

Jacqueline May

MEAT

The monsters had ransacked the kitchen again. Dried beans skittered in front of me and dug into my bare feet. “Amira!” I bellowed.

She appeared in the doorway to the back garden, silhouetted against the brightness outside. Her eyes were huge and pleading.

“Don’t give me that face. You need to get your beasts under control, and you need to sweep up this mess.”

“They’re all penned up, I swear.”

“You swore that yesterday. If it weren’t for that fool from the count’s estate, I’d be making *stew* of them.” The count, overly impressed with his rank, had sent an advance man to set the details of tonight’s visit. The prat stuck his nose in every drawer of my kitchen, haggled all my best recipes down to their dullest dregs, then, as if bestowing an honor, told me I must have been a knockout in my day. “Maybe I will.”

Tears gathered along the thick lashes beneath those unfair eyes. “You wouldn’t. Ina, you can’t!”

Of course I couldn’t. “Watch me.”

She fled into the yard, sparking a cacophony: squawks and screeches, mad clucking, a crash, a human cry of dismay.

I stuck my head out the door. “Those basilisks had better be wearing their blinders!”

Amira leapt in front of something, spreading her arms. Too late: I’d seen the stone chickens. One, frozen mid-step, toppled sideways into the grass. The basilisks, Beer and Barley, rubbed against Amira’s legs like scaly cats. When they were grown, they’d be the only domesticated mating pair in the province. They’d be able to petrify humans by then. I didn’t like to think what our employer, the duke, would use them for, but they made Amira happy.

“The count expects chicken,” I said. “The usual kind. Made of meat.”

Amira gathered Beer and Barley into her arms, their claws scrabbling against the tough canvas of her pants. She dumped them into

the empty cage and snapped the padlock. The live chickens wandered peaceably among their stone companions, pecking around their feet.

Embers thrust his red snout over the door of his stall to nudge Amira's shoulder. She cupped both hands around the snout and caressed the leathery hide as the dragon rumbled with pleasure. "There, love," Amira cooed. Despite all the times I'd found my cupboard doors scorched and the supplies scattered, watching this wiry, sweet girl with her monsters melted me.

I made my face stern. "Now the floor, if you please."

Amira gave the dragon one last pat. Our shoulders brushed as we passed each other in the doorway. Which chickens could I spare for tonight? So few were left; Embers must have been snacking again, though his world-class training was supposed to prevent that. Never trust an itinerant dragon peddler.

As I squatted to inspect my remaining hens, a male voice came from the kitchen: "Do *you* come with the meal?"

I straightened. The count's advance man stood with his arm around Amira's waist. He saw me and called, "Where have you been keeping this one?"

Even from this distance I could see Amira's hands tighten on the broom. She could take care of herself, but she didn't dare risk losing her job with the animals.

The man reached for Amira's bandanna. "Don't," she said quietly. He laughed and snatched it away. Her chopped hair stuck up in clumps. She looked like a wood sprite.

"Let go of her," I barked. The man kept his hold on Amira as he reached to shove the heavy kitchen door. I slammed into it just before it latched. Pain echoed through my shoulder. As the door swung back in, I saw the man freeze in surprise, Amira jerk to free herself, and then the stone chicken in my hands was rising, surprisingly heavy, and coming down to bury its sharp beak in the advance man's skull.

As we hacked away, Amira wheedled, "Some for Embers?"

Tiny drops of blood had splattered her cheek like dark freckles. I wanted to slide my thumb against her tawny skin to wipe them away, but I kept my hands tight on the cleaver and my eyes on my task. "Of course."