

## Chapter 16

Alice didn't have a plan. She started to rush to the front door, but then stopped short, her fists clenched. What could she do?

Old thought patterns circled through her head, accompanied by a feeling of weakness, of helplessness. It was so familiar it was like slipping into a well-worn shirt - something comfortable, yet profoundly unattractive.

*I'm just a General Laborer. I'm weak and useless.*

But she wasn't a weak and useless nobody anymore, was she? Her power now resided in her dragons.

She turned, studying them. Three pairs of eyes stared back at her: Iggy with fierceness; Numi with surprising cunning, and Prim who was quietly confident.

"We need to save Tom and the other child," she said, "but we must be discreet." This last part was aimed squarely at Iggy. "Find a way to stall those false Workers until I get down there. But they mustn't know that they were attacked by dragons."

"Fire doesn't betray its source," he said, then flew out.

"I'll help," Numi chirped. Alice almost called her back, wondering how a coin-eating dragon could assist a fire breathing dragon, but Numi's tone had been confident, and Alice simply didn't have the time to argue.

She turned towards the door and stepped out into the hall. The elevator, once charming, now only made her impatient. Every second to reach the lobby felt agonizingly long.

*"Calm yourself,"* Prim advised from Alice's shoulder.

"How can I be calm? I don't know what I'm doing," Alice said. "I need to be there for Iggy and Numi, but I can't risk be seen..."

*"Then I will help you,"* Prim said.

Alice looked at her. "What do you mean?"

Then, it hit her. She had just given Prim an illusion skill. "Will that work? Can you cast an illusion on me?"

"For a short period. I'm not very skilled with it, and it would probably be best if nobody looks too closely," Prim replied.

Alice nodded. "Transform me into a powerful Nobleman. Broad shoulders, rich clothing. I need to be intimidating because I don't want to fight."

Prim closed her eyes, and although Alice could still see her, it was as if the dragon had become translucent. Simultaneously, a light settled over Alice. She looked down and jumped when she saw her sleeves covered in rich, dark clothing. And her hands... They were not her hands. They were large and square, their nails finely manicured.

"This is amazing," she said, then reached for her neck.

It still felt the same—no Adam's apple or rough skin. This was merely an illusion. "I still sound like myself."

"The illusion is light only. I can't manipulate sound." Prim sounded apologetic, but her power was still a wonder to behold.

Alice glanced over to see Prim semi-transparent and realized that she could only see the dragon because she was her own aspect. Prim was not merely using an illusion skill. She was also using Concealment on herself. This would reduce the duration she could maintain the two skills, but Alice approved.

The elevator door opened onto the lobby.

*"Remember, you are a nobleman,"* Prim whispered, invisible on Alice's shoulder.

*I can do this,* Alice lied to herself, but she didn't have much of a choice. Squaring her shoulders, she strode out.

A genuine nobleman's shoes would click on the marble floor. Her own cheap, leather-bottomed shoes did not.

The attendant at the front desk glanced up from a logbook they were writing in. "May I help you, sir?"

Trying to deepen her voice, Alice replied, "Yes, I demand to know what's happening out there!" She pointed a thick finger towards the front room door.

The man looked quizzical. "Sir?"

"Did you not hear the shouting? There are ruffians attacking children out in the streets. Why hasn't Law Enforcement been called already?"

And, as if on cue, a golden fireball brilliantly lit up the windows outside the lobby.

"And now they're using fire magic. Rogue wizards!" Alice yelled, channeling her best Nobleman. "I pay too much to have my sleep disturbed like this!"

"Yes, Sir! I'll call for help at once." The Attendant sprinted to a glowing stone device she assumed was an emergency beacon.

"Do that. I'll give those ruffians a piece of my mind," Alice said, sweating and worried sick for her dragons. It took all her strength not to sprint to the front door.

Instead, she maintained a confident stride, as if she were a man, and threw open the door to quite a sight.

Two decorative trees and several bushes were ablaze. It seemed the culprit didn't have much control over his fire powers. The flames illuminated the courtyard well, revealing three men dragging a kicking boy, Tom, and a scruffy girl of about the same age. The children's mouths were open, yelling, but no sound came out.

Alice had heard of this in tales of Dark Magic classes —a silencing skill.

In the gloom, she caught a flash of a red dragon soaring through the dark air. But just a flash, thankfully. Iggy's reddish hue blended well in the dark.

It seemed the men had been attempting to drag the children out of the courtyard onto the street, but the fire had blocked their path, and they were now trying to find a different exit.

"What is going on here?" Alice yelled.

Her voice sounded... somewhat feeble to her, but one of the men looked over and said, "Nothing to see here, sir. We're arresting thieves."

"You don't look like Law Enforcement. Who are you? Why can I only see a Worker tag?" Alice demanded.

Instantly, the false Worker expressions shifted from wary to predatory.

Another offered a false smile. "Truly, sir, this is none of your business."

He started to approach Alice, who tensed. If he got too close, her illusion might not hold up. And if it came to a physical confrontation, Alice would be at a disadvantage.

Suddenly, a dark, slithering shape descended from the sky. Brightly burning claws struck the man's shoulders, using him as a springboard before flying away. The man cried out, attracting the attention of the other two who were still grappling with the children.

Then another man yelped, releasing the girl to reach towards his back. As he turned, Alice spotted a lump the size of Numi crawling up his spine under his clothes.

Tom, seizing the moment, kicked the man holding him in the knee. Distracted, the man released his grip. The girl, too, managed to slither fully out of the man's grasp.

"Run!" Alice shrieked, unfortunately in her own voice.

The children didn't need to be told twice and bolted in opposite directions.

"What the hell is going on here?" one of the men bellowed. When he turned his gaze towards Alice, his eyes burned with anger. He pulled out a club out of seemingly nowhere.

"Numi! Prim!" Alice hissed, taking a step back.

However, at that moment, the sweet sound of Police sirens echoed through the air.

"We need to run!" one of the men yelled.

"No, wait—" one of the others, the leader in front, started to say, but his companions had already left. Frustrated, he whirled on Alice. "I'll remember you, *sir!*" he snarled before taking off.

Alice waited for a moment, half convinced they would return. That this had been some kind of a bluff.

They didn't reappear, but another cluster of shrubs caught on fire. It seemed Iggy's flames were magically enhanced. They spread too fast to be normal.

The sirens were drawing closer. Alice needed to make herself scarce.

She backed into the hotel, whose doors, previously seeming like a sturdy barrier, now felt more flimsy than ever.

The hotel attendant ran up. "I signaled for the Officers, sir."

"Very good," Alice said, covering her badly deepened voice with a cough as if she had been caught in the smoke. "It seems that the ruffians have been chased off, but they might come back."

"May I ask, what's happening out there?"

"It appears someone thought it funny to start fires," she snarled, transferring fear into fake outrage. "Call the Fire Brigade as well."

"Of course, sir. If the Fire Brigade has any questions, which room should I refer them to?"

Certainly not her room. Alice hesitated for a second, then the first room number that popped into her mind was the same one she had stolen from.

"E15 on the fourth floor."

The man's eyes went wide. "Yes... Yes, my Lord."

*Lord?* She had stolen from a Noble? Whoops.

Alice nodded, then turned for the elevator, perhaps walking a bit faster than a dignified Lord would. However, she could feel Prim straining to keep up her skills. Slim figure shook against Alice's neck. The illusion dropped the moment Alice entered the elevator.

Immediately, she praised the little dragon, stroking her back. "You did so well."

The little dragon looked exhausted, but pleased. *"I leveled up my Illusion to 3, my Concealment to 10, and I gained an entire level."*

"Good. You worked hard, love. Thank you."

Once back in her room, Alice threw every lock on the door.

Iggy and Numi were there, having flown back through the open balcony. Alice made a big fuss over them, petting each and praising their efforts.

"Did you see where the children went?" she asked.

"No." Iggy shook his head. "Hopefully, they'll find a good hiding place."

Alice was worried for them, but it was too dangerous to go out as herself, and Prim was exhausted.

"You did great too, Numi," she said. "Was that you under the man's jacket?"

"Yes. He smelled like horse sweat," Numi replied, looking disgusted. Then she brightened and pulled out a small bag of coins. "But I managed to snag this from his pocket."

Alice laughed despite herself and opened the slightly damp coin purse. Several coppers spilled out, along with a single, gleaming silver piece.

Feeling generous, Alice let Numi eat the silver.

## Chapter 17

Alice set herself up by the chair next to the balcony where she could get a good look at the comings and goings of various Law Enforcement classes. The Fire Brigade had arrived and done their job admirably. Soon the trees and bushes were only smoldering.

Hopefully, the hotel would hire a Nature Mage out to fix the damage.

However, Law Enforcement continued to swarm all over the rest of the courtyard, which made Alice nervous. She watched for signs that the Workers had been arrested, or that Tom and the little girl were caught. But there was nothing.

Mostly, the officers poked around and interviewed anyone coming and going late into the night.

Alice began to get drowsy. She blinked, and it seemed the next moment she woke with the sun in her eyes. The courtyard below was clear. It was over.

Prim slept in her lap under the form of a large cat. A *very* large cat. Alice didn't realize until now that her dragon had continued to grow. She had been so preoccupied over the last couple of days that she hadn't really noticed it.

Numi and Iggy both slept on the bed.

*Where I should've slept*, she thought ruefully. Carefully, she rose from her chair with Prim in her arms, and settled the dragon down on the mattress before stretching and yawning herself. She'd had quite an eventful day.

Looking around the room, she found that she was growing tired of it. Besides, she was supposed to be an Apprentice Merchant, wasn't she? Or she would be, once she fixed the Visible Class again.

Oh. Had she gone out looking like a Nobleman but with the tag of a Maid?

Alice winced, but remembered that the Hotel Attendant had automatically called her a Lord. It wasn't a wonder that the false Workers had realized something had been amiss, however.

It only took a moment of concentration to change her visible class back to Apprentice Merchant. There. Done. She should go out and...

*What exactly does an Apprentice Merchant do?* she wondered. Probably some form of shopping, which she wasn't unhappy with. She needed more clothing, and a new place to rent.

The dragons were stretching and yawning, coming out of their slumber.

"Numi, be a dear and please collect all of the coins into your storage space," Alice said, "and try not to eat anything. I'll be ordering breakfast for us all, and I would like you to try real food."

"But I don't like real food, it's gross. It doesn't taste anything like coins," Numi whined.

"One would think that would be an advantage," Alice muttered to herself, "at least try it. It might do wonders for your scales."

"What's wrong with my scales?"

"They're kind of green," Iggy replied, shimmying to the side to flash his red scales in the morning light. For a brief moment they looked like dancing flames.

"There's nothing wrong with your scales," Alice said firmly, "and I want that to continue to be the case. You need a balanced diet."

Numi grumbled for a moment, but Alice sensed that she would acquiesce.

Then she took a double-take at Iggy. Her fearsome little man had grown at least a hand-span in length since last night.

Swiftly, she checked on his status:

<p style="text-align: center;"><b>Aspect 3</b> "Igcendiorum"</p>
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Level: 1  
Skills: 3/3  
Fire Breath (Permanent skill: Locked.) : Level 3  
Burning Claws: Level 2  
Ultimate Armor: Level 0

She frowned in thought. Clearly, Iggy's Fire Breath and Burning Claws skills received some experience from last night. Enough so that his primary skill actually reached level 3. However his overall level was at 1.

Was this because his Ultimate Armor skill was still at zero?

She suspected that was the primary reason, and was determined to keep a closer eye on her dragons stats to understand how they worked so she could help them grow faster.

Though... she couldn't be sorry his Ultimate Armor was still so low. It told that last night's fight had been so one-sided he hadn't been required to use it.

She just wanted to keep him safe... though she doubted Iggy would appreciate her trying to protect him.

Setting that aside for now, Alice then went to the vanity to try to do something with her hair. Luckily, the fancy room came with the basic supplies: a hairbrush, hair ties, and some device labeled with a 'drying charm', which she didn't quite understand until she glanced at the bath. It was still empty.

*Oh yes, I could order a bath, for a fee,* she thought, having heard that as a done thing from snippets of conversation among passing Noble Ladies. Then, afterward, she would follow it up with the drying charm.

A bath. A *real* bath with hot water and all the lovely soaps arranged in a row beside the tub. She wasn't sure why she hadn't taken advantage of that before now. Except that in her old life as a General Laborer, bathing was usually done only at need, scrubbing from a cold bucket which was never pleasant. And there were no charms but an old rag to towel herself off with – hopefully clean, but usually not.

Or perhaps she didn't have to order a bath at all. She was perfectly able to fill the tub, herself.

Leaving her dragons to squabble among themselves, she shut herself in the bathroom and turned on the spigot. There was nothing to be done with her clothes, which were starting to look



rather wrinkled. Especially compared to people she'd seen walking in this district. Luckily they were not too dirty.

She set them aside, and realized ruefully that she would have to buy something new today, Apprentice Merchant or not.

She exited the bathroom half an hour later, feeling cleaner than she'd ever felt in her life. The only downside was that her clothes had gotten a bit damp from the humidity. She made a face as she pulled them over her clean skin.

*I've become so fancy in just a few days, she thought to herself, amused. A real proper lady who worries about a bit of honest dirt.*

She had just gone to the vanity to see how she could best pin up her, lank blonde hair when a sharp knock came at the front door.

Instantly, everybody froze. Iggy and Numi, who were wrestling on the bed, and Prim, who had been preening her wings in the early morning sunshine.

"Prim," Alice hissed, then jerked her chin towards the window. "Hide them outside."

Instantly, the three dragons obeyed. Iggy and Numi dashed over to Prim's side, who extended her large wings as if to shield them. A moment later, they were hard to see, as they had been safely tucked under Prim's Concealment skill.

However, they weren't entirely invisible. All three took on the appearance of a ripple in the air as they scuttled together to the outside balcony where they vanished entirely. Hopefully, Prim had put them under her Illusion skill to give them an extra layer of protection.

*But how long can she keep that up?* Alice fretted. She had an instinctive feeling for Prim's skills and knew that the more creatures she hid under it, the more difficult it would be to maintain.

The knock came again. Alice swallowed down her first impulse, which was, of course, influenced by being a General Laborer all her life, to rush to the door and apologize for the barely perceptible delay.

"No, I'm an Apprentice Merchant now," she reminded herself. "I won't apologize to anyone."

"One moment. I haven't called for room service," she said, making her tone sharp to cover her nervousness. She momentarily worried if she had just made a hardworking Hotel Attendant or Maid cringe.

Alice quickly pinned up her bangs away from her face and strode to the door.

She opened it a crack, and her heart froze inside her chest. A burly Law Enforcement officer stood in front of her.

## Chapter 18

The Law Enforcement officer was dressed in a gleaming blue uniform, and flanked by two others. One, a woman who looked as tough as nails. The other, a thin, tall, but equally menacing man who seemed to leer down at Alice.

*They found me, Alice thought. They were able to track the blue steel coin that Numi ate. I should've never—*

The officer in front doffed his hat.

"Pardon the interruption, Miss. We have a few questions, if you don't mind."

"Questions?" Alice breathed, her surprise at their courtesy enough to snap her back into thinking. Oh yes: last night's activity, which would have been visible to anyone. "Is this about the ruckus from last night?"

"Partially, Miss," the officer replied. "We're trying to determine if you saw anything out of the ordinary."

She laughed. "Other than the trees spontaneously catching on fire? Honestly, I was wondering if I should be concerned for my safety."

All three of the Law Enforcement officers winced. Apparently, they didn't see it as a laughing matter.

Alice didn't either, but her nerves were wound so tight that she couldn't help herself. Seeing their reaction, she firmly tried to take better control of herself.

Again, the man in front tipped his hat to her. In fact he looked... faintly apologetic? But how could that be?

"It was quite a disturbance last night. Miss, if you don't mind, we would like to conduct a search of your premises. Just for safety's sake, of course," he added quickly.

"You think that I'm hiding a criminal in my hotel room?" The words slipped past her numb lips, but she had enough presence of mind to sound haughty and a bit insulted.

Judging by the slight wince — quickly covered up — the female Law Enforcement officer made, Alice realized she had not been the first one to push back against this request.

Of course. The high classers and Nobles would see this as an insult.

"No, no, Miss," the man said quickly. "Of course, as an Apprentice Merchant, we know that you would never *knowingly* hide a criminal in your room. But, you see," he leaned forward as if to confer a secret, his voice low, "we suspect the people who started those fires last night are unscrupulous folk. And they have been known to hide out, or worse, keep people under duress so they can't call for help."

The way he watched her intensely, his eyes searching her face for any hint of a micro expression, she knew, with a sinking feeling, that he was using a skill on her. Likely to see if she was lying or if she was indeed under duress.

Well she did have things to hide, as she had everything to do with the events of last night.

If he was using a skill on her, he might be picking up her fear and unease.

So, on a whim, she decided to play into it. "I have heard stories of terrible people like that," she said truthfully.

As a General Laborer, she had, of course, heard dozens of horror stories of Dark classers preying on people too weak to fight back. It was part of the reason why the Earl kept them on his grounds, behind thick walls.

It took everything Alice had not to look over her shoulder and make sure that her dragons were not in plain sight. She had to trust that Prim still kept them hidden.

"Yes, then, of course, if it will make you feel better," she said, again choosing haughtiness, though she felt this time her voice fell a little flat. "Please, make it quick. I do have things to do today."

This was the truth. The quicker they conducted their search, the less thorough they would hopefully be. But who knew what skills they would have? Would they be able to find the stolen blue-steel coin? She didn't see how, but she knew nothing of the powers of mid and higher classes.

But she had already agreed. She couldn't back out of it.

Stepping aside, she opened the door wide. The three entered, each tipping their hat to her.

Alice nodded back, her face stone, and tried to force herself to breathe and not clench her hands into fists.

The two junior Officers immediately moved to the right and left, one going to the bathroom to make a quick search... and the other heading to the balcony where Alice had last seen the dragons.

Oh no...

Alice wanted to stop him, but knew it would be terribly suspicious.

*Prim, keep them hidden...*

The Lead Officer stood silent in the middle of the room, his eyes shut.

Alice watched him cautiously, sensing that she was about to witness a skill in action. And, by the faint buzzing in the air, it was something magical.

She hadn't had much opportunity to see real-life magic aside from occasional vendor shows she had passed when she had been a girl. She was all together horrified, terrified for her dragons, and fascinated.

The man exhaled and a wave of blue emanated from his feet, pulsed out, covering the length of the floor in all directions, and crawling up the walls a few feet. It was as if he were in the middle of a pond and had thrown a stone.

Alice had no idea what it did.

A moment later, he opened his eyes and nodded. "I can confirm there are no human beings other than us and yourself in these rooms."

"Of course," Alice said, though her heart was hammering. "I could have told you that."

He gave her a thin smile. "Some Criminals have basic illusion charms, skills, or amulets. You may never have known."

Illusion... Prim...

But the policeman had said 'people', not dragons. And certainly not aspects of Alice's own class.

She nodded, swallowing. "Then, what are these two other Officers looking for? They're not going through my things, I hope?" she asked, eyeing the man and woman who were still giving a cursory glance around.

"My skill is only a basic one, ma'am," the Lead Officer said, apology in his tone. "It does help to conduct a visual inspection too. We've also received a report of money taken from another hotel guest."

Alice's heart-rate jumped.

"I see," she said, tightly.

"Nevertheless, everything appears to be in order." The man stepped closer and again his voice dropped low, confidential. "But, if you don't mind me giving you a friendly word of advice, especially as you don't have any protectors. When things go missing, it is often the result of an inside job, which doesn't speak highly for the rest of the business. If you catch my meaning." His eyes flicked to the door. "If you were my daughter, miss, I would tell you to find another hotel to lodge at."

He was being kind to her?

Her confusion faded a moment later because, of *course* he was. She had to learn to think of herself as an Apprentice Merchant. Now she was of one of the middle classes, she was granted basic dignity.

Before, she may have been taken in for questioning – if not outright arrested – for being near the scene of the crime.

Alice made herself nod. "Yes, I will take that into consideration," she said calmly, though inside her head, she was screaming, "*Get out! Get out! Get out!*"

Turning away, the Officer motioned with his hand. The other two Junior Officers stopped their casual snooping around, and joined him at the front door. With another tip of his hat to Alice, the Lead Officer stepped outside and closed the door behind him with a click.

Alice swallowed through a dry throat and whipped around back to the balcony. It was utterly empty in a way she knew wasn't one of Prim's illusions.

"Prim? Numi? Iggy?"

For the space of a few heartbeats, there was no answer.

Alice caught a shimmer out of the corner of her eye. She half-turned, biting back a cry of relief when she saw all three fade shimmer into view. They had been hiding within the grate of the fireplace, all three squeezed among the cold logs.

Prim must have moved them when Alice wasn't looking and hidden them with her Illusion magic. In fact, Prim looked a little tired, but very proud of herself.

"Oh my darlings!" Alice fell to her knees in front of them and scooped them up, one by one. "When I saw that Officer go to the balcony... but why didn't you stay outside? Prim, you could have hidden them among the brickwork."

"I couldn't fly." Numi crawled out, her stomach distended. "I took all of the coins from the safe just in case any of those Law Enforcement people were thieves."

Iggy snarled something under his breath, then jumped to swim through the air and perch on Alice's outstretched arm.

"I could have fought them off. Then they would have never *dared* to bother you again."

Alice stifled a laugh and petted her most fearsome dragon. Iggy's scales were warm to the touch.

"I know," she said, "but sometimes it's wiser to be discreet. Now we're under no suspicion at all. If you would have chased them off, they would have simply called for more backup, which would have caused me a lot of trouble."

"I suppose," he muttered, a little bit of smoke escaping from his lips.

"I gained another level in Illusion skills," Prim said, walking up to Alice, dignified as always. "And another level overall."

Blinking, Alice took a look at her status and noticed that indeed, Prim was right. "She squinted at her rose gold dragon. "Have you grown too?"

Prim flicked her wings in and out, and indeed they were larger than they had been before. Once the size of a cat, Prim could now be compared to a smallish dog, not even counting her tail which was easily two-thirds the length of her body.

"You look magnificent," Alice said, and Prim preened a little more under the praise.

"What do you want me to do now with all these coins?" Numi said. "I suppose I could return them back to the safe, but I don't like the idea of them sitting there, just waiting for those Law Enforcement officers to come back."

Alice didn't like that idea either.

"I think it might look suspicious if we don't move on, after last night and the reports of theft going around," she sighed.

She was a homebody at heart, and while she had been looking forward to going out on the town, she had been equally looking forward to returning to a soft bed. However, her payment for the room was up today, so at least it was good timing. "I suspect most of the other guests around here will be equally spooked. We should kill two birds with one stone, do our shopping, and find another hotel to stay at."

"I would like to continue to level my Concealment skill," Prim said. "So, I will accompany you."

"I will too," Numi said, "if we're going to a market, there's sure to be lots of coins dropped along the way."

Only Iggy looked less than happy about a day of shopping ahead of him. Seeing this, Alice said, "Iggy, I do need a brave dragon to help me find Tom and his friend from last night. Did you get a good look at them? Do you think you could help me track them down?"

Iggy perked up. "Yes, I did. Though most humans look the same to me, I got a good whiff of his scent. It was easy because he hasn't bathed in some time." He hesitated for a moment, then asked, half hopefully, "Do you think that there will be another great battle soon?"

Alice thought for a moment. "There... may be rats to fight along the way," she said, looking to Numi who had the most experience out of the three in scuttling in and out of small places.

Numi nodded happily. "Oh yes, lots of rats live in the dark places. Some are almost as large as Prim."

"Hopefully not as beautiful as I," Prim said, fanning her wings.

"Yeah, not really," Numi said, "they're all kind of gray and brown with red eyes. And none of them have any coins," she added, in disgust.

However, Iggy looked happy. "Yes, I would very much like to fight these rats."

Alice bit her lip. She hated to suggest it, but... "Work on your Ultimate Armor skill while you do. It's at zero now, and I believe you will level up if you fight at close range."

Iggy looked incredibly enthusiastic. That set off Alice's alarm bells.

"But please keep out of sight. No one must see you."

"Why?" Numi asked. "Are we bad?"

"No, all three of you are good dragons. But other people won't understand this if they see you." She thought about telling them that traditionally dragons were the tools of Dark Classers, but

decided against it. All three were so young and she didn't want to weigh them down with worry. "Do you understand?"

"I can fight from the shadows," Iggy agreed.

"I will work on my Concealment," Prim added.

"And I've always been really good at squeezing in and out of tight places. I'll be fine," Numi said. "No one will see me. They never look in the gutters, anyway."

Alice nodded, and it was as if the bands around her heart had relaxed... just a little.

"Okay," she said on a sigh, "let's find Tom."

## Chapter 19

At first, Alice thought the empty streets outside the hotel was due to people being put off by the events of last night or rumors of a thief running amok. But as she continued down the next few blocks, the streets were still empty. Her theory didn't hold water.

Many shops were shut tight, windows were shuttered, and people seemed to quickly scurry from one place to another without stopping to talk or conduct business. Even the carts that transported goods were missing.

Had they all gone to a less troublesome part of the city? Just because of last night?

That didn't make sense, but she struggled to figure out what else it could be.

As she walked, she resisted the urge to touch her hair. She'd occasionally catch glimpses of her locks out of the corner of her eye, or reflections in dark windows. Her reflection looked wrong.

Before leaving the hotel that morning, she took a long look at herself in the mirror. Her blonde hair made her stand out, especially if anyone from the Earl's estate or those Workers were still in search of her.

Prim had changed her entire appearance last night for a short amount of time, but doing the same for a long time would be a strain. So Alice asked Prim to change her hair color only.

Prim had agreed at once. "*Oh yes, I have just the thing.*"

Alice should have questioned her dragon's taste, because now her hair was nearly the same fiery hue as Iggy's scales.



Ah well, at least it didn't clash badly with her pale, freckly skin and blue-green eyes. But the overall effect gave her a different look: Dangerous and slightly alluring. She wasn't sure if she liked it.

At least the day was fine, with a sun overhead that wasn't too hot, and a lovely breeze came off the harbor. It didn't even smell of fish. That meant the fish markets were also on a break.

"*Where is everyone?*" Prim asked quietly, unseen on Alice's shoulder thanks to Concealment and Illusion skills.

"Maybe it's a holiday?" But Alice didn't truly believe it herself. She turned the next block and let out a breath of relief when she finally spotted a few open shops here and there, and small groups of people. But no one lingered for long.

Stopping at a vendor stall, Alice ordered a morning pastry filled with egg and cheese.

"The streets are unusually silent today," Alice remarked as the vendor prepped her food.

"Aye," he concurred, and offered nothing else.

Pushing, Alice asked, "Any idea why?"

He looked up, his brow furrowed. "Haven't you heard the whispers, young miss? About the mage duel last night?"

Her heart picked up pace, but Alice didn't let it show on her face. She shook her head. "Mage duel? What happened?"

"There ain't many details, but from what I heard two of 'em set fire to one of the upscale courtyards," he gestured northeastward, in the direction Alice had arrived from.

Biting back a laugh, Alice instead raised an eyebrow. "I see." It was amazing how fast rumors spread. "But why would Mages be fighting amongst themselves?"

The vendor shook his head. "They weren't fighting each other, miss. Rumor has it..." He cast a wary glance around. "The Seers have been cautioning about a Dark Lord rising within our city's borders. They've been sayin' so for weeks, yet few heeded their warnings."

Her inner amusement drained away as if someone had pulled a plug inside her. Dark Lords, naturally, sprang from Dark Classers. They were the worst type. "They... have? How good are the city Seers?"

The man snorted, "Oh, they're always forecasting doom and gloom. People seem to remember only their accurate predictions and overlook their misses. I don't think many folk took them seriously... that is, until last night. Still," he shrugged. "I personally don't put much stock in it."

Alice tilted her head, "Oh?"

"I've got bills to settle," he stated, a hint of exasperation in his voice. "It's the responsibility of the High classers to fend off the dark classers and safeguard the city." Seeming to recollect himself, he offered Alice a courteous nod, "I apologize for any offense, miss. However, no one expects a Vendor to engage in battle."

Right. His tag read Vendor. A rank slightly below that of a Merchant.

Paying for the pastry, Alice thanked the man and continued on her way. She took a bite, hardly tasted it, and covertly fed the rest to Prim. Her uneasiness only grew.

The part of town that had once seemed bright, airy, and opulent now felt as perilous as the slums she'd walked through on her first day. In fact, it felt even more dangerous.

The Seers were speaking of the rise of a new Dark Lord.

Alice couldn't shake off the uneasy thought that Dark Lords -- Dark Classers, in general -- often had dragons as allies.

But her situation was different, right?

Prim, Numi, and Iggy were aspects of her class. They weren't wild dragons she had dominated for evil purposes. They were kind-hearted. They were good.

True, Numi had a flair for stealing, but that shortcoming reflected more on Alice than on Numi. Alice hadn't had time to instill the right values in her dragon yet. That was something she would address once she found stability and safety.

Prim was inherently sweet and motherly. And yes... Dark classers usually had a multitude of minions, and Prim's main talent seemed to be making other dragons for Alice to command, but... that was different. *She* was different.

Besides, there was Iggy. He was her protector, not a mindless aggressive beast. Yes, he'd been the one responsible for the fires, but it had been for a good cause. And yes, he was currently engaged in combat -- Alice could faintly perceive it through their bond -- However, he was merely battling rats, and no one liked rats. Really, he was doing the city a favor.

Her attempts to reassure herself only made her feel worse.

*I am not a Dark Classer*, she told herself firmly, even though she had to admit she had no idea what her class truly was.

When she had originally accepted the class seed, she had believed it to be some type of animal husbandry class. That notion wasn't entirely wrong, but it wasn't completely right either.

Alice let out a frustrated sound, resisting the urge to stamp her foot—something she hadn't made since she was a small girl prone to tantrums.

Out of the corner of her eye, she caught a brief movement, a piece of fabric disappearing around the corner of an alleyway. She stopped and turned, staring.

Was it just a coincidence, or was she being watched?

Her first instinct was to investigate, but that would be foolish with the Workers still lurking about.

She had dragons, and it was time she used them.

"Prim," she whispered softly. The dragon on her shoulder shifted in response, though Alice couldn't see her. "Please scout that alleyway for me. I think I might be being followed."

*"I can, Alice, but if I leave your side, the illusion will fade."*

"I'll be here, in this doorway," she pointed to a nearby shop that stood just a few feet away. The shop was closed, its door hung with a handwritten sign indicating a 'family emergency'. After her earlier conversation with the Vendor, Alice wondered if this shopkeeper was preparing to flee the city.

"No one will notice me here. Please, go check and return quickly. And be very careful," she added with a touch of anxiety.

*"Of course,"* Prim replied.

Prim leaped off her shoulder, and wisps of Alice's now blonde hair were blown back by the wind from her beating wings.

Alice tucked herself into the corner, trying to appear inconspicuous yet not suspicious, and waited.

She didn't have to wait long. For the first time, Alice felt a bolt of fear from one of her dragons. It stabbed through her, right to the heart, and it came from Prim. She was in trouble.

No, Alice realized with sickening horror, Prim had been captured.

**Igggy!** Alice cried silently: A command for him to attend to her immediately. One which she had no idea until this moment she could give.

But she wasn't going to simply wait there for her defender dragon. Prim needed her.

Breaking her cover, Alice pelted back down the black and around the corner.

Now she was grateful for the streets being so empty today. There was no one around to note the antics of a so-called Apprentice Merchant.

The rest of her didn't give a damn.

Prim was frightened and captured and Alice *would burn the world* if anything happened to her.

## Chapter 20

Alice raced around the alleyway corner, fist balled, wishing for the first time since she had found the class seed which gave her Prim that she still had her old General Laborer strength.

She was ready to slap somebody down, to hit, punch, kick, gouge, and do whatever it took to save her dragon.

She didn't expect to be confronted by two high-pitched, young voices at the end of the alleyway.

"Mabel, let her go! She's not yours."

"It's a dragon. Maybe we could sell it to some fancy classer. Maybe we—OW! Stop pecking at me, you little beast!"

"Mabel, I'm serious! This is a bad idea!"

Alice came to a stop. "Let her go." She barely recognized her own voice. It was dark, low, and threatening.

The figures had finally come into view at the end of the alleyway: two short, childlike individuals.

One was Tom, and at that moment, only seeing red, Alice could only think, *I trusted you, but I'll never make that mistake again.*

She had trusted Dolly, too, and look where that had gotten her.

Prim, who was captured in the arms of another girl, twisted her head towards Alice and let out a verbal squawk of relief.

In the voice that only Alice seemed to hear, Prim said, "*You're here! I was worried. She saw straight through my illusion.*"

The girl holding Prim didn't seem to have a lick of sense because her arms tightened around Prim and she scowled up at Alice. "You can't take this away from me. I found her, fair and square."

Tom, however, seemed to have been waiting for the moment Mabel's attention was off him. He grabbed the girl's wrist where it was wrapped around Prim and wrenched it to the side. Prim twisted and got one wing free, flapping as if she wanted to lift off.

Alice headed for the girl, ready to pull her hair. It had been conveniently pinned back into a plait.

Before she had taken more than a few steps, a manhole at the end of the alleyway exploded upward, and a red serpent of fire and wrath flowed out.

It was Iggy.

Alice simply pointed to the girl, and her loyal, defender dragon breathed a plume of flame in her direction, thankfully stopping short of Prim. However, he advanced, his teeth and claws bared and flashing.

Mabel was too well-trained in the streets to do something silly like shriek. She simply dropped Prim and backed up a few hasty steps, hands up.

Tom gaped, too, but he didn't back away. Not even when Iggy turned furious eyes on him.

Prim caught herself with a flap of her wings before she hit the ground, her claws skittering on the grimy brickwork before she got into the air again. Within a moment, she alighted back on Alice's shoulder.

"Are you okay?" Alice demanded, her voice still hard and alien to her own ears.

*"She didn't hurt me. I was only surprised. She saw straight through my illusion."* Prim sounded much more put out by this than anything else.

"Alice—Miss... I... it's all a mistake." To Alice's disgust, Tom stepped to put himself between Iggy and the girl, his hands held out as if seeking supplication. "We didn't mean no harm to your dragons."

"A *misunderstanding*? She wanted to sell Prim to some classer." Alice thrust a finger at the girl, who visibly recoiled. Alice's pointing finger—her whole arm—was shaking in fury.

She hadn't been this upset over Dolly's betrayal.

In fact, she never remembered being this upset before. It was hard not to tell Iggy to rip the girl apart limb by limb.

She had risked *everything* last night to save them just last night. Ungrateful brats.

*"Alice. I am well. She didn't so much as damage a scale,"* Prim rubbed the side of her head against Alice's cheek.

"They're super poor, too. Only two coppers to their name." Numi seemed to pop up from behind the children—who both leapt in shock. Neither had seen her slither behind them—and spit out two sorry-looking copper pieces.

Less than a week ago, that had been close to what Alice herself had owned.

And that thought was enough to blunt the edge of her anger.

Iggy asked, in a growling voice that at that moment didn't sound too different from Alice's own, "Do you want me to dispose of the trash?"

Alice took a breath, let it out again, and somehow found it within herself to say, "Keep an eye on them, please."

And with that minor release, she also realized that they had been making a lot of noise in a city where the Law Enforcement would be on the lookout for any ne'er-do-wells.

"Prim, please watch the front of the alleyway. And if you're feeling up to it, cast an illusion to show all is well. Numi, is that all you found on them?"

"Well, the boy had a knife," Numi reached into her mouth and pulled that out, too.

"Hey," Tom objected, touching his back pants pocket, apparently where he had been keeping the knife.

"Hey, nothing," Alice snapped, "you ought to be on your knees thanking me and my dragons for saving you from the Workers last night—"

"That was you?" the girl blurted.

Tom turned to her. "I was trying to tell you! Then you snatched up Prim like she was a turkey that had escaped the marketplace."

"How did you see Prim?" Alice asked, focusing on the girl. Hadn't Tom called her Mabel? "Do you have a skill?" It was the only thing she could think of, though the girl looked younger than the minimum fourteen years old for a class. Also a skill like that would be prized beyond compare.

"A skill? No," she said, with derision, "I'm only twelve."

"Then, how? Tell me!" Alice snapped her fingers at the girl when she hesitated.

Mabel looked rebellious, but then sighed and pulled out a chain that had been under her shirt. A shiny golden medallion hung on the end of it.

Numi squawked, "I didn't see that. Alice, I need a real pick-pocketing skill."

Ignoring her, Alice squinted at the medallion. When it caught the light just so, odd writing flashed on the surface.

"What's that?" Tom asked, just as curious and openly envious as Numi.

"I got it from those Workers when they were trying to snatch us. One had the chain sticking right out of his pocket," Mabel said. "I didn't know what it was used for, but I figured if they had it, I wanted it."

Alice held back her grudging admiration that the girl had had enough sense to pickpocket the man as he was kidnapping her.

"What does it do?" Tom asked.

"I don't know, but I saw her following us, and you couldn't." She pointed down the alleyway where Prim was currently obscured by another illusion.

That medallion must be an artifact carved by someone from a Magician class.

Alice wanted it, and she knew with Iggy backing her up, she could just take it.

Still, she didn't trust herself to make smart decisions right at this moment. Instead, she continued on with her other questions, "What happened last night? Tom, I thought you had more sense than to get caught by those Workers."

Tom scowled. "It wasn't my fault. They raided the whole orphanage. Mabel and I almost got free. I was running—"

"Wait, they raided the entire orphanage?" Alice demanded. "And the Orphanage Staff just let them?"

Tom shrugged, and Mabel scowled.

"Of course they did. The Orphanage Workers always get paid off. It happens when it gets too crowded. So I was on my toes, expecting it. Usually they don't take the kids who manage to run. But they did this time."

Alice was feeling sick, both from what she heard and the sheer whiplash of going from white-hot anger to intense pity.

She thought she had it tough as a General Laborer, but she had let herself forget that she, at least, had a class—even if it was a low one—and therefore some value to society. These children had nothing.

"We always make ourselves scarce when there's a raid on," Tom added, nodding. "And this time, well, I thought maybe you'd give us some shelter," he said, "but they caught us in the hotel's courtyard right before I could get into the hotel."

And there was the anger again. He'd almost led the Workers to her and her dragons.

*He's just a kid, Alice reminded herself. A dumb kid who'd almost ruined everything.*

“Did they tell you what they wanted you for? The Workers?” she made herself ask.

Tom shrugged. “The mines, probably.”

But Mabel shook her head with an angry look Tom's way, “You shouldn't answer if you don't know.”

He turned to her. “Then what? They weren't exactly chatty with me.”

“Well, I hear things because I *listen*,” she shot back.

“So what did they say?” Alice asked.

The girl started to reply, but then a sly look crossed her face. “If you want to know, it will cost you.”

“Mabel, you don't know what you're doing,” Tom objected.

A bit of anger flared up again in Alice's chest, but she was back in control enough to squash it. Besides, she could appreciate Mabel's gumption. And, more importantly, she understood where the girl was coming from.

She lived on the streets, in a harder life than Alice had faced even as a General Laborer. It wasn't nice or polite, but it made sense that she would not let any opportunity go to waste.

Well, neither would Alice.

“Numi,” Alice held out her arm, and the green dragon took off into the air and landed on her wrist. Alice had to take a quick step before she staggered under the weight of her dragon. Numi was the smallest out of the three, but her stomach was apparently full of coins.

“A gold piece, if you please,” Alice said.

Tom and Mabel's eyes bugged out as Numi reached into her mouth and withdrew a gleaming — if spitty — gold coin. Alice plucked it out and held it between her fingers, making sure that it caught the light.

“This is yours to split in exchange every scrap of information you can give me about the Workers,” she said. “And,” she added as both Tom and Mabel took a step forward, “that medallion.”

Mabel hesitated, her hand closing over the medallion. “I could probably sell it in the marketplace for more.”

“The marketplace is shut down today, remember?” Tom said to her, earning a glare in his direction.



"You don't want to be flashing something like that in the marketplace," Alice said. "The Workers might be on the lookout for it. Besides, only High and Magic classers will be interested in something like that. And they're more likely to cheat you than buy honestly from you."

It was the same problem she had encountered when she first found the class seed, and a large part of why she had not gone to pains to find out how much it was worth. Anything valuable was much more likely to be stolen from her by a greedy classer.

"Yeah, then they'll dump your worthless carcass somewhere so you'll never tell on them, either," Tom added, much more brutally than Alice would have, but he had a point.

Mabel still hesitated. "How do I know you won't kill me after I hand this over?"

Alice pointed to Iggy. "I could sic him on you at any time. It's only because I'm friends with Tom that I decided to hear you out, first."

Tom beamed at her as if Alice had just paid him a grand compliment.

The girl seemed to at least see the sense of what Alice was saying, or perhaps she just couldn't see a way out. Slowly, reluctantly, she lifted the chain of the medallion over her head, and, holding it in her hand, she spoke, "I heard tell of what the Workers were saying to the Head Orphanage Mistress right before coins exchanged hands. They said that a Dark Classer was rising up. They weren't going to send us to the mines," she added with a significant look Tom's way, "they were going to use us as messengers and gofers for all of the Soldier classes'. Maybe make us fight, too, if things got bad enough. I dunno."

That was horrifying, and not surprising. Also, it fit in with what Alice had heard from the Vendor. So, there was a Dark Classer—maybe even a Dark Lord himself—on the rise.

"Anything else?" Alice asked.

"No, I swear." Mabel made a gesture to cross her heart. Her face was solemn enough that Alice knew this was a promise not easily broken by the orphans.

Alice nodded to Iggy who had been waiting on tenterhooks to launch forward. The dragon swam through the air so fast that Mabel didn't have time to do anything more than flinch before Iggy snatched the medallion out from her fingers.

"Hey—!" Mabel's cry was cut off when Alice flicked the gold coin to them. The two orphan kids dived for it, but Mabel was the one who came up victorious.

"Find somewhere to rent and hide for the next few days, till they're done cleaning out the orphanages," Alice said. "Maybe some new clothes, too. And food," she added. That gold coin would be more than enough for all of it.

They had spent too much time in the alleyway. Alice turned to walk away.

"Wait, Alice!" Tom called, "where do I find you if we hear more about the Workers?" His eager tone told Alice he wanted an opportunity for more gold coins.

Alice hesitated for a moment. Tom had meant well, but he had nearly led the Workers right to her dragons.

She couldn't let such a close call happen again. Already, she was thinking of plans for Prim's next egg.

"I'll find you," she called back to the boy, turned, and walked out.

It sounded like she truly did have to worry about the rise of a new Dark Classer. She and her dragons had leveling to do.