CHAPTER 13

'*What?*' Silke let out a squeak of excitement so unguarded I could hardly believe it came from her. 'The royal family read *my handbill*? Oh, I knew it was good, but I never really –'

'Are they wearing their crowns?' I asked, perking up. Now *that* would be something worth seeing ... and maybe more. My fingers tingled with the memory of all the lovely gold crowns in my family's hoard. They'd looped so neatly around my claws, clicking together with my every movement. Even the plain ones were delightful, but the ones encrusted with precious gems were my favourites.

It would be so much easier to go to sleep at night with a crown or two tucked against my side, just like in the old days!

But no. I gritted my teeth together and forced myself to think like a human, not a dragon. Trapped inside this

puny body, without sharp teeth, claws or flame on my side, there was no possible way for me to seize the crowns from the royal family's heads and keep them. Still, it was so hard to push down the roar of greed that wanted to billow up through my throat as I thought of all that lovely gold just waiting to be made my own and ...

'Don't you dare stop stirring, girl!' snapped Marina.

I jolted back into action just in time to stop the pot of chocolate cream from boiling ... and to hear Horst say, 'They're incognito.'

'They're *what*?' Was he saying that my wonderful crowns were ruined?

He waved one dark hand impatiently. '*Incognito* means *in disguise*.' He turned to Marina. 'A messenger boy came by this morning to make a reservation for "Count von Reimann" and his daughters. They're dressed like any other nobles, but the moment I saw them step inside, I knew exactly who they were, and so did everyone else. I wouldn't be surprised if there are scribblers from the newspapers hurrying over here right now. We already have a crowd piling up outside just to peer through our front windows!'

'Sounds like a pretty manky disguise then.' Snorting, Marina elbowed me aside to take over the last stages of the chocolate creams. 'Maybe next time they should think about wearing masks.'

'Oh, being incognito is only for show.' Silke spoke with a knowledgeable air, rocking back and forth on her heels with her hands tucked in her pockets. 'If they came as themselves, they'd have to bring along a whole honour

guard. This way, they can travel without so many soldiers and servants cluttering things up. But ...'

Her eyes widened, and she lost her poise. 'Ahh!' She clapped her hands to her cheeks. 'I can't believe the king himself read my handbill! The *king himself*! Is there any way to see into the front room from here? I want to see the crown princess! I've never been this close to her before!'

For the first time since I'd met him, Horst looked mischievous. 'If you want a *really* good view ...' Reaching over to the wall, he lifted a decorative plate from a hook just higher than my head. Behind it was an inch-wide square of clear glass. 'Just this once,' he told us both, winking, 'but be quick. No one wants to see eyeballs peering in at them as they eat!'

'Come on!' Silke grabbed my arm and pulled me with her. 'Ohhhhh.' She pressed her eye against the glass and hummed with satisfaction. 'She's even taller than I thought.'

'Who?' I asked.

'The crown princess, of course!' Silke turned back to me just long enough to roll her eyes. 'Really, Aventurine, even you must have heard of her, no matter where you came from. Not only is she beautiful, she also speaks at least seven languages fluently *and* she's the finest diplomat the royal family's produced in the last two hundred years. *Everyone* loves her. She's going to be the best queen that we've ever had!'

'She sounds absolutely perfect,' I said sourly.

I knew all about older sisters like that.

I had far more sympathy, when I peered through the

glass, for the younger girl who was sitting at their table. Her skin was the same light brown as her older sister's, and her thick dark hair was arranged just as carefully, but her expression couldn't have been more different. Her older sister smiled serenely and carried on a flow of conversation with their pink-skinned, thickly set blond father as more and more faces pressed up against the front window of the shop. Neither of them seemed aware of the crowd gathering outside, or of the other customers whispering and staring in at them. The younger sister, though, had her shoulders hunched and her face squeezed into an expression of miserable discomfort. As I watched, her fingers rattled out a nervous rhythm against the table ... until her older sister reached out, still smiling as graciously as ever, and firmly pressed them into stillness.

Oh yes. I knew older sisters like that *much* too well.

And none of them was wearing a single crown. Not even the 'crown' princess.

So much for human royalty.

Sighing, I stepped away and let Horst hang the plate back in place, covering up the peephole. He was beaming as he stepped away ... until he caught sight of Marina.

'What are you doing?'

Marina's eyes narrowed as she poured the last of the chocolate creams into a glass. 'What does it look like I'm doing, Horst? Even you should recognise a few kitchen tricks by now.'

'But ...' He shook his head, wide-eyed. 'Did you not hear a word I said? The royal family –'

'Wants hot chocolates,' Marina finished for him. She arranged the eight chocolate creams neatly on to a tray, then tilted her head, considered them and began to shift the glasses around into different positions, like birds changing formation in a flock. 'I'm aware of that. And I'll get to them ... when I'm ready.'

Horst grabbed his hair with both hands. 'Are you *insane?*'

Silke's eyes widened. 'Er ... you might want to keep your voices down. I'm pretty sure the wall isn't *that* thick.'

'That's right.' Marina gave the glasses of chocolate cream a tight smile. 'We wouldn't want to scare the customers, would we?' She circled one glass of chocolate cream slowly around its tray, narrowed her eyes and reached for another.

'You – !' Horst reached out and grabbed the tray.

Marina grabbed the other end. Glasses clattered against each other in their struggle.

'Watch out,' she said, her grin turning feral. 'If any of these spill, I'll have to make them all over again. Then the royals would *really* have a long wait, wouldn't they?'

'What is wrong with you?' Horst demanded. He stepped back, panting hard. 'Don't you realise that we finally have the opportunity we've been dreaming of? We could turn everything around after all! If the royals like your chocolate – if every paper in town reports that they came here and drank your hot chocolate and approved – !'

Taut lines formed around Marina's mouth. 'I don't care if the royals like my chocolate,' she said. 'That's not what I make it for.'

'That's not ... that's not – argh!' Horst slammed his fist against the wall, making the decorative plate rattle.

I ignored him. I'd been getting better at reading human expressions, especially Marina's, but there was something in her face now that I'd never seen before. I looked harder, trying to figure it out.

'Do you have *any idea* how close we're running to bankruptcy?' Horst glared at the wall that he'd just hit. 'If we don't find enough new customers soon – if our prima donna chocolatier doesn't throw a fit and scare away our final chance at survival –'

'Oh, *enough*!' Marina snarled. 'It's always about me ruining things, isn't it? It's all *my* fault the business is failing, according to you. It's all my fault that no one ever comes here. Never mind the fact that I'm only supposed to have to deal with the chocolate, I'm not *supposed* to be the one who deals with the public, or –' Her voice shook on the final syllable, and she slammed her mouth shut.

I'd never seen my mentor show such weakness before. I took a quick step closer, ready to protect her while she healed that telltale break in her scales.

'It's going to be all right,' I told her. 'You –'

'Don't worry about *her*, Aventurine,' Horst snapped. 'She's just throwing tantrums and trying to prove she's more important than royalty. Well, let me tell you something, Marina!' He bared his teeth at her. 'You're *not*.'

'Then that makes everything easier, doesn't it?' Marina snarled back. 'Because in that case, you won't mind when I walk out!' Reaching behind her neck, she unfastened her

apron in one quick move and pulled it over her head. 'See? I'm finished. So you can find someone else to blame when this all goes wrong. Because I'm *not* going to be the one who ruins our final chance. Not this time!' And with that she threw the apron directly into Horst's face.

'Marina!' he growled, his voice muffled under the apron.

But she was already marching out through the door that led to the stairs and her own private quarters above the shop.

Horst yanked the apron off his face. 'Arrgh!' Looking murderous, he turned and lunged after Marina through the private door.

'But – !' Silke began, starting forward.

The door slammed closed. I could hear the thunder of feet running up the stairs.

Silke stared at the door, and then at me. She looked as stunned as if a hurricane had just blown past.

I sighed and added long silver spoons to the tray with the chocolate creams. 'Well, they won't be back for a while.'

Marina and Horst's everyday battles were bad enough, but this one ... They could take hours of shouting to resolve it.

Silke's eyes looked wild. 'But what about the *royal family*? They're still waiting for their hot chocolates. With *my handbill!*'

I looked at Silke, standing with me in the bright white kitchen in her bright red jacket and black trousers, with no chocolatier, no waiter and no authority in sight.

'So, these royals are really important,' I said, to make certain, 'even though they're not wearing crowns?'

'*Yes!*' Silke threw her hands in the air. 'So if you still want to save this chocolate house, despite the fact that it's run by people without a single shred of business sense between them ... !'

I would have glared at her for that, under normal circumstances. Right now, though, I had more important things to worry about.

I had a hoard to protect, and no one else to help me.

'All right,' I said. I took a deep breath. 'Then we'd better get started.'