

Chapter 6

Alice didn't pause to consider. She simply acted. Shooting off her seat on the bed, she slammed into Dolly and slapped her hand over the other girl's mouth.

Either the muffling hand or the uncharacteristic violence shocked Dolly into silence.

For a moment the two girls stared at each other: One terrified, the other amazed at herself for acting so boldly.

Alice listened for the space of three breaths for somebody to come charging in or rip open the curtain that acted as their door and demand what was going on.

Instead, there was only silence.

It was just before dusk – not the official quitting time yet. No one else must have gotten off their shift yet.

Dolly struggled and Alice dropped her hand from her mouth.

The moment Dolly was free she pointed an accusing finger at Prim. "What is that *thing*?"

Prim puffed out her wings and arched her sinuous neck to hiss at the girl.

"Prim, be nice," Alice said. The little dragon fell silent and Alice turned back to Dolly. "This is Prim. She... she's my friend."

"Is that a dragon?" Dolly gasped and backed a half step, which put her to the opposite end of the small space. "It is! Alice, do you know what those things can do?"

Over the last week, Alice had not let herself think about all the awful tales of dragons she'd grown up hearing.

Prim, she told herself, wasn't like that.

"She's not like the dragons in the stories. Prim doesn't hoard gold. She doesn't have a dark class. She's very sweet."

"Sweet?" Dolly replied faintly. Then she straightened and looked hard at Alice. "You made a pet out of it? A dragon won't stay sweet for long. We have to tell somebody. Breydon needs to know."

“No!” Alice yelled. “Prim isn’t a wild dragon. She’s mine, but she’s not a pet. I…” She gulped. “I changed my class and she’s a living aspect of that.”

The definition slipped out without her realizing it. Once she said the words, however, she realized it was true. She hadn’t quite known what an aspect was at first, but over the last few days she had slowly come to realize that Prim was a living manifestation of her class’s power.

Alice didn’t have skills. She had a dragon who had skills for her.

Also, being an aspect of her class didn’t make the dragon any less real. Magicians, wizards, mages, and other casters manifested objects – and sometimes living creatures – out of nothing all the time.

So why shouldn’t she be able to do that with a dragon?

Dolly’s gaze sharpened and Alice realized she was being *Identified*. The one automatic skill everyone received when they reached fourteen. It was so common, Alice didn’t bother to include it on her sheet.

“Alice,” Dolly said slowly as if talking to someone who’d had too much to drink, “You’re still showing as a General Laborer.

Alice was about to explain that hers was now a hidden class. But she was distracted as Prim had lowered her defensive stance and crept closer to Dolly. Extending her neck, the dragon tried to get a good sniff at her.

“Look, she’s friendly, see?” Alice said, encouraged. “Prim just wants to be friends.”

Dolly’s gaze flicked from Alice to Prim and back again. “She won’t bite? You swear?”

“She’s very kind,” Alice confirmed.

Reluctantly, Dolly held out her hand for Prim to sniff.

Only because Alice knew Prim so well did she recognize the look of distaste that flashed over Prim’s face. It was a subtle shifting of the rosy gold scales over her muzzle.

Well, the fact Prim was making an attempt to be friendly was a start. The two would have to get along if they were all to share the same cubicle.

Meanwhile, Alice clearly saw doubt shadow Dolly’s face. Time to redirect her.

When it came to Dolly, that meant getting her to talk about herself.

“So much has happened over the last week,” Alice said, “You’ve been gone, and I met Prim, but I haven’t heard a peep from you. What’s happening with Breydon?”

Instantly, Dolly brightened. And though she kept a wary eye on Prim, she happily gushed about her time with the noble boy. Apparently, Breydon had made a point to romance her every night as if she was a high classer – including taking her out on the town to fancy restaurants and some events. They had even spoken of marriage.

It said something about Dolly’s self-centeredness that she would rather gush about her illicit boyfriend than ask more questions about the literal dragon in the room.

“In fact, I’m supposed to meet Breydon in a few minutes...” Dolly sighed regretfully. “I should get going now. I might be late. He hates tardiness.”

“You’re leaving now?” Alice repeated. “But Dolly–”

“He’s taking me to the opera,” Dolly said over Alice’s objection. “Can you believe it? Me, a General Laborer nobody rubbing elbows with the cream of the town.” She giggled and did a little twirl as if imagining herself in a ballroom... even though Alice didn’t think operas were dances.

“You won’t tell anyone about Prim, will you?” Alice asked anxiously, “Not even Breydon?”

Dolly gave her a look. “Why would I?”

“Please, Dolly. Promise me.”

Dolly gave an airy giggle. “Why would I tell him? A dragon in the General Laborer’s barn? He’ll think I’ve gone mad.”

Still giggling, she turned and made her way out.

Prim didn’t waste a second and hopped on Alice’s shoulder the moment Dolly was out of view. That was no small thing any more because her weight made Alice have to brace herself.

“*She smells of lies,*” Prim hissed.

Alice opened her mouth to defend her friend, but closed it again.

“She’s going to the opera...” A feeling of slow dread curdled her stomach and sent ice through her veins, “But she didn’t even change out of her work smock.”

Should she send Prim after Dolly to make sure she kept her word?

Prim had her Concealment skill, but that might not hold up if the Guards were on alert. Some of their skills were meant to find people who were hiding from them.

Alice didn't have time to hesitate. She bent to pull her straw mattress away from the cubicle wall.

There was a hidden covey she'd dug between the mattress and the wall where she hid her stash of coins. There should be twenty coppers – her entire life savings.

Instead of twenty, she saw three.

Prim had warned her that Dolly was going through her things. Alice had guessed that meant clean uniforms or hair pins. Not stealing her money.

She hadn't listened – hadn't wanted to believe.

Of course Dolly wouldn't want to look like the poor little General Laborer while Breydon was courting her. New clothing and makeup cost money.

Anger helped thaw the ice in her veins.

Scooping up her three coins, Alice spoke one word. "Prim."

The dragon crouched to take a firmer hold on Alice's shoulder. Her scales shifted color to conceal her shape among Alice's fall of hair.

Alice rushed out the cubical and through the barn. She didn't have time to grab extra clothing. It wouldn't take long for Dolly to find a Guard.

The moment they reached the light outside, Prim took off from Alice's shoulder. Her beautiful scales shifted again in subtle blues and browns. It became that much harder to track her, and easier to believe she was a passing pigeon rather than a dragon who had grown to the size of a cat.

"What do we do?" Prim called from above.

Alice had long suspected she was the only one who could hear Prim speak. This was confirmed by the fact that none of the General Laborers she passed looked up to hear the voice piping down from the sky.

Some threw odd glances at her quick pace, but all were too tired to ask why a girl was distressed. They were the lowest of the low. Someone was always in distress.

"Keep a lookout for me," she murmured after she passed a group of chatting General Laborers. "Tell me if you see guards coming."

"I see them!"

Already?

Alice immediately stepped off the servant's path and into the deep hedgerows, wincing as she trod over sprouting tulips she had dug into the soil with her own hands last fall. She ducked behind a tree just as she heard Dolly's voice from down the lane.

"Hurry! She's been possessed and thinks the thing is her pet."

"You say it's a dragon, miss?" one of the Guards asked.

Miss? How had Dolly gotten so high and mighty all of a sudden?

"Yes, it's a dragon, though it's small. But it must have powers to hoodwink Alice."

Alice peeked past the tree in time to see them walk by. Dolly strode in front as if she were a young noblewoman.

Hoodwinked? Prim, dangerous? How *dare* she.

Alice balled her fists but kept quiet.

It wouldn't take long for the Guards to reach the barn and find her gone. Once the alarm was raised, the front gate would be shut.

Turning, Alice continued through the gardens – all of which were lush so as to conceal the tall brick wall that surrounded the estate.

She quickly reached the wall. Thick ivy grew up the bricks, some of which pulled away in mats when she tried to climb up it.

She was a slight girl, but too heavy for the ivy to hold.

Prim fluttered to a nearby flowering tree. *"Here!"*

Alice looked. One of the branches was close enough to the top of the wall... if she jumped. She swallowed hard, not liking heights.

Then she heard the sound of ringing. The alarm had been struck.

Something about the room had vindicated Dolly's story. Perhaps the Guards had exotic skills she didn't know about. Maybe they could track her here.

A new bolt of fear gave her strength. She began to climb the tree. The bark was rough enough for her thin shoes to catch it, though she scraped her fingers.

Alice kept climbing with Prim chattering encouragement.

The branch was higher up than it looked from the ground and bowed alarmingly when she started to walk on it.

Prim fluttered to the top of the wall as if to show Alice that it was easy.

“Keep using your concealment skill,” Alice reminded her.

She took a breath and used a higher branch to help her balance. But the higher branch was shorter than the lower branch and she had to walk the last few feet on her own.

She did it at a quick pace and jumped...

... Too far.

She hit the top of the wall and had to flail her arms to keep from overbalancing.

Prim let out a cry that sounded like a diving hawk. She fluttered to Alice’s shoulder, claws hooking into her shirt and flapping wildly to try to keep her steady.

Somehow Alice kept her balance and fell into a crouch. Then she held the edge and eased herself down the other side before dropping.

She hit a dusty road on the other side. Beyond was a grimy factory surrounded by squat buildings. Past that, the dirty, dank town. There wasn’t a hint of green to be seen.

It was a whole other world from the lush estate that had been her home from when she’d turned fourteen.

In the distance, she still heard the faint clamor of warning bells. Would the guards look for her out here?

She didn’t know, but it was best not to chance it.

“Keep concealed,” she reminded Prim.

Then she headed directly to the maze of half collapsed shelters, hoping to lose her pursuers in the slums.

Chapter 7

Alice walked quickly through narrow alleyways bordered by crumbling buildings and falling-down sheds. Judging by cold, dark remains of cookfires, some of these sheds had once been homes to people. Alice didn't see any sign of anyone living in them now.

Craning her neck, she looked up at the tall pipe stacks that stretched into the sky. She had vague childhood memories of smoke coming out of those stacks, and later memories with rumors of the nobles objecting to the factory as sometimes the air would blow the foul-smelling smoke to the estate.

Now the factory was shuttered, but the area around the estate had not been cleaned. She wondered what had happened to the former Factory Workers. Hopefully, they had been moved to another factory and not left out on the streets. But looking at the old cookfires, she had her doubts.

As she walked, Prim darted up into the air and then back down again to scout the new surroundings.

"There are people all around, but when they hear your footsteps, they scuttle away like rats. I don't trust them."

Alice crossed her arms over her chest. She peered into the deepening shadows and still saw no one. If not for her dragon's warning, she would have thought she was all alone.

"I don't trust them either," she whispered. They could be desperate Beggars or predatory Theives with no way to tell the difference. "Any sign of the estate's Guards following us?"

"No, I think they're still searching the grounds. The alarm bells are still ringing. Do you hear them?"

Alice didn't. She'd moved too far into the slums. Apparently, Prim's hearing was better than her own.

"There is a small alleyway ahead, and through that, you go around that large building," Prim pointed with her head towards the former factory, *"then it hits a large road with many, many people."*

"That sounds like a main road," Alice said. She didn't know much about the town, but she knew that much.

Alice ducked through the narrow gap between two buildings that Prim had pointed toward. It was filled with paper litter, rocks, and other bits of trash. She tried to step carefully, knowing that turning an ankle would leave her deadly vulnerable.

The narrow alleyway led out to a rocky dirt path. Turning at the next crossing, she found herself, as Prim promised, on a sort of main road. Cart and foot traffic moved back and forth, and some shops were open. People glanced at her and then looked away again.

Alice was very conscious of the fact that she still wore her estate work smock. She would have to get rid of it. If anybody were searching for her, she would easily stand out.

Speaking of standing out, Prim had to be extra careful not to be seen by curious eyes. Alice was hyper-aware that her little dragon was pushing her concealment skill to the limit.

Prim stuck to the air, darting under eaves of houses and shops, and from tree to tree, keeping pace with Alice's slow walk. Her flitting concealment skill made her look like a bird, and she was easy to miss among the flocks of pigeons. No one paid attention to a fluttering shape overhead. Her concealment skill leveled up quite rapidly, and Alice got an notification.

"Primordialis's" Concealment Skill has reached level 7!

"There are so many people here," Prim called down to her.

Alice quickly looked around, but again no one reacted to a high, excited dragon voice from up above.

No one could hear Prim.

Alice nodded in reply, though she was too tense to smile. There were people all around, strangers, when Alice was used to knowing most faces by sight. They were from all classes, from General Worker which was the next rank up after General Laborer, to Merchants, Carters, Traders, and Shopkeepers.

There were even esoteric classes she had never seen before. She spotted a Farrier tag from a big man and a Nanny tag from a woman who was shepherding along several well-dressed children.

There was even a Lady of The Street tag from a woman who stood on a street corner, watching Alice with open curiosity

There were men, too, with hard looks in their eyes that had a Worker tag on them.

"Worker?" she wondered, having never seen that particular tag before. There was something about it that didn't sit right, and she didn't like how their gazes lingered on her as she passed by.

She got the impression, though she didn't know how, that those Worker tags were hidden classes too.

As a General Laborer, her food and shelter were dependent on her employer. Now, Alice couldn't go back to the estate. She had no explanation for Prim, and if word got to the Earl... well, having the attention of a Noble or other high classer was a risk to her life.

Her only hope was to find another noble or high-class family to take her in and hope that they did not treat her badly. But how could she find someone who was hiring? Her mother had gotten Alice the position at the estate before she died.

Alice wasn't even qualified to be a Housekeeper. She would have to display her skills, and she had none. And even if she did find a job in another noble's estate... how in the world would she ever hide Prim?

Alice walked down the street, worried thoughts swirling in her mind. Around her, the buildings grew taller, some as high as four stories, but the streets were far dirtier. Trash, human and animal, littered the curb, stuck to the cobblestone along with globs of mud. Only, it wasn't mud.

She felt eyes on her, though she could not quite pinpoint where they were coming from.

"Alice," Prim called from where she had ducked under a dirty eave of a closed shop, *"I'm hungry."*

"I know," she murmured, drawing an odd look from a passing Stable Apprentice.

That was another thing. Now that there were no kitchens to steal from, how was she going to feed her dragon? Well, likely the usual way: Buying. There were open-air vendors here and there with carts parked on the sidewalk.

Alice stopped at one which advertised they were selling meat pies. It cost her one copper just for two small pies, each as big as her closed fists. If that was how expensive things were on the outside, her money was not going to last for long.

It would have lasted longer if Dolly hadn't stolen from me, she thought with a burst of bright anger.

Alice hoped she somehow ran into Dolly and Breydon while out on the town. If that happened, she'd take the opportunity to snatch those coins back.

By this point, Alice was hungry enough to bolt down one of the meat pies herself. Instead, she stashed the still-warm pastries in a pocket of her smock and continued down the street. She would not eat until she could share it with her dragon.

She passed more dirty blocks, increasingly thick with people who sat on the edge of the curb, hands held out in supplication. Most had been begging for so long that the system had actually changed their tag to Begger.

Alice had no extra money for them, though the ones with children made her heart squeeze, but she had to be firm. Unless she figured out something for herself, she could easily become one of the Beggars.

The sun was setting and a chill wind blew through the streets, picking up some of the dirt and spinning it into mini dust devils. The clouds on the horizon made her think that it was going to rain soon.

Again, she felt eyes on the back of her neck. Though when she looked around, she spotted nobody.

Prim gave her no indication that she was being followed by the estate Guards. No, she was simply feeling the eyes of those who knew she did not belong.

And that she was possibly vulnerable.

Finally, coming to the end of a block, she spotted a two-story building with a paint-peeled door left ajar. Most of the windows on both levels had been knocked out, and those that were left were filmy with dust.

Alice glanced in. The floor beyond was empty, and there didn't seem to be anybody lurking inside.

That struck her as suspicious, but she needed somewhere to eat and check in with Prim in peace. Carefully, Alice walked in, every sense on the highest alert for sounds as she was not alone.

There was nothing so she made her way to the rickety staircase. The railing had been long ripped out, and some of the stairs were soft and rotted. Thankfully, Alice had always been a small woman.

She picked her way up and found that the second floor was just as empty as the first. Several doors stood at the other end, though they were barred by padlocks. Alice went to one of the broken windows and called Prim in.

Instantly, a shape fluttered through the broken out window and resolved into her dragon. If she'd only been half-paying attention she might have thought she was a pigeon. Her Concealment skill was coming along quite nicely.

Alice held out one of the meat pies to Prim, who snatched it up and started eating hungrily.

Looking at her ravenous dragon and wondering what she was going to do, the weight of the entire day seemed to fall all at once on her.

The next thing Alice knew, she had sunk down with her back against one of the locked doors and started to weep. Prim abandoned her pie and sat with her, doing her best to cuddle into her lap.

"It's going to be okay," Alice told her dragon, though she didn't know how that could possibly be.

"*What do you need?*" Prim asked.

Alice shook her head. "I just... I just need a moment to collect myself. It's been a hard day."

"*No.*" Prim pecked her with the end of her sharp muzzle. "*What do you need, Alice?*" Her words had a weight to them.

"I... I don't know," Alice hiccupped and wiped some tears away from her face. "I need a new job immediately... I need a place to live—a place that's safe."

Prim cocked her head. "*Is this place safe?*"

"I don't know," she said again. "It looks like no one's here, but it doesn't *feel* safe." Alice craned her head to look back at the locked door. "I would love to have a locked door between myself and the rest of the world right now."

Prim cocked her head to the other side. "*How does one obtain shelter?*"

There was only one answer. "Money, of course," Alice put her hand over her pocket with her two sad remaining coins. "Money will fix everything."

But the only way she could get money was by working... and that brought her back to the beginning of her problems. How could she find a job with no references and a dragon in tow?

Prim's eyes seemed to gleam.

The next thing Alice knew, her dragon had jumped off her lap and started snuffling along the floor. Alice supposed that she was going after crumbs of pie, though half of the pastry was still un-eaten.

Then Prim settled down and made an odd kind of cough. Her wings drooped as if she was curling them around herself, as if she was protecting something on the floor.

Alice received a notification:

Alert: 1 aspect token has been used.

At the same moment, Prim abruptly stood and... there was an egg underneath her.

Chapter 8

Alice stared.

The egg was about half as large as Prim's had been — the size of an anemic chicken egg. Mint green in color, it was speckled with a blush of blue freckles.

“But...” Alice said helplessly, looking back at her dragon, “You're too young to lay eggs.”

Prim didn't seem concerned in the least. “*You need help, and you had a free aspect token. This is how you grow stronger, Alice.*”

It clicked.

“Because you’re an aspect of my class...” she murmured as she tentatively reached to take the egg. It was warm and dry in a way freshly laid eggs usually were not. The egg gave a little wiggle in her hand as if the little creature inside was trying to break its way out.

The moment she touched it, she received a notification:

Do you wish to hatch this aspect now?

Alice looked down at her lone meat pie she’d saved for her own supper. She couldn’t afford another hungry mouth to feed right now, but Prim was right. As She of Many Dragons, this was how she grew stronger.

This was how she *protected* herself.

Alice glanced at Prim who returned her gaze with expectation.

“Yes,” Alice murmured to the prompt.

If nothing else, a second dragon would help her keep a lookout. She couldn’t shake the feeling that her hiding place was not safe.

With a crack, the egg split down the middle. A deep green head popped out, no bigger than an olive.

She was shaped a little like an olive, too. The head was much rounder than Prim’s delicate, femininely pointed head. The green dragon had large protuberant blue eyes, large nostrils and a noticeable underbite displaying several snaggily teeth.

She was strong and easily knocked away the top of the shell before crawling out. Her body was green with those same blue freckles that had been on the egg darkening her limbs and tail. A tiny row of emerald green spikes were already visible down her back, and her wings were sharp and pulled back almost flush against her body when at rest.

Yes, she was built differently than Prim in almost every way. Alice felt bad for the comparison but the new dragon's body was structured like a flat skittering lizard instead of a vision of a noble dragon, with limbs that turned out and long clawed feet for grasping.

There was nothing reptilian about the green dragon's alert gaze, though, as she looked around once she was free of the egg.

"Hello," she piped up to Alice. Her voice was different from Prim's too. She spoke aloud instead of in Alice's head.

"Hello," Alice repeated, helping to pick off a bit of egg off the dragon's back. While she was shaped differently than Alice expected, the little dragon's color was striking. "You're very pretty."

"I know," the little dragon said with easy confidence. "I'm Numismatis."

"I'm Alice and this is Prim. Well, Primordialis," she amended. "Do you mind if I call you... ah, Numi?"

The little green dragon's forked tongue shot out to lick one of her own eyeballs. "Yup, that's fine. Alice, I'm hungry."

Alice's stomach sank. She remembered what a bottomless pit Prim had been after she hatched – and now, still, actually. She doubted the meat pie would be enough. But it was better than nothing.

"Of course." She reached for the pie, but Prim spoke up.

"First, Alice must give you skills so you're useful. Then you may eat."

"Prim, that's unkind," Alice objected.

Prim flicked her wings in a shrug. *“You said yourself that we are in danger.”*

“I would like skills,” Numi said. She seemed to be the easy-going, direct sort. “Give them to me.”

And the creepy-crawling feeling that wouldn’t leave the back of Alice’s neck said her dragon wasn’t wrong. They were not safe here.

Like Prim, Numi had three skill slots available. Also, like Prim, one was listed as a primary skill and was locked.

Skill Slots 1/3
Primary Skill (locked)
Currency Forager

Available Skills:
Spatial Storage
Wise Investor
Lock Picking

Alice frowned as she looked them over. That last one didn't seem to fit in with the other three, though after a glance at the padlocked door behind her, she could see an immediate use.

"I wish these skills had a detailed explanation."

Was it always that way with skills? After all, her Cleaning and Strength skills she'd been assigned as a General Laborer had been obvious at face-value.

Perhaps a more thorough explanation would come if she ever received a high-rank identification skill.

Alice looked down at Numi. "Is there anything you like?"

"I like Currency Forager," the little dragon said.

"Yes, you already have that."

She bobbed her head. "And I like it very much."

"*She just hatched,*" Prim said with all the benevolent wisdom and authority of someone who had hatched out an entire nine days ago. "*She does not know what she wants yet, so you should choose the best for her.*"

"Yes, choose for me!" Numi agreed. Wrapping her long-claws around Alice's thumb, she looked up at her adoringly.

Alice hesitated for a moment longer. She felt a little bad about assigning someone's skills for them, but needs were a must. Numi was her dragon.

She looked to the door behind herself, bit her lip, and nodded once. Oddball skill it was.

"Lock-picking."

As for the second skill... she was torn on Wise Investor because it would be nice to know what to do with money, if she ever had it. And although she didn't want to say it aloud, she thought Numi might do with a little wisdom.

At the same time, for all her life Alice had heard wonderous things about spatial storage skills and items. Plus, she only had the slim pockets of her work smock to use.

That decided it.

“Spatial Storage.”

She felt the new skills slide into place.

Numi shivered all over and her blue eyes grew just a little brighter. “Oh, I like these.”

Prim jumped in, ever the leader. “*The first thing we need is a safe place to shelter, right?*”

“Yes,” Alice agreed, “But— “

Prim nodded to the padlocked door. “*Numi, it’s time to use your skill. Hurry up.*”

“If you please,” Alice said, wanting to be nicer. She was asking her newly hatched dragon to work on an empty stomach, after all.

“Will do!” Numi said cheerfully. Then, forgoing her wings completely, she scuttled down Alice’s sleeve, made a short hop to the floor, skittered across the floorboards like a lizard, and then directly up the wood just to the side of the door. Her long-outsized claws found every little crack and pit along the way.

Within a few seconds, Numi had made it level to the padlock. She looked at it with one protruding eye, flipped around upside down to look at it with the other, gave it a sniff, and then turned around to stick the end of her pointy tail into the keyhole.

“Are you sure you don’t want to use your claws—“ Alice started to ask.

A door slammed from down below.

Everyone froze.

Then came the sound of several pairs of heavy-footed steps.

Carefully, Alice crawled over to where there was a missing knothole in one of the floor-boards to look down.

There were three dirty looking men down below, casting around in the gloom. One had a rope in his hand, another what looked like a net, and the third a short club. All three had that generic Worker tag over them.

“You sure you saw the girl come in here?” one of the men asked. His voice echoed loudly in the empty building.

“*Hurry,*” Prim hissed to Numi.

Numi gulped. “Yes!”

The rough voices echoed up. “Well, I see no sign of her here. Maybe up those stairs?”

Alice froze feeling like a mouse trapped under the gaze of a hawk.

A moment later the padlock clicked open.

“*Go in, Alice!*” Prim said.

Standing, Alice crept back, wary of boards creaking. The padlock was open but the hinges on the door were visibly rusted and would make noise unless she opened it slowly...

Meanwhile, she heard creaking from the stairwell. The men were heavier than her and were taking the steps carefully, but they were still coming.

The moment the door was opened wide enough for her slim frame, Prim flitted in. Numi quickly followed.

Alice paused only to scoop up the meat pie left on the floor. She hoped she didn't leave any crumbs behind to give her away.

Then she stepped inside the previously locked room and carefully eased the door shut.

The padlock was in her hand, and there was a place to lock it from the other side. She quickly did so then stood back, grabbing Numi in one hand, Prim under her other arm.

The room was dusty and empty except for a few bits of furniture covered by dirty sheets. Like the rest of the building, most of the window panes had been cracked or broken out from stones thrown from below. By the thick layer of dust that coated the floor, no one had stepped in here for years.

From the other side of the door she heard, “Fan out.”

“I heard something!” another man said, voice high with excitement.

Then there was a curse.

“What is it?”

“Nothing. Just pigeons.”

Prim pressed her cheek against Alice’s own. Meanwhile Numi was quaking — no. She was growling softly in Alice’s grip.

They waited for what felt like an hour, though it had to have been only a couple of minutes, while the men argued and poked about. Twice, they tried the locked door — and the others nearby judging by the sounds — but didn’t seem hopeful that she had escaped within.

Alice didn’t think they were from the Earl’s Estate. They didn’t wear the Earl’s colors and they hadn’t looked official at all. No, they were searching her out for some other, darker purpose.

Finally, the men descended into arguing and decided to try another building nearby. The footsteps receded, but Alice didn’t trust that they wouldn’t return later tonight.

If she hadn’t been able to get into this room. If it hadn’t been for Numi...

She looked down at her newest little dragon. “Thank you.”

“*Your work was adequate,*” Prim added.

Numi perked up. "Do I get to eat now?"

Chapter 9

Alice mentally shook herself. Her own stomach pinched with hunger, but Numi was newly hatched, and she remembered how fiercely hungry Prim had been when she'd just hatched.

"Of course," she said, and with only a little bit of reluctance, offered her own meat pie to Numi.

The little dragon sniffed it, but then made a face. "Ick. You want me to *eat* this?"

Alice and Prim exchanged a look. There was no other food inside the room.

Numi, however, had other ideas. She started crawling into Alice's lap, snuffling at Alice's pocket. "What is in here?"

Curious, Alice pulled out one of her copper coins. Instantly, Numi grabbed it up in her tiny pincer claws. Although the coin itself was bigger than her head, she somehow wrapped her jaws around it. Before Alice could say anything, the entire coin went in. Numi's gullet was stretched as the coin descended to her stomach.

"Numi," Alice said, in complete shock. "Are you... are you okay?"

Numi licked her chops. "That tasted delicious."

Alice stared at the little dragon, mildly horrified. But the little green dragon scales seemed a little brighter as if the coin had given her strength. "Can I get more?" Numi asked, hopefully.

Alice hesitated. "I don't know if swallowing coins is good for you." Then she looked again at Numi's scales and thought back to what she had asked for just before the little dragon hatched. Had she accidentally requested a dragon that ate money? How in the world was she going to be able to afford to keep Numi fed?

"I only have one more copper left," she said but reached into her pocket anyway.

Prim poked her elegant head towards the window.

"If you want to eat more coins, you can go find some yourself."

"Really?" Numi sounded delighted.

"No," Alice said, then hesitated. "I mean..." She paused and looked down at the eager little dragon. "Would you mind getting coins for me?"

"Of course not, I want to. But only if I can eat some too."

Alice bit her lip, this was such a bad idea and she felt terrible. She was supposed to be protecting her dragon. But...

"You may eat half the copper coins you find and bring the others to me," she said, and on a burst of inspiration added, "But you may find others made of silver and gold. If you see any of those, bring them straight back to me. But... you must be careful, Numi. It's not safe out there. You must stay in the shadows and not let anyone see you."

The little dragon bobbed her head up and down, looking even more lizard-like than usual. "Okay, okay! I'll be careful. I'll look along the ground."

"You don't have any camouflage skills," Alice continued, "so you must stick to the darkness."

"And most importantly," Prim said, "you must make sure that when you return, no one follows you here. Evil men are looking for Alice. You must keep her safe."

For the first time, Numi looked entirely serious. "I will," she said. "I won't lead any evil people back to Alice. I promise."

"Stay safe," Alice picked up the little money-eating dragon and walked to the window to where one pane had been knocked out completely, leaving no sharp fragments behind. Below, the street was dark and empty.

There was no sign of the men who had come after her.

Unless they, too, had a skill that would keep them hidden. She didn't want to think about that.

She placed Numi at the edge of the empty pane, and the little dragon scuttled out. "I'll bring back many, many coins, and try not to eat too many of them," she said. Then, she flared her narrow wings and, to Alice's mild alarm, took off into the air.

Her flight was wobbly at first, but she straightened out and dove to the ground. Her green scales were impossible to see in the gathered darkness.

Alice returned to Prim, troubled. "Did I just do the right thing?"

"She is your aspect," Prim said, "this is how she can best help you. Now, you can best help yourself by eating."

Alice gave her dragon a look. "Don't start mothering me now."

In reply, the dragon only started preening her beautiful pearl-pink wings.

Alice sat and ate half of her meat pie, saving the other half. She didn't know if she could count on Numi being successful, and Alice had certainly gone with a lot less to eat than this. She could manage.

Somehow, despite her anxiety, she fell asleep.

Her rest was broken a few hours later by the sound of clinking. Opening her eyes, it took a few seconds for her to locate the source of the sound. There was a dark form by the window, and it was trying to squeeze into a broken-out pane that was too small for it. It took a few seconds for her to realize that it was Numi, her stomach distended.

Instantly, Alice was on her feet, dumping Prim off her lap, who squawked in indignation.

She rushed to the window, but the damaged frame wouldn't budge without being broken.

Luckily, the wood was old and rotted. It snapped when Alice forced it.

Numi squeezed all the way through. The little dragon's stomach was distended, much like a snake Alice had once seen that had just eaten some chicken eggs.

"Numi, are you okay?" she asked anxiously.

The little dragon peeped a happy reply. "I was too big for the window!"

Alice cradled Numi and brought her back to the corner where she and a slightly disgruntled Prim had been sleeping. Every motion brought a renewed sound of coins clinking together.

As soon as Alice sat down, Numi scuttled from her arms and stood in front of them. Then she reached into her mouth and pulled out one coin after another. It took a few moments for Alice to realize that Numi was yanking them out of her storage space, which apparently made the dragon like a money purse.

The coins kept coming, and Alice's eyes widened. "How many did you find?"

The dragon mumbled something, but her answer was lost as her mouth was misshapen. It only took a few moments before she was finished, and Alice was looking at a stack of 15 copper coins, 2 silver coins, and one gleaming gold.

It had taken Alice years of work to scavenge 20 coppers on her own, and moments for Dolly to steal most of them.

Now she was looking at more coins than she ever thought she would see at one time.

"What are these worth?" Prim asked, coming over and tilting her head one way, then the other.

"It takes a hundred copper to equal one silver, and it takes a hundred silver to create one gold," Alice explained.

"Did I do good?" Numi asked.

With a start, Alice realized that her shocked stillness was making the dragon anxious. In answer, she grabbed the little dragon up and cuddled her close.

"You did amazing. How did you find all these coins?"

"Oh, everywhere! They were stuffed in cracks between the edges of streets, and in gutters where the water collects. The glittery one," she used her pointed tail to indicate the gold, *"was between a house and the street."*

She could easily picture Numi's flat form scuttling in and out of cracks.

“Was I good?” the little dragon asked again. “Did I help?”

She hugged the little dragon closely. “You helped so much, thank you.”

Numi let out a purr of happiness.

Since Prim was looking on wistfully, Alice grabbed her and hugged her close too.

“Can I eat some of the coins now?” Numi asked. “I was very good and I only ate a few of them, but I’m very hungry.”

“You didn't eat them when you put them in your stomach?” Alice asked.

“No, I put them in my fake stomach, not my real stomach. I was very, very good,” said the little dragon, bobbing her head happily in affirmation. And why shouldn't she be rewarded for her work?

Alice plucked up the shiniest silver coin and passed it over to the little dragon. Numi's eyes bugged out even more than usual, and she ate it hungrily, biting through the large silver and swallowing it down in two pieces. Then, sated, she curled up on Alice's lap, while Prim curled up on the other side.

Alice stayed awake, staring at the coins and thinking.

For the first time since leaving the estate, she had a glimmer of hope. Things might turn out okay.

Chapter 10

Alice and her dragons weren't interrupted for the rest of the night.

In the dawn of a new day, Alice took stock of what she had. She knew they weren't safe in this room, despite the locked door. If the intruders returned with lock-picking tools or conducted a more thorough search, she would be in trouble. She needed a plan.

She sensed that Prim was on the verge of leveling up. Alice had occasionally reached that threshold under her old General Laborer class whenever she was about to advance a skill, and when she focused on Prim, she felt the same way. Like she was balanced on the edge of a cliff.

Perhaps laying an egg had given her a lot of experience.

Once everyone was awake, Numi had another copper coin for breakfast. Prim curiously watched the green dragon egg, but thankfully made no request for a coin, content with actual food.

Then Alice had Prim scout the area under her Concealment skill.

The dragon reported back shortly. *"I looked up and down the street, and I didn't see those men anywhere. But there are fresh foot tracks below in the dust on the first floor. I think someone was there during the night. It could have been the men or someone else looking to get out of the cold."*

"Either way, we need to leave." Alice straightened her work smock and brushed off stray dust as best she could. Her best shot at avoiding notice was to make it look like she was on an errand for a household. Although this task was typically reserved for specialized classes like Maids, a lower-income household with only a few servants might be desperate enough to send someone untrained such as a General Laborer out.

Alice separated the pile of coins in half, taking the silver and several coppers for herself and giving the valuable gold to Numi.

Then she stared in dismay at the little green dragon. "You don't have a Concealment skill. What am I going to do with you?"

"I'm still very good at hiding," Numi said. "And your sleeves are very big." The little dragon scuttled up Alice's leg like a lizard, into her shirt, and tucked herself into Alice's right sleeve.

It caused the sleeve to sag a little oddly, and Numi's hot scales pressed against the bottom of her arm, but it would do as a hiding place for now.

From inside the sleeve, Numi piped up, "The cracks in the roads are deep. Once you're outside, bend down and pretend to tie your shoe. I'll travel the cracks and look for more delicious coins."

Alice bit her lip. "Are you sure?"

"Yes, I want to find *all* the coins," the little dragon said enthusiastically.

Well, Alice could imagine the dragon scuttling in and out of the cracks in the streets. In this part of town, the cracks within the cobblestone streets ran deep, and it wasn't like anybody would be bending down to press their eyes on them.

"Okay," she said, glancing at Prim who immediately understood and went to the window. Alice headed for the door.

Outside the building, the streets were bustling with people, including House Servants, Merchants, and specialized workers like Bricklayers, Dockworkers, and Harvesters from various classes. There were apprentices and journeymen Merchants, Carters, Traders, and all kinds of people in between.

The higher-skilled classes and craft masters were nowhere to be seen. They sent their lower workers out to do their bidding.

Alice tried to stay out of everyone's way, keeping to the side of the road. Although some people glanced at her, they weren't interested and just read her identity tag before looking away.

Occasionally, she caught glimpses of Prim flying overhead, which looked like a bird if she didn't focus too much.

As planned, Alice slowly made her way down the street and pretended to bend down as if to tie her shoe. Numi then slipped out of her sleeve and into the wide cracks between streets and sidewalk, scuttling quickly from one crack to another when necessary. Whenever Alice caught a glimpse of the little green dragon, her heart skipped a beat.

People were too busy with their day and didn't seem to pay attention to their feet. Alice spotted quite a few rats in the darkness and figured it was better not to look too closely, herself.

Alice had a vague sense of where Numi was, and although she could not pinpoint her exact location, she knew the general direction and distance. They were connected.

Because she's an aspect of my class, Alice reminded herself. She had been She of Many Dragons for just over a week and a half now, and it was finally settling in what that meant.

During her slow stroll, Alice stopped at a food stall that was serving morning pastries. The prices were much more reasonable that morning compared to last night. She had been taken for a fool by the meat pie seller.

She paid only a quarter of a copper for two pastries, and suspected that was still a high price because the pastries were very rich indeed; fluffy with a thick coating of icing on top. The treat was almost too sugary for her taste, but she nibbled on it anyway and made sure to wrap the second pastry in a bit of wax paper for Prim.

While casually chewing, she spotted a stall that was hung with bright bolts of fabric. An old memory hit her of looking through such things and reaching out to feel the fabric between her fingers. She had been quickly chased away from the stall as a child because she was too young to have a class, and surely could not pay for it.

Well, they will not be chasing me away again, she thought, an odd feeling hitting her that was close to rebellion. *I have money now, and I have a good class, even if no one can see it.*

Alice strode up to the booth. The merchant behind the booth looked interested as she approached, until the moment she obviously read Alice's tag.

"Mind you don't get any fingerprints on the fabric, or I'll be reporting to your employer," she warned.

"Of course," Alice replied. Then, on a whim, she added, "I'm on an errand for my mistress."

"Is that so?" The woman looked skeptical.

Alice met the woman's eyes without flinching. After all, she was the friend of two dragons. Despite her impulse to shrug and make an excuse to leave, she calmly replied, "I need simple clothes for a simple woman. Nothing too expensive. My mistress wants to save some coin."

"What size?" the woman asked automatically.

Alice thought for a moment. "My height, but a bit heavier. She's recovering from her third child."

The clothes were for Alice, of course, but she wanted them to be a bit larger on her skinny frame, in hopes that she could hide Prim or Numi in a pinch.

"She's looking for a good deal," Alice added, cocking her head to the side meaningfully.

"Oh, a copper pincher. Hard times indeed," the woman replied, relaxing a bit and seeming more friendly. She must have assumed that Alice's family was struggling financially. They must be to send only a General Laborer out for their shopping.

The Merchant led Alice to a table displaying sturdier denim fabrics. Alice selected two shirts and a simple skirt that would cover her ankles and had deep pockets. Each shirt cost twenty copper and the skirt was priced at a half silver or fifty copper, but Alice considered it a worthwhile investment because the clothing was of better quality than what she was currently wearing and brand-new. The first brand-new clothing she'd ever owned.

After paying the fee with her last silver, she carefully took the nicely wrapped clothing and ducked into a narrow alley to change, making sure not to let any of her new fabric touch the filth on the ground.

While Alice was changing, she heard a piping voice interrupt her. Numi scuttled out of a crack in the brickwork. Her stomach was round and tight again.

"Alice, I found many coppers and one more silver," the little dragon said, looking happy.

Alice smiled at her and said, "Good work. Now, please give me the gold coin."

She heard a fluttering sound from overhead and saw something out of the corner of her eye that she thought might be a pigeon, but she soon realized was Prim.

She was glad to see her. Alice had often wondered if Prim had a deeper understanding of Alice's new class than she let on. "Prim, do you know if I need to keep my General Laborer tag?"

Prim cocked her head and replied, "*Do you want to show yourself as She of Many Dragons?*"

"No, no," Alice said, nervously giggling. "That would be disastrous. Most people think that dragons are beasts who eat cities, so that wouldn't be a good idea. No, I want to change my tag to something else. Do you think I can?"

"*I don't know*," Prim said.

That wasn't a definitive "no". Curious.

Alice accessed her profile sheet.

She concentrated on the hidden tag, and to her surprise and delight, a new option appeared. She could choose from several tags:

Available Hidden Classes:

- General Laborer
- Streetwalker
- Apprentice Cook
- Apprentice Merchant
- Household Maid
- Thief

Alice was taken aback. Why would anyone opt for "Streetwalker" or "Thief" tags?

The rest appeared to be starting classes. Also, this was a greater variety than she ever thought would be possible. What should she pick?

Prim suddenly squawked. Alice almost shushed her, but then she realized it was a warning.

Alice ducked behind a trashcan just in time to hear the sound of heavy footsteps coming down the alleyway.

As she dared to peek an eye around, she saw that one of the men's tags was that generic Worker again. Were they the same men, or different ones?

The men were speaking to each other in low tones, but she was too far away to catch the words.

It sounded like a business transaction, and then after a few minutes, one walked away, then the other. Alice looked up at Prim, who was clinging behind some piping leading down from the roof.

The little dragon bobbed her head, indicating that it was safe now. Alice let out a breath and straightened up, brushing off her new clothing.

That did it. She needed to change her visible class. If the Workers were reading people's tags and didn't look too closely at Alice, dressed in new clothing, maybe they wouldn't recognize her from last night.

But why did she need to be on the streets at all? She looked down at the gold coin Numi had given her, still clutched in her hand.

"What should we do now, Alice?" Prim asked.

Numi just watched her with her bugged-out eyes. They depended on her, and she on them.

Alice took a deep breath to settle her racing heart. She had been leaning toward the Maid tag because it would be work close to what she knew.

However, maybe it was the adrenaline from her close call, but she felt like she needed to take a risk right now.

"Ladies," she said softly, "I think we need to live like one of the rich folks."

She changed her visible tag to Apprentice Merchant.