
STEPHANIE BURGIS
The Girl with the Dragon Heart
BLOOMSBURY

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CHILDREN'S BOOKS
LONDON OXFORD NEW YORK NEW DELHI SYDNEY



CHAPTER 1

Once upon a time in a beautiful, dirty, exciting city full of people and chocolate and possibilities, there was a girl so fearless and so daring that ...

No, wait. I've always been good at telling stories. But this time, I want to tell the truth.

The truth is that, for once, my older brother was right: it *wasn't* sensible for me to accept the crown princess's challenge. A thirteen-year-old girl from the riverbank, with no proper home or schooling, setting out to mix with royals, match wits with vengeful fairies and stand up for her entire city? Anyone in Drachenburg could have told me that was absurd.

But there's one other truth I know for sure: if you have the courage to tell your own story, you can remake the world.

* * *

'Behold!' I pushed open the swinging doors to the kitchen of Drachenburg's finest chocolate house and strode inside, waving a freshly printed promotional handbill – one of hundreds that would be circulating through the city by nightfall. 'My latest masterpiece! Feel free to bow down to me in wonder and amazement and shower me with all your gold.'

Standing at the closest counter and stirring something that smelt delicious, the head chocolatier rolled her eyes at me. 'Oh, good,' Marina said. 'You've written more nonsense about us. As if we didn't have enough customers to deal with already!'

The doors behind me swung open as she spoke, and Horst, the maître d', hurried in, his lean brown face alight with interest. 'Show me, Silke.'

With a jaunty bow, I handed over my work, then stuck my hands in the pockets of my bright, twice-mended scarlet jacket and rocked back and forth on my booted heels as I waited.

I'd switched to wearing boys' clothing years ago for eminently sensible reasons. Wearing trousers instead of a constricting skirt, I could run as fast as the wind through even the busiest city streets. With a plain, dark green jacket and trousers, a white cravat and a green hat that hid my short black curls, I could fade into any crowd I chose. Today, though, I wasn't looking for camouflage or for escape. Today, I was ready to strut like a peacock and enjoy my well-earned rewards.

The kitchen really did smell amazing.

I reached towards the closest bowl, but Marina smacked my hand away, her fingers warm gold against my dark brown skin.

'Not that one! It isn't ready yet. Look.' She pointed to the next counter, where eight delicious-looking chocolate creams – my favourite – were cooling in long-stemmed glass bowls. 'Eat one of those,' she told me, 'before you pop from sheer self-satisfaction.' She scowled. 'And then show me what you've written about us this time.'

I *knew* she'd want to read my handbill! 'Here.' Humming, I pulled out a second copy from the pocket of my only-barely-stained silver waistcoat, one of my best finds from my brother's market stall on the riverbank. 'I brought an extra one for you and Aventurine.' Then I frowned, looking around the bright white kitchen as roasting cocoa beans rattled in the hearth with a companionable clatter. 'Where *is* Aventurine?'

The Chocolate Heart's apprentice chocolatier was the most ferocious girl I'd ever met, and the most fabulous one, too ... and not just because of her unusual powers. Aventurine was the whole reason I'd found my post here at the Chocolate Heart: actual *respectable* work in a real shop with walls, serving some of the most powerful people in the city. It was the first chance I'd ever had to show my skills to the world, and I was determined to make it my first step towards a big and glorious story of my own ... one that did *not* include sleeping in a tent on the riverbank forever.

But what was the point of showing off my latest triumph if my best friend wasn't here to see it?

'I sent her to the traders' market,' Marina said, plucking the second handbill from my grip. 'We need more sugar. The loaf they gave me this morning was hollow, so Aventurine's going to tell them it was rubbish and get them to replace it for free.'

'You sent A*venturine* to do that?' I stared at her. 'By herself?'

Marina heaved her big shoulders in a shrug as she looked down at the new handbill. 'She's my apprentice, isn't she? She has to learn. She might not pick the very best on her first try, but –'

'I'm not talking about the quality of the sugar,' I said impatiently. 'What if they're rude to her when she tries to return the first lot, and she loses her temper?'

Marina looked up from my handbill to give me a deeply satisfied smile. 'Then they'll learn not to fob us off with substandard sugar, won't they?'

'Argh!' I squeezed my eyes shut in anguish.

Did *no one* in this chocolate house understand the concept of good publicity?

It was hard enough to promote a chocolate shop whose chocolatier refused to come out of her kitchen to charm her patrons – Marina would never learn to be polite to important people – but between Aventurine's stubbornness and my storytelling skills, we'd finally managed to overcome that hurdle. Aventurine had won the patronage of the king, and I'd told the whole story to the world

through a series of brilliant handbills scattered across the city to lure in new customers every day. But even I couldn't think of any way to twist our story into a happy ending if the Chocolate Heart's apprentice got so angry that she accidentally spat flame in public.

That was the problem with having a best friend who had been born a dragon before a wandering food mage had turned her into a human and left her with food magic of her own. Her transformation had worked out well for all of us, since her massive, scaly family had negotiated an alliance with our powerful crown princess – the first known human-dragon alliance in all of history – and Aventurine had found herself a new home at the Chocolate Heart. Still, even as I'd written handbill after handbill about that victory, I'd had a niggling fear growing at the back of my mind.

Now that Aventurine had figured out how to use her new-found powers to shift back into her dragon body whenever she wanted to, I was just waiting for the moment she lost control of that shift – because whoever first created the phrase 'fiery temper' had definitely had dragons in mind.

If she did lose control, I had to be there – and not only for Aventurine's sake.

'I've got to go.' I spun around to leave, abandoning my poor, lovely, untouched chocolate cream.

Before I could push open the doors to the front room, Horst looked up from his copy of the handbill and grabbed the sleeve of my scarlet jacket. 'Silke, wait.'

F*inally*! I skidded to a halt despite the oncoming crisis, raising my eyebrows expectantly. 'Yes?' I'd been waiting all day to see his reaction to the new handbill. I couldn't wait to find out which line was his favourite!

But instead of expressing his admiration for my brilliance, Horst frowned, looking past me towards the clock. 'Don't forget to be back by one,' he said. 'We have a lot of bookings this afternoon, and we'll need an extra waitress to handle the crowd.'

'I *know*.' I had to stifle a dragon-like growl of my own. Didn't *anyone* understand me, even here? I wasn't reckless – or a child, no matter how young I looked.

I might only be thirteen years old, but I'd grown up on the night I'd lost my parents six years ago, on that terrible journey that had led me and my brother Dieter to our patchwork home on the riverbank of this city ... and no matter how hard Dieter had fought to control me, I'd been looking after myself ever since then. I knew perfectly well how to keep track of time!

Rolling my eyes, I pulled free of Horst's grip and slipped through the kitchen doors, clamping down hard on my frustration. 'But first I have to save that trader!' I called back before the doors closed behind me.

Then I flashed a bright, happy grin at the customers who'd turned to watch me from their tables in the bright golden-and-orange front room of the chocolate house. 'Don't forget to tell all of your friends,' I told them as I hurried past, 'you ate the best chocolate in Drachenburg today!'

I kept my saleswoman's smile all the way through the chocolate house and out of the front door ... until I stepped out of view of the Chocolate Heart's big front window.

Then I *ran*.



CHAPTER 2

The Chocolate Heart was planted smack in the middle of the wealthy merchants' district, with bright pink and blue buildings and expensive carriages everywhere. It should have been a lovely sight on a brisk autumn day like today, but I didn't have time to appreciate the spectacle. The traders' market where Marina bought all of her supplies was a full two miles away, in the dingy, tightly packed sixth district where none of her fancy customers would ever dream of going. If I followed the broad and winding road that spiralled out through all of Drachenburg's districts like the curl of a giant snail's shell, I would never reach it in time.

I ran through the smelly alleyways instead, cutting straight across the city. There were people in Drachenburg

who were born, lived and died in just one district, and treated all the others like dangerous foreign countries. But to me every bit of it was home, from the sunny yellow first district at the city's heart, where the royal palace stood in unshakeable golden splendour, to the grimy, heaving fifteenth district, where even the king's soldiers hesitated to go. I'd learned a long time ago that the skinny, shadowy alleyways, tucked away like shameful secrets behind the houses in every district, were the secret veins of the city, connecting all the different neighbourhoods into a living, breathing whole.

I had to dart and skip from side to side as I ran to escape the disgusting run-off that gushed down the centres of those alleyways. Unfortunately for my fabulous outfit, there was no way to escape the smell. It had rained for the past week, so the gutters were bubbling and overflowing with a noxious, clumpy, dark liquid goo made up of rainwater mixed with leavings from chamber pots, horse droppings and rubbish. Even when I held my breath, I could feel the stench floating up to stick itself against my skin and clothes.

But it was worth it. Every time I leaped out from the end of another curving passageway, I emerged into a whole new world of colour, filled with different kinds of people, sights and smells. From the third district to the fourth, the fifth ...

T*here.*

The big old brick warehouse hulked in front of me, all of the doors at the front propped open. No smoke was coming out of them, which was a definite relief. I didn't hear any screams yet either.

Good. I still had time.

I started for the closest door – and heard an all-too-familiar roar of rage.

Too late! I sprinted forward in panic.

The moment I raced through the door, I knew exactly where my best friend was standing, because everyone else was backing away from her in a widening semicircle. All the traders here were big, tough men and women, used to hauling around massive crates and competing for every sale of spices and ingredients from across the world, but at that moment, they all shuffled warily backwards in unison, their faces pointed away from me.

'*What* did you say about Marina?' roared a familiar voice beyond them.

Uh-oh.

If there was one thing all dragons were, it was territorial. *No one* was allowed to attack Aventurine's territory, which included not only the chocolate house itself but also Marina, Horst and me.

There were moments when I really, truly loved that fact. When I was lying awake late at night in my patchwork tent on the cold, bumpy ground of the riverbank, with the wind whistling through the thin cloth walls and a hundred other people shifting and rustling nearby, that knowledge – that no matter what might happen, I was part of Aventurine's territory now, and she would do absolutely anything to protect me, with teeth and claws and fire if necessary – filled me with wonder and a fierce gratitude.

Right now, though, was not one of those moments.

Right now was one of those moments when I wanted to scream at the top of my lungs while I shook some sense into my best friend's feral brain. Because sometimes dragons were *impossible*!

Taking a deep breath, I lowered my head, pushed my way hard through the closest knot of fully grown men and women and slipped out on the other side with a smile on my face.

'There you are!' I said to Aventurine.

At first, I couldn't even tell what had sent all those grown men and women backing away from her in fear. Oh, she was chock-full of seething ferociousness, of course. Her fists were clenched in front of her as she aimed a fiery glare with her unusual golden eyes at the man in the centre of the semicircle. And her new turquoise-and-orange dress was eye-wateringly garish enough to make *anyone* take a step back in horror ... not to mention the way her short black hair stuck out in all directions because she refused to ever take enough time away from the chocolate house to get a proper haircut ...

But really, she was barely five feet tall. What was their problem?

A flicker of movement on the wall behind her caught my eye, and I gulped.

O*hhh*.

The *problem* would be the shadow that stretched behind my best friend's small, fierce, human body ... the shadow that grew larger and larger as I watched, spreading across the market stalls and the brick wall behind her, until

it loomed over the entire market hall, with its massive tail lashing in anger and its giant jaws opening wide.

Even in shadow form, Aventurine's dragon teeth were impressive.

As an audible gasp of fear rippled through the crowd, I stepped forward, crossed my arms and gave her my sternest look – because I knew there was one thing that was even more important to Aventurine than territory.

'I hope you've got that sugar loaf for Marina,' I told her. 'She needs it *now* or else the new batch of chocolate will be completely ruined.'

'New ... what?' Aventurine blinked as if she were coming out of a daze. She swung around to stare at me, her shadow stretching, massive and reptilian, on the wall behind her. 'What are you talking about? We already made the new cakes of cooking chocolate today. And we don't put sugar in those anyway.'

'The chocolate creams then? Or hot chocolate?' I shrugged, keeping my expression bland. 'I'*m* not the chocolate expert, am I? I don't know what she was talking about. But I know Marina was in a hurry, and *something* chocolatey is going to be ruined if you don't get back soon.'

Aventurine scowled, but I could tell that I'd won. Chocolate always won over everything, for her. Her shadow was already shrinking as she turned back to the big man who stood in the centre of the semicircle. 'I would have had it by now if *he* hadn't said –'

'And I'm sure he regrets it very much.' I gave the man a stern look. 'Would you like to give my friend a decent loaf

of sugar this time? And maybe a partial refund, too, as an apology for the time she's had to waste in replacing that hollow loaf you sold Marina?'

For a moment, I thought he had actually seen sense. I watched his massive chest rise and fall in a shuddering breath. Then he looked past Aventurine. The dragon-shaped shadow was gone. Aventurine was only a twelve-year-old apprentice again, with short hair and an ugly dress. And I could actually see the shift in his perceptions as he glanced back at the other, watching traders ... and realised that he was only facing down two young girls after all.

His muscular arms crossed in front of him. His pale blue eyes narrowed and fixed on me. 'I think,' he said, 'that your friend's a public menace who's created a disturbance of the peace. Maybe we should summon the lord mayor's guard to deal with that.'

N*o, no, no!* Panic started a drumbeat in my head as the traders around him rustled and muttered in agreement. Meanwhile, Aventurine let out a dangerous snarl.

The lord mayor hated our chocolate house and always had. Getting him involved now would be disastrous for everyone.

So I cocked my head, raised my eyebrows and asked the sugar trader gently, 'Are you sure that's a good idea? You do know whose protection she has, don't you?'

The sound that came out of his mouth then was almost as much of a snarl as Aventurine's had been. 'If you're talking about those *dragons* ...'

Oops.

The rustling and discussion around him disappeared as abruptly as if an alarm bell had sounded. Suddenly the whole market hall was dead silent and the tension in the air was unmistakeable.

Goosebumps prickled down my arms. *Not good.*

I knew this feeling in a crowd. I knew it much too well. After so many years of living on the riverbank, I'd learned to sense it in the air like a warning, because my community – 'the riff-raff on the riverbank, not even wanted in their own countries' – was always first to be blamed whenever things went wrong for the city as a whole.

And when frightened, angry people found a focus for their rage …

Suddenly, they were all talking at once.

'Flying over our city like they own it!'

'Terrifying our children!'

'Who knows how long until they start eating *us*?'

'I heard the king's thinking of giving them human sacrifices, all laid out on the palace steps.'

'And you know where *those* will come from! Not from the fancy first district, oh no. They'll –'

'What are you talking about?' Aventurine yelled. She was panting as she stared around the semicircle of traders, her face creased in disbelief. 'Are you idiots? They're not going to hurt anybody! They're defending this city. They don't even eat humans any more!'

Ow, ow, ow. I cringed, but it was too late. Everyone was yelling now, and this time they all yelled the same thing:

'A*ny more?*'

Never, ever let a dragon handle diplomacy.

I cleared my throat, putting on a desperate smile. 'If you'd all –'

But the sugar trader was already striding forward, his face flushing bright pink with fury as he pointed one beefy finger at Aventurine. 'Call me an idiot, will you? Well, we all know you're in league with those monsters! If you think you can –'

'Wait!' I yelped, and leaped in front of my friend. She growled, trying to get past me, but I kicked backwards, clipping her shin hard to stop her. 'Listen to me, everyone! I wasn't talking about the dragons!'

I was tall for a girl – and tall for my age, too – but I still had to tip back my head to look the sugar trader in the eyes. My chest grew tighter and tighter as the circle of angry traders closed in around us, leaving no way out.

N*ot again!*

I *wouldn't* feel this helpless again. I had sworn that a long time ago.

I'd been seven years old the first time I'd felt that taste of sick danger in the air: the feeling of an angry crowd transforming into a mob. By then, I'd already lost my parents and any illusions of safety. I'd spent that long winter night shivering beside my brother and our neighbours, all of us crammed behind a protective wall of city guards, while raging local citizens burned down our tents and smashed our market tables in front of us, blaming that winter's food shortages on our arrival in their city.

But I wasn't that powerless little girl any more. I was *not*. I was the heroine of my own story, and I would make my story *work*.

If my first threat hadn't been intimidating enough then I only had one option left. There was just one person in Drachenburg who was more dangerous than any dragon.

'I was talking about the crown princess!' I said.

The traders around me all stopped moving. For the first time, I could see hesitation in the eyes of the man who led them.

T*here*.

I took a deep breath and prayed for my best friend to stay silent. It was time to make up a really good story, *fast*.



CHAPTER 3

The sugar trader scowled. 'What about the crown princess?' he demanded.

If there was one thing I understood – one thing I'd spent the last six years learning – it was exactly how my city worked.

People in every district rolled their eyes at the lord mayor's vanity and his greed, as his new mansion in the third district grew more and more over the top, with new gold-plated furniture delivered every week. As for the king, he was liked well enough unless times were hard, and he was politely toasted on feast days ... but from the highest of the nobles to the poorest of the poor, no one trusted him to look out for their best interests.

E*veryone* loved the crown princess, though. She made certain of it.

It wasn't just that she was famous for speaking seven languages, or that she was the cleverest diplomat ever born into the royal family, winning allies and new trading partners from among our oldest enemies. T*hat* filled the merchants and the nobles with delight, as the coffers of the kingdom grew and the richest people in the kingdom grew even richer. But the crown princess didn't only look out for them.

She sent her own personal guard to the riverbank every year when the first blizzards came, carrying tinder and food and blankets to shield us against the cold.

And when the peasants on the northern nobles' estates had stopped their work in protest two years ago, their employers had demanded that the king send out his army, but the crown princess had visited the peasants to hear their stories first. Then she'd summoned the proudest and most influential of the nobles to a private conference at the royal palace. No one knew exactly what had been said there, but when those grand aristocrats came out again, looking stunned, a new decision was announced: all of their workers would be given pay rises for the first time in decades, along with real rights to their own land on the nobles' estates. All the newspapers had claimed to be astonished, but I wasn't surprised in the least.

She was the most powerful person in the kingdom, and she *always* knew the right thing to say. She'd been my idol for nearly all of my life – until I'd finally met her a few months ago and realised just how ruthless she could be.

N*o one* became that powerful without being willing

to sacrifice other people along the way. She'd come very close to sacrificing my best friend's life in front of me when she'd thought it was necessary to save the city – and after I saw through her plans and saved Aventurine, I felt the full force of Princess Katrin's cold, calculating attention turn to me. It had been one of the most frightening moments of my life.

I never, ever wanted her to notice me again.

But I still understood the power her name carried in this city, so I took full advantage of it now as a new story spun into place in my head.

'Don't you think she has a plan?' I asked the trader. 'Do you really think she would have bargained with the dragons without knowing exactly how to handle them?'

'Well …' His brows drew together. 'But the king –'

'I was there,' I told him truthfully. 'I watched her do all the real negotiations.'

'You?' A woman on my left let out a snort. 'What would a girl like *you* be doing near royalty?'

I drew myself up proudly. 'I work at the Chocolate Heart,' I said, 'whose fabulous and one-of-a-kind chocolate saved our whole city from the dragons' rage!' I heard Aventurine snort behind me, but I ignored it as I smiled brightly. 'You may have read our story in the handbills? Once the dragons tasted our chocolate, they gave up their thirst for blood and swore allegiance to the throne. The king himself has been our particular patron ever since we saved the city from ruin and made the most powerful allies Drachenburg has ever known.'

'*Dragons* ...' It was a hiss from nearby, and it could have come from any of the traders around me.

I didn't let it slow me down.

'That's right!' I said. 'We have dragons on our side now, which no other kingdom in the world can claim. And the crown princess has *me* to keep an eye on them! Why else do you think I'd be dressed like this? Have you ever seen any girl who looked like me?' I threw back my shoulders, showing off my masculine jacket. 'I'm her eyes and ears in this city. I can slip into any corner to bring her back the latest news. I can warn her of any danger that threatens, no matter how quietly her enemies try to whisper. Even the dragons like me now, because I bring them the chocolate they love. And I listen to everything they say. Honestly ...' I shook my head, *tsk*ing between my teeth in disappointment. 'Did you really think the crown princess *wouldn't* send a spy into their ranks, to report back everything she needs to know?'

The traders were whispering among each other now, forming narrow holes in their ranks – holes that were very nearly wide enough for a skinny girl to run through if she took them by surprise.

But I didn't budge. I didn't even blink.

Confidence was *everything*.

'You're just a girl,' the sugar trader said finally.

But I heard the uncertainty in his voice, and I let my smile deepen.

'Oh, really?' I raised my eyebrows and nodded towards the back wall, where Aventurine's shadow had risen to

snarl at us all. 'And is my friend here just a girl? Really?'

All around me I heard air being sucked in past clenched teeth. My muscles tensed. If this went the wrong way ...

The first few traders stepped back.

'I always said the crown princess knew what she was doing,' said the woman who'd challenged me before.

'Can't get anything past her,' the woman's neighbour agreed. 'You remember how she tricked that ambassador from Villenne last year? Sent him home cursing and weeping into his wine. No one outwits our crown princess when it comes to negotiations.'

'The battle mages are probably in on the whole thing, too. You know they'll be working out how best to use the dragons.'

'And how to attack them if they ever turn against us!'

At that, Aventurine let out a low growl, but luckily no one was paying attention to her any more.

The tight circle around us had dissolved into clumps of two or three as traders on every side shifted and moved back, arguing and gossiping as they started back towards their stalls.

The market hall had been empty apart from the traders when I'd first arrived, during that slow period of early afternoon when all the restaurants in town were occupied with serving lunch. Now, a second round of apprentices started flooding through the doors with empty baskets, ready to pick up supplies for late-afternoon cakes, coffee and supper. Some of the apprentices were even

younger than me and Aventurine, but they were all moving fast, their faces set in determination and their empty baskets slapping against their legs – because when you are lucky enough to have a real job in this city, you know the importance of a deadline.

If we didn't hurry, too, I would be late for our afternoon-rush shift at the Chocolate Heart, and Horst would worry himself into a stew. But I didn't let myself look impatient, even as I felt the clock ticking. Instead, I tilted back my head to give the sugar trader who'd started this mess my sweetest and most dangerous smile.

'So,' I said, raising my eyebrows. 'Do I have to report this little incident to the crown princess, too?'

Dragons weren't the only ones who enjoyed winning battles.

Five minutes later, Aventurine and I were walking down the street with a fresh new sugar loaf *and* half a pound of vanilla pods, too. I laughed in delight as I scooped up one of the pods from the basket and tossed it up high into the air.

'Careful!' Aventurine caught the long, skinny pod in mid-air and tucked it neatly back into place. 'That's precious!'

'It was free,' I reminded her, 'because of me. Aren't you impressed?'

'It was free because you're a menace,' Aventurine told me. 'That ridiculous story!' Her face crinkled up as if she were in pain. 'I don't know which is worse – that you made

them think my family were idiots or that they actually believed it! As if a dragon would ever swear allegiance to a throne!'

'My *brilliant* story saved us both.' I twirled in a happy, dizzy spiral, holding my hands out around me as I spun on the toes of my shining black boots. This street was beautifully broad, nothing like the narrow, stinking alleyways I'd raced through on my way here. I swept an elegant bow as I finished, as if Aventurine were a queen. '*You're* the public menace, remember?'

'P*fft*.' She snorted like a horse, striding past an open warehouse doorway and cutting off a group of people who'd been about to step outside, as if they didn't even exist in her vision. 'I didn't do anything to alarm them. Humans are –'

'*You* didn't have to do anything,' I told her as I gave an apologetic wave to the people we'd blocked. 'Not when you've got a thirty-foot shadow there to scare them for you.'

'Shadow?' Aventurine turned to frown at me. 'What are you talking about?'

'You were about to shift bodies,' I said. 'Everyone could see it.'

'Don't be stupid.' She scowled, her steps speeding up. 'I had perfect control.'

'Oh, really?' I skipped in front of her to hold her golden gaze. 'Then why was your shadow lashing its tail?'

Aventurine didn't say a word, but her scowl deepened.

'You've got to be more careful,' I said as I fell back into step beside her. 'Did you hear what they were saying about dragons back there?'

'I heard,' Aventurine muttered. 'But I don't want to talk about it.'

Well, of course she didn't. If it couldn't be fixed with chocolate or with violence, why would she be interested?

Unfortunately, I couldn't set the problem aside so easily. It kept twisting around in my head, casting a sickly pall over my victory, as we hurried from the grey, warehouse-filled sixth district into the bustling fifth district, where the house colours shifted to timbered black and white, and red-and-yellow flowers bloomed in all the windows. A clock was chiming in the distance, and I knew I'd have to work hard to calm Horst when we finally reached the Chocolate Heart, at least fifteen minutes later than I was due.

Horst would get over his annoyance once he understood the circumstances. But I clearly hadn't been paying enough attention. How could I not have noticed that people were worrying so much about the dragons? And why hadn't I predicted it in the first place?

If there was one thing I was supposed to be good at, it was riding the mood of my city. It kept me safe. It kept me strong.

From the moment I'd sneaked out of our family tent, while Dieter was sleeping, on our very first morning in Drachenburg all those years ago, I'd felt the whole city calling out to me – and it was exactly what I'd needed to put my broken pieces back together. Maybe our parents weren't here to protect us any more, and I would never again see the home I'd been born into …

But every cobblestoned square and smelly corner of Drachenburg had been just waiting for me to come and make it my own, from the ancient tumbledown city walls that still circled the fourteenth district to the massive golden palace that sprawled across the city's centre, as unbreakable as a promise set in stone. There was a whole world beyond the riverbank, a world of colour and excitement, where no one ever seemed to be afraid.

I wanted it all. No, more than that: I *needed* it.

Dieter might think that the whole world revolved around our tiny market stall, but I had bigger dreams. I was getting ready to take charge of my own story, even if my older brother could never understand it ...

And the Chocolate Heart could *not* be the end of it.

I'd spent the last six years of my life living in patchwork tents on the riverbank, replacing one after another whenever a raging windstorm or a human riot stole the last one away from me. I was ready for a real home with walls that could never be broken or burned down again. That was why I'd turned down Horst's offer of a full-time job two months ago, even though the salary he'd offered had been dangerously tempting.

The Chocolate Heart had nearly gone out of business just before I'd got involved with it. The next time that Marina offended the wrong person, the whole shop could disappear, just like grains of sand swept away by the muddy brown river. I would *not* anchor myself to yet another home that could be taken away from me at any moment.

I had bigger plans ... or at least, I was supposed to.

How many hours *had* I spent working on those handbills when I should have been out roaming the city, searching for new and better opportunities?

How many times had I lingered in the Chocolate Heart after my official work was done, just hanging about the kitchen, washing dishes for free and sampling all the different kinds of chocolates that they made?

I wasn't a dragon, but I still had wings to stretch. I couldn't let myself get so distracted any more ... not even by the gorgeous smell of chocolate and a place that felt dangerously like mine. T*hat* was a story I could never let myself believe.

Aventurine startled me, just as we reached the third district, by turning to give me a knowing look from her gleaming golden eyes. 'I can feel you chewing on your own scales,' she said. 'What are you worrying about now?'

'Me? Worry?' I snorted, putting an extra swing into my step, so that my scarlet coat-tails billowed magnificently around me. 'Why would I? I've got everything under control.'

And I almost believed it ...

Until the crown princess's soldiers came for me the next day.

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