The Weight of What Remains

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The word home was easily Alice's least favourite word. Home suggested warmth. Her house had none. The curtains remained half-drawn, as if the sun had sinned. The synchronised tick of clocks filled the messy silence. Her mother stood at the kettle placed on the stovetop while Alice drowned in the odour of cigarette smoke and old lady perfume, which radiated throughout the air. It was familiar, but never tolerable.

"You're quiet again," her mother said. "That means you're hiding something, Alice." Alice felt her breath catch in her throat, eyes locking on the coffee table in front of her. A stack of envelopes piled high, all with the same red stamp on them reading PAST DUE, sat by a photo of her and her brother Archie, grinning far too wide as their mother stood behind them. "I worry about you," her mother continued, voice insincere, as she placed a chipped teacup in front of Alice. "You're not the same girl I knew. You've changed." The room filled with silence. "Especially since Archie's diagnosis…"

Alice stood abruptly and escaped to her bedroom where the air felt slightly less borrowed. She stood near the entrance and leaned back against the door. She looked at the books lining her shelves in careful order. She found peace in the way they behaved. They helped take her away from the cruelty of her own world. She pulled a weathered copy of 'Alice in Wonderland' off the shelf; the cover was slightly torn from use, sentences she had crossed out carefully rewritten in red ink. If the words on a page could be changed, so could everything else…right?

A soft knock at her door, followed by the turn of a handle, revealed Archie standing there. "River?" he asked.

She nodded and tucked the book under her arm, tossing her coat over her shoulders. The two walked gingerly past the living room so as not to capture their mother's attention. They sat under the oak tree as the river moved indifferently in front of them. Alice began reading while Archie tied little knots into the soft grass before peeking over her shoulder at the book. "Alice, you promised you'd stop changing them," he sighed.

"I'm not changing them, I'm fixing them," she said. "She was better off in Wonderland."

"Do you wanna play hide and seek?" he suggested; he thought that a game might help her feel less uneasy.

Alice closed the book and nodded, "I'll hide, you count." Alice closed her eyes and counted to thirty. She turned around and started looking for him. She peered up into the trees and searched behind shrubs, finally finding him tucked into a small ditch. "Found you," she smiled, helping him out of the ditch.

"Guess so," he panted, brushing dirt off his sleeve.

When they returned, the ground beneath them was different. A hole had yawned where they had sat. The edges were smooth and round. The soil around it was undisturbed, as if the earth had opened its mouth. Alice spoke, "Was that there before?"

Archie looked down, "Looks deep." It was deep and dark. The kind of dark that swallows all traces of light.

"We… should go home," she gulped, stepping back.

"You've always wondered what's underneath."

Before she could argue, the ground beneath them collapsed, not with a crack or a snap; it just seemed to… fold away. As they fell, light became a rumour. The ground above slipped past like a ribbon. The world stretched thin, then curved, then disappeared completely.

They landed with a thump. Alice groaned; Archie coughed violently. "Are you alright?" she asked.

"I don't feel well," Archie groaned, holding his chest. "My chest is pounding; it hurts to breathe." His face twisted in pain.

Alice looked around the room they were trapped in; she almost didn't recognise it. It looked nothing like the pictures. The curtains were rotted, lying in ribbons across the floor, bricks crumpled off the wall, and shattered glass rested by the windows. "We'll get out of here," she promised.

As she searched, she stepped on a loose tile, peeling it back, revealing a weathered key. She tried every door, finally forcing a dirty grey coloured door open after unlocking it. Archie appeared beside her as they stepped through the door. Alice looked around, her face dropping at the sight in front of her. Wonderland had been drained of all remaining colour. The trees sagged like piles of wet wool beneath a dull nicotine sky. The air smelt of lavender and tobacco, a scent they were certainly familiar with.

"It's… quieter than I imagined," Archie said. The silence felt almost forceful; like a pin dropping would cause the world to fall away.

"What have you done, child?" the Cheshire Cat said, appearing in a tree. "You're too old to be playing these games. You must leave."

"Staying here is the only way we stay together. I can't lose him."

"All things come to an end, child, sooner or later…"

"Why? Because you say so? Because some queen says so?"

"There are rules for a reason," the cat argued.

During Alice's argument with the Cheshire cat, she hadn't noticed the faint jazz music and flowing conversations coming from deep in the forest. But Archie did. And so, he stepped over tangled tree roots and hopped over stones, peeking out from behind a tree, looking at the string lights and table set up in a clearing.

"Alice! The tea party! Look!" Archie yelled. Alice shifted her attention from the cat to her brother and ran towards where he was hiding.

Alice paused, turning back, hoping to ask the cat one final question: What happened to Wonderland? However, when she looked back, the cat had disappeared.

Alice found her brother behind the tree; she followed his gaze to a long table, where a scraggly old hare, a sleepy little mouse and a tall twitchy hatter sat, sipping from their teacups and sleeping in teapots. The two walked towards the table.

"You're late," the Dormouse yawned.

"What?" Archie asked.

"Time doesn't wait forever," it yawned before its head hit the side of the teapot with a light tink.

"You… are wasting our time," Alice scoffed.

"Time? Now you know time?" the March Hare huffed.

"No, but I know you waste time by not spending it."

"Huzzah for the speech," the Hatter spoke, voice dripping with sarcasm. "The Queen will have your head if you keep that attitude."

"'I'm Alice, and I can stop time 'cause I'm the best,'" the Dormouse mocked, pitching his already high voice up and waving his arms dramatically.

"I don't sound like that!" Alice scoffed.

"'I don't sound like that,'" the Hare taunted in a funny voice.

"Enough," the Hatter scorned. The creatures went back to drinking their tea, smiling proudly, like they had accomplished something.

"Do you think this is the same Wonderland you love hearing about? Did it live up to your expectations?" the Hatter asked Archie.

"No, it's not the same. We sat by the riverbank every day; we read about Wonderland, and it wasn't like this in the pictures," Archie said.

"The riverbank? You had never sat by our riverbank. You only imagined you had. You wanted to be out of that hospital so much, you dreamt of a place that didn't exist."

The tea party collapsed as all of Wonderland's creatures emerged from every direction of the forest, taking a seat at the table. Two knaves seized Alice and Archie, dragging them to the head of the table. The Queen grinned as she stepped through a gap in the trees.

"The trial begins," he smirked.

"Alice, how… pleasant," the Queen frowned in disgust. "Let's see… Rule 93, no returning after banishment…"

"No! Please!" Alice begged.

"87: not stopping time."

"So many useless rules," the Cheshire Cat sighed. The Queen roared in anger, silencing the cat.

Alice pleaded, "Don't send us back! Please!"

The Queen grinned as she read the sentence, "Guilty! Banish them!"

"No!" Alice exclaimed.

They saw the world bending around them, then fading back to the dreary sky of Oxford. They landed on their backs. Alice stood, helping Archie to his feet. "Alice, I don't feel good at all," he gasped.

Archie collapsed onto her, clutching his chest. The two slowly sank to the floor. "No, no, no!" she cried.

The wailing sirens broke through the heavy afternoon air. Alice didn't remember calling an ambulance, but she held his hand the entire way; his breath was shallow, trembling.

"Please, Archie. I can't lose you now too," she whispered, kneeling beside his hospital bed.

His eyes fluttered shut, and his breath stopped as the monitor let out a prolonged beep. Alice let out a gut-wrenching sob, and his hand fell from hers. The world around them muffled into nothingness as their mother rushed in. Alice felt her mother's arms wrap around her as she cried. Tears wouldn't bring him back. The weight of his absence pressed in Alice's chest. Relentless and unyielding.