

Chapter 1

Alice stared down at the golden goose-egg which was most certainly *not* supposed to be in a puppy whelping box.

She had come to the hound kennels to check on Junebug, the Earl's prize hound dog. Sure enough Junebug now had a brick red New Mother temporary tag floating in red over her head and five squirming puppies nuzzled up to her belly. The intensity of the red tag would fade as the pups grew and were eventually weaned.

However, it seemed Junebug wasn't just prized for her foxhunting skills.

She had somehow generated a class seed. An item that was so rare Alice had only recognized it from stories. It was one of the few ways to voluntarily change one's class.

Alice reached for the golden egg, which was shoved up against the opposite side of the wooden box away from the puppies. Her fingers hesitated a fraction of an inch from the shell.

No. Skin-on-skin contact would activate it. Then she would never be able to sell it.

Glancing over her shoulder to make sure the Kennel Manager was nowhere near, she pulled the sleeve of her sweater over her hand. She grabbed the egg and shoved it into the front pocket of her apron.

No need to worry about breaking the shell. This wasn't truly an egg. It only looked like one.

Various Scholars and Priests classes debated whether class seeds sprung into the world randomly or out of a moment of need as a gift from the System. They famously generated in war-torn zones as if the System wanted to help soldiers in dire straits. As such, they were hard to destroy.

No sooner had Alice hidden the egg, then she heard footsteps behind her.

Old Roy, the Kennel Manager stomped into view.

"Who's there? Oh, is that you Alice?"

"It's me," she confirmed. "Just checking on Junebug."

He snorted and stomped up to her. "Well? She birthed yet?"

"Five pups so far," Alice said, quashing a spike of irritation.

Roy was the ranked classer here, so he was in charge. But the hounds were so well-leveled that they were intelligent enough to not cause trouble. Roy had been coasting in his duties for years, leaving it up to General Laborers like Alice to take up the slack.

The only hope she had to get a better class of her own was to show aptitude and hope the System would see and reward her.

What she wouldn't give for a Kennel Worker, Animal Caretaker, or Veterinarian Assistant identification tag.

Alice didn't dare tell anyone this, of course. Nor did she allow any distaste for the smell of alcohol wafting off Roy to cross her face. The man had been in his office drinking again.

"By the way Junebug's panting, there may be a few more puppies coming," she said.

Roy grunted and looked over. "You didn't touch none of the pups, girl?"

She shook her head quickly and backed a step just in case he tried to take a swipe at her.

Roy narrowed his eyes, but either believed her or didn't care enough to push. With a series of grunts and exaggerated grimaces, he maneuvered his large bulk into the straw-lined whelping box and reached to touch the puppies one by one.

As he did, the empty area over the newborn puppies' heads flashed with a Common Hound tag. That was quite a few ranks lower than Junebug's Prize Hound tag.

From what Roy had claimed, the Kennel Master class gave random bonuses to newborn pups under his care.

Alice suspected that might be a bunch of bunk. She'd never seen a newborn puppy with anything more promising than a Uncommon Hound tag.

"Worthless," Roy muttered, laboriously standing again.

She looked down at the tiny, squirming puppies. "You don't know that. They might earn a better class, once they grow up a little."

"Doubtful. You start as trash, you end as trash." Roy turned, unknowing or uncaring he was speaking to a General Laborer and stomped back to his office, and his drink.

As Alice watched him go, her hand slipped to touch over her apron pocket.

People started with the classes of one of their parents. That meant the families of General Laborers stayed General Laborers. Even noble's bastards only had a 50/50 shot of being a Gentleman or Gentlewoman, which was their starting rank.

If someone worked hard, dedicated themselves to a single task, and the System was feeling generous that day... someone might earn an upgraded class.

Or they could buy a Class Seed. Just like the one Alice had in her pocket. People paid fabulous amounts of money for a chance at greatness. Either way if she kept or sold it, her lift was about to change forever.

"I won't stay trash forever," she muttered, but so quietly it was doubtful Junebug even heard her.

Through iron will, Alice kept from checking her pocket through the rest of her long day of chores.

No employer of sense wanted to lose General Laborer, which by law could be paid at lower rates than more specialized classes. Even the Gardeners and House Maids had the class skills to earn a higher wage.

It wasn't much, but in the stratified world of class hierarchies it meant everything.

By design, Alice's duties were general and varied. A little of this, a little of that so she would have a harder time specializing. Sometimes she'd wash the outside windows or pull weeds in the garden. She'd chop firewood or haul furniture out of the unused rooms for storage.

She tried to take all the time she could in the kennels, but when Roy caught her working too often, she'd be sent to the washing rooms for a few weeks. That diluted her System experience.

With a sigh, she activated her class sheet.

Alice Turner

Age: 19

Class: General Laborer

Level: 20

Rank: 1

Class Skills

Cleaning (Rank 1 25% bonus): 40

General Stamina (Rank 1 30% bonus): 37

General Strength (Rank 1 15% bonus): 35

That short page was the sum total of her life's work. Her bottom-level, low class meant she was allowed three skills, which had been automatically assigned by the System.

Eventually through the toil of years she could move those skills to level 100 each. Then she'd gain Rank 2 and be eligible for another skill.

Not all classes were like this. Alice had heard rumors of marvelous benefits, of skills and ranks raining down on the children of those born lucky.

General Laborer was at the bottom of the bottom, and most found it impossible to dig themselves out.

All of which was the reason why the class-seed she found was so valuable.

Getting a new class would change the course of her life. But she had no way to know what this seed would change her class to until she used it.

There were high end Merchants who could tell her, but she had virtually no status, no powerful friends to protect her, and no one to believe her if someone decided to take the seed for their own.

That made selling it tricky, though not impossible. There were high-end auction houses with supposedly good reputations. She just had to find a way to safely get to one, first.

Or she could use the seed herself. Change her own life. That was a risk, too. But what if she disliked her new change? What if instead of General Laborer, she became something completely unsuited to her, like Musician?

Alice had always loved animals, working with them, and taking care of them. She found it easier to deal with animal kind than humankind.

Yes, her life would improve if she became a Seamstress, Merchant, or Politician, though none of those would make her happy.

But would it be better than the life I have now? She wondered.

Changing her class would be forever, and she doubted she'd ever find another class-seed.

Alice struggled with that question all through the day and found she still didn't have an answer when the sun went down at the end of her shift.

Bone tired from a day of work, and mind weary from the weight of her decisions, Alice went back to her room.

All General Laborers received housing as part of their pay. It wasn't much. An old, converted barn with the walls stuffed with straw to make it just warm enough for human beings, and the inside sectioned out into individual cubicles. She shared hers with Dolly, another General Laborer.

Between herself and Dolly, they kept the cubicle clean. The Duke's House Mage came by to refresh cooling and heating charms on the walls to make the extreme ends of summer and winter bearable. While Alice shared the bathroom facilities with everybody else, she knew she lived better than some General Laborers.

At least, that's what she told herself.

Alice's mind still turned over the question of what she was going to do with the class-seed. As such, she missed the warning signs from her roommate as she walked in.

Dolly had half of her clothing spread out across both beds. Unlike Alice, she spent most of her money, and resold gifts her lovers gave her — on expanding her outfits.

Dolly's face was done up with expensive paints, and her black hair was tied up in curlers.

Alice stopped short, then groaned. "Oh Dolly, I thought we talked about this..."

"Breydon *loves* me," Dolly sniffed. "And I realized that, while you're coming from a good place, you're also jealous."

Carefully, Alice sat down on the very edge of her own bed, which was the only part not covered with clothing. "Dolly," she said patiently. "Breydon is a son of an Earl —"

"Fourth son. He told me his father won't object to our marriage."

Confrontation made Alice sick to the stomach, but Dolly was being stupid with her future. "I've heard he's gotten two of the Chambermaids pregnant this year..."

Dolly whirled on her. She had applied half her blush, making one cheek stand out much redder than the other. "Those girls were *lying!*"

"Who told you that? Breydon?"

"He's *Sir* Breydon to you." The non-painted side of her face had gone red with anger, matching the other. "Besides, if I get pregnant... Well, there's a chance the baby will have his class..."

Alice couldn't believe Dolly was being so stupid. "It takes fourteen years to find out anybody's class. Dolly, have you... Has he..."

She couldn't finish, too mortified at the idea. Unwed single mothers who were General Laborers were not treated kindly by society. Their value was in stolid, dependable work. That became difficult with a baby to look after.

"You are such a child." Dolly rolled her eyes and then turned to finish the rest of her makeup.

Alice wanted to talk some sense into her, but it felt like her throat had closed up. She'd never been good with confrontation and she just knew Dolly would lash out at anything she said.

Alice hated herself but kept silent as the grave as Dolly finished getting ready. Judging by the amount of makeup she put on and the low-cut shirt, she planned an evening with Breydon.

Dolly turned back once to look Alice up and down with a critical eye. "You know, you're not going to get anywhere unless you start taking chances. Do you want to be a General Laborer forever?"

"I—"

"Well, think about it. Breydon has other brothers, and I suppose you're pretty enough to catch one's eye."

Then she flounced out, brushing past the curtain that functioned as their door.

Tears welled up in Alice's eyes. She quickly brushed them away.

Over the years, she had received some attention from other boys – even looks from noble heirs, but she didn't want romance. She wanted a better life.

And what had she done to get it? Skulked around the kennels and hoped that the System would someday notice and change her class. She was pathetic.

She had the means to change her life right now, and she had been too afraid to even take it out of her pocket.

Alice liked to live a careful, considerate, quiet life. She knew she shouldn't let Dolly's words get to her, but... the other girl was right, wasn't she? People could work for a lifetime without the System offering a class change. To most, it was a pipe dream.

Meanwhile, if she decided to sell the class-seed and got swindled, instead, or the seed stolen... She would never forgive herself.

Maybe the System has seen me and this is its answer. I can change my life right now, and I don't need anybody else to do it.

I just have to be brave enough to try.

Any other class is better than [General Laborer].

Alice got up, firmly yanked the curtain across the cubicle shut so not a gap showed through, and then pulled out the egg-shaped seed with her bare fingers.

It activated in a flash of light.

Chapter 2

In that brief flash of light, Alice thought she heard/felt/saw a question.

What do you want?

Her answer felt as if it was pulled from the middle of her skull: *I want to be happy. I want to be able to make friends. I don't want to be scared anymore.*

It all happened at the speed of thought, and a moment later, she wasn't sure if it had been in her imagination or not.

Congratulations! You have activated a class change seed!

You are able to change your class from General Laborer to She of Many Dragons.

This is a one time offer. Do you wish to accept?

Alice gasped and then quickly slammed her hand over her mouth to stifle the sound.

She looked around with held breath, but no one poked their head into the cubicle to see what was going on.

She looked back at the egg-shaped class seed.

Dragons?

The monsters who slew entire cities? Who hoarded gold? The ones that class adventurers hunted for years to slay for their experience?

Was this... a dark class? Something forbidden?

No other information was provided. Nothing that told her what she would gain and what she would lose. Some classes apparently had moral alignments that Priests and Clerics could see. There was none of that information, either.

If she accepted this class would she become a bad person?

What if she said no?

This was a one time use, single offer. If she declined, the class seed would crumble into dust as if it had never been generated. In time, Alice might be able to convince herself the whole thing had been a bad dream.

But deep down, she knew she would live with that regret for the rest of her life.

No. Good or ill, Alice *had* to take this chance.

Holding her breath, she accepted the class change.

Warmth swept through her, like a cleansing tide washing in and out, leaving irrevocable change behind.

You have changed your class from General Laborer to She of Many Dragons.

Alice had never seen anybody activate a new class from a seed. That was reserved for people of means. But she had heard stories and expected the egg to explode into glitter, vanish, or perhaps melt into her skin and become part of her forever.

Instead, a ragged crack opened along the length of the egg and bits of shell fell away.

A little dragon head the size of a grape popped out and looked at her.

She was a beautiful rosy gold with brighter edges along her wings, the tip of her nose, and down its spine. She blinked bright yellow eyes at her.

Instantly and completely: Alice was in love.

The baby dragon started pushing bits of shell away, revealing more of her form: two arm limbs, two hind legs, and two wings. There were tiny bumps along the tops of the spine, signaling one day she would have spines.

Alice had helped baby chicks that were too weak to hatch out of the shell on their own. The process could take hours.

But this shell crumbled away from the little dragon within a minute, leaving it clean and dry in a way that naturally born animals weren't.

"Look at you," Alice breathed, "you're not scary at all."

The little dragon gazed back at her, and though it had hard scaly lips, Alice could swear she was smiling back at her.

The moment faded and slowly Alice's sense of excitement was replaced by horror.

What had she done? The only reason she was given meals and allowed a safe place to sleep was because of her General Laborer class. What would happen now?

Quickly, she located her subclass system. It had changed.

Hidden Class: She of Many Dragons

Visible Class: General Laborer

Alice let out a breath. Anyone who was old enough to access the class system would still see her as a General Laborer. That would give her time to figure things out.

But... hidden class? She had never heard of that setting before. Then again, she had never dealt with anything but the most basic of classes.

She looked down at her dragon with regret. "You can't be here. It's not safe for you. If the duke finds out..."

The little dragon blinked up at her. Her tiny claws wrapped around Alice's thumb and she said quite clearly in Alice's mind, "*I'll stay with you.*"

“Did you... Did you just talk?” Alice whispered.

“Yes,” sweetly replied the baby dragon.

Her mind spun. “My name is Alice,” she whispered. “Do you have a name?”

“*My name is Primordialis.*”

“That’s...” She wanted to say that it was a pretty name, but it wasn’t. It was certainly an *impressive* name — a scary name. One that reminded her she was holding a real life dragon in her palms. Even if she was a tiny one.

“Pre– No, Primordial... Can I call you something shorter like... Prim?”

“*I like that. I like you.*” Prim rubbed her little head against Alice’s thumb, and Alice felt her anxiety fade and her heart melt a little. “*But I want to stay here and help you.*”

“Help me? How can you–?”

She cut her words short as several people trudged by the curtained front of her cubicle.

As soon as they had passed, Alice re-tugged the edges of the curtain tight to ensure again it covered any gaps. Then she shielded the single burning candle stub to dim the light.

“*Give me skills, then I’ll help you,*” Prim said.

“Skills?”

Alice’s eyes widened. She hadn’t even properly checked her status sheet yet.

Sure enough, not only had it changed, she had several decisions to make.

Alice Turner

Age: 19

Class: She of Many Dragons

Level: 1

Rank: 1

Aspect: 1/1

Aspect 1

“Primordialis”

Level: 1

Primordialis' Skills: 1/3

Mother of All (Permanent skill. Locked.) : Level 0

(Unassigned)

(Unassigned)

View available skills now?

Mother of All?

Alice had never heard of that skill. Then again, the ones she dealt with had always been straight forward. No one ever had to explain what cleaning was meant to do.

Furthermore, it looked like she had to choose two skills for her new dragon. As a General Laborer, her few skills have been assigned to her by the System. She had never had the opportunity to choose them.

“I don’t know... What if I choose wrong?” she asked the tiny dragon. A sick feeling churned her stomach. “What if I mess you up?”

“*You never could. Whatever happens, we will work through it together,*” Prim said calmly.

Alice felt a new stab of shame. The hatchling was minutes old and already seemed more mature and confident than Alice herself. She should be reassuring Prim, not the other way around.

“*Let’s take a look together...*” Prim whispered.

Available Skills:

Common Sense - Exercises supernatural good sense and sound judgment.

Concealment - The ability to hide and blend into the environment without being noticed.

Authority - The power to give and enforce orders on lesser aspects.

Adaptability - The supernatural ability to adjust to new conditions.

No fireball or other outwardly aggressive skills. Alice was both worried and glad. She already couldn't imagine sweet little Prim setting fire to someone. On the other hand, the world was unfair and her dragon would need to defend herself.

"Authority?" she asked hesitantly. It gave her a level of power over other aspects. Was that the system's term for dragons?

Prim nodded her head vigorously.

"Adaptability?" she tried.

"Concealment feels more powerful."

If you couldn't fight something, the next best option was to hide.

Alice added both.

Prim shivered, and as the skills were assigned, the golden highlights flashed before resettling back to a still brilliant hue. *"I like those very much,"* she cooed. *"Alice, I'm very hungry."*

Oh no.

Alice looked around for food. As usual, she had given her earlier leftovers to the kennel dogs. Junebug had to regain her strength after giving birth.

There wasn't a scrap left for Prim.

"Can you wait?" Alice asked.

Prim gave her such a sad look that Alice's heart ached.

No, she couldn't let her new dragon go hungry. But there was only one place to get food at this time of the evening: by stealing from the kitchens.

The problem was, Alice had never stolen a thing in her life.

Chapter 3

Alice poked her head out of the cubicle and looked around. At the same time, Prim poked her nose from Alice's curtain of blonde hair and looked in the other direction.

It was dark thanks to the need to save valuable candle stubs. The only sound heard through the barn was rhythmic breathing.

Most General Laborers worked hard the live-long day, and spent their scant coins on tiny luxuries from the estate store: A bottle of liquor, oats, or an extra blanket for the bed. A few had families they supported, though they usually returned to the barn cubicles to get an early start on the dawn shift.

Unless it was a holiday or somebody was trying to drown their sorrows, they were back in their beds right after sunset.

Alice crept out, down the short hall, and through the barn doors which were left open due to the mild night.

Once outside, her confidence failed her. She froze.

"Danger?" Prim asked.

"No..." she whispered. "No danger."

But she knew there were sure to be Guards patrolling everywhere. Thanks to their class skills, she would never see them. Not until they wanted her to.

More than that, the estate which had grounds so familiar she felt she should be able to walk it with her eyes closed, looked a lot scarier at night. As if it were a haunted mockery of a home she knew.

But she could not stay out in the open. Nor could she go back to her bed and leave Prim hungry.

Alice forced herself to move, creeping along the servant's footpath, hoping against hope she would not be seen. Her excuse if she got caught was that she had a stomach ailment and needed to see the estate Healer.

There would be no excuse for getting caught in the kitchens, though.

So don't get caught, she thought to herself. *I can't afford to, for Prim's sake.*

That thought inspired enough bravery to get her to the back of the main house. The back kitchen door was supposed to be locked, but she knew the Cooks could be lazy. She was unsurprised to find that while the door was shut tight, the lock barring the way hung loose.

Carefully, she eased it open and peeked her head inside.

The massive estate kitchen was dark, with only a faint gleam of moonlight shining through one of the tall windows.

The open ovens looked like a monster's mouth and the counters set in the middle of the room gleamed like the bare, sharp edges of ice.

It was intimidating and Alice felt the last dregs of bravery drain away. Everything about this room told her she should not be here.

Prim had a completely different take. *"I smell food!"*

She launched herself from Alice's shoulder, flapping wild and inexperienced in the air. She looked like a struggling butterfly trying to find her wings for the first time.

Alice gave a cut off cry and reached for her. Prim was too fast, and she missed her grab.

Well, she could not stay in the doorway forever. Alice stepped fully into the room and closed the door behind her, locking it.

Meanwhile, Prim had fluttered to a door on the opposite side of the kitchen. She made little frustrated sounds as she tried to pry it open. The door was heavy, and she was very little. She had nowhere near enough strength to move it.

"Alice! Alice! I smell food here!"

"Be quiet. I'm coming." Alice crossed and jiggled the knob. It, too, was unlocked. Opening it revealed a deep walk-in pantry stuffed with more food than Alice had ever seen in her life. Shelves full of cheeses covered in wax and left to age. Baskets of freshly harvested fruit. Roots and potatoes all stacked on the shadowy lower shelves. There was an entire cart of dough left to rise for the morning breads. Another with today's baked breads, crusty and waiting to be sliced.

Prim and Alice's stomachs both let out audible growls.

With a squeal of delight, Prim launched herself to land on top of one of the loaves of bread, savaging it with her tiny pinprick claws.

"Prim, don't!" Alice yelped and stepped forward to pull the little dragon away. But not before Prim had gobbled down tiny chunks. It looked like a rat had been nibbling on the top.

Prim let out another indignant squeal which Alice quickly shushed. With her other hand, she grabbed a loaf and took it to the counter... Only pausing to grab an apple along the way, too.

Setting the food and dragon on the counter, she said, "Here," and pulled a hunk off the bread to feed it to her.

Inwardly, she despaired about how she was going to cover up their theft. Everything in the pantry had been placed in neat rows. Now there was a gap where the bread used to sit.

Prim ate. Seeing her enjoy the food, Alice couldn't help but tear off a chunk for herself. The bread was only a day old but made with finely sifted flour: Chewy and fluffy and probably some of the most delicious food she'd ever had.

With the edge taken off her hunger, Prim looked to the second door next to the pantry. "*What is in there?*"

Alice hesitated, but she could hardly be in more trouble if she were caught now.

When she opened the second door, chilly air wafted out. This was a cold room, and no doubt the result of someone's class skill.

Looking inside, she saw thick hunks of meat hanging from the ceiling, and even more in all varieties stacked on shelves.

With another high noise of delight, Prim flew in.

Alice thought about calling her back, but meat was probably better for the dragon than bread. Looking around, Alice spotted a knife and stepped inside to cut off a hunk of the hanging beef, which had been previously roasted. It was likely the remains of the main family's dinner from last night.

Then she disengaged the dragon from chewing on a turkey leg and brought her back to the counter.

Alice proceeded to make herself a sandwich while Prim feasted.

Soon, Alice was fuller than she could remember being in her life. And the little dragon was so stuffed that the sides of her stomach bulged out. She looked like a ball that the rich classer's children played with.

Prim burped, then labored into the air to settle on Alice's shoulder.

Alice looked at the counter, Which was no longer gleaming and now streaked with crumbs and the remains of their meal.

"How am I going to clean this up without a skill?"

The answer was: the hard way. After all, she had only gotten her class when she came of age at fourteen, like everybody else. Halfheartedly, Alice swept the crumbs into her hand. But then, she was stymied, having nowhere to dispose of them.

Normally all this just came to her, or her cleaning skill managed to evaporate the little bits of dust and debris. It was a passive, small magic. One that Alice had gotten used to working without much thought.

Still looking around with hands cupping the crumbs and last bits of meat, she spotted the bin where the Cooks put the edible food out for the pigs.

And next to it stood a larger bin, filled with old, stale loaves of bread, scraps of vegetables, and the gristle from last night's beef.

It was labeled General.

This was the food that would be thrown into a big pot, cooked altogether and served up for Alice's own twice-a-day meal.

"I'm a step above the pigs," she realized.

It shouldn't have been much of a shock. It was just a fact of life.

But for now, for the first time, she felt a flare of anger.

"*You are She of Many Dragons,*" Prim said, content and sleepy on her shoulder. Leaning over, she stroked the side of her head against Alice's cheek. "*You will never dine on pig food again.*"

Chapter 4

Alice and Prim had ventured out of the General Laborer barracks three nights in a row.

Astonishingly, they'd managed without encountering a single guard on duty. Alice could not fathom why.

At first, she wondered if her class had gifted her a run of extraordinary luck.

Gradually, the answer dawned on her, and it was stark and simple: there were no patrols on the estate's grounds.

Despite being told that the guards were there for her and everybody else's safety, and that their sole duty was to keep watch at night, the reality was *no one* kept them safe.

Also, she was not the only one out and about.

Alice kept to herself and ensured that Prim remained hidden. But she passed others on the narrow servant's paths—Maids and Laborers of all stripes, moving stealthily in the night. None stopped, spoke, or acknowledged one another. They seemed to pretend the other didn't exist.

It was an old trick among the lowest classes: That way, if questioned, no one could tell the truth of what they saw.

However, Alice was the only one to venture to the kitchens.

She treasured these hours. Though they left her exhausted from lack of sleep during the day, it was the only time that Prim could soar freely through the night air.

For the first time in her memory, Alice had a full stomach every night. It made an amazing difference to her strength during the day. Even though she was tired, and she no longer had the skill of strength and endurance that the General Laborer class gave to her, simply eating well made up for much of that lack. Though she certainly didn't clean as well as she used to, she was generally more alert, quick on her feet, and able to cover for her mistakes.

People hadn't noticed. So far. It helped that Alice had never been much of a trouble-maker, and so no one expected her to slack off or steal.

Prim slept amid Alice's belongings by day. She kept out of sight even from Dolly—not that Dolly was around much. The girl only stopped by their shared cubicle to quickly change for the day ahead.

She didn't sleep in her own bed, and Alice had a bad feeling she knew where Dolly was sleeping. There wasn't much she could do there. She had warned her.

Alice's lucky streak ended on the fourth night.

Once she crept out of the General Laborer barracks, as usual, she let Prim fly into the air. There was no moon that night, and the dragon was practically invisible.

Though she couldn't see her, Alice sensed Prim's presence nearby as she flitted among the trees and followed Alice through the servant's path that led to the kitchen.

Alice smiled to herself as she gazed upward, making a small game of trying to spot Prim in the dark branches above.

She suddenly stopped short. A man had materialized out of nowhere, standing in front of her.

He had blonde hair and blue eyes, his skin clean without a hint of either pockmarks or simple dust, and muscles more defined than those of a General Laborer. The fine cut of his clothes accented his broad shoulders and trim waist. But it was the Gentleman tag above him that sent a chill of fear through Alice's heart.

Catching her breath, she quickly stepped to the side of the path, lowering her gaze and fully expecting the man to brush past her.

To her surprise, he made no move.

"What are you doing out of the barracks, girl?" he demanded.

Alice's heart hammered, but for an insane moment, she wanted to bark back, "*What are you doing walking the servant's paths, sir?*" For they were both where they should not be. There were specific, well-guarded, beautifully decorated, and supposedly secure pathways that nobles and people of importance were supposed to take.

But of course, since Alice wasn't stupid, she didn't say that. Instead, she shook her head.

"Sorry, sir," she stammered, as if walking the servant's paths were her fault.

"I asked you a question," he said.

Alice shook her head again, then quickly made up a story. "I... I couldn't sleep, sir. So, I thought a walk might clear my head."

"What does a General Laborer need to clear their head for?" he muttered.

Alice risked a glance up, and her fear only intensified as she recognized him—not just any young noble, but one of the Earl's own sons. Though she wasn't sure of his name, she had seen enough glimpses of Breydon, Dolly's lover, before to spot the resemblance.

This was bad.

"I'm sorry, sir," she hastily offered, resisting the urge to look up to the trees and check on Prim. Thankfully, she didn't hear the flutter of wings overhead. Prim must have perched on a branch. "I'll return to the barracks right away."

Poor Prim. She would want to eat, but Alice could save her breakfast in the morning for her dragon. She had endured longer without food before.

His blue eyes narrowed. "You live in the General Laborer barracks, don't you?"

Instead of pointing out the obvious—that all General Laborers resided in the barracks, and if he knew anything about his father's estate, he would be aware of this—Alice simply nodded.

"Yes, sir," she answered meekly.

"I'm looking for a girl about your age, calls herself Dolly. Do you know her?"

Alice hesitated before answering. "Yes, sir. I know her."

"Then go get her," he instructed. "Bring her here."

Alice winced at the request. "I'm afraid, sir, that Dolly's not in the barracks."

"Not in?" he demanded, his tone turning chill. "Where is she then?"

"I don't know, sir," Alice replied, her voice barely above a whisper.

"But you suspect, right?" His voice turned exasperated. "All of you servants gossip with one another."

There was rustling from overhead. The man was growing angry, and Alice got the impression that Prim was readying herself to leap down with claws bared. No... No, that would be a disaster.

The nobleman misread her silence. "Where is she?" he demanded.

She needed to make up some sort of a lie, but fear clouded her thoughts.

"Look at me," he commanded. "Answer me."

She glanced up, and despite her fear, she couldn't help but notice his handsome features, even if he was an overbearing jerk.

"I think... I think she went out to town," Alice ventured cautiously.

"By herself? The town is no place for her. There are dark classers around!" He cursed under his breath. "We provide you with food, housing, and shelter, but you people always make it so hard for us to protect you. Why don't you just behave?"

His voice rose sharply, and Alice trembled, acutely aware that this man could decide to punish her to send a message to the other General Laborers.

And she knew with certainty that Prim would not allow him to touch her.

In a desperate attempt to save herself, she blurted out the truth. "Dolly's with sir Breydon," she said abruptly. "She goes out with him every night."

There was a moment of stark silence.

"Breydon. I see," his voice was cold.

Alice winced and braced herself for what may come next. That had been a dumb move. He could easily think she was lying or dirtying Breydon's good name.

His next words surprised her. "Very well, then. Continue your... *walk*. But I expect you to stay within the estate grounds. It's not safe for your kind tonight, or any night. You have no skills to defend yourself. Do you understand me?" he said sternly, as if she were an ill-behaving horse and not a person.

"Yes, sir," Alice replied.

Turning on his heel, he strode off.

Alice's legs felt like jelly, and she turned to lean against the nearest tree for support.

Prim fluttered down to her shoulder and gently stroked her cheek against Alice's. "*You feared that man would hurt you.*"

"He could have, but he didn't," Alice's thoughts were a whirlwind of emotions. "Oh, Prim, I'm afraid I've just done a terrible thing."

Prim cocked her head. "*What was that?*"

"I should've made something up. Now he knows Dolly is with Breydon and he'll be looking for her.."

"*But you told the truth,*" Prim pointed out, puzzled.

A terrible sense of betrayal weighed on her shoulders. "She's my friend. I should have protected her, but..." But the truth had sent the man away from Prim. She couldn't quite bring herself to regret that.

Prim huffed in confusion. She clearly didn't understand. And why would she? Dolly had been absent from her room except for brief visits over the last few days. And during all of those, Prim was asleep.

"*Alice, I'm hungry,*" Prim said.

Alice closed her eyes, then collected herself. The smart thing to do—the safe and cautious thing—would be to return to the barracks. She should wait for Dolly, perhaps find a way to send a message to warn her, though Alice had no idea how she could.

But her dragon was hungry, and despite her worry for Dolly, she *had* made her own bed.

"Okay, the kitchens, then," she said, "but we must be careful now a Nobleman's out and about."

"*I'll keep watch,*" Prim said, fluttering back up to the branches. "*You are safe with me.*"

Alice let out a light laugh, despite herself. "Who's supposed to protect who?"

"*You are She of Many Dragons,*" the dragon said. "*And I am your aspect. I protect you, of course.*"

Chapter 5

Late that night, Alice managed to sneak herself and Prim back to her cubicle without being seen by any Guards. But not before she stole a final half loaf of bread and a fist-sized piece of beef for breakfast in the morning. It had become a habit, and she rearranged the shelves so hopefully the gap wouldn't be noticed.

Dolly still wasn't in her bed when she returned.

With a sigh, Alice only hoped her friend had sense enough to be careful. Alice had warned her time and time again, but Dolly insisted on playing a dangerous game with the Earl's son.

More dangerous than sneaking around at night to steal from your employer? she thought.

Guilt might have swamped her... except that the thefts had been for Prim's sake. Not her own.

And the image of the food bin for the General Laborers being nearly indistinguishable from the pig slop bin erased the last bit of her guilt. She felt stabs of rage every time she cast an eye on it in the kitchens.

As usual after the meal, Prim was all but passed out from over-eating. Alice carried her in the crook of her arm. Prim's rose-gold tail hanging loosely down like a lady's ribbon. She had grown over the last few days. Now she was nearly the size of a cat.

Pulling the curtain shut tight, Alice tucked herself and her dragon into bed.

Though she kept an ear out for Dolly, her roommate failed to return again during the night.

The next week passed in the same way.

In the morning, Alice would wake to the sound of the morning gong which was struck at the first light of dawn to rouse the low-class servants. She would quickly dress and lay out Prim's breakfast, which consisted of the food she'd taken from the kitchens the night before.

Making the dragon promise once more to stay in the cubicle and keep out of sight, she'd nervously head to the outdoor tables that was the General Laborers eating area. Being the lowest of the low classes, they weren't allowed in the main estate. Rain, shine, or snow, food would be served at the outdoor tables.

Occasionally one of the wives of the estate's Nobles would take pity and perhaps send one of their staff to put up a tarp to give cover to the outdoor diners. Any covering lasted a few months at maximum before it was torn to shreds by wind and rain.

Alice was used to eating in the cold and the wet, but now that he had tasted finer food, she was quickly tiring of the bowls of slop.

Everything in the kitchen bin not given to the pigs was dumped into a large pot with water and boiled for an entire day. The result was a gray mass with an occasional meat or vegetable chunk. It never much mattered to Alice before. Food was food and there had never been enough of it.

Now that she spent the late evenings gorging herself with Prim, Alice found it harder to finish the disgusting meal in front of her. Being out in the open air made it cold on top of everything else. Whereas she used to bolt it down, now she struggled to finish her breakfast.

So she took scraps to the kennel to feed Junebug and her growing puppies.

But she knew she couldn't possibly get away with the kitchen theft much longer. She was amazed – and a little consternated – that she hadn't been caught by a Guard yet.

She tried to pick up after herself and Prim in the kitchens, but with her Cleaning skill gone she knew she must have left some evidence behind. Yet there had been no outcry from the Cooks or Bakers.

Part of her which still believed in the order of society insisted that this was all due to luck. Luck, which would surely run out soon.

Another part of her... One she felt was slowly waking inside of her ever since Prim had arrived in her life, told her to look around and really see. The Kennel Manager was a drunk who rarely came out of his office and let the General Laborers do the work that his specific class should take care of.

The Guards hadn't caught her because they weren't on patrol. Likely, the night shift were tucked in their warm beds, or out on the town and were dependent on rumors to keep would-be thieves or Dark Classers away.

As for the Cooks and Bakers... It was entirely possible that they stole food, too. Perhaps they figured it was one of their own who left crumbs behind.

These thoughts were distinctly uncomfortable because it meant... Well, it meant her life and all the stringent rules that she had lived by, was a lie.

And more and more often, Alice found herself resentful of work she had once taken pride in. She had always looked forward to working in the kennels, even if it meant cleaning out the soiled bedding, feeding some of the pit dogs which weren't as nice as Junebug and the other hounds, and all the other things that the Kennel Manager should be doing. Just for the hope of being rewarded with a higher class.

Now she wondered why Roy the Kennel Manager didn't get off his fat ass and do it himself.

"Because he has people like me to do it for him," she muttered to herself, sinking down on a turned over bucket to sit next to Junebug. The puppies were doing well. It would still be a couple of weeks until their eyes opened, but each one showed vigor for nursing, and was visibly gaining weight.

"You're a good mother, Junebug," Alice said, scratching one of the hound's ears.

"Will I be a good mother someday?"

Alice shot up from the bucket so fast that it tipped behind her. She looked around, but couldn't see her dragon. "Prim?"

She caught movement from one of the shadows. Alice squinted — she only could pick out that Prim was there because she knew her shape.

The little dragon had grown much faster than Junebug's puppies. She was now as long as Alice's arm, excluding the tail. It made sense for the sheer amount she ate.

Alice swung around to make sure no one was working close enough to hear. The rest of the General Laborers got done with their kennel chores as fast as they could and went off to go do something else. Alice was usually the only one who lingered.

And Roy, the drunk of a Kennel Manager was, of course, nowhere to be found.

"What are you doing here?" Alice asked, fear tightening her throat. "Has something happened?"

She hated leaving Prim alone all day, but the dragon usually slept in the box of uniforms Alice used as a storage chest.

"Some girl came into your room. She went through your things. She is a thief."

Alice was taken aback by the vicious anger she heard in Prim's voice. "What girl? Wait, did she have dark hair?"

"Yes. And sneaky eyes."

"It must be Dolly, then." Her roommate had been in and out of the cubicle only infrequently — just long enough to dress. "And she's always been nosy. Did she see you?"

"No, she is a sneaky, magicless worm. She had no chance of seeing me."

"Prim, that's not very nice."

*"She was looking through your things. **Your** things,"* she repeated as if unsure Alice understood.

"Yes, she is very disorganized and loses bits and bobs all over the place. I'm not surprised. She didn't take anything, did she? My clothes?"

"No," Prim grumbled. Her barely visible form shifted in place from where she clung from the kennel's rafters. She wasn't happy.

Alice sighed. "It's not safe for you here. Can you go back to the barn? Dolly should be gone."

The truth was, Dolly should have been on shift like the rest of the General Laborers but Breydon the Earl's son had likely given her special leave to... *attend* to him.

If there had been any action from Alice telling the other noble about her, she hadn't seen it.

"I'm awake now, I want to be here with you," Prim said.

Alice hesitated, but Prim was very hard to see. Junebug, with a dog's acute senses, didn't seem to notice the dragon yet. And she would be expected to be on high alert, considering the puppies.

Alice had given up her class skills to Prim which made her days cleaning and general maintenance around the estate harder, and every task took longer... But she couldn't be sorry for it.

Nor could she be sorry for the dragon's company.

"Can you keep your Concealment skill up?"

"Yes."

"Then you can stay."

Alice smiled to herself and quietly stepped out of Junebug's whelping box. She was looking forward to working with a little company, for once.

Prim was as good as her word and kept out of sight using her Concealment skill. By the end of the day, they received a message.

Primordialis's Concealment Skill has reached level 5!

Your class, She of Many Dragons, has reached level 2!

For reaching an even level in your class, you are awarded 1 Aspect Token.

"Aspect token?" Alice wondered. She looked toward Prim who was resting on the low branch of a nearby tree while Alice weeded the garden. Though she couldn't see the dragon, she heard Prim rustle her wings in a shrug.

"I think we leveled up because I've been using my skill all day," Prim said, which... didn't answer Alice's question at all. Odd. Prim was usually perceptive.

Alice decided to look carefully at her class's stats tonight to see if there was a hint as to what an 'aspect token' could be used for. Meanwhile, it was nearly dusk which meant it was nearly the end of her shift.

She could go to the barn early. Just this once.

She had nearly forgotten Prim's warning about Dolly. Walking into the cubicle, she pulled the curtain and used a small bowl and stale water to clean up from her day of hard work.

Prim landed on her bed and finally let go of the Concealment skill with a happy sigh, spreading out her wings in a stretch of relief.

Of course that was the exact moment Dolly shoved the curtain back and strode in. "Alice! You would never believe the day I had—"

Her eyes landed on Prim.

Dolly screamed.