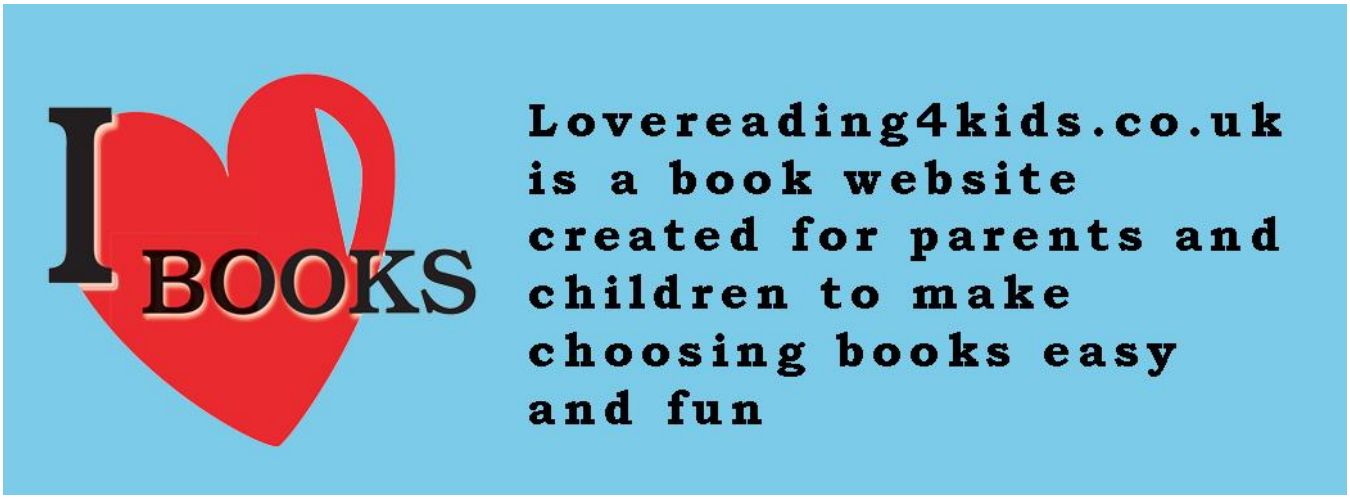


Opening extract from

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Written by

Stephanie Burgis

Illustrated by

Freya Hartas

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CHAPTER 1

I can't say I ever wondered what it felt like to be human. But then, my grandfather Grenat always said, '*It's safer not to talk to your food*,' – and as every dragon knows, humans are the most dangerous kind of meal there is.

Of course, as a young dragon, all I ever saw of them were their jewels and their books. The jewels were delightful, but their books were just maddening. What a waste of ink! No matter how hard I squinted, I could never make it past the first few paragraphs of cramped, crabby text. The last time I tried, I got so frustrated I burned three of those books to cinders with angry puffs of my breath.

'Don't you have any higher feelings?' my brother demanded, when he saw what I'd done. Jasper wanted to be a philosopher, so he always tried to stay calm, but his tail

began to lash dangerously, sending gold coins showering through our cavern as he glared at the smoking pile before me. 'Just think,' he told me. 'Every one of those books was written by a creature whose brain was half the size of one of your forefeet. And yet, apparently, even *they* have more patience than you!'

'Oh, really?' I loved goading high-minded Jasper into losing his temper ... and now that I'd laid waste to my tiny paper enemies, I was ready for fun. So I braced myself, scales rippling with secret delight, and said, 'Well, *I* think anyone who wants to spend his time reading ant scribbles must have an ant-sized brain himself.'

'Arrrrgh!'

He let out the most satisfying roar of rage and leaped forward, landing exactly where I'd been sitting only a moment ago. If I hadn't been expecting it, I would have been slammed into a mountain of loose diamonds and emeralds, and my still-soft scales would have been bruised all over. But Jasper was the one who landed there instead, while I joyously pounced on his back and rubbed his snout in the pile of rocks.

'Children!' Our mother raised her head from her forefeet and let out a long-suffering snort that blew through the cave, sending more gold coins flying. 'Some of us are trying to sleep after a long, hard hunt!'

'*I* would have helped you hunt,' I said, jumping off Jasper. 'If you'd let me come –'

'Your scales haven't hardened enough to withstand even a wolf's bite.' Mother's great head sank back down

towards her glittering blue-and-gold feet. 'Let alone a bullet or a mage's spell,' she added wearily. 'In another thirty years, perhaps, when you're nearly grown and ready to fly ...'

'I can't wait another thirty *years*!' I bellowed. My voice echoed around the cave, until Grandfather and both of my aunts were calling their own sleepy protests down the long tunnels of our home, but I ignored them. 'I can't live cooped up in this mountain forever, going nowhere, doing nothing –'

'*Jasper* is using his quiet years to teach himself philosophy.' Mother's voice no longer sounded weary; it grew cold and hard, like a diamond, as her neck stretched higher and higher above me, her giant golden eyes narrowing into dangerous slits focused solely on me, her disobedient daughter. 'Other dragons have found their own passions in literature, history or mathematics. Tell me, Aventurine: have you managed to find *your* passion yet?'

I ground my teeth together and scratched my front right claws through the piled gold beneath my feet. 'Lessons are boring. I want to explore and –'

'And how, exactly, do you plan to communicate with the creatures you meet on your explorations?' Mother asked sweetly. 'Or have you been progressing further with your language studies than I had imagined?'

Jasper let out a muffled snicker behind me. I swung around and shot a ball of smoke at him. He let it explode harmlessly in his face, his eyes gleaming with amusement.

'I can speak six languages already,' I muttered as I turned back to Mother.

Still, I couldn't quite lift my head to meet her gaze.

'By the time she was your age,' Mother said, 'your sister could speak and write twenty.'

'Hmmph.'

I didn't dare snort smoke at Mother. But I would have snorted it at Citrine if she had been stuck here with us, instead of living far away in her perfectly extraordinary, one-of-a-kind, dragon-sized palace. Citrine wrote epic poetry that filled other dragons with awe and was worshipped like a queen by every creature who came near her.

No one could measure up to my older sister. There was no point even trying.

I could feel Mother's gaze on me grow even sharper, as if she'd read my thoughts. 'Language,' she said, quoting one of Jasper's favourite philosophers, 'is a dragon's greatest power, reaching far beyond the realm of tooth and claw.'

'I know,' I muttered.

'Do you really, Aventurine?' Her long neck curved as her massive head swung down to look me in the eyes. 'Because courage is one thing, but recklessness is quite another. You may think yourself a ferocious beast, but outside this mountain you wouldn't survive a day. So you had better start being grateful that you have older and wiser relatives to look after you.'

Mother was sleeping deeply only two minutes later, her heavy breaths *whoosh*ing as calmly and evenly through the cavern as if we'd never even had an argument.

'Not a day?' Jasper whispered, once she was safely asleep. He shook off the last of the gemstones clinging to his back, and grinned at me, showing all of his teeth. 'Not an hour, more likely. Not even half an hour, knowing you.'

I glared at him, mantling my wings. 'I could look after myself perfectly well. I'm bigger and fiercer than anything else in these mountains.'

'But are you smarter?' He snorted. 'I'd wager all the gold in this cavern that even wolves are better at philosophical debates than you. And they probably don't set things on fire every time they lose!'

'Ohhh!' I whirled around, lashing my tail. But there was no escape. The cavern walls were too close, and feeling closer with every second. They were pushing in around me until I could barely breathe.

And I was supposed to spend another thirty years trapped inside this mountain, listening to my relatives tell me off for the fact that it was boring?

Never.

That was when I realised exactly what I had to do.

But I wasn't stupid, no matter what anyone thought. So I waited until Jasper finally gave up teasing me and curled up with one of his new human books – one that I hadn't burned. It was a philosophical tract, so I knew I would be safe.

'I'm going on a walk through the tunnels,' I told him, when he had flicked the pages five times with his claw.

'Mm-hmm,' Jasper murmured, without looking up. 'Aventurine, listen to this: this fellow thinks it's morally

wrong to eat meat. *And* fish, too! He won't hurt any breathing creatures, so he only eats plants. Isn't that fascinating?'

'*Fascinating?* He's going to starve!' I flicked my ears in horror. 'I told you humans had pebbles for brains!'

But my brother didn't even hear me. Smoke trickled in a long, happy stream through his nostrils as he held the tiny book close to his eyes, rumbling with satisfaction.

I stepped right over his tail, one foot after another, on my way to freedom.

Rattling snores echoed down the long tunnels from the caverns where Grandfather Grenat, Aunt Tourmaline and Aunt Émeraude slept. Luckily, at this time of day, when the sun was at its highest, no one was likely to wake at a few scrabbling sounds from the corners of the mountain. Dropping to my belly, I wriggled my way up the side tunnel I'd discovered two years earlier, the one that was too small for any of the grown-ups to use. At the very top, filled and hidden by a boulder the size of my head, was a secret entrance to the mountain. It was my favourite spot in the world.

I'd shown Jasper of course, ages ago, but he almost never visited it – only when I dragged him there. He was always happiest curled up in our cavern with a book, or scratching out long, wordy treatises with one foreclaw dipped in ink.

I was the one who loved pushing the boulder free and poking the tip of my snout out of the hole, to take deep, tingling breaths of the fresh, outside air and watch the clouds float through the sky overhead. I'd never dared to go any further, but I lay there for hours sometimes, just

dreaming of the day when I would finally be allowed to stretch my wings and fly across the endless sky.

Today, for the first time ever, I wasn't going to stop at dreaming.

I was going to show Jasper – *and* Mother – just how capable I was of taking care of myself. Then the grown-ups would have no excuse to keep me hidden away any longer.

With exhilaration flooding through me, I folded my wings tightly against my sides and lunged for the outside world and freedom.

It was harder than I'd expected to squeeze out of the hole. My shoulders stuck in the opening until I nearly roared with effort. I had to bite my mouth shut and swallow down choking smoke to keep myself silent. Finally, *finally*, I forced myself free with an explosive *pop*! It sent me tumbling on to the ground outside ... and whimpering with pain. My folded wings had scraped so hard against the rough, craggy edges of the rocks that there were ragged tears, now, in my silver and crimson scales.

What had Mother said? '*Your scales haven't hardened enough to withstand even a wolf's bite …*'

I gnashed my teeth and pushed myself up on to all four feet, babying my wings by holding them half-folded at my side. Every breeze that blew across them made me wince, but I growled away the pain.

So, I wouldn't be making my first attempt at flight today. Never mind. I didn't need to fly to catch my prey.

For the first time in my life, the sky arched blue and free all around me, and I was free, too. The jagged

peak of the mountain rose behind me. Below me lay a forested valley. And in between, buried somewhere in the rumpled foothills and narrow, rocky paths where animals and humans made their tiny ways ...

I set off down the mountainside, following the scent of food.