
STEPHANIE BURGIS
The Princess Who Flew with Dragons
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BLOOMSBURY
CHILDREN'S BOOKS
LONDON OXFORD NEW YORK NEW DELHI SYDNEY

BLOOMSBURY CHILDREN'S BOOKS
Bloomsbury Publishing Plc
50 Bedford Square, London WC1B 3DP, UK

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First published in Great Britain in 2019 by Bloomsbury Publishing Plc

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A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

ISBN: PB: 978-1-5266-0433-0; eBook: 978-1-5266-0432-3

2 4 6 8 10 9 7 5 3 1

Typeset by RefineCatch Limited, Bungay, Suffolk

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CHAPTER 1

I *knew* it was a bad idea to leave home even before I ever heard about the ice giants. But when your older sister rules your entire kingdom, it's almost impossible to say no to her.

'Sofia! Good morning.' My sister, Crown Princess Katrin of Drachenheim, gave me her warmest smile as she greeted me from her seat behind the polished wooden desk of her office.

O*h no*. I'd seen too many powerful nobles take their seats under the spell of that smile, only to be sent away fifteen minutes later with stunned faces, somehow persuaded into plans they could never have imagined in their worst nightmares. It had been six months since the last time Katrin had come up with a clever new plan for *my* life. The very idea of being drawn into another one now

made me want to flee straight back to my bedroom, to curl up with the protection of my books and a locked door.

I was a princess, though, and princesses can never show fear. So I crossed my arms and scowled, planting myself firmly in place. 'Well?' I demanded. 'What is it this time?'

Her eyes narrowed dangerously. 'I beg your pardon?'

I narrowed my own eyes back at her even as nerves rattled frantically against my chest, reminding me of every battle I'd lost against her before. 'You've summoned me to your office instead of your sitting room,' I told her impatiently. 'That means we're here on business – there's something you want me to do for you. But you're sitting behind your desk instead of coming around to meet me. T*hat* means you know I won't want to do it – so you're reminding me that you're the one in charge.' A*s always*.

'Hmm.' Katrin's lips tightened. One long, elegant brown finger tapped twice on the desk. Then she stilled it and her face relaxed into its usual serene authority. 'Well,' she said, 'apparently I haven't wasted the kingdom's money by hiring those expensive tutors of yours.'

Now she was complimenting my intelligence.

I was in so much trouble.

I said, 'Please tell me you haven't promised me in marriage to a wicked fairy *again*!'

Her perfect jaw tightened. Her voice sounded as if it were being ground through glass. 'I never actually signed that betrothal contract last winter.'

But she'd seriously considered it, and we both knew it. My sister might have been forced to take on the duty of

raising me when our mother died, but I'd always understood what mattered most to her: *anything for the good of the kingdom*.

I raised my eyebrows pointedly. 'How about that time you sent me up to the top of a clock tower to be eaten by monsters?'

'I did *not* –!' She stopped and let out a long, controlled breath. 'I was forced to send you as a *hostage* to attacking dragons, not as their *supper*. If you recall, it was our only chance of saving the city! But those "monsters" have become our kingdom's best allies ever since we signed our treaty with them. Didn't you just send a five-page letter to one of them yesterday?'

'Hmmph.' Of course her spies told her whenever I sent Jasper a new letter. The fact that my one true friend was a dragon who lived underneath a mountain over sixty miles away – and wouldn't be allowed to even leave his cavern until he turned fifty – meant our letters were the happiest and easiest space I knew. We would never meet, so I would never have to worry about mucking things up the way I always did in person.

But I should have known that our letters had never been truly private. Even in the apparent safety of my own rooms, I was surrounded by ladies-in-waiting at all times and, naturally, I wasn't the one who had chosen them.

My sister was all about *control*.

Control of her emotions, which she never allowed any of us to glimpse any more – *if* they still existed and hadn't been swallowed up like everything else in her life by …

Control of the kingdom, which our father had handed over to her several years ago. He hadn't wanted to deal with any difficult decisions – or any emotions of his own either, after our mother's death. Something had vanished behind his blue eyes when Mother died, leaving only a hearty, artificial veneer that I could never manage to pierce.

And, of course, control of me.

'I trust,' she said evenly, 'that you will *always* wish to do what's best for our kingdom, no matter what the personal sacrifice might be. Is there any other repayment for what our people give us?'

She waved one graceful hand at the luxurious office around us, full of rich, dark wood and gleaming silver. 'This palace ... these lovely gowns we're both wearing ...' She tilted her head. 'Haven't you just put through *another* order of new books from the university at Villenne?'

I tried not to squirm. 'So?'

I'd been forcing myself to save most of my pocket money for other purposes lately, but this was a brand-new series of tracts by my favourite philosopher in the entire world, Gert van Heidecker, taken from his famous lectures in far-off Villenne, and it looked utterly *amazing*. I couldn't wait to curl up with all six volumes on my bed and close the door on the rest of the world while I absorbed every one of them from beginning to end. I might not even come out for meals until I'd read them all through at least three times.

It was the one time I ever felt completely confident that I was *definitely* doing the right thing: when I was lost in a beautifully impractical, passionate debate over the nature

of truth or free will or reality itself, with my imagination flying free and the terrifying outside world locked far away from me.

Philosophy was all about the search for wisdom – a search that could take place without any interruptions in the safety of my own bedroom. Better yet, I could argue anything I liked when it came to philosophical debates, because, for once, I couldn't hurt my family *or* my kingdom with any of my stupid mistakes or strong opinions – and in the study of philosophy, unlike courtly life, we were *supposed* to argue over everything.

It was absolutely perfect for me.

'I saw the price of those books, Sofia.' Katrin's voice pierced my happy fantasy. 'Do you have any idea what most girls your age earn as an annual salary in their full-time work as apprentices or housemaids?'

Ouch. I set my teeth together.

The awful truth was, I *hadn't* known that a year ago. It had never even occurred to me to wonder. Six months ago, though, I'd seen for myself the way refugees lived on our city's riverbank, sleeping in thin tents even in the snow. All of them scratched out a living with their makeshift market – even the youngest children there.

I'd met fierce, brave girls my own age too, who worked hard for their living. Unlike the unobtrusive servants in our palace, *they* hadn't been shy about letting me know what it felt like.

Last winter, two of them had saved my life and the entire kingdom from a fairy invasion that had left me with

nightmares ever since ... and the worst part was, I'd done almost nothing to help them along the way. I'd always dreamed of showing my sister that I *was* worthy of our family after all, but when the real test had come, I had stuttered and stumbled and had to be *rescued*, like a helpless – no, a *useless* – princess.

I'd always known I was a disappointment as a royal. But I'd never realised how disappointing I was as a *person* until then.

Katrin's tone gentled as I stood in scowling silence. 'I know about the money you've been sending to the riverbank to build real houses there.'

'So?' My shoulders hunched. 'They deserve roofs over their heads, don't they?'

It was the least I could do from the warmth and comfort of my rooms. But I'd tried so hard not to let my ladies-in-waiting find out. N*o one* was supposed to know that I was the one funding those houses.

I should have known better than to think I could keep any secrets from my sister.

'I agree,' she said calmly. 'Unfortunately, there's been some unrest among the city's merchants. They claim the new construction would spoil the view from their shops – and you know how much they hate that riverbank market! However, I dealt with their objections rather neatly in yesterday's privy council meeting. In fact, we're *all* delighted that you're finally taking an interest in our city.'

U*h-oh*. I eyed her suspiciously, hugging my arms tighter across my chest. I knew that purring tone of voice.

'What would you think,' she asked, 'of *not* having those books shipped here from Villenne after all?'

O*h no.* Righteous fury boiled up within me. N*ot this time!*

I had been out-manipulated by my sister so many times. But this was going *too far.*

'That money came from my personal allowance, Katrin!' The words ground out between my teeth. 'I have *every* right to spend it on books –'

'And of course you can still buy your little books,' said Katrin soothingly. 'But you needn't have them shipped all the way here.'

'I ... beg your pardon?' I blinked, caught off balance.

My sister sat back, lacing her hands on her lap and cocking her head, like one of my many tutors waiting for me to fail another unexpected test. 'You may not have heard,' she said, 'but there is a great and historic exhibition about to take place in Villenne.'

'You mean the Diamond Exhibition?' As if she could catch me out that easily! I'd had tutors in everything from etiquette to astronomy flinging unexpected quizzes at me almost every day of my life. 'Of course I've heard of it, Katrin. It's in all the newspapers.'

'Well, it is a once-in-a-lifetime event.' Katrin's smile deepened. 'The chance to view the greatest inventions, magical spells and industrial offerings of our age, all gathered together on display ... It sounds worth a royal look-in, don't you think?'

I stared at her. 'Katrin, Villenne is over four hundred

miles from here, and that exhibition begins *this week*. Unless you've learned how to fly – *oh*.'

O*h no*.

Of course humans couldn't fly themselves, without wings. But I *had* flown once before, veering wildly back and forth through the night sky on the scaly back of Jasper's ferocious sister Aventurine, as she and her best friend had saved me from invading fairies and goblins, leaving my family's palace broken and burning behind us.

That whole night was a memory shrouded in horror – one that I never, ever wanted to repeat. I'd barely left my own room ever since. If it were up to me, I would *never* step outside the rebuilt walls of our palace again.

But I should have realised that my calculating older sister would remember all the details from that night and reshape them into a use that I could never have imagined.

O*h, Katrin*.

I'd been trying so hard to stay fierce and strong throughout this meeting, but at the thought of my sister's slim, upright body sailing out of reach, so high and vulnerable in the sky above me …

I sank down into the chair in front of Katrin's desk. '*You're* going to fly there?' I asked in a horribly small voice.

My sister was going to fly hundreds of miles away from me? Out into the terrifying, unknown outside world where *literally anything* could happen?

My sister, who kept everyone and everything in this kingdom under control, was planning to *leave*?

N*ever*.

'You can't leave Father to look after everything!' I straightened triumphantly in the chair. 'He would never agree to that. Anyway, you know he would make a terrible muddle of the kingdom while you were gone.'

'I know.' Katrin nodded approvingly. 'That's why *you*, Sofia, are going to fly there in my place to represent our kingdom. We need someone to represent us to the wider world, to find us new trading partners and allies from across the continent. I*f* you can manage any of that, you'll win our merchants' full support for those houses on the riverbank. So, if you want to help our people, collect your precious books *and* finally prove your value to the kingdom …'

She smiled sweetly as I gaped at her in disbelief, an empty hollow forming inside my chest where my silly, unearned sense of security had rested ever since our palace walls had been rebuilt.

'Isn't it lucky,' said my sister, 'that you've already flown once before?'



CHAPTER 2

Needless to say, my devious older sister didn't give me any time to think up an escape. Within less than an hour, I was sitting in a beautifully ornamented wooden carriage – one of my family's finest! – as it rose straight up into the air from our south-west courtyard, dangling from the giant claws of a massive green-and-gold dragon: Jasper's terrifying aunt Émeraude.

It wasn't that I didn't like his family ... in theory. But it was *so much* easier to like them from a distance of sixty miles or so.

Katrin smiled serenely as she waved her farewells from the safety of the paved ground below, where she stood next to our big, bluff, red-headed father. He had finished waving already and was beaming around at the gathered courtiers

with his usual, meaningless public smile. I'd hoped to snatch a moment in private to beg for his help, but he'd only strolled out at the last minute and given me a quick, bruising hug that muffled every protest I'd tried to make.

Then I'd been bundled into the carriage with my ladies-in-waiting all rustling and chattering after me, and our guards had shut the door firmly behind us.

Wind gusted against the doors and windows as the dragon's giant wings beat above us, sending our carriage swaying in mid-air. My two younger ladies-in-waiting, Anja and Lena, shrieked with excitement as our view of the golden palace veered sickeningly up and down.

The two guards who accompanied us looked stern and unmoved. My older lady-in-waiting, Ulrike, was already working at her embroidery with her usual aggravating air of prim self-righteousness, blonde hair piled in perfect curls above her head.

I took deep, slow breaths through my clenched teeth and tried with all my might to calm my roiling stomach.

'Aaaah!'

The carriage took a sudden, swooping dip, and my stomach swooped with it. A horrible moan escaped my lips before I clamped them shut and squeezed my eyes shut too, against the nauseating view of all those houses below ... much, *much* too far below us.

'Isn't this exciting?' Anja bounced happily up and down on the seat beside me, tilting the carriage more every time she moved. 'I never imagined that I would fly!'

Oh, for goodness sake.

'You're *not* flying,' I muttered, slitting my eyes half open to glare at her. '*That*'s the dragon.'

And it was utterly humiliating. No matter what I tried – no matter how many promises I ever made to myself – my sister always outwitted me in the end.

Gert van Heidecker wouldn't have let himself be so easily outmanoeuvred. He won philosophical debates across the continent every year and left his opponents shrivelled and mumbling in defeat. I'd read all of the details in his published letters, and Jasper and I agreed: he was the ideal philosopher.

The ideal *human* philosopher anyway. Jasper insisted that the finest dragon philosophers were even more impressive. But when he found out that I had bought van Heidecker's newest treatises hot off the press, I knew perfectly well he would snort smoke in envy.

It was almost enough to reconcile me to this trip …

Until the carriage took a sudden, sharp swing to one side and my stomach lost its battle with gravity.

'U*rrrrp*!'

My sister's guards really were well trained. They didn't budge so much as a muscle as I was sick all over their polished boots.

Anja and Lena did, though. They both shrieked with horror as they yanked their feet out of the way, and Lena's face turned positively green.

It was the only comfort that I found in that whole day's journey.

*

We finally sighted Villenne forty-eight unspeakable hours later. By then, my silk gowns were hanging noticeably looser around my figure and my head was pounding an endless, throbbing beat. I'd managed to eat a few scraps of food each night when we'd landed, but each time I'd got back into the carriage, I'd lost everything I'd eaten the night before.

With every breath, I cursed my sister's scheming. The amusement in our dragon's golden gaze both nights, as she watched me stagger around on legs like loose jelly, didn't sweeten my mood either. Not even a long new letter from Jasper – tossed carelessly in my direction from Émeraude's great claws – could make me feel any better.

I *only wish* I *could be there with you to explore the most famous human city in the world!* he'd written to me in a big, sloping, dark red scrawl. *Just think: you'll be exploring the city of Gert van Heidecker himself! You must tell me everything about it.*

But all I could think of were the stories his aunt Émeraude would carry back to him about me. They would all be unbearably humiliating. Jasper and I had formed a perfect philosophical friendship by letter – could it ever survive if he discovered how useless I was in real life?

U*gh.*

Even Lena and Anja looked unusually subdued as we all took our places for our third day of travel. No number of washes could clear the stench from the carriage by that point, and the glass windows had been sealed for flight. They couldn't be opened without breaking them.

Every one of us had tried.

But as the third hour of flight began that day, something nigh on miraculous occurred. High, round, colourful domes shaped like curling seashells appeared in the distance below us.

A gleaming white palace rose up from the centre of the shimmering seawater beyond and the older guard, Jurgen, spoke for the first time in our whole journey. 'Villenne.' He jerked his square brown chin at the window in a nod. 'That's it, Your Highness.'

'*Uhh!*' A croak of pure joy escaped my throat as I lunged forward to spread my fingers against the glass. It felt blessedly cool against my skin. The sight below felt even better. I took it in with a greedy gaze, absorbing every detail as we swung back and forth above it and my stomach lurched in accompaniment.

Somewhere down there, in that massive cluster of islands connected by sparkling white bridges, was the university where Gert van Heidecker lectured to enraptured students in serious blue robes.

Somewhere too was the Diamond Exhibition, the reason I'd been forced into this carriage of horror in the first place.

But most importantly ...

Somewhere down there was a bed – a *real* bed, with a mattress and a deep, cosy duvet, in a room with a door that actually *locked*. Soon I would be tucked underneath that duvet with my brand-new books and a steaming pot of hot chocolate in my hands. I could hardly –

'Move aside!' Jurgen barked as he and the younger guard jerked upright in their seat across from me.

'I beg your pard–!' I began.

He yanked me away from the window as something round and black shot past it.

Screams filled the wildly rocking carriage. I didn't join them. I just absorbed the message of that cannonball with pure, cleansing fury.

'They're shooting at us,' the younger guard, Konrad, announced.

'Of course they are,' I snarled.

T*hank you so much, Katrin.*

Enough was enough.

Ignoring my guards and ladies-in-waiting alike, I grabbed the door handle and flung the carriage door open in mid-air.



CHAPTER 3

Cold wind rushed into the swinging carriage. I gripped both sides of the doorway for balance, leaned outside as far as I dared and bellowed, '*You flaming idiots! Don't you know who we are?*'

The carriage shook harder and I staggered. An ominous rumbling sound exploded above me, making me flinch – until I realised: giant Émeraude was actually laughing.

I glowered up at her green-and-silver belly. 'And just what are *you* amused by?' I shouted.

Her long, scaly neck snaked down through the air until her massive head was grinning directly at me with dozens of long teeth fully bared. '*You*, little princess,' she said in a voice like thunder. 'I find you amusing.'

Another cannonball *whoosh*ed past me, less than a foot

from my head. I tightened my grasp on the door frame, resisting my guards' attempts to pull me back into the carriage.

'Have you even noticed we're being *shot at*?' I demanded.

Émeraude's great green lips pulled back even wider, revealing – impossibly – more teeth. 'My scales are impenetrable,' she said with malicious satisfaction. 'They can shoot as many pebbles at me as they like. I'*ll* take no notice.'

'Gaah!' I stomped my foot in frustration – and the carriage tipped, throwing me forward.

'Aaaahhhhh!' Desperately, I clung to the doorway, my feet dangling in mid-air …

And my guards landed with twin *thud*s against my back.

I fell forward, screaming. My arms windmilled in the open air, but there was nothing there to save me.

The connected islands of Villenne spread out far below, strange and lovely, the last sight I would ever see …

Or so I thought, until something much worse appeared before me.

'No-o-o!' I twisted desperately, but gravity was inescapable.

I fell directly into Émeraude's open mouth and landed in hot, stinking darkness as her massive jaws closed around me.

Everything blurred in a fog of horror and disbelief.

N*ononononononono!*

Sunlight pierced the darkness. Émeraude's great, hot

tongue curled beneath my body. I was tipping, tumbling, falling …

And I landed on the wooden floor of my carriage a moment later, panting and staring up at the horrified faces of my companions.

'Ahhh! Ahhh! A*hhh!*'

I slammed my mouth shut. But I couldn't stop the desperate wave of shivers that shook my body against the floor.

The smell of the dragon's mouth clung to my skin and my hair. My hands and gown were sticky from her tongue.

I had *been inside a dragon's mouth*!

'Your Highness?' Lena peered down at me, blue eyes wide. 'Are you all right?'

I stared up at her in disbelief.

Was I *all right*?

'She should really have a bath,' Émeraude said through the open doorway, smacking her lips. 'She tasted like sick. Disgusting.'

T*hat was it!*

I pushed myself upright. Breathing hard, I grabbed hold of the closest bench seat and pulled myself the rest of the way up until I stood on wobbling legs.

'Tell me,' I said to Jurgen. 'Did my sister bother to warn the Valmarene royals that I would arrive with a dragon?'

'Er …' Jurgen gave a sidelong look at our dragon, whose green-and-silver face still filled the doorway. 'I believe she thought it would be a more effective show of strength if it was unexpected, Your Highness.'

'An *effective show of strength*.' My teeth clenched on the words. 'And did she have any ideas about how we could stop our hosts from thinking they had to *defend themselves against fiery death* when we arrived, out of the blue, with a terrifying *dragon*?'

He cleared his throat, looking pained. 'She … gave me to understand she had discussed that matter with Lady Émeraude's family.' He glanced at her again, even more nervously. 'I believe there was meant to be a flag? To assure our hosts that we come in peace?'

Émeraude snorted, her hot breath swirling through the carriage. I shuddered uncontrollably at the too-familiar smell of it.

'I don't care for carrying silly flags from my mouth,' she informed us disdainfully. 'And I am not a citizen of your puny kingdom.'

'Oh, for –' As another cannonball flew past our unbroken window, I let out a growl fierce enough for any monster. 'Fine!' I snarled. 'I'll do it myself then!'

So that was how I entered the fabled city of Villenne on my first-ever diplomatic mission: hanging halfway out of the open door of my carriage, with dried dragon spittle covering my hair and skin, and my two guards gripping tightly to my legs as I dangled a heavy Drachenheim flag in the air.

It was a good thing I'd never expected to be the perfect princess for this mission, because this had to be the most embarrassing first impression *ever*.

*

When we finally landed on Villenne's central island, swooping low over the glittering blue water that surrounded it, dozens of black-robed battle mages were waiting for us. They stood in tight, martial lines, framing three edges of the large, tiled square between the great white palace and the water. Near the back of the square stood a couple draped in silks and furs who must have been the king and queen of Valmarna ... but six more rows of armed soldiers stood between them and us.

Every one of them looked poised and ready to leap into action the very moment we chose to attack. It might almost have been funny if I hadn't been fighting so hard to keep myself from being sick again in front of all of them.

Émeraude dropped the carriage the last few feet on to the ground with a *thunk* that bounced me off the floor and cracked my head against the open doorway. Grinding my teeth, I pushed myself up, letting the flag fall from my hands and kicking my legs free from my guards. I could feel every eye in the square watching me, and it made every inch of my skin burn with horror.

I *hated* looking stupid. I hated it *so much*! But because I'd been born on royal display, someone was *always* watching me whenever it happened.

So I jerked my chin into my haughtiest pose, as if I didn't care at all, and patted down my spittle-sticky silk gown while my ladies-in-waiting fussed behind me and clucked despairingly about my hair. There was nothing that could be done about that without a bath or, better yet,

a pair of shears. I would have shaved my entire head just to be free of that dragon-mouth stink!

But right now, it was time to act like a princess for the sake of my people, my kingdom and my own trampled pride.

Lifting my disgusting skirts, I stepped as gracefully as I could from the carriage ... and every soldier before me yanked up their musket in challenge.

I froze. My guards lunged from the carriage to throw themselves in front of me.

The sound of Émeraude's laughter rolled ominously through the air ... and I finally realised that those muskets were all pointing up at *her*. She had dropped down just above us while I'd been focused on my own humiliation, and her wings cast a cool shadow over the tiled square.

'You needn't worry, puny humans,' she rumbled down to us. 'I'm not hungry for any delicious little snacks like you today. I only wished to say farewell to my valued ally.' She tipped her massive chin at me, her golden eyes glinting, and lowered one scaly eyelid in a wink. 'I've enjoyed these past few days, young one. I look forward to meeting you again.'

I glowered at the malicious amusement in her gaze. 'We thank you for your kindness,' I growled, 'and look forward to meeting you again as well.'

B*ut only in my nightmares*, I finished silently.

By the look in her eyes, she knew it. Chortling, she circled low over the square as the soldiers' muskets tracked her, waiting. Then she shot high into the sky, sending a gust of cold wind billowing over all of us in her wake.

Phew. My shoulders relaxed for the first time in days as I turned to the royal couple before me, shifting my guards aside and ignoring all the soldiers who still stood between us. Five minutes of empty compliments on both sides, and I'd be *finished* with this unbearable journey at long last! I'd be conducted to my guest room in the palace, I'd take a luxuriously long, hot bath, and then I would *finally* be left alone to snuggle up in warm duvets with my new Gert van Heidecker books and –

'*Well!*' King Henrik's bushy grey moustache quivered with fury as he strode towards me, scattering soldiers in his wake. Small and skinny, he was barely two inches taller than me, but his chest swelled impressively as he swaggered to a halt much too close to me for comfort. 'This was *not* the courtesy we expected from a guest, young lady!'

Argh. All my instincts warred against my training. 'Your Majesty,' I began tightly, 'if you would simply –'

'Are you attempting to order *me* around? *You*?' He raked his gaze over me, lips curling with open disgust. 'If you are a princess of Drachenheim,' he spat, 'which I doubt, then what *exactly* do you have to say for yourself? I can only hope, for the sake of your insignificant little kingdom, that you have come prepared to grovel for your behaviour and your most inappropriate appearance!'

Enough.

I had never grovelled to anyone in my life – and if this man thought he could stand here and bully me, he had *no idea* of what I'd already endured.

I had *been inside a dragon's mouth*!

So I raised myself up until I was looking directly into his glaring eyes, and smiled fiercely as I said, 'I beg your pardon. Did no one ever bother to tell you we had allied with dragons?'

In royal talk, what that actually meant was: *Your spies must be terrible. How sad for you!*

His face flushed bright red. 'You impudent little ... Of course we knew of your cursed alliance! But to fly over our capital city with no warning –'

'Oh no, were you *frightened*?' I cooed with gooey, sickly-sweet sympathy. 'Oh dear. We're such good friends with dragons ourselves, you see, we sometimes forget that other, *weaker* kingdoms might fear them.'

Beside me, Konrad gave a convulsive cough that made his lanky body shake. Jurgen thumped his skinny back with one big hand as the king's face shifted from dark red to dusky purple.

Who knew that diplomacy could be *fun*?

Before King Henrik could explode from fury, though, his tall, silver-haired wife glided up behind him, resplendent in deep purple silk and an ankle-length silver cloak. 'Forgive us, Your Highness,' Queen Berghild said sweetly, 'but we were *so* taken by surprise by your magnificent entrance, I'm afraid your proper quarters aren't ready for you yet.'

'Oh?' My entire bruised body sagged as my vision of bath, bed and books slipped even further out of reach. 'I'm sure I could make do with –'

'No, no.' The queen heaved a sigh of almost-perfectly-faked regret. 'You see, the room we'd originally assigned to your party would never do, now that we've met you. Those quarters in our palace are *far* too small for a princess who is *such* good friends with dragons!'

H*mm*. I narrowed my eyes up at her suspiciously. 'And the quarters that *would* be appropriate?'

'Oh, those won't be ready for at least another week … or maybe three. Possibly not until the Diamond Exhibition is long over.' A triumphant smirk stretched Queen Berghild's lips. 'Luckily,' she added in a kind, motherly tone, 'we have quite a pleasant little terraced house set aside for moments when such *honoured* guests arrive without warning. Better yet –' her eyes widened – 'it's a good forty minutes away from here, so you won't be distracted by any of our nation's *inferior* entertainments or royal gatherings.'

'F*orty minutes*?' My voice came out as a croak. Suddenly I could feel every piece of dried dragon spittle on my gown and in my hair, as if they were burning directly into my skin.

'Forty minutes,' repeated the queen with deep satisfaction. 'First by boat and then by carriage. I should warn you, though – the boat journey can be a bit unsettling.' She glanced at my spittle-stained gown and her smirk deepened. 'I do hope you don't get travel-sick?'

Behind me, Anja let out a groan.

For once, I couldn't blame her.

From: Her Most Exalted Highness Princess Sofia Alexandrina
Maria of Drachenheim
85 Svëavagan
Gemlarna
Villenne

To: Her Most Exalted and Serene Highness the Crown Princess
Katrin Augusta Sibylle of Drachenheim
The Royal Palace
Drachenburg
Drachenheim

Dear Katrin,

~~Well~~
~~As you may have predicted~~
~~You won't be surprised to hear~~
~~Next time you expect a dragon to follow human instructions or logic~~
~~I wish~~
~~I'm sorr~~

Never mind. I'm sure you know what happened already. You always do. So I don't know why I even tried to write this letter.