



CHAPTER 20

I scowled at the lines of stiff-backed men in uniform. There must have been at least a hundred of them, all heavily armed, and every one of them was in my way. 'What are they doing here?'

'Protecting the royal family and the privy council, most likely.' Silke gnawed on her lower lip, frowning. 'I knew they'd have an honour guard, but I didn't think there'd be this many soldiers here. They must be planning to hole up in the town hall if there's a final siege. I guess this'll be the last line of defence for the city, while the royals and the lord mayor stay safe inside those stone walls.'

'Safe?' I snorted, copying Marina's favourite sound of disdain. 'Do they actually think dragons can't set stone on fire?'

The whites of Silke's eyes suddenly looked enormous.
'They *can*?'

I shrugged. 'We're talking about dragonfire, not kitchen flame.'

'But – no, never mind.' Silke squared her shoulders. 'Later you'll have to explain how you know all this. But for now ...' She gave me a firm look. 'No clenching your fists. No meeting anyone's eyes. Remember: you're a lowly housemaid, and you work for someone just like that awful Greta woman. You know what that's like. Head down ... and go!'

She grabbed my arm and started forward, dragging me behind her.

She barely made it five steps before she was hailed. 'You there!' A soldier who didn't look any older than Dieter marched forward to bar our way, drawing his sword. 'What are you doing this close to the town hall?'

'What do you think?' Silke replied. I had my eyes firmly fixed on the ground, following orders, but even I could hear the eye-roll in her voice. She let out a heavy sigh, too, as she yanked me around to stand in front of her.

Gritting my teeth, I let her do it.

'I've found the crown princess's maid at last,' Silke said. 'She'd made it halfway across the city by the time I caught up with her, trying to run away. Stupid girl!'

'Oh. Um.' The young soldier's voice nearly cracked, but I could feel him eyeing me up and down, and every inch of my skin prickled with aggression in response. I wanted to

lift my eyes and bare my teeth and glare him down until he went skittering back and ...

No! I whispered to myself. Not a dragon. Not right now.

The moment seemed to last forever, but he finally let out a snort and shook his head. 'Got scared and ran, did she? Abandoned her post?' His voice came out bigger this time, as if he'd somehow put on an extra few inches of muscle just by looking at someone even more frightened than him. Worse yet, his tone sweetened, adding a sickly shade of condescension as he reached forward and tapped his finger under my chin. 'You don't need to worry, sweetheart. We'll take care of any dragons that threaten this city.'

My family would eat you in a heartbeat, I snarled silently. But I kept my mouth clamped shut with all my might, and I didn't even try to bite his finger off as he pulled it back from under my chin.

'Oh, you know what ignorant country folk are like,' Silke told him. 'But you're from Drachenburg originally, aren't you? I can tell just by looking at you.'

The soldier's shoulders straightened and his chin lifted an extra notch. 'I am!'

'I knew it,' Silke said. 'It's just so obvious that you know what *you're* doing.' She leaned closer, confidently, without letting go of my arm. 'We'd better get this idiot back to the crown princess, though, as soon as possible. Of all the times to neglect her duties to the royal family ...'

'Of course!' The soldier wheeled around. 'Just wait here.'

He marched away, moving every bit as stiffly as the little clockwork men I'd watched in that toyshop window,

during my afternoon off. The idea of him fighting my family ...

I said, through my teeth, 'If he touches my chin again, I'll eat him.'

'Don't worry about him,' Silke said. 'Worry about the next round.'

Sure enough, when he came back a moment later he was accompanied by an older man with dull grey hair and two bright stripes on the shoulder of his uniform. 'The crown princess's maidservant, eh?' The new soldier looked me up and down with narrowed eyes, and I didn't need Silke's warning arm-squeeze to keep my gaze lowered and my mouth shut. 'I didn't hear anything about this,' he rumbled in a cave-deep voice.

'I'm not surprised,' Silke said. 'It happened just on the way out of the palace.' She shrugged. 'We realised she'd gone missing before anyone had even stepped into the first carriage, so I promised the crown princess I'd hunt her down and bring her back. She's new to service, you know, and she panicked at the thought of dragons, but she knows her duty now. She won't abandon her mistress again.'

'Hmmp.' The man looked from one to the other of us. 'And why aren't either of you girls wearing palace uniform, if this little story is true?'

I looked at Silke out of the corner of my eyes.

She smiled straight at him. 'She wasn't going to keep her uniform on when she ran away, now, was she? She's not *that* much of an idiot. And the princess prefers me to

stay out of uniform, always, to be her eyes and ears in the city.'

Then she cocked her head as she studied him just as frankly as he had studied me. 'Right now, though, major, I have to ask you a question: exactly who do you think we really are, if you find the truth so doubtful? Do you imagine that we're dragons in disguise?' She snorted, even as my hand tightened on my scale-cloth. 'I don't know what you're afraid of, but I know what frightens me ... and that's the crown princess, if she finds out we've been kept chin-wagging out here when I was ordered to bring back her new maid as soon as possible. So -' she took a step forward, dropping my arm, and met his eyes full-on - 'if you have any more questions,' she said sweetly, 'why don't you put them to the crown princess yourself?'

I'd always known that Silke had a touch of dragon to her. But as I watched her stare down the big man, I could almost see the scales that she deserved glinting in the air around her.

'There's such a thing as friendship,' she had told me in the market square.

For the first time, I truly understood what she'd meant. Because I knew then that I would fight on her side forever.

The man's jaw worked as he glared back at her. His hand fell to the handle of his sword.

But then he stepped backwards and lowered his head. 'Very well.' His voice came out as a low, angry growl. 'Lieutenant -' he jerked his head at the younger

soldier – ‘don’t leave them on their own in the royal apartments. I want you to escort them to the crown princess personally and see exactly what she says. Then report back to me.’

Silke nodded with cool authority. ‘Thank you, Major. That will do.’ She turned back to me but didn’t grab my arm this time. ‘Come along, *Eva*.’

Oh, I would absolutely pay her back for calling me that!

But not now. Right now I followed her and the young lieutenant past row after row of armed soldiers across the square, then through the big, iron-braced oak doors of the town hall. As the doors fell closed behind us with an ominous *thunk*, I didn’t even feel tempted to let out a single roar of triumph.

Yes, Silke had taken care of her part of the bargain. Now, though, it was my turn. And if I was worried about how I could handle my own family ... I had *no idea* how to make the royals see sense. Especially when they’d ignored everything I’d tried to tell them last time, in the Chocolate Heart.

Human society was so complicated. Why couldn’t I just roar at people to *make* them do what was necessary?

But then, from the sounds of distant shouting that echoed down the wide corridors of the town hall, it sounded as if some humans were already trying that method.

There were even more soldiers lining the wide white-and-silver corridors inside, standing as still as stone between elaborate marble statues and tall windows.

stood stiffly in place with no expressions on their faces, no matter how heated the yelling in the distance became or how close to them we walked. Only their gazes flickered back and forth beneath their iron helmets, following us as we passed, to mark them out from the cold, sightless statues at their sides.

I would have snorted in disgust at the view around me if I hadn't been in disguise. This was the seat of all power in Drachenburg? This was the central hoard of the king's town and privy councils, their greatest chance to awe the world? Really, marble was only another word for 'dirty white stone'. I didn't see a single gold plate or sparkling diamond anywhere. Even when I tipped my head back for a quick glance at the ceiling, the looping curlicues carved there were painted white-on-white and made of simple plaster. No dragon would take this place seriously for an instant.

The thought of this city trying to protect itself against my family would have been laughable if it wasn't so horrifying. This was *my* territory now, for better or for worse. But I wouldn't even be allowed to defend it unless I could get past all the noisy humans in my way.

The shouting grew louder and louder with every step I took. Even if the din hadn't alerted me, I would have known exactly which door we were heading towards, because four tall soldiers stood guard outside it. They stepped aside at a word from our lieutenant, who opened the door to reveal a scene of total chaos.

The room inside was as big as a cavern, with swags of deep purple velvet hanging from the high walls, and people

crowding the space on all sides. A long wooden table filled the centre of the room, with the king sitting at one end in a chair like a throne, the crown princess sitting in a smaller chair beside him and a big, scowling man with a floppy red velvet hat sitting in a medium-sized chair at the other end of the table. Half of the other chairs were filled, but the rest had been abandoned as their owners paced around the table, yelling and waving their arms.

And they weren't the only people there. Even more soldiers lined the walls by the heavy swags of purple velvet, while women and men in fancy clothing sat in rows and rows of padded chairs, watching the show in front of them and whispering to each other behind decorative fans. Servants moved back and forth between all the different groups, seeing to their masters' needs.

How did these people ever get anything done? The noise was so intense it took me a moment to even pick out any of the individual voices, as our lieutenant led us carefully through the crowd towards the table and the crown princess.

'This is why we should have sent the army and the mages into the mountains years ago! If anyone had ever listened to me ...' *That* came from a man in a dark green suit, banging on the table.

The man behind him shook his head violently. 'We should be digging tunnels underground to escape into the forest! If we set the army to digging now ...'

A tall, bony man in a black robe snarled, 'Maybe if we had been given enough funds for our research, without

the merchants always haggling over prices and trying to keep all the taxes for themselves ...'

The woman next to him let out a muffled shriek of outrage. 'We merchants are the only reason this city has prospered! If you black-robed nincompoops were ever left in charge -'

Another woman, in a long black robe, lunged up from the table and shouted, 'What did you just call us, shopkeeper?'

Stones and bones. We didn't have time for any of this!

When I'd tried to talk sensibly to the royals before, they hadn't listened to a word I'd said. I could already tell that this group wasn't interested in calm reason either.

So it was time to stop acting like a servant and be a dragon, after all.

'Enough!' I roared, only two feet behind the king.

Everyone in the room jerked around to stare at me. Even the king peered around the back of his massive chair with wide, startled blue eyes.

I knew exactly what they all saw when they looked at me, with my young face, short hair and dull brown dress. I knew that their shock would only hold them silent for a moment, before their outrage and disbelief would take over.

So I used the single moment that I had, crossed my arms and gave the king a look as steady and grim as any I had ever seen from Marina.

'None of you can stop those dragons,' I told him. 'But I can.'