



CHAPTER 9

'Ha!' said the woman again, and flung both her arms into the air. Turning sharply, she marched towards the pair of doors at the back of the room. 'Apprentices – pah! I've had enough of them.'

The man closed his eyes for a moment as she passed him, lines popping up all over his forehead. Then he sighed and looked at me. 'Ah ...' His weary gaze travelled from my short spiky dark hair to the red toes of my shoes, peeping out from underneath my new purple-and-gold dress. 'We will be looking for a new apprentice, it is true, but I'm afraid right now isn't ideal timing, and –'

'I'll grate all the nutmeg!' I said. Whatever that is. 'I won't skip any steps or use any substandard ingredients, ever. I'll do anything you tell me to, to make the chocolate

better. That's all I want – to learn how to make the best chocolate ever.'

The woman paused, turning back to look at me with one hand already resting on the door in front of her. 'The best chocolate ever, eh?' The face-fur over her eyes lowered as she studied me, her dark eyes piercing.

'Chocolate is my passion,' I told her.

'Oh, for ... !' The man let out a pained half-laugh and shook his head. 'We appreciate your enthusiasm, young lady, but may I ask: do you have any actual references? Any chefs who can vouch for your talents? Or any connections to important civic leaders or members of this community?'

'No.' My chest was starting to tighten again, my breath growing shorter, as I felt all of my lovely warm certainty start to slide away from me. 'But ... it's all about the chocolate here, isn't it?'

There was a moment of silence as the man and woman looked at each other.

I clenched my hands around my folded-up scale-cloth and forced myself to stay silent as they argued without words.

Finally, the man let out a hissing breath through his teeth. 'Yes,' he said tightly, 'of course the chocolate is the most important part. But still – does your family have any influence at all? Any connections that might help our shop?'

They both turned their heads towards me, waiting for my answer.

I swallowed hard, conscious of Silke standing outside

the window with the rest of the crowd, watching everything that happened inside with intense curiosity.

At least she wouldn't be surprised. She'd told me that I would never be allowed to stay inside a place like this.

'No,' I said numbly. 'No connections at all. Just – chocolate.'

'Right.' He sighed and shook his head. 'In that case –'

'Quite,' the woman said briskly. 'I think we're finished here, don't you?' She pushed against the two back doors with both hands, and they swung wide open, emitting a burst of scent that made my mouth water. 'Well?' she demanded. 'Are you coming or not, girl?'

My mouth dropped open. So did the man's, as he swivelled around to stare at her. 'Now, wait one minute, Marina ...'

'I'm coming!' I said, and hurried after the chocolatier before she could change her mind.

'Think of it this way, Horst.' Marina tossed the words back over her shoulder. 'If this girl hasn't got any fancy connections, then no one important will be offended when I toss *her* out on her ear for being useless. That should make you happy!'

He only let out a groan in reply.

But I didn't have any time to worry about the future. I needed every bit of my attention right now for the cavern full of chocolatey bliss lying before me.

There were enough jewel colours in Marina's kitchen to make any dragon hum with pleasure. The clean white walls

were lined with shelves of tall, curving pots made of glinting silver, copper and gold, along with stacks of blue-and-white porcelain cups with intricately curling and ornamented handles. If I'd been back home in my cavern, I would have spent hours running my claws around every one of them, inspecting them with pure delight.

But they weren't the best part of the kitchen. Not by a long way.

Where the front room had been painted the colours of fire, this room was full of flames, smoke and heat that didn't have to be imagined. A big white oven bulked in front of me with a long piece of heavy stone laid on top of one of its grates. On my right, a long charcoal brazier billowed more smoke into the room, while two copper kettles and a massive silver-coloured pot cooked above it. On my left, a giant fireplace filled one full wall of the room, sending out so much heat I could have basked in front of it for hours.

A funny gold-coloured metal contraption hung over the hot fire, suspended on a long, thin bar, smoking with heat and turning over and over again without any human hand touching it. With each new turn, a shower of rattles erupted inside the metal casing, as if a whole pile of small, hard pebbles was being roasted inside it ... but as I breathed in deeply my nose assured me that whatever was hidden within was much, much more intriguing than mere pebbles.

And then the smell from the kettles and the metal pot and - !

So many scents washed over me at once that I staggered, my vision blurring.

'Watch out!' Marina said sharply.

I yanked myself upright just before I could stumble into the table beside me. It was covered by more than a dozen glasses with long, thin stems leading up to curving, shallow bowls, each of them filled with a dark, creamy-looking substance that smelt amazing.

If she hadn't stopped me, I would have knocked at least half of them off the table.

I gritted my teeth and refused to apologise.

'Where shall I start?' I asked, jerking my chin up and walking further into the room.

She didn't follow me. 'When was the last time you ate?'

'Who, me?' I blinked at her. 'This morning.' I frowned, thinking back. 'Early morning.'

'I might have known.' She let out a hiss through her teeth. 'Of all the absurd –'

'I don't need food,' I told her. 'I need work.'

'And how are you going to do any work for me if you're swooning all over the place, ninny?'

I only understood about half of what she'd just said to me, but it was more than enough to make my face-fur draw together into a frown. 'My name's not "ninny".'

'I don't care what your name is. You're not setting to work in *my* kitchen without food in your belly. Hunger leads to distraction, which leads to carelessness – and you'd better learn right now that I don't tolerate carelessness in my chocolate house, not now, not ever. So ...' She scooped

up one of the glasses full of sweet-smelling darkness and handed it to me along with a long silver spoon. 'Here. The people who ordered these ran away like frightened bunnies five minutes ago. You might as well eat one instead of letting them all go to waste.'

Dragons could go for days without food when they needed to, and I didn't like being treated as if I was weak. Still, as the scent drifted up from the glass in my hands, I lost the will to argue. 'Fine,' I muttered, and dug in.

The first taste made my head spin all over again. The second taste made pleasure shoot up and down my body in a shower of gold.

A moment later I stared down at the empty glass in my hands, almost moaning when I realised I was finished. 'What *was* that?'

Marina looked at me with her face-fur raised and her arms crossed. 'You tell me,' she said. 'What did it taste like?'

I closed my eyes, running my tongue along the top of my mouth and trying to soak in any last tendrils of taste. 'Well, obviously there was chocolate –' so rich, so silky, so intense, my stomach felt warm at the thought of it – 'and then there must have been milk of some sort – no, thick cream ...' I'd tasted them both on that cart ride, so I knew the difference.

'And then ... oh, there was definitely cinnamon.' Nothing could make me forget that flavour! 'And something else to make it taste so sweet. But there were at least two other spices in it for flavour, and I don't know either of their names.' I opened my eyes and met her gaze, refusing to lower my own

or look ashamed. 'I don't know the names of a lot of things here, yet.'

She studied me for a long moment. Then she nodded. 'Fair enough. The other two spices were nutmeg and vanilla. You'll learn the taste of them fast enough if you work in this kitchen, I can promise you that.'

Nutmeg and *vanilla*. I memorised the names, filing them away.

'Now,' she said, 'I want you to taste this.' She strode to the charcoal brazier on my right and unhooked one of the copper kettles from the closest grate. 'Pass me one of those chocolate pots, will you?'

Following her pointing finger, I stood up on my toes and lifted down one of the lovely silver pots from the shelf nearby. It looked almost like a kettle, but it had two lids instead of one and it was far too dainty to survive a fiery stovetop. If I hadn't been so curious about what was coming next, I would have taken a moment to play with the different lids and work it out like a puzzle. Instead I handed it to Marina before she could ask a second time.

'Good.' She opened the lower lid and poured in the contents of the kettle. Dark, rich brown liquid streamed through the air, sending up a cloud of steam that made me close my eyes for a moment as I breathed it in.

Hot chocolate. Oh, this was definitely hot chocolate – but not like the food mage had made it. Not at all.

Incredibly, it smelt even better. Richer. More intense. And there was something else about it, something ...

I'd moved closer without even realising it.

... nudged me back with one strong arm as she reached towards the closest table. 'Now it's time for the molinet.' She picked up a long wooden tool with a wide, ridged bottom, and flipped open the top lid of the chocolate pot, exposing a hole in the lower lid that was just big enough for the skinny end of the molinet to slip through. A moment later, the lower lid was closed, the bumpy part of the molinet was hidden inside the pot, and she was rolling the slim, long wooden end of the tool vigorously between her hands. 'Never stint on this step,' she told me. 'Otherwise you'll lose all the froth.'

Oh, I wouldn't be stinting on any steps, not ever! I could tell that even before I'd taken a single sip.

'And now ...' She opened the lower lid, pulled out the molinet and closed the whole pot. 'If you'll pass me a cup ...'

I didn't even take a second to choose between all the different colourful patterns. I just grabbed the closest porcelain cup and handed it over.

Dark, frothy liquid filled it to the brim. It took all my willpower not to lunge as Marina finished pouring.

'One sip,' she told me. 'Only one, and I don't want you to swallow it all at once. Roll it around and take your time with it. *Then* tell me what you taste.'

My hands trembled with anticipation as I lifted the cup to my lips and closed my eyes. Slowly, reverently, I took my first taste and held it in my mouth, swirling it back and forth to savour every last drop. There was another, more subtle taste behind the deep, dark

chocolate, something faint and warm that wasn't cinnamon, and it was growing ... growing ...

Ohhh! I almost dropped the cup as the hidden flavour exploded in my mouth like a fireball. It burned through my senses in a roar of flame until I swallowed it down without even meaning to and my eyes flew wide open. I was panting hard as I stared at Marina, my chest rising rapidly up and down. Flames licked through my body, almost like ... like ...

'There,' said Marina, in a tone of deep satisfaction. 'You haven't had that at any other chocolate houses, have you?'

'What was it?' I whispered. I couldn't find my voice.

She smiled smugly. 'That,' she said, 'is chilli chocolate. Our house speciality. What do you think?'

I didn't answer. But a sudden, startling wetness pricked at the back of my eyes.

I'd thought I would never feel that heat in my throat again. I'd thought that I had lost my flame forever.

Marina waited a moment and then nodded, as if satisfied by my response. 'All right,' she said. 'Drink the rest of it up, but don't take too long. That lazy lout Erik hadn't even finished grinding all the cocoa nibs for the day! It's a good thing you've eaten now, because there's plenty of work to be done, and believe me: you'll need all your strength to do it.'

The smile that stretched across my face when I heard that was completely uncontrollable.

I could hardly wait.