



CHAPTER 14

I had watched Marina make hot chocolates time and time again. But it felt more than intimidating to pick out one of her clean copper kettles for myself. It felt *wrong*. I had to stop myself from taking a guilty look backwards as I crossed the kitchen to the wall where they hung, to make sure she wasn't watching me do it.

I had never been allowed to make hot chocolate by myself, not even under Marina's supervision. I'd only watched, carefully taking note of every movement I could glimpse from my side of the kitchen, as she'd performed the all-important ritual.

'I hope you know how to do this,' Silke said, 'because if the royals don't like your hot chocolate, then everyone in this city will know it in less than an hour, and my

brilliant handbill campaign will have been wasted. You'll never get a customer again ... and I'll never get my payment! Do you have any idea how many favours I had to call in, just to get that handbill printed in the first place?

I gritted my teeth and grabbed the largest copper kettle. 'I'll be fine,' I told her. 'But you'd better get started.'

'What?' Her eyebrows shot upward. 'I don't know how to make chocolate! I can't -'

'Not that.' I pointed to the tray of chocolate creams. 'Those need to go out before they cool.'

'And you want me to deal with them?' Silke looked from the tray to me. Then she let out a crack of laughter. 'Oh, well,' she said. 'Why not? At least it'll be a new experience for all of us.' She gave a twirl, the tails of her red jacket flaring around her. 'I'll bet none of your fancy customers has ever been served by a girl like me before!'

Whistling through her teeth, she scooped up the tray and strode out through the swinging doors, her head held high. A moment later I heard her voice ringing out through the front room, strong and confident:

'Ladies and gentlemen! I believe some of you are waiting for these?'

Phew. She was gone. My shoulders relaxed. The last thing I needed was an audience as I tried to do this myself for the first time.

But when I tried to move forward, I couldn't do it. The kitchen suddenly seemed huge and echoingly empty. I could almost feel the walls expanding around me as I grew

smaller and smaller, my chest tightening more with every moment. Too-familiar words suddenly rolled through my memory.

'Your scales haven't hardened enough to withstand even a wolf's bite ...'

'You may think yourself a ferocious beast, but outside this mountain you wouldn't survive a day ...'

I'd set out from my family's mountain twelve days ago to prove I really was capable of defending myself and our hoard, no matter what my mother claimed. But the Chocolate Heart wasn't just my personal hoard to defend. It was my final chance at happiness, too. If I made a single mistake now ...

'What are you waiting for, girl?' That was Marina's voice, sharp and strong in my memory. I squared my shoulders and stepped up to the cupboard where the round cakes of cooking chocolate were kept.

One dense, crumbly cake of chocolate, two round spoonfuls of ground sugar, water, milk ... a touch of cinnamon, a taste of vanilla, a breath of cloves, and for the final touch ... I paused, my hand hovering above the plate of fiery red chilli powder.

Marina had never told me exactly how much chilli she used in her chocolate.

Too much, and the royals would gasp and choke for breath. Too little, and the hot chocolate would be as bland as grass.

If I let myself wait and wonder any longer, I would never make a choice at all.

So I tossed a solid pinch of dried chilli pepper into the kettle before I could think any more about it. Either it would be perfect, or it would burn their mouths to cinders. I wouldn't know until they drank it.

Please, please, let this taste right! Let me save my hoard today. Let them love this place as much as I do!

The lid of the kettle rattled in my shaking fingers as I closed it and set the hot chocolate mix on to the charcoal brazier to cook.

Silke sailed back into the kitchen, her tray full of empty cups and glasses. 'Lots more orders,' she said cheerfully. 'No one wants to leave while the royals are still here to gawp at. So at least you'll make plenty of silver for the chocolate house today ... even if your hot chocolate does turn out to be disgusting, eh?' She slid me a mischievous look.

But I couldn't even bring myself to rise to her bait. I had too much experimenting to do ... and *quickly*.

Chocolate creams, at least, I knew how to make. I had no idea how to make the pastry for chocolate tarts, but luckily, a dozen pastry shells sat waiting in their baking dishes on the counter, prepared by Marina earlier that morning. I mixed together a big bowl of fresh, eggy chocolate filling for the tarts, and as I poured out the rich, sweet-smelling mixture into all of the little pastry-lined baking dishes, I hoped with all my heart that they would taste as good once they were baked as they smelt at that moment.

But nothing else mattered as much as the royals' hot chocolates. As soon as the kettle was ready, I shoved the tarts into the oven and abandoned everything else to pour

the steaming liquid into the three most elegant silver chocolate pots we owned, while Silke hovered over my shoulder. Then I growled until she moved away so that I could use the long wooden molinet to froth the hot chocolates, one by one. I could feel the clock ticking steadily away in the front room, while the royal family – and their watchers – waited for their service ... but just as Marina had instructed me the very first time we'd met, I took my time with every one of them, not stinting so much as an instant of care.

My hot chocolates had to be absolutely perfect. They had to be so good, the royals would *want* to save the Chocolate Heart, for all of our sakes.

Finally, I set all three hot-chocolate pots in a row on a tray, along with three beautifully ornamented porcelain cups in silver cases.

'At least they look pretty,' Silke said. 'So, now we'll see, eh?' Dropping me a wink, she picked up the tray. 'Feel free to watch through that little peephole as I have my one and only interaction with royalty! I'll need a witness if I want my brother to believe me when I tell him what I did today.'

I yanked the decorative plate off the wall as the kitchen doors swung shut behind her.

There were more and more people crowding outside the Chocolate Heart now, pushing and shoving for position in front of the broad glass windows. For the first time since I'd moved into the chocolate house, every single table was occupied, and a long line had formed at the front door.

Silke was right. If the king took one sip and gagged – or coughed, or winced and set the cup aside – everyone would know about it. And I was beginning to understand humans by now. It didn't matter how many people had tasted Marina's hot chocolate before and loved it. If any of them heard that the royal family hadn't liked it, they would immediately decide that they didn't either.

Humans really were herd animals. And now I was at their mercy.

Silke swept up to the royal table as if she'd been mixing with the upper crust her whole life, smiling and chatting as she laid down the tray. The king was so lost in thought he didn't even seem to notice, his eyes narrowed and his gaze fixed on his hands, which were clasped together on the table in front of him. The crown princess gave Silke a smile, though, and said something that made Silke's own smile deepen. At the sight of the three chocolate pots, even the youngest princess straightened, looking suddenly hopeful. She started to reach for hers, and I tensed, waiting ... but then her older sister gave a tiny head-shake and she subsided, looking embarrassed.

Silke poured for each of them with a flourish. Then she scooped up the empty tray and moved back a step, looking expectant.

I waited with her, holding my breath.

The crown princess looked at her father. Nothing happened. His gaze was still fixed on his hands. The younger princess reached out again for her own cup, but she snatched back her hand at a stern look from her older sister.

Not a single customer in the whole shop was moving. Every gaze was fixed on their table. Then the king gave a sudden start, his eyes flying wide open. The crown princess smiled and nodded towards his cup.

Grimacing, he nodded. He reached out, lifted the cup to his lips ...

And the front door of the chocolate house flew open. The small, perpetually annoyed-looking man who'd run his fingers over the paintwork in our front room four days earlier marched inside, along with the tall, brown-haired woman who had tried to bribe me. At the sight of her wide, satisfied smile, everything inside me braced for danger.

'Attention!' the man bellowed. 'By order of the lord mayor himself, all customers are hereby required to vacate this chocolate house immediately. We are here to inspect this establishment!'

I slammed my way through the swinging doors into the front room just as half the customers in the chocolate house jumped to their feet, blocking my way. Voices rose around the room, calling out in confusion and outrage, but they all fell silent as one man spoke:

'My good man.' It was the king; when I stood on tiptoes and peered between the two men in front of me, I could see him still sitting at his table, looking astonishingly calm. 'May I ask why, exactly, these premises need so urgently to be inspected?'

'They – ungh!' The lord mayor's man turned pale as his gaze fell on the king and the two princesses. He stumbled into a bow. 'Your Maj–'

The crown princess cleared her throat meaningfully. The king shook his head.

Silke said, 'May I present Count von Reimann, a *valued customer* of this establishment?'

'Sir!' The lord mayor's man straightened, looking panicked. 'We didn't expect to see – that is – the lord mayor wants – but –'

'Perhaps,' said Silke, 'you could wait just a few more minutes to carry out your important inspection? After all, don't you think the lord mayor would prefer *Count von Reimann* to be allowed to enjoy his drink first?'

'Well ...' His eyes darted from side to side as the king watched him smilingly, one regal hand already resting on the royal chocolate cup. Next to the king, the younger princess reached for her own cup with a hopeful look, and the lord mayor's man sighed. 'Perhaps ... oh ... I'm sure he wouldn't really mind ...'

'Ahem.' His colleague elbowed him aside. Her gaze swept the room, her lips twitching as she met my eyes through the press of bodies. 'The lord mayor,' she announced, in a voice more than loud enough to reach every onlooker peering through the glass outside, 'has received deeply, *deeply* disturbing reports of the serious lack of hygiene in this establishment, accounts so troubling they must be resolved without delay for the sake of every person in this building. After all, if there truly are rats

running around the kitchen floors ... cockroaches in the cupboard where the chocolate is kept ... massive patches of creeping mould beside the ovens ... and old hot chocolates left out for days, only to be reheated again and again for each new customer who comes - !

Cries of horror erupted throughout the room, drowning out her voice as she continued her recitation.

But I didn't need to hear the rest of her words. I was already shoving my way through the crowd, pushing grown customers aside and growling fiercely as all the fear I'd felt earlier drained out of me. If I'd had my claws, I would have ripped her into shreds before she could speak another poisonous word! I was more than ready to take on this territorial challenge.

'Those are lies!' I was panting with effort by the time I reached the royal table, where the king and both princesses were rising to their feet, leaving their hot chocolates completely untouched. The older royals were back to looking cool and expressionless, but the younger princess's face was twisted up in disgust, and she'd shoved her hot-chocolate cup as far from her seat as possible. 'She's making all of this up!' I told them. 'The lord mayor hates us. He's been trying to shut us down for ages. He -'

'Well, I suppose we know now why no one's ever allowed into the kitchens.' The king sighed. 'Pity. I should have liked to meet a real food mage, just once. They're supposed to be rather quirky and entertaining chaps, not like all those grim battle mages who can't stop groaning on and on about dragons. Never mind. Shall we ... ?'

He tilted his head at the front door, where eight different people were all trying to squeeze their way out at once. One man was gibbering loudly about rats, while his female companion held her parasol like a weapon, just waiting to stab some imaginary vermin in self-defence.

'No!' I said. 'Just listen to me. This is ridiculous. It's a trick! It's -'

'Leaving now, before things get even messier, would certainly be sensible.' The lord mayor's woman gave the king a smile as sweet as sugar.

I burned for the ability to shoot flame. 'You can look at the kitchens right now,' I said desperately. 'All of you! Come with me, and you'll see for yourself. There's no mould! There aren't any rats or cockroaches! There's -'

'Would you like a tour?' Silke asked, gesturing towards the kitchen doors. 'We'd be more than happy and honoured to show you -'

'A tour?' The lord mayor's woman laughed. 'How exactly are we meant to have any tour without the presence or authority of the infamous head chocolatier? She's not coming out even for this, is she?' She turned to the king. 'Are you really going to ignore the decision of the lord mayor on the say-so of two children you don't even know? A waitress wearing scandalous boys' clothing, and a disreputable apprentice already known to be violent?'

Her voice half dropped, as if she was sharing secrets, as she looked straight at me. 'I know all about this girl, you see. She was thrown bodily from the doors of every respectable chocolate house in town, because she came

from the streets. So trust me, sir: you can't take her word on anything.'

That was it. I'd had enough of human diplomacy. This was war!

I flew at her, snarling, with my hands outstretched.

Silke's arms clamped around my waist just before my fingernails could rake the woman's face like claws. 'No!' she hissed. 'Aventurine, think!'

'You see?' The lord mayor's woman was breathing quickly as she pointed at me. 'This girl is positively feral! Do you want an animal like that making your chocolate?'

I writhed in Silke's grip, glaring at the lord mayor's woman. If she wanted to see what an animal would do, I was more than ready to oblige her. 'You - !'

'Young lady ...' The crown princess startled me into silence by stepping forward and putting her cool hands lightly around mine. 'I do admire your loyalty,' she told me, 'and I appreciate your offer to see this mysterious kitchen for ourselves. However -' she gave me a steady look - 'the cafes and restaurants of Drachenburg follow the laws of the lord mayor and his town council, and neither of them has requested our assistance here. After all -' she gave me a rueful half-smile - 'we are only a count and his daughters, at least for today. You see?'

'No!' I said. 'I don't!'

She squeezed my hands gently and then let go, shaking her head, as her father and sister started for the front door. 'I do wish you all the best of luck in the future.'

'I don't need help *later*.' I was almost choking with frustration. 'I need it *now*. You have to listen to me! Wait!'

But the crown princess was already turning her warm, sympathetic smile to the lord mayor's two assistants. 'And I wish *you* both good fortune in the performance of your civic duties.'

'We thank you, my lady.' The lord mayor's woman ducked her head as she lowered herself into an elaborate curtsy. Still, I could see her grin, not even half hidden, and it made my stomach roil.

As the crown princess followed her father out of the chocolate shop, ignoring all of my last, desperately shouted protests, the bell over the door sounded a maliciously bright jingle ... and bile ran down my throat, as bitter and scorching as my lost flame.

This can't be happening!

But it was.

I had set out to prove myself when I left my family's mountain.

But – just as my own mother had predicted – I had failed.

My roar of despair echoed through the abandoned room.