

Chapter 11

Alice stood in front of a gleaming, fancy building. Since she didn't know the city, she had asked Prim to look for something large and imposing. The dragon had certainly delivered as, at rising five full stories high, this was the tallest building she had ever seen.

It made her a little dizzy just to look at it. Or perhaps, her dizziness came from the fact that she was doing something unlike anything she had experienced before. Even the walk over to this side of town had been odd.

As a General Laborer, she was accustomed to automatically stepping out of the path of higher-class individuals. However, with Alice's new clean clothing and her Apprentice Merchant tag, other classers suddenly gave way to her.

Not everybody, of course, but some tipped their hat or nodded their head respectfully as she passed by. One man even stopped his horse-drawn cart in the street and asked if she wanted a ride. Flustered, Alice declined and the man rode off. It only occurred to her later that he wasn't just being nice. He likely saw her tag and wanted extra coins.

No one expected General Laborers to have anything worth spending other than their labor.

Somehow, Alice managed to navigate several streets, each busier than the last. Towards the end of her walk, she received other looks too. People sniffed at her new but simple clothing. Apparently, she was not dressing according to her station.

She kept her arms tucked close. Numi snoozed in her left-hand sleeve, having done a good day's work. She wondered if that little dragon would have more luck with coins in this fancy part of town.

Meanwhile, Prim practiced her Concealment skill and flitted from building to building, up high.

Now Alice stood in front of a building that proclaimed itself as a hotel. She should probably aim for something more modest, but at the same time... she was taken by the possibility of living well above her station for once. She wanted to experience sleeping on a real feather mattress instead of straw or reed mats, even if it was just for one night.

Nodding to herself, Alice scraped her fingers through her blonde hair to make it as orderly as possible. She was not dressed as fancy as some of the people she'd seen, but hopefully, her new false class tag and the money would speak for themselves.

From the branches of a decorative tree, Prim spoke. "*What do you think?*"

Alice replied quietly, "These people are a much higher class than me."

"*You are much better than them,*" Prim said with absolute confidence. "*And soon, you will level up again, which will make you much more **powerful** than them.*"

Alice smiled to herself, thinking that Prim was one of the kindest creatures she had ever met. She also wouldn't know what she would do without Numi, the one who also found the money for her.

I am She of Many Dragons, she thought, gathering up the last bits of her courage. *That has to mean something.*

Squaring her shoulders, she nodded to Prim. "If this works, I'll request a room with an outside wall. Wait for me to open up a window and then come in. Keep hidden until then."

"*I will,*" Prim replied. "*You'll do fine.*"

Since Numi was sleeping, Alice left her in her sleeve to keep her safe. Then, with a deep breath, she crossed the street and entered the hotel.

Her first shock was that somebody with a Hotel Attendant tag opened the door for her.

It was as if he had been waiting for her arrival. Alice eyed the man for a second, but he simply nodded and turned his attention back to the outside.

Imagine that, she thought. *Somebody opening a door for me.*

The interior was made of pale stone, possibly marble, with gilded edgings. Her cheap shoes echoed across the lobby, sounding as loud as a trumpet announcing her arrival.

A woman with a Hotel Attendant tag stood behind a giant counter, towering over Alice. The slightly dismissive look from the attendant made Alice feel small, but dismissiveness was at least familiar to her.

"How much for a room for one night?" Alice squeaked out.

The attendant looked at her. "Most people don't have to ask. Are you coming to meet somebody? Your father, perhaps?"

Alice shook her head.

The attendant hesitated and then asked, "For just yourself, miss?"

"Yes."

The woman sighed. "It is quite a lot. We are an exclusive establishment, the amount is ten silver a day. This, of course, includes two complimentary meals per service day, and the checkout is at noon."

Alice imagined how much how many fine shirts, skirts, and new shoes she could purchase for ten whole silvers. Not to mention the meals.

Then she remembered the men who had looked for her -- who might *still* be looking for her. They would not dare to try and search an establishment such as this. She wasn't just buying luxury. She was buying a place that would, temporarily, cloak her.

More than that, she wanted a taste of the luxury she had seen from a distance all her life. Even if it was just for one night, it would be nice to remember this night fondly for the rest of her life. It would be something she could tell her children about.

"I once stayed within a high-class establishment, ordered whatever I wanted, and slept on a bed that felt like a cloud."

Only... instead of children, the image came to her mind of telling a covey of dragons that instead. Odd.

"Of course, we do have rooms without concierge service," the attendant continued. "It still includes the meals but not the additional little comfy extras most of our clientele demand. That would be eight silver a night."

Apparently, Alice's hesitation had been a bit too long, and despite her snooty attitude, the staff were looking to fill rooms. She couldn't imagine a place this high class would be in that much demand on a constant basis.

"I would like one of those, without the concierge," Alice said and slid the gold coin across the table.

The hotel assistant nodded and did not seem fazed at all about the appearance of a gold coin. She changed it out quickly, giving Alice a half gold mark which was the equivalent of fifty silver and four neat stacks of ten gleaming silvers, and two extra. Alice took the coins awkwardly, realizing that she only had her deep pockets and that the coins would clink together. Well, there was nothing to be done.

A proper lady would likely carry a purse or have an assistant to take care of that sort of thing.

The hotel assistant abruptly tapped a bell, which rang loudly and made Alice jump.

"Our man, Peter, will be along for your luggage," the lady said.

"I...don't have any luggage," Alice murmured. That got an unexpected look, though the attendant didn't comment further.

A new man, Peter, who wore a red and gold uniform complete with a fancy cap on top, came up and looked at Alice expectantly. The attendant spoke to him in an undertone and handed him a key. She must have explained that Alice had no luggage because Peter glanced at her back a couple of times, his eyebrows raised.

Had this been this a mistake?

Well, Alice had paid, and it would raise more alarm if she backed away now.

"This way, miss," Peter said.

Alice followed him, keeping her free hand stuffed in her pocket to keep the coins from jingling.

The man stepped into an incredibly tiny room. Alice followed him, confused, until he pressed the button. There was a sound of gears, and Alice squeaked when she felt the pit of her stomach feel heavier.

"I never liked elevators myself, ma'am," Peter said conversationally. "But I assure you that ours are inspected by the city twice a year. All our gears are oiled—but not too oiled, if you catch my drift." He winked at her.

Alice had no idea what he was talking about, but she had heard of elevators before. She just never thought that she would be able to be in one for herself.

She nodded, trying to calm the racing of her heart.

The elevator jolted to a stop, and the doors opened to a gilded hallway painted bright red with golden accents, which felt warm and opulent.

At the end of the hall, Peters stopped and presented Alice with a key with a little flourish. Alice took it and realized that she was being given access to her very own room. Except for last night, she had never stayed in a place where she had her own lock to her own space.

Then Peter held out his hand again, and after a moment, Alice realized he was asking for a tip. Just for guiding her up the elevator? Was she being taken advantage of, or was this how high-class people spent their money?

Thankfully, she still had some coins with her and slapped a silver in his hand.

"Thank you very much, miss," Peters said, though he looked a little annoyed at the amount. "Let me know if you need any help."

He tipped his cap to her, and she unlocked the door to her room.

Her room was a huge space, with the carpeting so thick that it caught the rough edges of her simple shoes. It was creamy and thick, with a huge bed that could fit at least four people. To the

side stood two other doors, one leading to a giant closet, which was empty and would likely stay that way, and the other to a gleaming and beautiful bathroom. The bathroom had a huge claw-foot tub, actual running water, and an indoor toilet.

Alice turned the tap on the beautiful sink and water ran, bright and clear out of it. She cupped her hands and took a sip. It was sweet and cold, like it had just come out of a well.

Alice smiled to herself and did a little twirl.

A surprised peep came from her sleeve, and Numi crawled out, looking a little annoyed by the interruption to her nap.

"Sorry, love," Alice quickly deposited the sleepy green dragon on her bed, left a copper coin for her to munch on, and then headed out to the windows.

She had her own small balcony with a table and chair set out.

With a grin, she opened the glass door. Sweet, warm air drifted past her face.

Prim flew in with a burst of wings that sounded like a flock of mourning doves. The dragon circled the room, chittering happily. "*This is the type of place where you should sleep at night,*" Prim said with satisfaction as she landed on the top frame of a mirror.

"At least for one night," Alice said.

There was a writing desk set to one side. She pulled it open and found actual paper, blank and unused, along with an elegant pen and quill. She could read a little, but it had been years since she had tried to practice her writing.

Sitting down, Alice used the pen to sketch out her name over and over. Her letters were wobbly at first, her fingers unpracticed, but she improved quickly. By the end, the letters looked neat if not flowing, and beautiful. At least it was readable.

Numi had finished her snack of a copper coin and sat up, looking around. "I smell more coins outside."

"I'm sure there's plenty around here, but let's wait to search until nighttime," Alice said. "There's too much activity on the streets."

She glanced back and noticed a small door set in the middle of the far wall. It was a dumbwaiter where she could order food. Sliding it open, she found a little menu sitting inside.

Alice studied the menu, then ticked the box for roast beef sandwiches and sent the list down the dumbwaiter.

Ten minutes later, the sound of a bell tinkled and the dumbwaiter rose again. Prim squeaked in surprise as a mound of sandwiches appeared, then dived onto one of them.

Alice and her dragon enjoyed a lovely meal while Numi insisted on eating one of the new silver coins.

That afternoon, Alice took a nap on the gigantic bed. When she woke up, it was evening and the city streets were becoming quiet. Prim was out on the balcony, still as a statue and somehow hiding in the shadows as if she had wrapped them around her.

"Alice," she called softly. "*Come out here. The men are back.*"

A cold chill ran down Alice's spine, and she immediately became as tense as if her lovely, relaxing afternoon had never happened. She clutched the blankets to herself in fear. "Where?"

The dragon gestured with a wing.

Carefully, Alice crept to the balcony and looked out.

Sure enough, she saw three figures walking down the street, peering around statues and in bushes as if they planned to flush someone out like partridges. They had followed her here.

Did they know which room she was in? No, it didn't seem to be the case because they were poking around the courtyard and up and down the street. Alice kept the lamp turned down on her side and peeked out, watching.

"Why are they following me?" she asked, but her dragon did not have an answer.

Alice watched the men until the evening light became too dim to see them. City attendants came by to light the gas lamps, but by then, they were gone.

However, the night had become ominous, and it felt like every deep shadow outside held a man in wait with a club and a net.

Numi piped up, "I want to go look for more coins."

Alice bit her lip, unsure if it was worth the risk. However, her little dragon looked at her with such hope that it was clear Numi really wanted to do this. "Okay, but you must be very, very careful. Those terrible men are still out there. I don't know why they're looking for me, but... I'm worried."

"I'll be careful. They're looking for you, not for me," Numi said blithely before scuttling down the face of the hotel and jumping off the balcony.

Returning inside, Alice sat down on her bed, anxious and unable to fall asleep because of her earlier nap.

Prim dozed in her lap. Petting her dragon, Alice nibbled her lip in thought. Why were the Workers after her? Weren't there many easier targets in the city? It didn't make any sense. She wasn't that important.

Had the Earl from the estate she left put a bounty on her head? If that were the case, wouldn't City Officials or Lawmen come in and arrest her properly?

Thoughts chased each other in her mind, but she didn't have any answers.

As she fretted, she heard a slight scuffling at the front door.

Prim perked up with a hiss, and Alice hoped it was just somebody walking by.

Then the front door to her room creaked open.

Chapter 12

Alice froze in horror, knowing that the false Workers had found her at last. She should have done better by her dragons, should have taken the gold piece, and used it to run for a new city. She should never have assumed that these gilded walls would protect her...

Prim hissed.

Alice quickly shushed her. Their only chance was to stay hidden.

The figure at the door hesitated, perhaps hearing something. Then he entered the darkened all the way and closed the door to a crack behind him.

After the initial shock had passed, Alice realized that the figure was rather small, almost childlike.

He was also carrying something—a bag that would neatly fit a dragon.

A new horror washed over Alice. Prim did not have any skills to protect herself, and Numi was out on the prowl for new coins.

That meant it was up to Alice to fight and protect them.

The figure began poking around, likely still blinded by the bright hallway lamp outside. But he wouldn't be for long. Alice's own silhouette was hidden against the balcony curtain. But as soon as his eyes adjusted, he would see her.

Using hand gestures, Alice indicated that Prim should hide.

Then, she reached out, her fingers circling the base of a heavy brass lamp. She moved to strike when the figure was turned away from her. In one fluid motion, she stood from her chair, ripped the lamp from its socket, and struck him across the head.

At least, that was the idea.

At the last moment, the figure hunched in reflex. Alice struck him across the back and shoulders instead, driving him down. Though she never hit anyone in her life before, she knew her strike wasn't strong enough to knock him out.

The figure cried out in a child's voice.

Alice hurried across the room and switched on another lamp and the room was bathed in a golden glow.

A dirty boy lay crouched in the middle of her floor, dressed in a hotel worker uniform. The clothing was too big for him and puffed up oddly around his ankles and wrists as if he had tried to inexpertly roll the fabric back. It had to have been stolen.

Alice had no time to take in what she had done before the boy lurched back to his feet, turning around. Clearly, he wasn't too hurt. His expression was equally horrified.

"Miss! Oh, I'm so sorry, Miss. I came here for the chimney sweeping—I didn't mean to startle you." He rushed to the fireplace as if to emphasize his words.

Unfortunately, that was where Prim was hiding, concealed like one of the ashy logs.

The little rose gold dragon raised her wings in shock, effectively breaking the camouflage.

The boy froze, and Alice had the presence of mind to cross the room and cover his mouth before he could let out a scream.

"Say nothing!" Alice told him in a hard, cold voice she barely recognized. "Prim, go lock the door."

She had never given a command like that before, but Prim obediently flew over to the still-ajar front door, used her momentum to fully close it, and engaged the lock with her dexterous claw-fingers.

The boy shook Alice's hand off, openly gaping at Prim. "Is that..."

"It's none of your business! And I know you're a thief, not a chimney sweep, so don't deny it."

The boy's mouth snapped shut over his next lie.

Concentrating, Alice tried to identify him, but came up with no class tag. Not a big surprise. He seemed too young for the system to recognize—maybe twelve or thirteen at the most, and an underfed twelve or thirteen years old at that.

"I'm sorry," the boy said again, "I had no idea that you were a high-classer, Miss. My boss sent me in here to sweep, you see. We thought that the room would be empty, Miss."

Alice rolled her eyes. "If you're a chimney sweep, then I'm a dog. But I do believe that you thought I wasn't in here." Which was why he snuck in to steal whatever she might have left behind.

The boy's false earnest expression cracked, and his gaze again flicked towards Prim.

"Say, is that your pet *dragon*? Is that for sale?"

Prim arched her neck imperiously.

"She's no pet," Alice said, half in exasperation as she rested one fist against her waist. "What is your plan here? If you keep stealing things from people, the System will take note. Then, when you're finally old enough, all you'll get is thief classes. Is that what you want?"

The boy looked at her with derision in his eyes.

Alice continued, "And that means you won't be able to work anywhere decent—no employer will have you."

"Well, I can't get employment now. I gotta eat, don't I?"

That was true, but... "Where are your parents?"

He shrugged.

She sighed.

A knock came at the door, and they both froze.

The boy turned to her, pleading now. "Please don't tell. Coming into your room was just an honest mistake. Really!"

She highly doubted that.

"Stay there." She started to move to the door, but paused when she caught him looking toward the balcony window as if considering whether he should jump or not.

Prim solved that neatly by alighting to him. He caught her by reflex, his expression softening. Carefully, he started to pet the little dragon.

The knock came again and Alice turned back to the door. "Coming."

She opened it just a crack to see a woman with a Hotel Worker tag over her head.

"Apologies for disturbing you, Miss." The worker curtsied neatly. "It's time to collect the orders for the evening meal. Will you be dining in your room today, or will you be joining us in the restaurant downstairs?"

I just caught a thief in my room, I don't think anywhere is safe enough to leave, Alice thought, half hysterically. But she kept her face a blank mask. That was a talent she had picked up a long time ago when trying to go unnoticed by the Earl and his family. "I would like two dinner orders brought up to my room," she said after a moment of thought. Then she dug in her pocket and handed over two silvers. "And please make it quick."

The woman seemed pleased but not all that surprised by the extra incentive. "Right away, Miss." Another curtsy.

Alice closed the door and locked it again for good measure. When she turned back, she saw that the boy had taken a seat and was quietly petting Prim.

Well, at least he hadn't attacked them.

"Her name is Prim, and I'm Alice, by the way," she said.

The boy seemed half-enthralled by the dragon and wasn't listening. "She's so pretty..."

Alice waited a moment, and then prompted, "What's your name?"

Finally, he tore his gaze from the little dragon and looked at her. "I'm Tom."

"Hello, Tom," Alice said.

"Hello, Tom," a piping voice echoed from the balcony.

They both turned to see Numi, who had freshly crawled up the outside of the wall and onto the balcony. She scuttled inside, her bulging stomach rattling with fresh coins.

"And that's Numi," Alice said, resisting the urge to pinch between her eyebrows. She was getting a headache.

"How many dragons do you have?" Tom asked.

Thankfully, Numi said, "Alice! Alice! You're going to love this. I got two more—"

Alice quickly interrupted before the little dragon could brag about her findings in front of a thief. "Thank you, Numi. You've done wonderfully."

"So... They're smart? Can this one speak?" Tom looked at Prim, who just blinked her eyes at him.

Alice liked the open admiration from the little thief. But she was painfully unsure of what to do about him. Should she threaten him? Put the fear into him so he never thought about telling anybody else about what he saw?

The problem with that was that fear tended to fade fast, and shortly after, Tom might come back or just sell her out completely.

The other thing that held her back was the fact that Prim seemed intent on making friends with him, and Prim tended to have a good read on people. If Alice had listened to her earlier, she might have been better prepared to deal with Dolly.

Before she could decide what to do, another knock came at the door.

"That was fast," she muttered. She had to remember that lesson: good tipping meant good service.

Soon, Alice returned with two fancy plates with silver-topped lids over them. She'd had to fend off the overeager hotel worker who wanted to set up her dining table... Whatever that was meant to mean. Alice insisted she could do it herself, which caused an odd look. Taking the tray, she closed the door.

The tray was filled with two covered plates. Setting it up on the table, she lifted one of the lids and gasped.

There was, in her estimation, an entire feast on the plate before her. Roast chicken with the skin crusted in herbs, a large mound of fluffy mashed potatoes with a pool of gravy, and a selection of vegetables — asparagus and carrots were also seasoned beyond anything she had seen before.

The smell was both pungent and divine. Even Tom, who was half enraptured by Prim, stood up to take a look.

Alice didn't blame him and made a little *ohh* of appreciation as she lifted the second lid and found an identical feast.

Then she looked at Tom. You do catch more flies with honey...

"Well?" she said, "what are you waiting for? Dig in." She sat at the table and grabbed one of the forks that came along with the meal.

Tom took a couple of eager steps towards the food, an expression of longing on his thin face. But then he paused. "How do I know it isn't poisoned?"

In answer, Alice rolled her eyes and took a forkful of mashed potatoes off the second plate. She made a point of chewing and swallowing.

Tom must have decided that having a full, delicious meal for once was worth the risk because he quickly joined her at the table. They ate hungrily, and she suspected, like two starving wolves. For a few minutes, all that could be heard was the sound of chewing and cutlery scraping.

Alice only paused to give choice bits of chicken to Prim. Numi, of course, declined the food.

But... what was she going to do about Tom?

Well, there might be some value she could get out of him. "Tom, do you know this area?" she asked, casually.

"Of course," he replied, thickly, his mouth full. Then he paused and picked up one of the napkins that had come along with the meal. "There sure are a lot of fancy napkins around here. I wonder why they all look different..."

"Have you seen any men around here who... act oddly?" Alice asked, trying to redirect him.

"What do you mean?"

She decided to be blunt with the kid. "They have Worker tags over their heads, but I don't think they're workers. I've never heard of that class before."

He froze, gravy and potatoes slipping off his fork. "Hunters? You've seen them around?"

"Hunters?" she repeated.

Immediately, he shook his head. "You don't have to worry about them, Miss. Not a high-classer like you. They're for... my people. But you've seen them around?" He seemed alarmed.

"I have," Alice said. The heavy meal she had just eaten sat badly in her stomach. "Can you tell me about them?"

He looked hesitant.

"Tom," she said, "I want to know what's happening in the city. And," she added, knowing that this would seal the deal, "I can pay for the information."

That seemed like the type of thing an Apprentice Merchant would say, right? One who was trying to get herself established?

Well, it was good enough to pass the muster of a suspicious twelve-year-old.

Tom still looked uncomfortable, but he said, "Well, for people like me, they're known to pick people off the streets. Sell the girls to the brothels, the boys to the mines." He took a look around the room. "If you don't mind me saying, Miss, that's why a lot of people around here have bodyguards."

Her gut twisted even further. "I thought you said high-classers don't have to worry."

He looked at her with eyes that seemed too old for his young face. "A mark is a mark, Miss. You don't want to get caught being stupid. Not in this city."

That... was sound advice.

After a moment's thought, Alice dug around for another silver and passed it across the table.

"This is for the information." Then she added another two silvers, "And this is for future information. If you hear word about what those hunters are up to, you come to me straight away. Deal?"

She hoped that this would be enough to buy his silence and that her continuing to throw silvers at him would be worth more than him deciding to try to burglarize her again, or worse, rat out her dragons.

He grinned, and for the first time, his expression looked genuine. "You can trust me, Miss Alice."

She hoped so because she didn't have much else of a choice.

Chapter 13

After Tom left, Alice barred the door. Looking back, she should probably have done that in the first place, but she had been blinded by the richness of the hotel. She had thought all that luxury gave her safety.

She'd been wrong.

The extra lock was a thin shield, but she felt mildly better.

"*What's wrong?*" Prim asked. "*He is nice.*"

"He's nice right now." Alice bit at her lower lip. It felt rough from mistreatment already, and she feared she was in danger of drawing blood soon. "Right until he spends those coins and comes back looking for more."

Or decides to skip that step and go straight to the hunters, she silently added, not wanting to upset her dragons.

"If he does that, we'll just give him new coins if he comes back," Numi said confidently. "I can find plenty of them."

"This isn't about coins." Alice started to pace the length of the room, back and forth, her mind a whirl of anxieties.

Everything felt too big, too much, and she was so vulnerable. For a moment, she missed her old life. It had been dull with no bright future ahead of her, but everything from her sleeping arrangements to her two meals a day had been taken care of.

But she had no future there. Just the same day in, day out, hoping to catch the System's attention.

Well, for better or worse, she *had* caught the System's attention.

She had to believe that meant something. That she was capable of living up to her class.

"*You're very worried,*" Prim said again. "*Tell us what's wrong.*"

Alice nearly laughed. "Everything. I need to find work," she paused and shook her head, "No, first I need to find somewhere safe. This hotel is nice, but with the hunters out there... I'm worried. I couldn't even protect myself or you from Tom when he came in." She looked at her hands — slim, feminine, and lacking any sort of muscle. "He's just a kid without any skills of his own, and if he had attacked me... I don't know what I would've done."

Alice had no skills. Her dragons did, though.

"*So you need a protector,*" Prim said. "*That's what Tom told you earlier, right?*"

"Yes, but I can't hire one of those."

The green dragon started to speak but Alice held up her hand to interrupt her. "I know, Numi, you've brought me a lot of coins, but I don't think there's enough money in the world to pay off an adult who ever found out that I had dragons."

That money would be worth more gold than she could imagine. Dragons were the terrors of the kingdom, and though that certainly did not apply to her friends, she didn't think that she would be given the chance to explain herself, should they ever be caught.

Prim fluffed herself up, almost as if offended. "*You certainly do not need to **buy** a bodyguard.*"

"What do you —" Alice stopped, then looked at Prim. Her eyes briefly unfocused as she glanced at the profile sheet. Mother of All. "You mean, you want to lay another egg?" she asked. "But we don't have another aspect token."

"Numi has leveled up several times, and so have you. I think your class is on the verge of leveling up again. We just need one more level."

Prim was right. Alice had thought so herself, and with a burst of chagrin, she realized she was thinking just the way she had been when she encountered troubles in her old life, with her old class. Deep in her heart, she still thought of herself as a General Laborer who strived for coins and power she would never have. For help she would never receive from uncaring high-classes and a mysterious System.

But now she did have that power. She needed to start thinking like She of Many Dragons.

She did have help, and she had options. Only, instead of leveling herself up, her power came through her dragons.

She turned to Numi, who was lounging across the back of a small, delicate, powder-blue sofa. Her stomach was still full, and from the satisfied smile on her green face, she had likely eaten some of those coins rather than putting them into her storage space.

"Numi, how did you do tonight?" Alice asked.

Instantly, the little green dragon went from somnolent and sleepy to alert and eager. "I thought you would never ask," she said, opened her mouth, and started plucking out coins.

To Alice's shock, though — and should she really be surprised, considering the area they were in? — Numi took out one silver coin after another from her mouth until she had a stack of at least 25 right in front of her. Then she started on the copper coins. Two stacks of 25. By then, her stomach had shrunk considerably.

The little green dragon gave her a smug look, then opened her mouth and pulled out another gold coin, then a second, and finally, a third.

"Numi..." Alice said, stunned. She swooped down and pulled the little dragon into a hug.

Numi squeaked happily in her arms.

"You did amazing!" Alice said. "Oh dearest, I'm sorry I didn't check with you earlier... Were you uncomfortable holding all that in your stomach?" She looked at the coins again, realizing that there were certainly more than there had been before. Numi seemed a little longer, too. She was only a couple of days old but she had already grown.

"No, it was just all very heavy," Numi said.

"Well, that's a couple of days worth of rent here," Alice said, amused. "And that will give us time to figure out how to level you up." She looked at her profile, which included the two dragons.

Alice Turner

Age: 19

Class: She of Many Dragons

Level: 2

Rank: 1

Aspect: 2/2

Aspect 1

“Primordialis”

Level: 4

Primordialis' Skills: 3/3

Mother of All (Permanent skill. Locked.) : 1

Authority: 4

Concealment: 9

Aspect 2

“Numismatis”

Level: 1

Numismatis' Skills: 3/3

Currency Forager (Permanent skill. Locked.) :6

Lockpicking: 2

Spatial Storage: 4

Prim was very high in her Concealment skill.

Alice had gotten notifications on and off through the day but had learned to ignore them.

Numi had leveled up a few times too, but she could see that there was some ground to gain in her Lock Picking.

"Lock picking," Alice murmured.

Alice looked around the room with new eyes. "It seems that these fancy classers would have a safe..."

"A safe?" Numi sat up, very interested.

"Look around the walls. I think that the attendant, Peter, should have shown me around, but he probably didn't think much of me," Alice murmured, and why should he? She had not been acting like a proper lady. Just a scared girl pretending to be one.

She needed to remember that she had power.

The dragons started hunting around. The room was very large so there was a lot of ground to cover.

Numi, however, who was used to looking within hidden places, was the one to find it.

"In here!" she called happily from the closet.

Alice came in to see her pointing with her tail to a small dark safe with a brass lock in the closet.

The safe was open, of course, and ready to be filled with jewels and coins and then relocked by whoever was renting the room.

Inspired, Alice took one of the silver coins and showed it to her dragon. "This is yours if you can figure out the lock," she said, placing it in the empty safe. There was a note inside with the combination. But Alice didn't need to read that. She put the silver coin on the note, closed the door, and spun the lock.

Numi dived on it immediately, and Alice and Prim watched with interest as she pressed her head to the door and started spinning it back and forth.

"What are you doing?" Alice asked, amused.

"Figuring out the combination. I can hear the tumblers," Numi replied.

Alice looked at Prim, who shrugged. She didn't know what that was meant to mean either.

But this was Numi's skill, so she likely knew what she was doing.

Numi spun the lock this way and that. It looked random to Alice, but the dragon was focused and intent. She gave a happy little yip sound every time she settled on a number, then started working the dial in the other direction. Finally, in less than a minute, she swung the safe open.

Alice didn't have time to congratulate her before Numi leapt inside, falling on the silver coin like a cat on a mouse. She bit it in half and swallowed both parts in two gulps.

And, she had gained a new skill level out of it, bringing it to three.

Now Alice was paying strict attention, she felt a trickle of that experience feed from Numi to herself. It was similar to how it felt when she ranked up a level in her old Cleaning skill.

"Great job," Alice said, warmly. She felt as if she was on the very edge of leveling up... Just one more level should do it.

She looked at the safe, then frowned, knowing that it only had one combination and Numi had already figured it out. The little green dragon needed more practice.

An idea occurred to her, and she winced, knowing that it could backfire on them easily.

Just in case, she looked again at the dragon. "Do you think after you've rested, you can go out again and look for more coins. Perhaps you can gain another level in Currency Forager."

Numi hesitated in thought and then reluctantly shook her head. "I swept this area pretty clean. I sniffed out every single coin for two blocks in every direction. I can go further away from the hotel, if you want..."

"No," Alice said, immediately. Something instinctual told her that she did not want her dragon to stray too far from her. But neither did she want to go out and accompany Numi herself, especially with the hunters poking around.

That brought her back to her original idea.

She bit her lip again. This time, she tasted a little blood.

"I... have an idea," she said, "but it's dangerous, and it will take all of us to succeed."

Both the dragons perked up and looked at her.

"What is it?" Prim asked.

Alice let out a breath. She could hardly believe what she was about to suggest. A couple of weeks ago this would have been unthinkable, but... she had changed.

"We go to other suites... in unoccupied rooms," she said, "and we break into every single one of them until Numi levels up."

Chapter 14

"How will we know which rooms are empty of people, and which are not?" Prim asked, cocking her head to the side.

Her question gave Alice pause. She turned away, picking at her lower lip for a moment in thought. But she already knew. It was just a solution she did not particularly like.

"Only a few people can go through this hotel freely, yet not be noticed," she murmured out loud to herself.

Numi perked up. "Who is that?"

"The staff, of course," Prim said, all too easily.

Numi blinked her large buggy eyes. "Yeah, but Alice isn't a Hotel Attendant. She's an Apprentice merchant. Well, she's really She of Many Dragons but right now she's pretending..."

As Numi chattered, Alice swiftly took a look at her sheet and confirmed that Hotel Attendant was not one of her available hidden classes. However, Maid was. The hotel staff would surely be able to tell the difference, but would a high-classer?

No, she didn't think so. The lower classes were all but invisible to the uppers.

This was a very dangerous gambit, but Alice needed her dragons to grow stronger, fast.

With that in mind, she changed her visible class to Maid..

They did not move until it was the dead middle of the night. That was the best chance, Alice decided, for there to be fewer people around.

She thought briefly about leaving Prim safe back in the room, but if she and Numi were discovered, nowhere would be safe.

So, with reluctance, Alice hid Numi up her sleeve and instructed Prim to creep along with them under her most effective concealment skill. Alice pinned up her hair into a neat, plain bun she had seen some of the Hotel Attendants wear.

Her clothing was not at all appropriate. While it was neat, plain, and simple, it didn't match the hotel uniforms.

She would address that first. If Tom could find a uniform, so could she.

The first thing she did upon exiting her room was to check the small closet doors that were on either end of the hallway. These were unlocked and didn't give Numi the opportunity to practice her lock-picking skill.

The small closets were meant to store extra supplies — cleaning potions, scented beads that were charmed by Low Magician classes to emit a fragrant scent, or else destroy a particularly strong, noxious one. Piles of fluffy, clean towels, sheets, and extra blankets. There was even a cot that was folded up and neatly stored in the corner.

No extra maid outfits, though. She would have to search on.

Alice turned to the elevator and, feeling a sense of wonder, pressed the button to call it.

Thankfully, the inside of the elevator was empty. This hotel trusted its patrons to be able to navigate on their own. She peered at the buttons for a moment, glad to see that they were easy to understand.

Her floor, number three, was lit up. The rest were arranged in a tidy row. Below the first floor was 'B', she assumed for 'basement'. Surely there would be extra uniforms there... But there were much more likely to be Hotel Attendants who would immediately read her class tag and realize that something was wrong.

So, for lack of another idea, she made the elevator go one floor up.

As soon as she pressed the number four, the doors rumbled shut and Alice felt briefly heavier as the elevator ascended.

A small smile crossed her face, and she took a moment to think about how far she had come in such a short period of time. From a General Laborer to a girl who rode in elevators of a multi-story building. And it was all thanks to her dragons.

She looked at Prim, who had settled on the floor of the elevator, tucked in a corner and seemed to blend with the shadows. Numi was hidden her sleeve. Soon there would be one more dragon added to their little family.

Alice couldn't wait to meet them.

With a jolt, the elevator stopped and then the door slid open. The hallway beyond was thankfully empty as well. Though, the different color scheme briefly took her aback. The rugs were blue and gold and somehow... richer.

Alice suspected that higher-end guests rented the fourth floor.

It was just as quiet as the floor below.

She went to the first closet and found even more cleaning agents in greater varieties. The sheets seemed to be made of silk instead of fabric, too.

If Tom returned, Alice might lead the boy to these closets. Surely, he could fence the material and make himself a tidy profit.

Unfortunately, again, there were no uniforms.

With a frown, Alice walked to the other end of the hall where she noticed a small sign that said 'Butler's Room'.

The door was unlocked. She opened it very carefully, listening for sound.

When there was none within, she walked in all the way.

This was yet another closet— a larger one — but she had hit pay dirt.

Not only were there more supplies, several uniforms were hung up... Two of them with stains on the sleeves or on the front, indicating why they had this changing room here.

The high classes expected their servants to be neat and presentable at all times, even when doing the dirty business of cleaning up after them.

Alice had heard the Maids and Housekeepers complain about it a time or two back at the Earl's estate.

Swiftly, Alice changed into one of the outfits with a splotch on the sleeve. It looked like the maid had splashed ink on herself, but that was fine. She only needed to be presentable at a glance.

Finally ready, Alice reentered the hall and took a closer look at the rooms.

Most of the doors had ominous "Do Not Disturb" signs hanging off of the doorknob. Others had menus placed by the door with breakfast orders written down.

Curious, Alice picked one of them up. Her eyebrows rose when she saw an elaborate breakfast order of something called 'Salmon Benedict' with fresh squeezed orange juice, two carafes of coffee, one of hot chocolate, and a selection of fine pastries.

She hoped that this was a meal for several people, though she suspected that the room only contained one or two.

To so casually order such a rich feast...

Shaking her head, she replaced the menu.

"Prim, keep an eye on the hallway just in case anybody comes through."

Most of the room doors had similar 'Do Not Disturb' signs on the knobs. In fact, there was only one with neither a sign or a breakfast menu in front of the door.

It had to be empty.

Alice walked up to the door and put her sleeve to the knob. "Okay, Numi, just like just like we planned," she muttered.

She felt the little green dragon shift around in her sleeve. Then her pointed tail poked out as she started picking the lock.

The door opened with a soft click.

"These doors are not very hard," Numi muttered.

Alice was too nervous to reply. Her heart beat a fast rhythm in her chest, like a little hummingbird. She eased the door open a crack and put her ear to it. No sounds of breathing, and the room beyond was dark. With a nod, Alice walked in, gave Prim just enough time to fly in after them, and then closed the door behind them all. Again, she listened. Nothing. The room beyond was empty.

Letting out a breath, Alice headed straight for the closet. She didn't bother to turn on a light in the room – paranoia was on high, and though she doubted anyone was in the street beyond watching for lights where there should not be, she was too nervous to take any risks.

Just like with her room, there was a small safe inside the closet. Numi let out a little chirp of happiness and scuttled out of her sleeve, hopping to the safe. Just like with Alice's safe, she put her ear to it and started turning the lock this way and that.

"This room is larger than ours," Prim noted. "There's a whole other room beyond."

"It's on a higher floor. Probably serves richer clients," Alice said.

"When you get more dragons, you should have a room like this," Prim said.

Alice didn't have time to consider that before several things happened at the same time: Numi, got the safe open, and with it, a new level, bringing her to 4. At the same moment, Alice received her own level and a notification:

You have gained 1 new aspect token!

A heartbeat later, Numi cried out aloud, "Coins!"

"What?" Alice asked, distracted by her notifications. Should she hatch out the aspect now?

Then what Numi said clicked. Her head snapped around to the little dragon. "What? There're coins in there? But how can that be?"

Sure enough, the safe door opened to reveal several gleaming short stacks of gold coins, larger stacks of silver, and even a couple... Alice wasn't sure what they were. Three coins were of a bluish steel color.

Numi dived in, and before Alice could utter, "No, Numi!" she took one of the steel-blue coins, ripped out a hunk and swallowed it.

Her green hide started to glow and she instantly gained another level, bringing her to three. Prim squawked indignantly: Numi was now only a level lower than her!

"This is good stuff," Numi said.

Alice looked around and, locating a lamp in the gloom, flipped it on. What she saw made her stomach drop. There was a suitcase tucked to the side of the main bed, and although the closet was empty, a man had laid out his clothing for the day: A sharp suit and vest with leather shoes, polished to a gleam.

This room was occupied.

"We have to get out of here," she said. It was only luck that the man seemed to be out right now.

"I think we should stay," Numi murmured. Her voice was slightly slurred, and there was an unfocused quality to her eyes. She looked... drunk. Wobbling on her feet, she popped in the rest of the coin and swallowed it with a happy sigh.

In response, Alice quickly scooped up her little green dragon and shoved her into her sleeve again.

"Prim," she called. Prim immediately alighted to her, a comforting weight on her shoulder.

Alice knew they couldn't show that they had been there. The blue coin was all gone.

Alice went to shut the door to hide the theft, then paused, her fingers hovering over the coins. There were four golden stacks. Each one of those coins meant another layer of safety and security for herself and her dragons.

She took a stack and slipped it into her pocket. Then, she closed the safe before she took any more, especially the blue steel, and spun the lock.

Straightening, she headed for the door.

"Let me," Prim said as Alice opened up the door a crack.

Prim stuck her elegant head out, looked this way and that down the hall, and retracted her head to look at Alice. "It's clear."

Exhaling, Alice stepped out and closed the door behind her. She heard it click behind her.

Then she headed down the hall, every fiber in her wanting to run. She hit the elevator button.

The door opened almost instantly. A man stood on the other side, dressed fancily in a top hat and black suit including tails.

Years of habit had Alice lower her eyes and duck her head, dipping her knees in a tiny curtsy.

The man barely looked at her and brushed past her quite rudely, striding down the hall. Alice quickly slipped into the empty elevator, but as the door closed, she saw the man turn towards the door she had just left.

That had been so close. Another few moments, and he would've caught her in his room.

She jammed the button for the floor below, and was relieved once again when the door reopened and she saw that the red and gold hallway was empty.

She only let out her breath when she was back in her room, every lock thrown on the door. She leaned against the door, a hand pressed to her heart.

"That was too close. He could've caught us."

"But he didn't," Prim said.

Alice checked her sleeve to see Numi snoozing and... she felt a lot heavier than before. The fabric in her sleeve was now noticeably dipping.

The way Numi was growing, Alice didn't think the little dragon would be able to hide that up her sleeve for very much longer.

With a sigh, Alice crossed the room and gently eased the little dragon out of her sleeve and onto the bed. Numi curled up into a sated ball.

Next, Alice went to the balcony, first making sure to turn the lamp as low as possible, and looked out.

If the man with the tall hat discovered the theft, surely he would be calling for Police Officers, Lawmen, Constables or something. Maybe they would search all the rooms and account for the coins... Maybe they would hire investigative Magicians.

"Alice," Prim said again, fluttering next to her and landing on a small table meant to hold fancy drinks. "Alice, aren't you forgetting something?"

"What?" she peered out anxiously again, fretting she'd forgotten something vitally important that would make them be caught.

Prim's voice was rich with amusement. "The aspect token. Do you want to use that now?"

"Oh!" She spun back around, heart lifting in hope. "Right."

Alice looked at her dragon, and Prim closed her eyes in her dragon version of a smile.

"What do you need, Alice?" she asked.

"I need a defender," Alice said.

Chapter 15

Alice lifted a scarlet egg in trembling fingers. The egg was feverishly hot to the touch. It was as deeply saturated red as a drop of blood. When she held it up to the light, she saw faint thin golden striations threaded through the shell.

Do you want to hatch this dragon?

"Yes," Alice whispered, closing her eyes, and thinking of what she needed. A defender.

A jagged crack split the egg down the middle. The dragon inside was not shy at all and a red snout burst out of the crack, nostrils flaring as it inhaled. Then, with a loud crack, it punched its head through the top of the egg.

Immediately, Alice could tell that this dragon was male. There was just something masculine about the set of his square jaw, and the bony protections over his eyes as well as the beginnings of golden, swept-back horns.

Within a few seconds, he had crawled out of the hole he had made — and it was apparent he had a different body-shape than Prim and Numi.

His body was long and snakelike with short limbs and a long, thick tail that only tapered at the very end. As with his egg, he was scarlet in color, his scales gleaming like a red drop of blood, but the accents were gold: from his horns, a line down his back, to his golden-tipped claws. Lighter, wheat-colored hair sprouted around his neck like a lion's mane. He was beautiful and utterly fearsome at the same time.

And very much like a dragon Alice remembered seeing in a puppet show when she was a little girl.

It was a memory she hadn't thought about for a long time. Following her mother as she went to work, Alice's attention had been caught by an open-air puppet show. Lots of children of high-born families sat in a group in front of the stage while the puppeteers manipulated their puppets into amazing feats and told the story. This one was of a terrible dragon that attacked and ate an entire city. Long and snakelike, it had a body shape like her newly hatched dragon, though the puppet had been blue with water powers.

Remembering that, Alice felt a moment of fear. That ended when the newly hatched dragon's eyes met her own, golden and fierce and so, so protective and loyal.

Alice *knew* he would never turn on her. That he would be loyal forever and always.

"My name is Igcendiorum," he said, in a deep rumbling voice. "Give me orders so that I may protect you."

"Oh," Alice said, startled. Incendiorum was someone who got to the point. And just like the other dragons, he also had a tongue twister of a name. "Do you mind if I call you, uh, Iggy?"

The dragon thought for a moment, exhaling a breath of pure heat that Alice felt, even though he was only as long as her forearm. Newly hatched, he was already bigger than Numi, though their eggs had been about the same size.

"Yes, that will be acceptable," he said.

"Great, hi. I'm Alice, and this is Primordialis – I call her Prim. Over there sleeping on the pillow is Numismatis. I call her Numi."

"*Welcome,*" Prim said, "*I expect great things from you.*"

Numi only let out a slight snort in her sleep.

Iggy nodded with great dignity to Prim, then turned his attention back to Alice.

He clearly wanted his skills. Alice looked into his stat sheet.

The first thing she noticed was that like the other two, Iggy had been born with an ingrained skill.

Primary Skill: Fire Breath

And, just like the others, she had a choice on the rest.

Burning Claws Danger Sense Ultimate Armor Venom Bite

Well, there was little ambiguity about these.

"Oh dear," Alice bit her lip and looked down at the small, but already quite intimidating dragon.

"Well... What would you like?"

"Anything with fire."

That meant Burning Claws would be one of them. Looking at his gold-tipped claws, Alice had to admit that it likely fit.

There was room for one more skill. Danger Sense, Ultimate Armor, or Venom Bite?

She rejected Venom Bite right away, something in her recoiling at the idea of having a dragon with venomous abilities.

Danger Sense could be very useful, especially as this was a whole new world to Alice, and she could see herself blundering into a dangerous situation all too easily.

But on the other hand... Iggy already had Fire Breath and Burning Claws. If he had to defend her, Alice didn't want him to get hurt.

He was there to protect her, but she had some obligation to protect him as well.

"Ultimate Armor," she said, with a firm nod.

The golden highlights along Iggy's back, claws, and, weirdly, even his teeth now as she looked at them, glowed brighter briefly as the skills sunk in.

Iggy flexed his claws; he looked quite pleased. "Now, point me to your enemies and I will dispatch them at once."

"They're out there," yawned Numi, waking up enough to point at the balcony.

"Excellent," Iggy rumbled. Then, he flicked open wings that, much like Numi's, seemed a little too narrow and sharp for his body. When he leapt into the air it was more like he swam through it than flew, somehow using his long, horizontally and vertically flat tail to help propel him.

"No!" Alice reached out and thankfully caught Iggy before he could make it to the balcony.

The little dragon wound around in her hand to look back at her.

"You *don't* want me to fight your enemies?" He sounded put out. "Aren't they a danger to you?"

"Well..." Alice hesitated. "I mean... You can't just go out and chase them away." Though somehow she suspected that Iggy didn't have *chasing* in mind. "You don't know what they look like," she added, with relief, finally settling on an actual excuse.

Iggy hesitated at that. "Then point them out to me, and I can... *chase* them off," he said, sounding reluctant at the last part.

"Yes, later perhaps. We have to be careful," Alice said. "It wouldn't be safe for me if people knew that I have dragons. We have to be as quiet and circumspect as possible. But, I do want to be safe."

Iggy swelled a little as his chest puffed out. "I live to serve."

That made Alice a little uncomfortable, but at least he wasn't trying to fly out of the balcony in search of who knew what.

"Are you hungry?" she asked, remembering how hungry Prim and Numi had been right after hatching.

Sure enough, Iggy hesitated for a telling moment.

"You can't defend me on an empty stomach," Alice said.

"*Yes, you should eat something,*" Prim agreed, in a commanding voice. "Then you may grow larger and stronger so that you may better defend Alice. Right now, you're only big enough to poke someone's eye out."

"I'd rather burn someone's eyes out," Iggy said, but Alice could tell that the loyal dragon was tempted by the thought of food. Thankfully, she still had the remains of the meal as she hadn't set it outside the door like she had seen other people do.

Tom's plate, of course, was so clean it was possible to use the plate again, but Alice had set some of her chicken aside for the dragons later.

She offered it to Iggy, and he fell upon it and gobbled it up so fast that Alice decided it might be best to order a midnight snack from the dumbwaiter.

She sent the message down to order more sandwiches — turkey this time, and wondered if she was waking any poor Cook up. Well, sandwiches would be easy to put together. She was just writing down her order when Prim spoke up.

"Alice," Prim called, "*I also have skills to assign.*"

"You... What?" Turning from the dumbwaiter, Alice looked at her dragon in shock. Then, she swiftly opened the menu.

She had been so focused on Iggy that she hadn't seen that Prim had reached level 5. Likely due in part to all the Concealment she had been practicing recently.

"Prim... That's amazing. Congratulations. Wow, you have another skill."

She was amazed. She had leveled up as a General Laborer but had never been allowed to gain more skills. That was one of the main limiting factors of the lower classes. The higher classes, of course, had more skills available to them. It was partially what made them so powerful.

Quickly, she opened up Prim's available skills. She had three in total, including one from last time:

Common Sense Logistical Planning Illusion

Alice bit her lip. It seemed that Prim certainly had a good amount of common sense even without the skill for it. Or she was just bossy and tended to sound like she knew what she was doing.

Logistical planning was useful. Prim was clearly intelligent, and it would be nice to have someone help Alice organize her life.

The last one. Illusion. That seemed promising. Prim had certainly got a lot out of her Concealment skill, but it wasn't perfect.

After all, Prim had been caught by Dolly and by Tom by surprise.

Hadn't she just told Iggy that they needed to stay secret?

"How do you feel about Illusion?" Yes, Prim was her dragon, but Alice felt she should have a say as well.

Prim cocked her head this way and that and then once more before she nodded. "Yes, I think I would like the Illusion skill."

So, Alice added it, and Prim's scales brightened.

"Give me a skill too!" Numi called.

She had woken up completely and was chewing on a copper piece that she had somehow come up with — Alice suspected from her storage stomach.

Alice checked but... "You don't have a new skill yet, love."

"Aww," she ducked her head. "But I thought I was doing good."

"You are. Prim has been hatched for over a week, and she only got her first skill now. You're well on your way."

Sitting right next to her, she patted the little green.

The dumbwaiter rumbled a moment later with their sandwiches. Iggy fell upon them almost at once. Prim took one half sandwich of her own, splitting it with Alice. Numi, of course, preferred coins.

After finishing her last bite, Alice placed her hand over her mouth in a big yawn. This had been an exhausting day, and she didn't even know what time it was. She hadn't dared to turn the light on yet to check the wall clock.

"Prim, dearest, do you see signs of Law Enforcement? Or anything going on around the courtyard?"

Prim fluttered to the balcony window to look out. "No, all is well."

Then the man with the top hat hadn't discovered the theft. The longer it took, the more likely Alice was in the clear.

"I think... It's time to go to bed. It's been a long day." Exhaustion fell on her at once.

Again, Iggy flew to the balcony. But this time, he didn't try to escape. He only sat on the edge, his dark red scales seeming to blend in with the night even though he didn't have a Concealment skill. Probably something to do with the color red.

"I will guard," he said.

Alice wanted to object. He had just hatched, after all. But, on the other hand, Numi had gone out searching for coins when she had just been a hatchling. Guarding seemed like it would be within his wheelhouse.

"I'll order us a big breakfast tomorrow," she said, and she only had enough time to shift her clothes into something more comfortable before she crawled under the sheets. She fell asleep almost at once.

"Alice... Alice..." A soft, insistent voice woke her up. She blinked, feeling like she'd only been asleep for a bare few moments.

And for a second, she was confused. It was still dark in the room. What was going on? Her eyes fell on Iggy, and though she had only known him for a very short amount of time, it was like resting her eyes on an old friend. He had flown to her bed, and seeing she was awake, he slithered over. "I have a report."

"Hmm?" she asked, still muddled.

"Prim described the Workers to me. I have spotted them along the street. And they have captured someone."

That jolted Alice awake. "Captured someone?" she repeated, horrified. "Who?"

"Two children. A boy and a girl."

A feeling of premonition hit her. "Is the boy about twelve years old? Sandy blonde hair? About this high?" She used her hand to measure the distance.

He nodded.

It was Tom. The false Workers had captured Tom.