second most common, I mean, besides death.”

Frank closed his eyes for a moment, then opened them again, quiet worry in them. “Insanity. Madness. Retreating within oneself to a place where the pain cannot follow.”

“An impenetrable jungle, or an endless desert, to keep all intruders out.”

"But it also helps the self in." Frank looked at us again. "This could be another manifestation of madness... hallucinating the desired other, something or someone that we want to see again..."

"Oh, honestly, don't you think we would have done that before now if we were going to do it at all?" Alice snapped. "And so far, all of this makes perfect sense to me. Everything looks and feels exactly as it should, and..." She realized suddenly part of the reason she was cross. "And I'm hungry. I haven't been hungry in a long time."

"Nor have I. Tired, frustrated, angry, yes. But not hungry. Nor thirsty, for that matter. And that, along with our being together, would seem to indicate that this place, wherever we are, that this is real."

"So let's accept that as a working hypothesis, shall we? And move on to other things?"

"Yes. Such as, which is the door to the bathroom? Perhaps we can get a drink from there. And then venture out to see where we are, and with whom..."

Alice got up. "This is the bathroom, here," she said, opening the door. "I think there are cups... lights, please."

The candles here lit immediately as well, illuminating the small tiled room with its toilet, bathtub, sink—and mirror. Alice stared at her reflection.

Her face had become thin and lined, much as Frank's had. Her eyes seemed much too large, and her hair, as she had discovered earlier, had turned white. She was still recognizably herself, but different, very different.

"You are still the most beautiful woman I know," said Frank softly behind her.

"At this point, I'm the only woman you know," Alice retorted, glaring at his reflection. "We have no idea even if anyone else from the Order is still alive..."

Behind Frank, fire flared in midair. Both Longbottoms whirled.

"I would imagine Dumbledore is still alive," said Frank with a smile, holding out his arm to receive the glossy scarlet-plumaged bird which had appeared out of the fire. "We may even be at Hogwarts—this seems appropriate for one of the guest suites there. Hello, Fawkes."

Alice caught the note Fawkes dropped into her hands. It was addressed to both of them in Dumbledore's spidery handwriting. Excitement ran hot through her as she tore it carefully open.

"Dear Frank and Alice," she read aloud. "On my own behalf, and that of our old friends, welcome back to Hogwarts. The world is quiet here—no immediate danger threatens. The lock on your door is for your benefit and not your detriment, as you may wish to remain alone for some time while you acquaint yourselves with one another. If, however, you lack anything, you have only to request it aloud.

"I regret that I cannot come to see you myself immediately, but business calls me away. However, a young woman of my recent acquaintance, one of the current teaching staff here at Hogwarts and a friend of several friends of yours, would be happy to meet you, and to bring you up to date on events which have occurred while you have been absent."

"Absent," Frank repeated, smiling as he stroked Fawkes' head. "Tactful as always, Dumbledore."

"Today, in case you were wondering, is Christmas Eve. I hope to see you in time to wish you a Happy Christmas, but if not, let this letter stand for the wish. If you would like to meet with our adjunct professor of Muggle Studies, you may tell Fawkes so, and he will convey that wish to her. Yours very sincerely, Albus Dumbledore." Alice looked up from the letter. "What do you think?"

"I think this is precisely what we need." Frank looked at Fawkes. "Would you tell this young lady—the adjunct professor of Muggle Studies, I think it was—that we would very much like to meet her?"

Fawkes gave a gentle trill, spread his wings and was gone.

"And since we know we're at Hogwarts," said Frank, a broad smile spreading onto his face, "I know who will likely be ministering to our needs."

Alice answered his smile with one of her own. "They always have liked you."

"Oh, house-elves!" Frank called in a dulcet tone, making Alice laugh aloud.

Two of the little creatures appeared, attired in Hogwarts tea-towels. One of them was able to provide the current time, about three o'clock in the afternoon. Frank and Alice decided, based on this, to have a combined tea and supper, and were soon sitting down to a hearty meal.

Alice suspected that someone might be spying on them, watching to see when they were finished, so that they weren't embarrassed by being caught with their mouths full or anything of the sort. If that was so, whoever was watching must be enjoying seeing two dedicated Aurors playing with each other like a pair of children, even going so far as to have a small food fight with their leftovers.

The house-elves, asked politely, cleaned up all traces of the fight when they came to remove the dishes, and Alice had just finished sucking a sherbet lemon (some of Dumbledore's tastes had rubbed off on her) when someone knocked at the door.

"Just a moment," called Frank, and went to the door, taking the key from his pocket and unlocking it. He hung the key on the peg near the door where they had found it and stepped aside as the door opened.

Alice rose to greet their guest, a woman with rather frizzy brown hair and friendly brown eyes. *She's not so young*, was her first thought. *Though I suppose she is to Dumbledore. Mid-thirties, perhaps. As old as I am...*

A little chill ran down her spine. *As old as I was. I was in my mid-thirties. Now... I suppose I must be in my early fifties. Wizards and witches live longer than Muggles, but not so long that we won't miss twelve years from our lifespans...*

"Mr. Longbottom," said the woman, extending her hand to Frank. "Mrs. Longbottom." Her hand was warm, her smile the same. "You can call me Danger."

"A code name?" Frank inquired.

"No, actually, a nickname. I acquired it as a girl after an incident involving roller skates, a number of my friends, and a lot of sharp gravel. My real name is Gertrude, but I loathe and abhor it utterly."

Alice couldn't help laughing a little.

"Danger, then," said Frank, sitting down as the women did the same. "Danger, I'll be blunt. We've figured a few things out, or we think we have. Were we, or were we not, mad? Insane?"

"You were."

"For how long? We think it's been years, verging possibly on... twelve. Are we close?"

"It has been almost exactly twelve years since you were attacked," said Danger with a slow nod. "I was warned that you were good at putting pieces together, but I'll admit I wasn't expecting this. Do you have any idea how much easier you've made my job?"

"Quite a bit?" suggested Alice.

"That's one way to put it. Now, it is my pleasure, occasionally dubious but far more often truly one, to give you the news of these past twelve years. I'll start with the most important piece. Voldemort is still gone."

Frank chuckled. "And Francisco Franco is still dead," he said.

"Yes, but unlike Franco, Voldemort has attempted to return."

Frank stopped laughing. "He has?"

"Yes. Once about a year and a half ago. He was stopped, but he is still out there, somewhere."

"We thought they were crazy, thinking we knew where he was," Alice said quietly. "We thought he was dead."

"No such luck." Danger's face was grim. "I was there. I saw him. He's still around. Not currently killing people, though, and most of the Death Eaters are either in Azkaban—including the four who came after you, I might add—or playing possum."

Alice sighed. "You were right, darling," she said to Frank. "There's nothing left for us to do. Twelve years in Azkaban is a punishment beyond anything I'd be willing to inflict."

"I just wish we could have gotten a few of the ones who claimed they'd been under Imperius," said Frank stiffly. "Like Malfoy. No chance he's in Azkaban, is there?"

Danger winced. "Well, not now."

"Now?" repeated Alice. "You mean he was there?"

"Yes. He spent nine years there, almost exactly. We're still not sure how he escaped, but he did, along with someone else."

"Who?" asked Frank urgently.

"I'll tell you, but I need to explain something else first." Danger frowned, organizing her thoughts. "Do you know how James and Lily Potter hid from Voldemort?"

"They used the Fidelius Charm," said Alice bitterly. "Sirius Black was their Secret-Keeper. And he betrayed them to Voldemort."

"No." Danger's denial was quiet but very strong. "Sirius was *not* their Secret-Keeper. They told everyone he was—even Dumbledore—but they changed Secret-Keepers at the last minute. They gave it to someone else. And that someone else was the traitor. Not Sirius."

"You're sure?" blurted Frank, looking both astonished and hopeful.

"Who was it?" asked Alice over him. But her mind was already working. *Who would James and Lily Potter have trusted with their lives, if not Sirius? Not Remus, he wasn't anywhere near them when the Charm went up—but what about...*

Frank's mind had obviously been working along the same lines. "Pettigrew," he said. "Peter Pettigrew."

"Yes." Danger nodded. "He betrayed them. And that street scene was a setup. Sirius never killed anyone."

*So he was sent to Azkaban for nothing...*

Alice felt ill. She'd been to the prison many times, and hated it, as any intelligent person would. It had hurt to think of the bright, laughing young man she'd known as an apprentice and a new Auror locked away there, and the only way she'd been able to stand it was by reminding herself of his terrible crimes.

*Crimes he never committed...*

"He's not still in Azkaban, is he?" she asked urgently.

"Oh, no. No, not at all. But I had to explain that to you so that you'd understand. You see, the other person who escaped Azkaban with Lucius Malfoy was Peter Pettigrew."

Frank let out a sigh of comprehension. "How long has he been locked up?" he asked.

"About two and a half years," said Danger.

"Was Sirius in Azkaban until then? For a mistake?" Alice was terribly afraid the answer would be yes, and was tremendously relieved when Danger shook her head.

"Something's missing," said Frank, rubbing the arm of his chair in thought. "Pettigrew was only caught two and a half years ago, correct?"

"Three. He's been at large for about six months now. But basically, yes."

"When was Sirius released, then? And why? I know Barty Crouch, and he would never have let a prisoner go without good evidence of innocence."

"Well, I can't quite answer that question, but I can tell you that Sirius only spent about six months in Azkaban. A little less, I think."

Alice breathed a quiet sigh of relief.

"Now, the reason I can't answer that—reasons, really, there's more than one—but the first reason is that Barty Crouch isn't head of the Department of Magical Law Enforcement anymore. And no, he's not Minister of Magic, either," she added, forestalling Frank's question. "He's with International Magical Cooperation these days."

"Why?" asked Alice, bewildered. "What happened to him?"

"Did you get a good look at your attackers?" asked Danger instead of answering.

"Yes, but—oh. Of course." Alice closed her eyes as what must have happened came clear to her. "His son. They caught his son in Death Eater activities. His career would be over no matter what he did."

"What did he do?" asked Frank.

"Repudiated the boy and asked for the maximum penalty," said Danger. "And that made most people see him as a monster who would sacrifice his own son to his career. The boy died in Azkaban, and Crouch's wife shortly thereafter. He's in a dead-end job with no chance of advancement." She shook her head. "Pity may be wasted on him, but I can't help it..."

Then she smiled. "But there's another reason I can't tell you why Sirius was released from Azkaban. He wasn't released. He escaped."

"Oh?" Alice allowed her intense interest to show in the monosyllable. She wouldn't put it past Sirius Black to achieve the impossible, but she wanted to know how he'd done it.

"You didn't know this, I'm sure, but Sirius is an Animagus. He can turn himself into—"

"Wait," said Frank, holding up his hand. "Let me guess. A big, black dog."

Danger smiled. "He pulled something over on you, didn't he?"

"He ate my lunch," said Frank with dignity. "You remember that, dear, don't you?"

"Oh, yes." Alice laughed. Frank had come into her cubicle looking angry and puzzled, and had related how he had returned to his desk to find a big black dog licking its chops, with the wrapper of his sandwich lying empty on his chair. Before he could do anything, the dog had disappeared under the desk, and when he went to look for it, there was nothing there.

"He Disapparated under the desk, didn't he?" Frank was asking Danger now.

"Yes, he did. He won the bet, too."

"Of course it was a bet." Frank looked up to heaven. "Of course. He and James Potter would bet on anything. Anything at all."

"You sound like you know Sirius," said Alice curiously. "Do you?"

"Yes, I know him. He's a friend, a good friend, but nothing else."

Alice glanced at Danger's hand and found it free of rings.

"But I am married," Danger added quickly. "I just don't wear my ring... or rather, I do, but not anywhere most people can see it." She indicated her neck, where a fine, golden chain disappeared beneath her robes.

"Who are you married to?" asked Frank, then shook his head. "No, wait. We got off track. We were talking about Sirius, and how he escaped from Azkaban. Which isn't supposed to be possible. It had something to do with his Animagus form..."

"Yes. Dementors have trouble sensing the emotions of animals. They're attuned to humans, not other kinds of life. So Sirius could avoid some of their effects by changing into his dog form. And it was another animal that let him out of his cell, and helped him swim to shore from Azkaban."

"Another animal." Alice pursed her lips, thinking. "The other boys. James and Peter and Remus. Were they Animagi as well?"

"James and Peter were. Not Remus. But it was Remus who helped Sirius escape."

"Oh, of course!" Alice had suddenly remembered what it was that made Remus Lupin so special, and what his main job had been in the Order of the Phoenix. "But wait... he can't control his transformations, can he?"

"Transformation?" asked Frank, still in the dark.

"You don't remember, love? Remus' condition?"

"Oh yes." Frank's face cleared, then clouded again. "But that doesn't make sense. How would a werewolf get to Azkaban, and how would it know what to do once it got there?"

"Remus met someone," said Danger, and Alice got the impression that the other woman was choosing her words carefully. "Someone with... unusual magic. Magic which allows a werewolf to keep his human mind during a full moon. And someone who had... found out the truth about Sirius and Pettigrew. On his next transformation night, he waited until he was fully transformed, then Apparated to Azkaban, released Sirius, and the two of them returned to the mainland."

"And this was almost twelve years ago," said Frank, in a tone of checking his facts.

"Yes."

"So Sirius would have had to live on the run for nearly nine years."

"He had help," said Danger with an enigmatic smile. "He posed as a family pet for about five years. When that cover was blown, or almost blown, he and his family spent a few months in America, then came back here and settled down in Devon under assumed names. The furor about him had died down by then, so he could get away with a fairly minimal disguise. He was eventually found out, but Wormtail—Pettigrew—was located just in time for his trial, and the truth came out."

"He and his family?" repeated Alice. "Which family is this?"

"Does he have a child, by any chance?" asked Frank before Danger could answer. "A daughter, about nine or ten?"

Danger smiled. "Her name is Meghan."

"And she looks like her mother."

"Very much."

"Ohhhh," Alice breathed in sudden understanding.

"Sirius and Aletha were married shortly after his escape," Danger said. "Meghan was born about a year later. Aletha claimed she'd adopted a Muggleborn orphan."

"Sirius, a father." Alice felt a smile coming to her face. "He always loved Harry so dearly..." She stopped, realizing what she'd said. "Harry. Good heavens, Harry. I know he went to Lily's sister, but Sirius would never have let him stay there, not if he was free—he'd have done something, gotten himself into their house as their pet dog, I suppose, but that can't be what you mean by his family..."

"No, it isn't," said Danger, now grinning openly. "For quite a number of years, people thought Sirius had abducted Harry. The headlines in the *Daily Prophet* came in that order. One night, Sirius Black was missing from Azkaban. The next morning, Harry Potter was gone, kidnapped from his relatives' home. But no one ever seemed to notice that the article said Harry had been missing for two days."

"Meaning Sirius couldn't have taken him," said Frank. "Who did?"

Danger's grin turned a bit sheepish. "Well... I did."

"You?" said Frank and Alice in unison.

"I know, I know, I didn't know his family, I'm not a proper person to raise him, but I lived down the street from his relatives, and I have a sister who's



almost exactly his age. I used to babysit for him, and... I learned to love him. So when I had the chance to give him a real family, and be part of it myself, I jumped at it. He's very much like a son to me."

*Like a son.* Alice steeled herself and plunged in. "Danger, please, tell me quickly. Our son. Our Neville. What happened to him, after we were attacked? What did they do to him?"

Danger shook her head. "They didn't do anything," she said. "You hid him, didn't you?"

"In a closet," said Frank. "We charmed the entrance invisible, we hoped, but we didn't have long, and they'd broken all our security charms, everything we'd done to keep the house safe, so we didn't have much hope that they wouldn't break the charm on the closet as well."

"It seems they weren't interested, then. Neville was found safe and well, and he's been living with his grandmother—your mother, Mr. Longbottom."

Frank smiled. "I'm sure he's had a wonderful time," he said. "Mum's quite a piece of work..."

Alice saw understanding, and sorrow, come onto his face. "My father?" he asked quietly.

"I'm sorry," Danger said. "He died about nine years ago. Peacefully." She rose. "I'll... leave you alone for a little while."

"Thank you," Alice said, before moving to Frank's side and putting her arm around him, feeling his shoulders shake. The door closed behind Danger, and Frank began to sob harshly as Alice held him close.

"I don't know what to feel," Frank confided in her some time later, bewilderment clear on his face, mirrored by Alice's own. "I mean, my father's dead, but Neville's alive. And we still have our son, but we've missed most of his life."

"But we do have him," said Alice, her own throat tight. "And that wonderful news about Sirius—I hope he's around here somewhere, I've missed him—oh, Frank, it could have been so much worse. But it could always have been better too..." She began to laugh, a little hysterically. "If this had never happened, maybe that would have been better..."

And then they were both crying, holding each other and crying for the strange and wonderful oddness of the world.

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What seemed like a long time later—the windows had long since faded to black, the candles provided the only light in the room, and Alice was starting to feel hungry again—a knock sounded on the door.

"Just a moment," Frank called. "Are we presentable?" he asked her quietly.

Alice looked him over. "You are if I am," she said.

"Hold still." Frank gently straightened her hair. "There, you'll do now. Come in," he called.

The door swung open. "I hope I'm not interrupting," said the man it revealed.

"Remus!" Alice jumped up and ran to him, embracing him. "It's wonderful to see you!"

"And you, believe me," said Remus, returning her embrace gently before shaking hands with Frank. "We never thought it would happen, though we never stopped hoping."

"What exactly did happen?" asked Frank, sitting down. "We're not at all clear on that."

"To tell the truth, neither are we," said Remus. "We didn't do it."

"Who's we?" asked Alice.

"We as in adults. There weren't really any adults involved in your cure—well, in the beginning stages, yes. Andromeda Tonks had the original idea for a potion that might help you, and Aletha finished it. But the actual cure was done by eight Hogwarts students, two of whom appear to be descendants of the Hogwarts Founders."

Frank nodded. "Neville and who else?"

Remus' eyebrows went up. "You know about Neville?"

"I am his father."

"Yes, and Sirius is Meghan's father, but until she saved Harry's life, he had no idea she was a natural Healer," Remus returned. "Are you an Heir, then?"

"Yes, I am. My family had a ring of Helga Hufflepuff's, it had made it down through the centuries. I don't suppose you'd know what happened to it."

"Not a gold ring with the initial H on it, was it?"

"Yes, actually."

Remus looked highly amused. "That explains a few things," he said as if to himself, then looked back at Frank. "Neville has it now. In a way."

"In a way?"

"Never mind. He has it."

"Yes, that's very interesting," said Alice in her best "humor the boys" tone. "Now what were you saying about Sirius Black's daughter being a natural Healer?"

"Meghan is an Heir of Ravenclaw, and the Ravenclaw power is healing. Last year, Harry took a bad fall at a Quidditch match. He would have died, but Meghan saved him. Now she's used that same power, in conjunction with Neville and the rest of their friends, to heal you. I'm afraid that's as much as I know about it."

"I think this is a case of 'don't look a gift hippogriff in the beak,'" said Frank.

"Yes, I think so," Alice agreed. "What are you doing with yourself these days, Remus?"

Remus smiled. "Teaching Defense Against the Dark Arts."

"Oh, congratulations. I know how much you love reading and learning. I'm sure you make a fine teacher."

"You must know Danger, then," said Frank. "She was here earlier, she's an adjunct professor of Muggle Studies... do you know, I don't think we ever caught her last name?"

Remus' smile widened. "I'm quite sure you didn't," he said. "And I'm also sure she did that on purpose. She's a bit of a tease, I'm afraid."

Alice smiled herself. "Her last name is Lupin, isn't it?" she challenged.

"No, not quite."

"Something hyphenated, then," said Frank. "Or she never changed it. But you two are married, aren't you?"

"For my sins," said Remus, raising his eyes to heaven.

There was a feminine shriek in the hall. "*I heard* that, Remus John Lupin!"

"It's generally considered polite to knock," Remus said mildly as the door flew open, revealing an irate-looking Danger.

"I was *about* to knock, when I heard you say that *horrible* thing about me!" Danger planted herself directly in front of Remus. "I want an apology, this *instant!*"

Remus stood up and, with careful precision, placed Danger's arms around his neck and his around her waist. Then he drew her in towards him and bent her backwards in a passionate kiss.

"And this is what I put up with every day," said a new voice.

"Aletha!" Alice shot to her feet again, hugging her friend. "You look so beautiful—and you're a mother now, you must be so proud of your Meghan..."

"Yes, very. She's a wonderful girl, very grown-up for her age. Of course, that might just be associating with older children her entire life."

"Harry?" asked Frank, embracing Aletha in his turn. "And Danger's sister, I think I heard mentioned?"

"Yes, her name is Hermione," said Remus, surfacing and sitting down again, Danger pulling over an ottoman for herself. "But we have one more living in the house. I think Danger told you Lucius Malfoy got what he deserved some years back?"

"Yes, why?"

"His own wife turned him in," said Aletha, sitting down. "And when they searched the house, they couldn't find any trace of Malfoy's son, Draco—he was four then, he's the same age as Harry and Neville." Her smile flashed out brightly. "And they didn't find any trace of him for years. He disappeared just as completely as Harry Potter."

"And to the same place?" asked Alice, the pieces falling neatly together for her.

"Yes, he's ours now," said Remus.

"How?" Frank looked astounded. "I can't see you just walking into Malfoy Manor and taking him home with you."

"Happened the other way around," said Danger. "Lucius Malfoy brought us home, back when we were in hiding because of Sirius—broke into our house, Stunned us all, and took us prisoner. He planned to turn Sirius in and use the political capital from that to get guardianship of Harry. He didn't know that we'd gone to Dumbledore and convinced him Sirius was innocent, and he certainly wasn't planning on Narcissa Stunning him and offering us our freedom in exchange for our taking Draco away with us."

"He took his mother's name," said Aletha. "So he's Draco Black now, instead of Malfoy. He's a Gryffindor—as is Neville, by the way. And they're

rather good friends.”

Frank smirked. “I wish I could see Lucius Malfoy’s face now,” he said. “I remember it so well, how he strutted about when Narcissa had a son, so very proud that his name would continue. And now it won’t, will it?”

“Not likely,” said Danger. “Draco cursed quite a number of people back in his first year when they called him the son of Lucius Malfoy. Come to think...” She frowned. “I believe Neville helped him with that. If I remember right, they cursed every single Slytherin in their year into the hospital wing.”

Frank burst out laughing. “All by themselves?”

“Well, Harry and Hermione helped,” admitted Remus.

Alice laughed with her husband, but something had come to the surface of her mind, and it would not be denied. “I was wondering,” she said quietly as the laughter died down. “When can we see Neville?”

“You can see him now, if you like,” said Aletha, “but I’m afraid he’s asleep, and probably will be for a few days.”

“A few days!”

“He used a lot of his magic in the Healing. It takes a toll. But he’s not hurt, he’s in no danger, he’s just asleep. And trust me, he’ll be fighting his way awake as soon as he can. He wants to see you probably just as much as you want to see him.”

“Can we see him now, then?” asked Frank.

“Of course.” Aletha got up. “Follow me.”

She led them down a flight of stairs and through one or two passages before stopping in front of a carved door and tapping lightly on it. It swung open a crack, and she exchanged a few words with the person on the other side before opening it wider. “You can go right in,” she said. “Don’t worry too much about staying quiet, I don’t think a herd of erumpents could wake any of them at the moment.”

Alice was through the door in an instant, her heart racing. Her son, her little boy... she’d missed so much with him, but she wouldn’t miss any more. From this day on, she would be his mother again, and love him the way he should have been loved...

Children slept in piles all over the room. The general untidiness made them look like a lot more than eight, but Alice only had eyes for one. Very near the door, lying on his back, was her son.

*Well, eyes for two. It's hard to avoid, when she's so nearby...*

The little girl Frank had described lay beside Neville, pressed against him, their hands entangled on the mattress between them. She was very like a smaller, younger Aletha, but Alice had no doubt she’d show her father’s spirit and fire when awake.

But her eyes kept coming back to Neville. There was no doubt he had been the boy who had come to her in the desert, braving the heat and the sun to find her, and spending his magic recklessly just to convince her that she didn’t kill everything she touched. A Gryffindor, she remembered, he was a Gryffindor as she had been, and it seemed he deserved to be in that House.

Frank knelt beside her now, staring down at Neville with glistening eyes. He reached out and gently stroked a strand of hair away from his son’s forehead, then let his hand rest against Neville’s cheek.

A shadow fell across them as someone else knelt on the other side of the two children. “He’s the year’s best student in Herbology,” said a man’s voice. “He and Meghan dance beautifully together. He won the House Cup for Gryffindor his first year, and these kids once stole a car just to go say hello to him on his birthday.”

Alice’s own eyes filled with tears. Just that, four sentences, and she knew twice as much about her son as she had before. She looked up to see who had given her this gift.

Sirius Black grinned at them. “Your son,” he said, “is corrupting my daughter.”

“I don’t think so,” said Frank promptly. “The way I heard it, your daughter is corrupting our son.”

Sirius nodded. “Quite possibly... call it mutual corruption and leave it at that?”

Alice laughed. “Troublemaker,” she said, leaning carefully over the children to hug Sirius. “Mutual corruption, indeed.”

“It’s good to have you back,” Sirius said. “I think you’ll like it around here.”

Alice looked down at her beautiful son. “I think we will too,” she said softly. “Yes, I think we will like it.”

It wasn’t a perfect world they’d awakened to. But it was closer than some.