CHAPTER 4

Without my flame, I couldn't even start a fire. All I had to keep me warm through that long night was the shelter of a rock and my own horrible thoughts ... oh, and my growling stomach, too.

Inside the mountain, Jasper and Mother, Grandfather and my aunts were all sleeping on cosy mounds of gold and jewels with trails of warm smoke ruffling out of their noses. Every time I pictured their comfortable sleep, I snarled ... but only because snarling was better than moaning.

I had never felt so small or so pathetic in my life.

But then, I'd never lost my family before.

By the time the sun finally began to rise, though, I was sick and tired of my misery. I'd thrown dozens of rocks the

evening before, smashing them into the mountainside until my stringy human muscles had burned with effort. Then I'd felt strange wet drops stream out of my tiny human eyes for hours as I lay huddled on the cold ground, giving in to my weakness in the dark, where no one could witness the humiliation.

Now I was finished. *No more!* I blinked out the last of the irritating wetness from my aching eyes and pushed myself up from the ground with a growl of fury. What kind of dragon would curl up and surrender just because she'd had a bit of bad luck? My family might not think I could survive on my own, but I would show them. I would show everyone, including that lying, cheating food mage, exactly how strong I really was. I would walk my way down this mountain, I would find myself a *livelihood*, whatever that might mean ... and I would eat as much chocolate as I wanted, *forever*!

I'd made it all the way off the mountain and on to the wide dirt track that cut through the green, wooded lower foothills before I heard hoof-beats coming up behind me. My soft, unprotected feet hurt so badly by then that pain thudded through me with each new step and I had to clench every muscle to force myself through it. I hardly even noticed the steady clopping sounds growing closer.

But when I heard the sound of two voices raised enthusiastically in song, my shoulders hunched in agonised protest.

Not that winding-road song again! Nothing good ever happened when I heard that song!

Worse yet, now that I could make out more of the words, they made even less sense than the verse that the food mage had sung.

'For true friends can never, ever be parted, and true love can never be stopped when it's started ...'

Oh no? I growled low in my human throat. *Try getting transformed into the wrong species and see how fast you get parted from your friends, humans!*

As the hoof-beats and the caterwauling drew closer, I braced myself and turned to see exactly what was coming towards me.

Oooh! As I sucked in a breath of longing, my stomach growled louder than ever. The hoof-beats belonged to a big white horse who made my mouth water at the sight of him. What a fine meal he would have made for a dragon!

The humans behind him were well padded, too, and wrapped in loose, dark green outer coverings, with more saggy green fabric plopped on top of their heads. I'd never seen a dragon with only one colour in their scales, but maybe these humans were hoping to be mistaken for trees. If so, they were much too noisy for the trick to work. They rode high in a jangly cart, but even the rattling of its wheels and the horse's hoof-beats couldn't drown out their nonsensical song.

Then they saw me.

'Oh, oh, oh!' The female grabbed the male's arm. 'Friedrich, look, it's a girl! Oh, stop now, stop!'

Oh yes, I agreed silently. *Please let the singing stop!*

But the humans didn't just stop singing. The male

tugged on the straps that he held in his hands, and the horse drew to a stop only two feet away from me, whiffling suspiciously.

Ah, the frustration of having tiny, blunt human teeth! But I was still a dragon inside, where it mattered. I tipped my head back to meet the horse's gaze and let him see it: yes, he was right to be suspicious. I was a predator. If I'd had my claws and fire right now, he'd be the best breakfast I'd ever had.

'Oh, you poor child!'

Ack! I should have been paying more attention to the animals behind the horse.

I staggered back in horror, but it was too late. The female human had already jumped down from the cart and thrown her arms around me. She pressed my face into her soft chest until I could barely breathe.

'Just look at you! Wandering in this terrible wilderness all alone. I can scarcely believe it! Oh, Friedrich, look, she doesn't even have any shoes! And she can't be more than twelve, can she? Oh, she is just exactly what we've been looking for!'

Shoes? What were shoes? And how could they possibly have known to look for me? Even I hadn't known I would be here.

But I couldn't have asked her any questions if I had wanted to. My mouth was smushed against her fuzzy green covering, and my arms were pinned to my sides.

'Mmmmph!' I managed, through closed lips. 'Mmph!'

'Oh, you're *cold*,' the female said. 'Look, Friedrich, she's

cold, and she doesn't have anyone to look after her, so really we'd be doing her a favour, now, wouldn't we? We couldn't possibly leave her here like this, could we? Oh no, no, you're quite right. It's really for the best for all of us.'

Had Friedrich said anything? All I'd heard from him so far was a muffled sigh as he sat on the high seat of the cart, keeping his gaze steadily fixed away from us. But my captor started forward as if he'd agreed with her, tugging me towards the cart, pulling off her green covering and wrapping it around my shoulders. It trailed to the ground and pooled around me, so warm that I couldn't bring myself to push it off again.

Still, I dug in my bleeding feet and slapped my hands against the cart before she could actually pick me up and put me into it. 'Wait!'

'Wait?' The female blinked rapidly at me, her mouth making an O. 'Oh, Friedrich, she's upset. Why is she so upset? Do you think she's frightened? Or –'

Friedrich still didn't turn to look at us, but his face scrunched up underneath his bushy grey face-fur as if he was in pain. 'Now, Greta –'

But I didn't need anyone to speak for me. 'I am *not* frightened of anything or anybody!' I drew myself up to my full height and glared up at the human who'd trapped me. 'Where exactly do you think you're taking me? I don't even know if you're going in the right direction!'

'The right *what*?' she said. 'You're on your own in the middle of the *mountains*! How could anything be the wrong direction from here?'

But for the first time Friedrich turned around. "S a fair question, Greta.' He nodded down at me from his seat on the cart. 'Where are you headed, young lady?'

I tilted my chin up proudly. 'I'm going to a big city,' I said, 'to find a livelihood.'

'You want to work?' Greta said. 'Oh, isn't that wonderful? You see, we have the perfect position for you already.' She beamed. 'If you could believe it, we've just lost our last maid. That girl was so unreasonable and greedy – *such* a city girl! She was always demanding to be paid for every little thing she did, always whining about wanting days off ... Oh, she broke my heart with her ingratitude, she really did. Didn't she, Friedrich?'

Friedrich's eyes rolled around so wildly I took a step back. Was this a human warning signal? Was he about to attack?

Greta didn't seem to have noticed, but then, she was looking at me, not at him. 'Now here you are, like a miracle, to take her place,' she said happily. 'It was obviously meant to be! We'll take you into our home just as if you were our own daughter, and you can cook and clean and do all the little things we need, and of course you won't need any payment at all, will you, because you would have starved if we'd left you here, so really –'

'No cleaning,' I said firmly. Friedrich's eyes had stopped rolling, but I kept a wary piece of my attention on him as I spoke, just in case. 'And I won't be a maid, whatever that is. I'm going to be an *apprentice*, and I need to find chocolate.'

'Chocolate?' Greta stepped back, blinking rapidly. 'You?'

Friedrich's big shoulders rose and fell under his green covering. 'Plenty of chocolate houses in Drachenburg nowadays,' he said. 'It's the new fashion, isn't it? King's fancy.'

'Hmmph,' said Greta. 'As if you'd ever stepped into a chocolate house in your life, Friedrich. Honestly, the things you say! If you didn't have me to look after you ...'

But I had already made up my mind. 'Perfect,' I said.

A house made of chocolate? What could be better? I couldn't wait to move into one now that I was human!

Then I frowned, remembering danger. 'There aren't any food mages in those chocolate houses, are there?'

Greta stared at me with enormous greyish-green eyes. Then she burst into laughter. 'You really are an ignorant little creature, aren't you?' Smiling, she stepped back up to me and rubbed the top of my head, mussing up all my head-fur and making my teeth clench. 'Why, I've never heard of a real food mage in my life! Honestly, I think they're just a myth, like music mages. Magic doesn't happen around respectable folk, you know!'

Phew. I jerked away before she could rub my head again, but I was too relieved to snarl.

The next time I ate chocolate, it was definitely going to be non-magical! I'd had quite enough unexpected transformations for a lifetime.

'What about other kinds of mages?' I asked. 'Are there many of those in Drachenburg?' If I could intimidate one into helping me ...

Friedrich shrugged, adjusting the horse's long leather straps in his hands. 'There's always the king's battle mages,' he said. '*They're* real enough, aren't they? There are probably around a dozen of those, gathered up from all across the kingdom and all living together near the palace, so I've heard. Ready to be sent out to fight enemies and dragons and suchlike on the king's command. Like in the story-books, you know. Excitement.' He slid a glance at Greta, who was looking at him with narrowed eyes, and added hastily, 'Not that I would want it for myself, of course.'

'Hmmph.' I scowled.

I had a strong suspicion that any mages who specialised in fighting dragons would be completely unreasonable about turning me back *into* one, no matter how fair and just that would be. Besides, there was no point in being transformed back into my proper shape only to be immediately captured by a bunch of dragon-hating battle mages.

'All right,' I said, and turned in the direction that the horse was facing. *Towards chocolate.* 'I'll go to Drachenburg then.'

'With us!' said Greta, clapping her hands. 'That's where we live!'

'Well ...' Frowning, I started to back away. I didn't like the determined look in her eyes. 'I'm not sure ...'

'There's no point arguing with her,' Friedrich told me, and shifted over on the bench of the cart. 'Might as well get in now, save us all the bother.'

'And isn't it lucky for you that we were here to help?' Greta wrapped her arm around my shoulder, halting me in

my retreat. 'We would never ordinarily be out in the wilds, you know, but we were just visiting my sister and her husband on their farm.'

Gently, she began to tug, pulling me slowly back towards the cart as her words streamed brightly over my head. 'If you can believe it, those two are both so provincial they have no idea how much everything really costs in Drachenburg. They're *such* nitwits when it comes to money! So we always pick up plenty of cheap fresh food from them and then sell it for a wonderful profit back in Drachenburg. Really, it only serves them right for being so foolish, doesn't it?' She gave a little rippling laugh. 'Although we do keep some of it for ourselves, of course. You can never get *really* good milk or meat in the city, can you?'

My head was whirling from her stream of words, and I didn't even know what 'milk' was. But at the word 'meat', my stomach gave an almost dragonish roar.

'Just listen to you! You're starving!' Greta scooped me up with surprisingly strong arms, hefting me into the cart before I could protest. 'And just look at all that blood on your bare feet. Here ...' She climbed up after me, then leaned over the seat, digging into the bags and baskets and boxes that were all stacked precariously in the back of the cart, as Friedrich clicked his tongue and the horse started forward. 'I don't have any shoes in here, but at least I can give you some food for the journey.'

'Meat?' I said hopefully. I craned my short neck, trying to see into the basket she was digging through.

'*Meat?*' She let out a burble of laughter. 'Lord, child, we

can't stop and build a fire to cook meat now! We're still in sight of the mountains, aren't we? Don't you know how dangerous it is out here? We like to roll through just as quickly as we can, don't we, Friedrich?'

'But I don't need my meat cooked,' I said. 'Really!'

'Oh, you silly thing, I can see how hungry you are, but don't worry. You don't need to resort to that. Just look what I found.' Greta popped back up with a beaming smile that showed all of her teeth, while she kept her hands hidden under her green covering. 'Ta-da!' She pulled out one hand. 'A bottle of milk, fresh from my sister's best cow! And –' she pulled out her other hand – 'goat's cheese!'

I stared at them in horror.

The milk was white. Bone-white. So was the cheese. If they were meat, they would have been rancid.

'Are you sure they're safe?' I asked.

'What a question!' Shaking her head, Greta unscrewed the lid from the bottle. 'You think I'm going to let you starve before we even get you to the city? Especially when you're going to be such a good, grateful child from now on and do every little thing we ask of you?'

'What?' I said. 'I'm not –'

'Here you go!' She pushed the open bottle into my face until I had no choice but to drink or let it pour down my chin.

I drank. And then I kept on drinking, because she didn't let up the pressure. I didn't finally manage to push it away until I'd had two long gulps. *Phew.* Before I could recover, I found a slab of clammy white cheese in my hand.

'Eat up!' Greta said brightly, and pushed it towards my mouth. 'You'll need your strength soon enough!'

My stomach twisted at the sight, but I gave in.

Humans ate the strangest things. Luckily, my new human body apparently did, too. The cheese didn't hurt my throat or stomach at all. Neither did the milk. I wasn't even disgusted by the taste.

My grandfather would have been so ashamed of me.

But I was definitely drawing the line at vegetables.

Greta watched me with an almost draconic eye until I'd eaten every crumb of cheese and drunk the very last sip of milk. Then she gave a contented sigh. 'There. You'll be all right now, won't you? I'll wrap up your feet to keep you from bleeding on the cart, and then you'll be ready to set to work just as soon as we get home.'

I wiped off the last drops of milk from my chin and gave her a wary look. I'd always known humans had tiny brains, but this one seemed particularly forgetful.

'I'm going to work in a *chocolate house*,' I reminded her. 'I'm not going to be your maid – or anyone else's. Remember?'

'Oh, of course, of course,' she murmured. 'How could I forget? Now just sit back and let us take care of everything until we reach the city ... because, trust me, you'd never find it on your own.' She patted my shoulder. 'You're just lucky we came across you out here. Do you know –' her voice dropped as she leaned even closer to me, squeezing me tightly between her and Friedrich – 'my cousin Georg saw a dragon flying over these mountains once! They say there's a whole nest of those vicious creatures living around here.'

'Now, Greta ...' Friedrich sounded weary.

'I'm serious!' Greta said. 'Oh, no one likes to talk about them, but they do exist, you know. There's no point pretending otherwise. They may stay clear of the big cities and farms nowadays, but anyone who travels in these mountains is in danger. Why, I suffer from the terror of it every time we travel! Don't I, Friedrich?'

Friedrich only heaved a heavy sigh. But I thought I saw the horse's ears flick in irritation. I didn't blame him.

'I don't know why the king lets them stay here,' Greta said. 'I keep saying and saying, he ought to send out his battle mages to finish them all off for good! I know I'd sleep better at night. And there are a lot of important people in the city who agree with me!'

'Finish off *dragons*?' I couldn't stay quiet any longer. I jerked my head around to glare at her. 'Are you crazy?'

Her mouth fell open. 'Well, of all the rude things to say!'

I scowled. 'Those dragons would eat every one of the battle mages if they tried.'

'That's what I said,' Friedrich muttered. 'The king's a sensible man, Greta. He doesn't want to get near any dragons. No one does.'

Well, I did. I would have given anything to get back to my family, especially right at that moment.

But the cart carried me further and further away from our cavern with every *clip-clop* of the horse's big feet, as Friedrich and Greta argued over exactly how best to deal with dragons, whether it was poisoning or spell-casting,

staying well out of their way (Friedrich's idea) or sending in the whole army to kill them (as if they could).

And then, unbelievably, things got even worse. Because when the arguing finally stopped, Greta decided it was time for another jolly round of travel songs.

It was going to be a very long journey.