



### CHAPTER 3

The first thing I realised when my eyes opened was that I was in the wrong place. Just a moment ago I'd been sitting on my haunches, looking down at that colourfully dressed human with the astonishing cooking skills. Now all I could see was blue sky.

*Oh. I must be lying on my back.*

Well, that was strange. I'd never lain on my back before. It would have crushed my wings.

*My wings!* Where were my wings? I couldn't feel them underneath me. I scrambled to get back on all four legs – and promptly fell on to my front.

*What was wrong with my legs?*

I opened my mouth to let the smoke free from my throat. Then I realised: there wasn't any. Why wasn't there any

smoke building up in my throat? I always coughed up smoke when I panicked. And I was definitely panicking now!

'Careful,' said a voice nearby. It sounded familiar, but not quite right. The last time I'd heard that voice, it had sounded so much smaller.

I twisted my neck around. It was surprisingly hard to do. But I didn't have time to worry about that.

The creature standing before me was human. It was my human. But how had he got so big? A minute ago he'd been tiny. Now he towered over me.

'You should move slowly,' he told me. 'It'll take you a while to adjust, I expect.'

'Adjust to *what*?' I shrieked.

Then I froze, my throat closing up in protest. That hadn't been my voice. My voice was supposed to thunder through the clearing. *This* voice sounded tiny and creaky. It sounded ... it sounded almost like ...

Shivers seized my body and shook it against the ground.

'Here.' The human sighed and pulled the outer layer of cloth off his arms and back. 'You look cold. It's probably from shock.' He dropped the long purple thing over my back, and it flooded across me, falling to the ground on both sides.

How could it be so big on me? Unless ...

'I can't be,' I whispered, in that terrible, small, wrong voice. 'No!'

'Oh yes,' he said. 'I am sorry, you know, but it couldn't be helped. You were going to eat me, after all ... and when

you were that size, I had no hope of stopping you.' He moved his shoulders up and down. 'What else could I do but fix that?'

The world spun around me. I couldn't breathe. I tried to dig my claws into the dirt to steady myself. They pushed uselessly against it and refused to sink in.

I would not look down to see the reason why. I kept my gaze on the lying, deceiving human in front of me.

'You're not a magic person!' I said. 'You can't fool me. You're not wearing black coverings!'

'Black - ? Ohhh, I know what you mean. You're thinking of the king's battle mages in their robes.' He snorted. 'No, I'm not one of *them*. They do all the big, flashy magic on the battlefields, so they get all the gold and glory, and the uniform, too. But as for me ...'

His lips stretched into a smug smile. 'I'm something far more interesting: a food mage. There aren't many of us, but trust me, we're not lacking in power. And you liked the hot chocolate that I enchanted, didn't you? So that's something.'

*Something?* That hot chocolate had been the best thing I had ever tasted. Just the memory of it made my stomach hurt with longing.

After all of Mother's worries, I had finally found my passion ... but at the worst possible moment.

And what exactly did he mean by *enchanted*?

The food mage leaned down and scooped out something round from his bag. It glinted in the sunlight. Dread filled my stomach. I knew what that was. Grandfather had brought one home for us once, along with a whole batch of

other human contraptions like kettles and pots for us to study. Citrine had identified it immediately.

A mirror.

'Do you want to see yourself?' he asked with a strange gentleness.

No, I thought. But I wouldn't let myself say it out loud. I was a dragon. I would not act afraid of anything, especially not in front of someone who should have been my prey.

The mirror came closer and closer as I lay, frozen, waiting for it.

I would not run. I would not disgrace myself. I ...

He lowered the mirror directly in front of my face.

A very young human female looked back at me with wide, horrified, golden eyes.

The food mage didn't stay long after that. Whistling, he gathered together all his things, taking the time to wipe down his cooking pot. My mouth watered at the smell, but I clamped my small, blunt teeth together and forced myself not to ask for any more of his chocolate.

He didn't deserve that satisfaction.

'Change. Me. Back!' I ordered him. 'Or else!'

Fifteen minutes earlier he would have trembled at the growl that rumbled through my voice. Now he only gave me a twisted smile as he slung his bag over his shoulder.

'Good luck, little dragon.'

He'd taken back his outer covering by then, leaving me wearing only what the transformation had left me, a

silver-and-crimson fabric in the pattern of my scales. It covered my raw, unscaled body like a second skin, but it left my soft feet completely unprotected. No matter how hard I tried, I couldn't force myself to look closely at those poor, bare little things, or at the silver-and-crimson imitations of my scales. Whenever I tried, my pathetic teeth chattered against each other uncontrollably, and I had to wrap my weak upper limbs around my chest to keep the rest of me still.

*Grandfather will know what to do.* I just had to keep repeating that to myself every time I started to forget that dragons never, ever got scared.

'You might come to like being human, you know,' said the food mage. 'Once you get over the surprise of it all, you should travel down the mountain. The closest city is Drachenburg, the capital. That's probably the best place to find a livelihood and a place to stay.'

'A livelihood?' I repeated, and stared at him. 'What's that?'

Sighing, he shook his head. 'You have a lot to learn. Just remember: go that way.' He pointed down the mountain-side. 'I'd look for a position as an apprentice, if I were you. I don't know how old you were as a dragon, but you don't look more than twelve now, so you're about the right age. You'd better start walking soon, though. You don't want to be stuck up here in the dark when the wild animals come out.'

'I'm the fiercest thing in these mountains!' I snarled. He made a funny little noise in the back of his throat.

Then the furry lines over his eyes lowered. His mouth twisted. There was something about his face ... oh, stones and bones. Was that *pity* I saw?

How I wished that I still had the power to breathe flames! I would have set him alight, chocolate and all, just to wipe that expression out of existence.

'Good luck,' he repeated, and turned away.

A minute later, even the sound of his whistling had faded. I was alone in the clearing, on a mountain that suddenly felt enormous.

Right. Fury gave me power. Gritting my teeth together, I rolled over and pushed my back feet into the ground.

*I can do this.*

I hadn't dared try to stand up in front of the food mage. I couldn't bear for anyone – especially *him* – to witness me wobbling around like a fool. Now that he was gone, though, I wasn't going to stay here a moment longer. I had a mountain to climb and – I groaned at the thought of it, sagging back down on to all fours – I had a horrible surprise for my family.

Oh, how my mother and my grandfather and both of my aunts were going to shake their heads over me when they saw what had happened! My puny teeth clenched at the thought of what they would say. And the way Jasper would tease me afterwards ...

*Never mind.* I just had to get it over with as quickly as possible, and then – once all the thundering and wing-flaring was past – they'd settle down and sort me back into my proper form.

Somehow.

But dragons can't do magic, whispered a tiny, high-pitched voice in the back of my mind.

I silenced it immediately, growling low in my short, narrow throat. I wasn't about to lower my neck in submission and give up. I was a dragon, not a worm, and it was time to return to my cave. For once I would happily sit back and let my family take care of everything until this ludicrous little problem was fixed.

And then I would find more chocolate! All I had to do, first, was learn to walk.

If humans could do it, how hard could it be? I shoved myself upright with a grunt of effort.

Five minutes later, I was panting and lying on the ground again, where I'd fallen hard ... *again*. Human bodies were ridiculous!

Snarling, I slammed my forefeet – *hands* – on to the ground.

I couldn't walk on two legs? Fine! I'd just walk on all fours then. It made far more sense anyway. Humans would do it themselves if they were more practical creatures. All it took was a little cleverness, angling my over-long back legs in just the right way, and then ...

Owww! Whimpering, I dropped back down to the ground after only three steps and sucked my hurting right hand in my mouth for comfort. A drop of blood leaked on to my tongue.

Ick! I spat it out in horror. How could *blood* not taste good?

This spell really had gone right through me. If I didn't get it fixed soon, I'd end up craving vegetables!

That was more than enough to make me try again.

This time I wriggled around until I found a fallen branch lying not too far away. *There!* I'd heard of dragons who managed with only three feet. If they could do it, so could I.

Gritting my teeth, I started to limp-walk up the mountainside.

After twenty minutes I managed to toss the stick aside and walk – not easily, but capably – on two sore and aching feet.

After thirty minutes a massive shadow passed overhead. I jerked my head back so fast that my neck *poinged* in protest.

*Aha!*

Up above me, where there should have been nothing but blue sky gradually fading into darkness, I saw a massive expanse of red and gold, flying low and close, barely higher than the treeline.

I would have recognised that scale pattern anywhere.

'Grandfather!' I yelled. I started jumping up and down, finding new muscles in my human legs that I hadn't even felt before. I waved my arms wildly, giddy with relief. 'Grandfather, it's me!'

His head – so much huger from this position! – tilted. One great golden eye focused on my jumping figure.

'Grandfather!' I yelled again.

He gathered his wings and circled around to fly ... in the opposite direction.



My mouth dropped open. I stared up at him in disbelief.  
'Hey!' I yelled. I reached down and grabbed a rock the size of my hand. 'Come back here!'

I threw the rock as hard as I could.

It didn't hit him, of course. It fell far short. But it caught his attention, just as I'd hoped it would.

His neck snaked around in a whirl of colour. His enormous mouth opened wide.

I put both hands to my tiny human mouth.  
'Grandfa-!'

Flame billowed out of his mouth in a massive fireball aimed straight at me.

My new body took over before my mind could catch up with it. I fell to the ground and tumbled hard, tucking my head into my chest and wrapping myself into a ball.

Heat scorched my back, then disappeared. I lay frozen, waiting for the next fireball to arrive.

Without my scales I would burn to ashes in seconds.

Any moment now ...

Wait. How long had it been?

Warily, I opened my eyes.

Slowly, I untucked my head.

Far away, in the sky above, I saw the distant figure of my grandfather flapping away from me. He didn't even bother to look back.

I stared after him.

*He'd tried to flame me.*

And then he'd left me here!

Family never left each other. Dragons protected their

hoards and their hatchlings with their lives! It didn't matter how much I complained about all the bossy adults in my mountain, I knew with every fibre of my being that they'd do anything – anything! – to keep me safe.

But then ... My human throat swallowed convulsively again and again, as if something horrible was caught inside ... like the truth.

... I wasn't their hatchling any more, was I?

My gaze clung to my grandfather's figure as he grew smaller and smaller in the distance. Bruises and scratches covered my soft, weak limbs, making every inch of my skin ache.

I knew exactly what my grandfather had seen when he'd looked down at me.

That fireball had only been a warning. He wouldn't bother to actually kill a pesky little human unless she did something really provocative and threatening, something like ... oh, say, *trying to make my way into the family cavern.*

Taking a deep breath, I pushed myself up until I was sitting on my padded backside on the hard ground, my arms wrapped defensively around my legs. The air was cooling as the sky darkened. A strong breeze blew across the mountain, fluttering my long, black head-fur around my face and sending chills rippling through my vulnerable, unscaled skin.

The mountainside spread out below me, just as it had four hours earlier when I'd first set out on my grand adventure.

But this time I finally understood that I couldn't go home again.