

## The Girl Who Never Knew Herself ©

By Brie Fennell

**A**lice sat with the bonfire in front of her. She was far enough away to keep warm, but not close enough to cook. Her knees were curled deeply into her chest, and the damp ground beneath her soaked through her robes.

Marrielle, her girlfriend, leaned into Alice's side. Her arms loosely wrapped around Alice as she teetered off into a drunken sleep. Some thirty feet away, patrons cheered drunkenly as music flowed from the bard's instruments.

Alice surveyed her surroundings. Other couples sat around the fire; some snuggled up to each other, while others snogged, and one couple just outside the circle tried to push their intimacy beyond the status quo.

The night sky had cleared, and Alice could see stars glistening as they aimlessly drifted through the cosmos. A streak of light darted across the sky. Alice looked at it and wished that one day this moment would become her reality; hoped that the happiness she felt in this moment would never fade. That when she woke up in the morning everything would be as it was in this moment. Alice's eyelids grew heavy and her thoughts became blurred. She leaned herself into Marrielle and fell into a slumber of her own.



A cold light shone through the dusty curtains. The bedroom reeked of uncleanliness; a pile of unwashed clothes, dyed black with grease and oil, sat next to the hamper. Last night's dinner sat half-eaten on a desk. Garbage littered the room: coffee pods, pop cans, fast food containers, and opened hot chocolate packets.

Michael was lying on his bed, the sheets around him stained red.

A razor blade rested on the bedside table next to him. Groggily, his eyes opened at the introduction of the light. A single headphone dangled loosely from his ear, blaring music at detrimental volumes. He let out a long-winded sigh as he sat upright and leaned against the backboards of his bed. His body was slow and unwilling to respond so early in the morning. His thighs stung as he shifted them, the freshly closed gashes from the previous evening violently covering the surface of his legs. Underneath his boxers a flagpole had risen, as if his body was celebrating that it had survived the onslaught of his mind. He looked at it with disgust, hoping that it would shrivel into nothingness if he ignored it.

He thought to himself about the dream he'd just had. The details were fuzzy, but the emotions he felt during the dream were clear: warmth, happiness, and belonging. All those feelings had faded when the sunlight intruded his room. Now, he felt sadness for the dream that never became reality, anger at the sun for pulling him to consciousness, and hate towards his body for being what it was. The more he chased the dream, the harder it became to immerse himself in it. Just as he felt close to reaching his dream, again, someone spoke from the other side of the bedroom door.

“Michael, are you awake?” Michael’s mother said. “You’re going to be late for school.”

Michael already knew this—his phone said 7:47 a.m., and school started at eight. He had no intention of going, he wasn’t wanted there anyways.

“I’m not going today, mom,” he said.

“Are you not feeling well? I can get you some Tylenol if you’d like.” She tried to open the door, but it had been locked the night before. “Hey, Mikey, I know that it didn’t go well the last time, but if you want to try counselling again, I can try to get an appointment tomorrow?”

“I’m fine, please just leave me alone.”

“Okay, hun, but call me if you need anything. I need to go to work,” she said.

Michael was silent as his mother walked away. He hated speaking. He wished he could tear out his vocal cords. The walls shuddered as his mother closed the front door of the house. Michael reached for the string that hung carelessly from the curtain mount. He pulled the string and watched as the winter sunlight vanished from his room. Seconds had passed, then minutes into quarter hours, before hours had disappeared as Michael sat in a corner with his body curled in a ball. His stomach rumbled throughout the frail body he refused to feed. He stared aimlessly, wondering what was different about him. Did he have Dissociative Identity Disorder with multiple alters influencing his thoughts?

*What if souls were real*, he wondered. Perhaps he had the soul of a woman that was placed in the wrong body.

When he could no longer bear sitting in the same position anymore, he stood up and rustled through the dirty pile of clothes that laid beside the hamper and shivered as he searched for something of relative cleanliness. Once he found something and was dressed, he sat in a worn-down office chair. He pressed the power button of his computer, and with a flicker of green light, the machine awakened. An out-of-tune melody played as the computer brought itself to life. The monitor on top of the desk illuminated its display, showing the login screen. Michael entered in his password, taking note of the time on the display: 3:22 p.m. School had just finished, not that it mattered to him. He would have been amazed if anyone had noticed his absence.

Once Michael’s desktop loaded on the screen, he moved his cursor to the icon titled *Kingdom of Magic*. The video game opened, Michael clicked on the saved game titled “Alice Spellbinder” and waited to be brought into the only world where he felt he belonged.



Alice trod carefully as she made her way across the frozen tundra alone. The cold nipped at her hands and feet despite the heavy fur cloak she wore over her robes. In her left hand, she held a staff with a crystal orb atop it that illuminated her surroundings while her right hand prevented the blizzard from entering her eyes. In the distance, the light of a fire reflected off a rocky outcrop.

When she reached the camp, she saw that tents made of hide had been constructed, and her companions were unloading their packs. Hafthar was the first to notice her; he was a beast of a man at 6'5," and his weapon of choice was a battle axe as large as Alice herself.

"Alice, you made it!" he cheered as the other party members listened in. "We thought you'd been eaten by Frost Wolves or worse, Tundra Spiders."

Alice smiled at Hafthar. "Thanks for sending out a search party to make sure I was okay."

"What? We were about to, we just wanted to wait a—"

"She's teasing you, Hafthar," a voice said from the nearest tent. Marrielle was the one to walk out of it. She leapt towards Alice and gave her a quick kiss.

"Glad you made it, love, did you find what you were looking for?"

"Yes, I did. It wasn't easy, but I found it." Alice gestured to the silver dagger sheathed under her cloak.

"Great, everyone's around the fire," Marrielle noted as she pointed towards the others. "This way."

Alice followed Marrielle to the fire, joining the rest of the party members who were merrily drinking and sharing stories. Markell—a mage known throughout the empire for his prowess in the arcane arts, and Alice's part-time mentor—was busy stoking the fire with

flame spells; Flynn, Alice's longtime friend and a talented archer, was sharpening arrowheads; and Adriel, a thief who preferred to keep her past under wraps, was preparing the shafts. Alice sat down with Marrielle, leaning into her for warmth, and was wrapped underneath her lover's cloak.

"Hey, Markell," Flynn said, reaching for his attention.

"Yes, Mister Archer, what is it?" Markell asked.

"Remember that time you reincarnated a tundra spider to scare Alice?"

"How could I forget? She was so frightened that she cast an oblivion spell and nearly tore the fabric of time and space apart," Markell laughed.

"Heeeyy," Alice interjected. "I had control of the situation. Besides, that tundra spider was the size of a mammoth, and you know that I'm afraid of them."

"Control of the situation? If Adriel hadn't knocked you unconscious with a poison dart, none of us would be here," Flynn said.

Alice looked over to Adriel. The quiet thief gave a small wave of her hand and smiled at Alice, as if to confirm the retelling. Alice's focus shifted back to Markell. "At least I didn't conjure a dragon inside The Emperor's personal chambers."

"She's got you there, Marky," Marrielle chimed. "Oh, and what exactly were you doing in The Emperor's chambers?"

Markell blushed and dipped his head. "That's . . . that's a story for another time."

A collective wave of laughter passed around the fire. Alice was pleased with her rebuttal, if not a little bit concerned for Markell's pride.

At the end of the night, Hafthar walked up to the fire and

gathered the attention of everyone. “Listen up!” his voiced boomed. “Tomorrow we enter the dungeon. We don’t know what’s down there, so everyone needs to be ready.”

Alice knew what she was required to do as the party healer; her job was to get everyone out alive until her magicka was depleted or the last drop of her blood dripped. She would get her party out safely, regardless of the danger to herself. It was a daunting task, but she knew come morning that everyone would be counting on her.



The light in the sky had faded long ago and Michael’s eyes had grown heavy. He looked at the time to see it was 1:09 a.m. His body wanted to sleep, but Michael didn’t want to return to reality. He wanted to stay in the world that *Kingdom of Magic* let him escape to; he wanted to be Alice Spellbinder. Not for the magical powers she possessed, but for the comfort Michael felt when he was her. He saved the video game and shut down his computer. In the darkness, Michael stood up, and hit his left thigh on the computer desk. A stinging pain shot through the self-inflicted slashes covering his leg, reminding him of his own mortality. He lay down in his bed as his leg stung, thinking about the adventures he’d had as Alice. He remembered the dream he’d had last night. He thought about the feeling of warmth and comfort that accompanied it, and how that as Alice—not Michael—everything felt proper to him.

As Michael drifted off into his sleep, he whispered, “To anyone out there who can hear me, whether you’re an omnipotent god or a benevolent spirit.” He paused for a moment, desperately hoping that someone would respond. “Tomorrow, when I wake up. I want to be Alice Spellbinder. And if that can’t happen then I don’t want to wake at all.”