

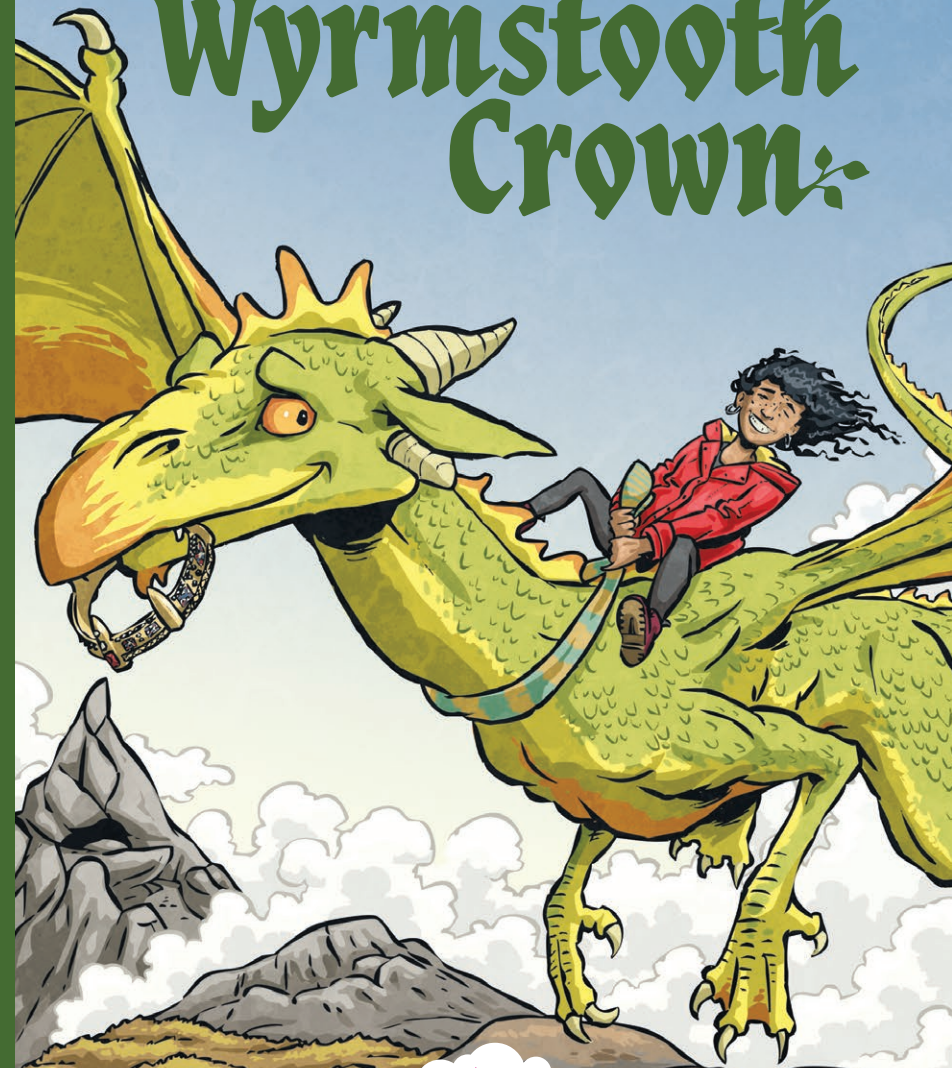
“You brought a human here, Guster?
A land-ripping, air-poisoning human?”
“Only a little one, Ma.”

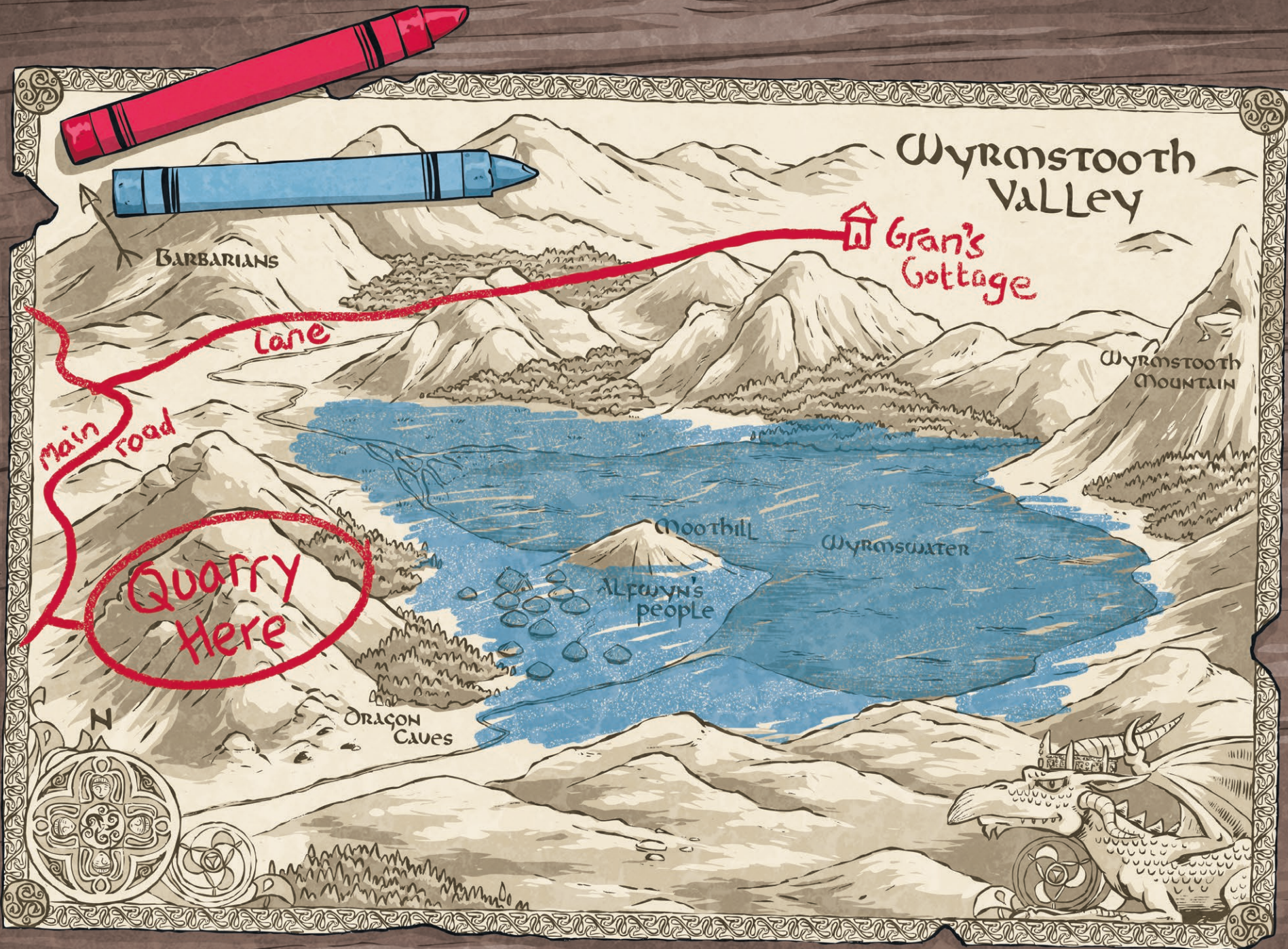
Guster the dragon dreams of saving the day, like the heroes in his ma's tales of long ago. So, when a human army invades his peaceful valley, he is determined to use his dragon cunning to beat them. What he doesn't expect is the friendship of bright, brave Miranda, a human girl.

Can Guster and Miranda come up with a plan to stop the army, before the last home of dragonkind is destroyed?

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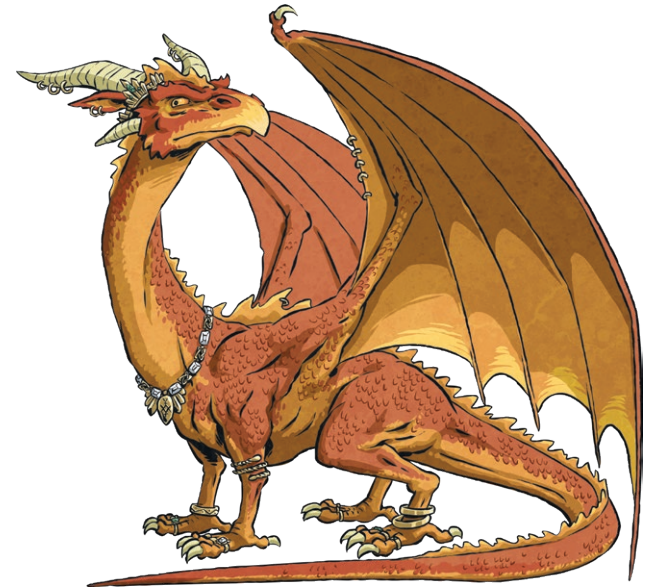
The Wyrmostooth Crown





A TWINKL ORIGINAL

The Wurmstooth Crown



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Chapter One

Of Crowns and Caverns

Guster the dragon lay in the mouth of his cave. He itched. His back itched and his belly itched. His fingers and his toes itched. Even his eyes and ears and nose itched. It was unbearable.

Guster felt like this every autumn. While the leaves on the trees flushed into their autumn finery, Guster's green summer scales slowly changed to copper. This was a mountain dragon trick which kept them safe from human eyes. Humans couldn't spot green scales against the grass, red scales against autumn leaves or white scales against snow. Guster thought that humans must be very stupid.

Guster rolled on the rocky ground. He scratched his back and scraped his shoulders. His head wriggled and his legs flailed. It did no good. If only there were some way to soothe his scaly skin...

Guster twisted to his feet. "Ma?" he yelled into the darkness. "I'm going swimming."

Metal clanged and crashed as Guster's mother, Redbreath, clambered over her treasure hoard.

"Guster, my crystal, my gem, my jewel," she intoned. Redbreath's rich, melodic voice could charm wild animals to walk into her jaws. "The lake is far too cold to swim in. I don't want an icicle for a son." Redbreath picked at her teeth with a silver dagger. She wore an emerald-studded tiara over her right ear and at least one ring on each talon.

Redbreath's hoard had once been the envy of dragons for miles around. Now, Guster and Redbreath were the only dragons left.

"I don't care about being an icicle," said Guster. He sprang out of the cave and onto the mountainside. "My scales itch."

"Guster, you're a dragon, not a fish," Redbreath protested. "Have some dignity."

But Guster was already clambering, with leathery wings awkwardly outstretched, onto the rocky outcrop that he used as a launching pad.

It was a crisp morning and an impish breeze tangled the treetops. Birds swooped, hares ran and lizards scuttled. Guster and Redbreath's cave was at the top of the very tall, very pointy Wurmstooth Mountain. In the valley far below, the lake rocked this way and that. The sunlight stretched along its surface like a diving board.

Guster gripped the familiar stone. He could imagine the cool lake water washing his itches away. He crouched and wriggled. Just as he was about to leap, he spotted something that looked wrong – very wrong.

The far side of the lake swarmed with strange creatures. They didn't have wings or tails, and they walked upright on two legs. Guster had seen pictures of these beings in his mother's ancient books so he knew at once what they were: humans.

"Ma! Ma! There are humans by the lake," he yelled,

dancing around on the rock.

“Humans!” shrieked Redbreath. There was a clash like an avalanche of metal, and Redbreath’s elegant red head snaked from the cave mouth, her tiara askew.

“What are they wearing, Ma?” asked a curious Guster, peering at the human army with his pinpoint vision. The human’s heads and chests were coated in something yellow, but like no yellow Guster had ever seen. It was a sickly green-tinged hue so bright that it almost glowed. Guster knew that it couldn’t be natural. He was sure that it must be magic. “It looks like...”

“Armour,” said Redbreath grimly.

“Wizard armour,” Guster breathed, a puff of smoke curling from his tongue. Guster’s favourite stories were tales of humans and dragons battling each other – especially when the dragons won. Now, he felt like he was part of a story. He couldn’t wait to fly down to the lake and chomp the humans’ heads off. He flapped his yellowing wings.

“Guster!” Redbreath cried. Redbreath was prone to dramatics, but now there was a note of real panic in her voice. “Get down before they see you.”

“But I want to see what they’re up to, Ma.”

“I thought that humans had forgotten dragonkind,” Redbreath moaned. “I thought that we were safe. Into the cave, my diamond, quickly.” With that, she shrank behind the boulders.

Guster stared hard at the human army. There were so many of them and they seemed to multiply every time he looked. Where were they all scurrying from?

“Guster,” Redbreath scolded, in tones sharp enough to scare the dead. “Inside, now!”

Reluctantly, Guster scuttled into the gloomy cave.

Redbreath sat very upright, with her eyes closed. “I foresee... I foresee... a human! In our cave!” Redbreath had the gift, rare even among dragons, of foresight.

Guster wasn’t scared of humans coming to the cave. He would chomp their heads off. “Is it a big one, Ma? With armour and a huge sword?”

Redbreath wailed, “I cannot tell! It has the shape of a human and the smell of a human, but all is blurred and dark. Oh, Wulf, Hund and Otor,” she muttered,

"Catte and Naedre. Guide me, wise ones, guide me." Guster knew that his ma was praying to the animal spirits. "Give me clear sight like my ancestors. Show me the human's face."

"We have to go down to the lake, Ma," said Guster, impatient. "We have to find out why they're here."

"We already know why they're here," said Redbreath darkly. "It is the same reason humans always come. Humans and dragons have been at war for hundreds of years." She shook her back legs and forelegs, as though shaking off a curse. Steadily, she sat down and wrapped her jagged tail all the way around herself. This was the way that Redbreath always sat when she was about to tell a tale of the old times.

Guster loved Redbreath's tales. He stilled his restless feet, folded his impatient wings and settled down to listen. With a deep breath and a clack of her jaws, Redbreath began...

For more than a thousand years, humans have waged war on dragonkind. With their blades, humans topple our forests; with their bricks, they stifle our earth; with their fumes, they choke our air.

It was not always this way. More than a thousand years ago, this valley was home to a clan of humans and a colony of dragons. The clan chief was a brave man named Alfwyn, and the dragon colony's queen was a wise dragon of two hundred summers, named Tangleclaw.

Alfwyn's clan and Tangleclaw's colony weren't just peaceful, they cooperated in all things. They shared food, obeyed the same laws and fought side by side. They even worshipped the same gods: spirits which took animal form. These were Wulf and Hund, Catte and Otor, and the trickster snake god, Naedre.

Guster shuffled about. This wasn't the story he'd expected. He wanted to hear tales of wicked humans being beaten by clever, brave dragons. If the humans had sent a whole army of wizards, then they surely weren't here to be friends.

"But, Ma," he said, "what about the humans in the valley *right now*?"

"Hush, my pearl," said Redbreath, "or I won't tell you of the barbarians."

"I love the bit with the barbarians!" cried Guster,

spinning around in an excited circle. At last, Redbreath was getting to the good part.

The first the humans and dragons knew of the barbarian attackers was smoke on the horizon – a wall of smoke which stretched from the western mountaintops to the roof of the sky. The young boy on lookout duty fled, screaming down the mountainside. “Attack! ATTACK!” he cried, throwing himself at Alfwyn’s feet. “Ten times the number in our clan, and ten times that number again. Each warrior has weapons and armour, the like of which our smiths couldn’t hope to forge in a hundred years. We’re doomed!”

In the middle of the valley stood the moot hill, the place where serious meetings took place. By moonlight, Alfwyn, Tangleclaw and their most trusted advisers gathered on the moot hill for a council of war. The advisers felt only despair.

“We are outnumbered.”

“Their armour is better than ours; their weapons, too.”

“We haven’t a hope.”

Mighty Alfwyn, however, was courageous. “We will

fight to the last man,” he declared. “We fight for glory and to earn our place among heroes.”

Tangleclaw, the oldest and wisest of dragons, wasn’t interested in being a hero if it meant that she’d lose her life. Tangleclaw had the gift of foresight and she had foreseen the village in ruins. However, she revealed none of this to the council. “They are strong, but we are cunning,” she said. “Listen to my plan and tomorrow we will beat the barbarians.”

A part of Guster wanted to hear again of Tangleclaw’s brilliant plan. Brilliant plans were his favourite part of his ma’s tales. But his mind kept straying to the humans on the bank. How many had gathered? What were they planning? Did they know already that Redbreath and he lived in the cave at the top of the Wurmstooth Mountain? How could Guster sneak out to spy on them?

As Redbreath closed her eyes and lost herself in the past, Guster had a brilliant idea. He crept, as soft as a whisper, to Redbreath’s gold hoard and silently sifted through her treasures. At last, he found the thing that he wanted. Smiling to himself, he tucked the object under his wing and turned to his mother with rapt attention.

The clan and the colony worked all night. Some dug and some sewed, while others bashed and burned. By dawn, the village was ready.

When the barbarian chief marched down the mountainside in the morning, he was surprised by what he found.

It looked as if the town had already been ransacked. The roundhouses were half collapsed, as though a giant had sat on them. The fields were bare and the streets deserted but for a lonely, hunched beggar.

The beggar's hair and beard were matted. He was dressed in rags and he stank like cow manure. As the barbarian chief reached the village outskirts, the beggar cried, "Flee! This village is cursed by a demon. Turn now and run if you value your lives."

But the barbarian chief scoffed.

"You think you can fool me, old man? Lure me into the village and ambush me? I've seen this trick before."

The beggar man quaked.

"Truly this demon is like nothing else on earth," said

the beggar. "In one swoop, it crushed our tithe hall. With one breath, it burned our cowsheds. One stamp of its great foot was enough to flatten three homes. Come and I'll show you. It's not far."

After much persuasion, the barbarian chief followed with a band of warriors. The beggar man led him to the village square. There, they saw a great crater in the shape of a mighty, taloned foot.

"What beast made this?" said the barbarian chief. Just then, a huge shadow swept overhead.

"That one!" cried the beggar.

The barbarians looked up. Above them flew a great, ragged shape with huge, black wings. It blotted out half of the sky.

"Archers, ready your bows!" cried the chief, just as a mighty fireball flew from the creature. It struck down a score of barbarians in one blow.

The beast roared with a sound so loud and harsh that it could split the earth open. As another fireball flew, the barbarian chief lost his nerve.

"Retreat!" he ordered. "Retreat!"

With that, the barbarians fled. Alfwyn took off his beggar's rags, combed his beard and washed himself clean of the stinking manure. The villagers led their cattle and sheep out from hiding and the dragons landed, still clutching the great black sheet that they had trailed through the sky. Tangleclaw's plan had worked; the valley was safe. But that was only the beginning of their troubles.

Guster stared out of the cave mouth. The object hidden beneath his wing was beginning to dig into his skin. It was past midday and he was running out of time!

"In honour of their victory, the human smiths forged a crown of pure gold. They named it after this very mountain: the Wyrmostooth Crown." Redbreath opened her eyes and flicked her long red tail. "That crown is the reason humans and dragons are now at war."

Redbreath rose up and stalked to the back of the cave to her treasure hoard. Guster inched closer to the cave mouth.

"The Wyrmostooth Crown has been passed from mother to daughter, dragon to dragon, for generations,"

Redbreath said, as she picked up bracelets and helmets and tossed them aside. "Now, it is safe in my hoard."

"Not safe enough," Guster whispered to himself, and with a bound, he leapt out of the cave and up the mountainside.

He could still hear the clangs and crashes of Redbreath's search as he clambered onto his launching rock. He gripped the Wyrmostooth Crown tightly in his talons and leapt.

Guster soared through the cool air, sighing in relief as the breeze soothed his itchy scales. He glided over treetops of yellow and gold, over shimmering streams and thundering waterfalls, and down, down into the valley below. Careful to stay low so that the wizards on the far bank wouldn't spot him, Guster drifted towards the lake. It glittered like liquid jewels. With a kick of his legs and flick of his tail, Guster plunged headfirst into the icy water.



Chapter Two

Of Wizards and Water

The lake was cold, colder than Guster was expecting, but not so cold that he couldn't bear it. He swooshed through the blue-green gloom, drifting over rocks and pebbles. The cool water streamed, as soft as silk, across his itchy scales. Green plants swayed to music that only they could hear. Glittering fish darted around like shining silver coins.

Guster stretched out his webbed feet, one still clutching the Wurmstooth Crown. He paddled lazily along, spun onto his back and stared through the waving water at the cold, blue sky above. Surely, he was in dragon heaven. This valley, this lake, had been Guster's home

his whole life. What if the human army destroyed it all?

Ichiness crept uncomfortably into Guster's scales. He kicked his legs and swam hard, deep into the centre of the lake. He was here to spy on the human army and he knew he'd do whatever it took to stop them.

In the lake's centre stood an island. A thousand years ago, when the lake was much smaller, this island had been the moot hill. Guster dragged himself out of the water onto the stony shore and shook himself from head to tail. With careful, lizard-like movements, he slunk into the dense trees.

The island was small – barely five wingspans in length. Twigs and brambles crunched under Guster's feet, and leaves caught on the ridges of his spine until at last, he reached the perfect spot. From here, he could peer across at the wizards on the shore.

Many of the yellow-armoured humans stood clustered in groups, plotting. As Guster watched, he realised they had already changed the shape of the land. Cutting through the grass and bushes, a long, grey track snaked over the western slopes, down to the lakeside.

Along this track crawled huge, terrifying beasts. Guster knew that they must be animals because they moved about on their own, but he had never seen anything as unnatural in his life. The beasts looked terrifying; they were almost as big as him! One had cruel, shining claws at the end of its crooked arm. Another had a mighty mouth which munched up the rocky ground. A third was so heavy that it rolled the earth flat as it skulked along. Scariest of all was the smallest beast. It had four mouths, and as Guster watched, they all opened to belch out four more armoured humans.

“Yuck,” said Guster to himself. He felt a bit sick. If the humans had tamed beasts such as this, did the dragons even stand a chance?

Guster shook himself. “It’s just like the village versus the barbarians, in Ma’s old story,” he said to himself. “Humans are powerful, but dragons are clever. All we need is a cunning plan to outwit them.”

However, everything Guster knew about humans came from his ma’s stories, tales at least a thousand years old. None of it matched up with the army Guster now saw before him. If he was going to come up with a plan, he needed more information. He needed to get closer. The only question was: how?

As he pondered, he scratched his ears with his back foot. His scales were beginning to itch again. He scratched his neck and his belly and his nose. Was it worth all this itching just to turn the same colour as autumn leaves?

That was when Guster was struck with an idea.

He crept backwards through the trees, staring skyward. Soon, he found exactly the right sort of tree. He gripped a great branch in his talons. He twisted, strained and snapped the branch off. It was so huge, it would cover half his body. Its leaves were the same yellow-green as his scales.

Gripping the branch in one front claw and the crown in the other, the young dragon leapt back into the lake.

Guster arranged the branch so that it covered his head and back. Slowly, slowly, he floated towards the distant shore. Only his eyes and nose poked above the water’s surface. If any of the humans cared to look, they would assume that he was a piece of driftwood.

As he approached the bank, he began to hear noises. His pointed ears twitched, swivelling until they heard the chatter of human voices.

“...two planned detonations this afternoon...”

Guster didn't know what this meant, but he guessed that it might be part of a spell.

“...health and safety officer is finishing the inspection...”

Officers? Inspections? Now Guster knew for sure that he was facing an army.

Just as Guster was congratulating himself for the success of his disguise, one of the smallest beasts crawled up beside the nearby humans. Two of its mouths gaped open, and the humans allowed themselves to be swallowed.

Eurgh!

Guster paddled with his back legs, desperately trying to follow the beast along the bank, but it moved quickly up the track and away from the shore. Guster needed to follow the humans, but how? He thought about pretending to be a tree or a boulder, but he couldn't work out how to create a convincing disguise.

Perhaps he was thinking about this all wrong. In his ma's story, the dragons didn't try to hide. They did

the exact opposite, making themselves as huge and terrifying as possible.

Guster grinned to himself at the thought of a hundred petrified humans running in fear while he swooped overhead. Lost in his imagination, he spread his wings and dived back into the water. “You puny humans can never defeat me,” he gurgled. He streamed through the lake, spitting fireballs at imaginary wizards. “Ha, ha, ha, ha! I am a fearsome dragon, and I have come to crunch your bones!” His breath boiled the water, creating hot bubbles of steam which rose and burst on the surface.

Just then, a thunderous sound echoed and rippled through him. The lake trembled; the stones on the bottom bounced and skittered. Panicked, Guster pushed off from the lake bed and burst out of the water with a gasp. What had just happened?

Guster turned to the shore. It looked as though a giant had taken a chomp out of the mountainside. Below the crater lay a mound of debris as high as the moot hill. As he watched, he heard a shout, and sparks of white light shot from the hill. Guster saw the earth shift. The face of the mountain inflated like a balloon, then crumbled into a million fragments of grass, soil

and rock. As it slid downhill, a wall of smoke billowed behind it. The lake seemed to fold, and a huge wave of water hit Guster at the same time as the noise did.

BOOM!

Guster's head was engulfed in the ice-cold wave. He tumbled head over wings over talons. Water filled his nostrils, making him choke, and he burst to the surface again, snorting and spitting smoke.

Guster's huge dragon heart beat so hard against his chest that he thought his ribs might split. He flapped his wings as hard as he could, sending sheets of water this way and that. He had to get into the air and away, now!

With a final mighty heave, Guster was airborne. He righted himself and sped across the lake. His mind was racing. What wizardry could take out half of a mountain in seconds?

As he soared, he heard growls and shouts behind him. He glanced back. The humans and their beasts had gathered on the lake shore. A lot of the humans raised their arms to point as he flew away.

Terrified that their spells would catch him, Guster ducked and put on an extra burst of speed. He was nearing the shore, a place where forest grew thick. Guster dived and plunged through the treetops, landing at speed on the bare earth. He rolled to a stop against a tree trunk.

Clutching his head, Guster shook himself. Dust and twigs rained off his scales onto the ferny ground. He looked down the sloping hillside into the darkness of the trees. He looked up the slope and saw the same thing. As his heartbeat calmed and his ragged breath slowed, Guster realised that he was lost.

Slowly, he began to limp through the forest. His thoughts raced. The humans were more powerful than he could ever have imagined. Their magic was like nothing from the stories. Glowing armour, tame monsters, explosions that could shake the very earth – how was it possible?

Guster had to warn his ma, and fast. If only he knew the way home! She'd have given up looking for the Wyrmostooth Crown by now. Perhaps she was out on the lake, looking for him. What if the humans caught her? What had he done?

Guster fell forlornly to the forest floor, and gripped his throbbing head in his claws. It was only then that he realised – he had dropped the Wurmstooth Crown!



Chapter Three

Of Gods and Glory

The trees tapped against the glass of Gran's cottage window. Miranda grabbed her boots. She couldn't wait to go dragon hunting.

"I explored these woods alone when I was your age," said Miranda's gran, taking the girl's red mac down from the coat rack, "and your da did too, and neither of us came to any harm. You're a sensible girl and I'm sure you'll be quite safe, never mind what your mother thinks." Gran wrapped a long, striped scarf around Miranda's neck, then gently teased her frizzy hair loose. "Unless a dragon gets you, mind!"

"If I met a dragon, I wouldn't let him eat me," declared Miranda defiantly.

"Wouldn't you now?" said Gran, putting her hands on her hips. Gran was so stout, she looked as if a gale couldn't knock her over. Miranda was almost as tall as her already.

"No, I wouldn't," said Miranda, kneeling to tie her purple boots. Miranda liked her monthly visits to Gran's. Gran was the only person who would talk to her sensibly about dragons. "In the stories, dragons and humans used to be friends. If I met a dragon, I'd make him be my friend."

"The dragon might have other ideas," said Gran. She picked up a knife from the kitchen counter and, with a practised hand, cut a slab of lemon drizzle cake. "Provisions for your adventure," Gran explained, wrapping the slice in a napkin and popping it into Miranda's rucksack. Miranda's mum didn't like it when Gran gave Miranda extra slices of cake, but that didn't stop Gran.

"I'll need some for the dragon too," said Miranda. "Otherwise he won't be friends with me."

"Oh, go on then," chuckled Gran, cutting yet another slice. "If my homemade cake can't convince a dragon to be friendly, nothing can."

Miranda opened the wooden back door. An autumn breeze pranced into the kitchen, making the tea-towels flap. Miranda stopped in the doorway. "Do you believe in dragons, Gran?" she asked.

"Well, now," said Gran, licking cake crumbs from her fingers. "It's my job as a grown-up to tell you that dragons don't exist." She cut another sliver of cake for herself before putting the lid on the tin. "But it's your job as a child to believe in them anyway." Gran winked and Miranda nodded. "I wish your da still believed in dragons. Maybe then he'd leave my valley alone," Gran sighed. "You can go down to the lake to watch them at work if you like. But no getting in the water. And no disappearing down any caves, either."

"I won't."

"Be back by teatime."

"Bye, Gran!"

Miranda closed her gran's back door, swung open the

garden gate and stomped down the slope from the little cottage. With every step, leaves crunched and crackled, but Miranda didn't hear them. Her head was full of dragons.

Miranda loved stories of dragons, or worms as they were called in the old days: the Lambton Worm, who was accidentally fished from a river; the Laidly Worm, who was really a cursed princess; the Mester Stoor Worm, who could wrap his body around the entire world; the Lyminster Knucker, who was killed with a poisoned pudding.

Miranda's favourite tale of all was that of the Wyrmostooth Crown, a story of this very valley. As Miranda plodded through the trees, she peered up at Wyrmostooth Mountain, which was the highest, pointiest mountain for miles. It was so sharp, it looked like a dragon's tooth. As Miranda picked her way through thickets and brambles, searching for signs of dragon activity, her grandmother's voice filled her head.

When the Wyrmostooth Crown was forged, humans and dragons lived together in this valley like neighbours. Yes, they bickered sometimes, but they could count on each other for a cup of sugar. By working together, they had beaten the barbarians.

Alfwyn, the brave leader of the human clan, held up the Wyrmostooth Crown before everyone. It was brand new and the gold shone like sunshine. Then, Alfwyn declared, "We are not a clan anymore. We are a kingdom! I will be your king."

Well, the dragons weren't happy about that.

"Why should a human be king?" they said. "Why not a dragon?" Soon all the dragons were crying out for wise Tangleclaw to take the crown and rule. Alfwyn wasn't going to give up without a fight, though.

"Who was bravest in the face of almost certain death?" cried Alfwyn. "I was! I disguised myself as a beggar and met the barbarian army alone and defenceless. I should be king!"

"Who came up with the plan in the first place?" cried the dragons. "Tangleclaw did! The village wouldn't be standing without her cunning. She should rule the kingdom!"

Tangleclaw had the gift of foresight, of course, so she already knew who would gain the crown. Still, she was quite happy to let the other dragons argue on her behalf, while she licked the remains of lunch from

under her claws.

"Whose village was ruined for the sake of Tangleclaw's plan?" cried Alfwyn. "Ours was! We humans made sacrifices to save your skins. I should be king!"

"Who sent the barbarians scampering away in fear?" cried the dragons. "We did! Without the dragons shooting fireballs, there would be no village to rebuild. Tangleclaw should be queen of the kingdom!"

It seemed that the dragons and humans would never agree.

BOOM!

Miranda staggered. Her thoughts were interrupted as the earth shook beneath her feet. Trees quivered and startled birds flew, squawking.

For a moment, she wondered if it was an earthquake. Then she remembered: her dad's crew were starting work by the lake today. The boom must have been a controlled blast, to loosen the earth so that the workmen could get at the rock beneath. It was nothing to worry about.

She heard the lap and splash of water, and knew that she was heading towards the lake. Gran had said that she couldn't go swimming in the lake, but not that she couldn't look at it. Miranda turned downhill and kept on stomping. Her gran's story played in her head like a recording.

Just as the argument between dragons and humans looked as if it would come to blows, a swirling, misty shape appeared on the lake.

Everyone watched as it floated over the water's surface to the shore and drifted to the top of the moot hill. All at once, everyone was rushing and pushing like toddlers, to climb the hill and find out who the misty being was.

When all were gathered on the moot hill, the figure spoke.

"I have come to settle your quarrel," it said. The humans and dragons knew, from the way its melodic voice seemed to echo in their bones, that they were in the presence of a powerful spirit.

In those days, spirits took animal form. "Surely it is the Otor spirit," muttered the villagers, "for it came

from the lake."

But the spirit did not reveal which it was. "Your fight over who should possess the Wyrmostooth Crown and rule over dragons and humans is easy to settle. I propose three contests for Alfwyn and Tangleclaw. Whoever proves themselves the fiercest, the wisest and the most generous shall earn the crown."

The first contest took place the very next day. As dawn rose, Alfwyn and Tangleclaw stood at the edge of the great forest. Each clutched a bow and quiver.

"A leader must be a fierce hunter, who provides for the people," said the shapeless, misty spirit. "Whoever brings back the most game from the forest to feed the people will win the first contest."

Alfwyn's grip on the bow was sure, but Tangleclaw's webbed talons fumbled and fidgeted. She could not shoot an arrow like a human could.

"Now we know that the spirit is the Hund," muttered the villagers, "for it is tame and surely favours humans."

Sure enough, at the end of the day, Alfwyn had caught three stags and a wild boar. Tangleclaw had only

caught a single rabbit.

Miranda stalked through the undergrowth, tracking wild game. She saw something rustling in the bushes ahead, drew her imaginary bow and –

BOOM!

The startled rat scuttled from the underbrush to its den in the roots of a tree. Miranda cursed. She nearly had that.

This time she was prepared for the earth to shake and the birds to cry. She was nearly at the lake now, and the splashing and crashing grew louder and more frantic. Stealthily, she descended through the tangled trunks of the forest, towards the muddy bank.

The second contest took place on the moot hill.

"A leader must be a shrewd adviser," said the mysterious spirit, "dealing wisely with villagers' problems."

Two farmers climbed the hill. The first bowed before Alfwyn. "Should I plant wheat or turnips to feed my family?" she asked.

"Wheat!" cried Alfwyn confidently. "For it grows in abundance, and without wheat you cannot make bread."

The second farmer bowed to Tangleclaw. "Should I plant wheat or turnips to feed my family?" he asked.

Tangleclaw raised an eyebrow and stared at the farmer with her deep, black eyes. "When the cold weather comes, the wheat crop will fail. Grow turnips if you want to eat at all," she advised.

As Tangleclaw had the gift of foresight, what she said came true. When harvest time arrived, the farmer who planted wheat went hungry, while the farmer who planted turnips grew more than he knew what to do with.

"Now we know that the spirit is the Catte," muttered the villagers, "for it is cunning and surely favours dragons."

Just as Miranda's purple boots splodged in the muddy bank, she was crossed by a shadow, as if a huge bird flew overhead. She looked up but was too late. The bird was gone.

Wading into the shallow water, Miranda could see all

the way across the lake to where her dad was at work with his crew. Although the men and women were miles away, they were easy to spot in their high-vis jackets and yellow hardhats. The far shore was going to be the site of a new quarry, and Miranda's dad was the site manager. Already, the explosive blasts had transformed the mountainside from green grass and bushes to rubble and bare rock.

Miranda's dad had told her time and again why his job was important. People needed stone to build homes, he said, and the stone had to come from somewhere. Still, Miranda couldn't help but agree with Gran. She wished her dad had left this place alone. The valley and the lake were home to deer, badgers, wildcats, otters, eagles and, of course, dragons.

The misty spirit announced the third contest in the village square.

"A good leader must, most of all, be generous. For the final contest, both Alfwyn and Tangleclaw must host a feast for the village. They must provide sufficient food, drink and entertainment to satisfy all who come. Whoever hosts the best feast will win the Wyrmostooth Crown."

"Now we know that the spirit is the Wulf," muttered the villagers, "for it surely favours its stomach."

At once, Alfwyn made preparations for the biggest party the village had ever seen. Huge joints of beef and boar were roasted, and gallons of ale and mead were brewed. He hired a dozen musicians and storytellers to perform at the feast.

Tangleclaw did nothing. For a long time, she had known who would win the contests and who would hold the crown. She began to suspect that the mysterious spirit was not as helpful as it appeared.

The day before the feast, Tangleclaw visited Alfwyn. "Let us end our quarrel," she said. "Dragons and humans lived together just fine before this crown business. Let's forget the crown and be neighbours once more."

"Coward!" Alfwyn cried. "You are afraid of losing to a human – and lose you shall, because I will never give in!"

Tangleclaw sighed to herself. She knew that it was useless. Still, it had been worth a try.

On the night of Alfwyn's feast, no dragons were seen

at the party. Tangleclaw slept on her treasure hoard, but in the cavernous warren that ran inside the mountains, a secret meeting took place.

"Tangleclaw has given up," said the dragons, "but we can't let the humans win."

A young dragon, his horns not yet fully grown, declared, "I know where the crown is kept. We could steal it tonight, while the humans are partying."

Alfwyn's feast really was a great success. The humans ate, drank, danced and sang until the early hours. When they finally fell into a deep sleep, the young dragon skulked into the village. He slipped into the great hall, stole the Wyrmostooth Crown and flew swiftly back to the assembled dragons.

Crowing with delight, the dragons ran to wake Tangleclaw.

"We have the crown!" they cheered, delighted flames puffing from their mouths.

Tangleclaw was not surprised. She'd known all along that she would lose the contests but gain the crown.

"We may have the crown," she said, "but we are now at war with the humans. A war that will last more than a thousand years."

The dragons were too thrilled to listen to Tangleclaw. They placed the crown on Tangleclaw's head, and capered down the rock passageways to celebrate with raw meat and fantastic jewellery.

As Tangleclaw settled wearily back onto her bed of treasure, a misty figure appeared in the mouth of her cave.

"You planned this," she said to the spirit. "You love to sow discord, don't you, Naedre?"

As she addressed the spirit by name, it took its true form: that of a coiled snake. The spirit laughed a strange, hissing laugh, and squirmed away into the night.

It is said that Tangleclaw foresaw how peace would at last be achieved. But that part of the story was lost, long ago...

Miranda turned away from the lake and headed uphill. She trekked through dense bushes and tangled thorns,

trying to imagine how Tangleclaw must have felt to own the crown that had cost a thousand years of peace. Miranda wondered where the crown was now.

She pushed through a thick clump of ferns and emerged in a clearing. It looked as if someone – or something – had been here recently. The undergrowth was flattened, and the branches overhead were snapped.

It didn't take much for Miranda's mind to jump to dragons.

"Which way did he go?" she muttered to herself, spinning slowly round in the clearing. She spotted scrapes on a nearby tree trunk. "That way!" She crept forwards, looking this way and that in search of clues. What would she do if she really met a dragon? She would offer it her gran's cake of course, but what if dragons didn't like lemon drizzle cake?

A few metres ahead, Miranda came to boggy ground. She crouched to inspect it: sure enough, the ground was marked with big, pointy shapes like claw prints. Up ahead, the undergrowth grew thicker. Miranda wrapped her scarf tightly around her neck so that it wouldn't snag. She felt like a real dragon-hunter.

She followed a trail of broken twigs and flattened weeds. Up ahead, she thought she saw something move – something yellow-green and shiny. When she looked again, she saw that it was just the fluttering leaves of a tree.

She took another step and felt something jab into the sole of her boot. Lifting her foot, she bent to inspect the object. It was round and covered in mud. Miranda wiped the dirt away on her mac.

“Woah!” she breathed to herself, holding the object up. It was a crown. A gold crown, studded with jewels, with spiky, claw-like points all around. Carefully, she lifted it onto her head so that it nestled in her mass of dark hair. She began to imagine that she was Tangleclaw.

Suddenly, she was flooded with tingling excitement. Forgetting to be stealthy, she whooped and ran through the forest. “I’m a dragon!” she roared, as she stamped and crashed.

“No, you’re not,” said a voice above her head.

Miranda stopped. She stared at the tree in front of her. All at once, she realised that she wasn’t staring at autumn leaves, but at gleaming scales. The tingling

excitement drained away and left her cold.

Slowly, she raised her head until she was staring into a burning, amber eye. A horned head was perched atop a long, thin neck, which flowed into a body as big as an elephant’s. Miranda saw four legs, and at the end of each were talons the length of bread knives. The creature had strange paper things folded against its back. They couldn’t be... wings?

“I’m a dragon,” the dragon hissed, “and if you don’t give me back my crown, I’ll chomp off your head.”

Face to face with a real dragon, Miranda forgot to offer him cake and ask to be friends.

Instead, she screamed.



Chapter Four Of Questions and Quarries

“AAAA...”

Guster waited for the small human to stop screaming.

“AAAAAAA...”

He didn't really want to chomp off its head. Ma said that humans these days did so much dark magic, they were probably poisonous. If Guster was going to get indigestion from eating a human, he wanted it to be a big, scary one at least.

Up close, the human was even more strange-looking than he'd imagined. Its eyes, nose and mouth were all squashed into a little space on its head. This human seemed to have a mane of hair like a lion. It wore a long, striped string around its neck and a big red tunic over most of its body. Guster wondered if the tunic was a type of armour, like the wizards' yellow mail.

“...AAAAAA...”

The human seemed to be nearly done screaming now. It hadn't let go of the crown, though. Perhaps it hadn't understood Guster's request.

“...AAAaaah!”

The human had finished.

“So, you'll give the crown back then?” asked Guster.

The human clamped its hands over its mouth. Its umber cheeks flushed dark pink. It took a deep, shuddering breath in and out before it lowered its hands.

“Sorry, I didn't mean to do that,” said the human, with surprising dignity.

Guster flicked his tail. He needed the crown, now. He was in a hurry to fly back to Redbreath and tell her about the army and their explosions and giant beasts. Besides, he knew that even a small human might still have powerful magic.

Nevertheless, he couldn't show the human that he was nervous. Guster leaned in closer and glared as fiercely as he knew how. "I meant it," he said, though he hadn't meant it at all. "Give me the crown, or it's crunch time."

"Is it very special?" asked the human, lifting the crown off its mane with both hands.

"Not really," Guster lied. He didn't want the human to realise that it was the Wyrmostooth Crown itself, the crown that had caused humans and dragons to wage war against each other for centuries. "But it's mine. So give it back."

"I've never seen a real-life dragon crown before," said the human, turning it this way and that to inspect the engraved gold and sparkling jewels. "I was pretending to be Tangleclaw," the human explained. "She's an old dragon queen from this story my gran likes to tell."

"Tangleclaw?" Guster leapt up suddenly, snapping several tree branches and causing a flurry of faded leaves to flutter down.

"Do you know about her?" asked the human.

"Of course I do," Guster huffed. "Tangleclaw is one of the most important queens in dragon history. She's my ancestor," he added smugly.

"I thought no one knew that story but my gran," said the girl. Guster decided that she was probably a female – she had tiny hoops dangling from the bottom of her ears, which reminded him of his ma's treasure. "It's so unfair, isn't it, what happened to her?" the girl went on. "King Alfwyn wouldn't listen, and Naedre tricked them both." She sighed crossly. "I wish humans and dragons had never fought."

Guster blinked. He frowned. He turned over the girl's words in his mind, making sure that he had heard them correctly. A human who wanted peace with dragons? As far as Guster knew, no humans had felt that way in over a thousand years.

"Oh, I nearly forgot!" said the girl suddenly. "Do you like cake?"

Without a second thought, the girl held the crown out to Guster. Guster hooked it on one long, curved claw. The girl swung a bag from her shoulder and rummaged around inside. She pulled out two wedge-shaped objects, and unwrapped the paper from around them.

"My name's Miranda, by the way," she said.

"Guster," said Guster.

"Pleased to meet you. I brought cake on purpose, in case I met any dragons. I was hoping we could be friends. It's lemon drizzle."

"Lemon... drizzle..." said Guster, staring at the spongy slice in Miranda's hand. He had the Wyrmostooth Crown. He should just fly away.

But Guster didn't want to leave. This was the perfect opportunity to be an undercover spy. Since this human didn't seem out to kill him, all he had to do was earn her trust, and she'd spill hundreds of human secrets. Then he'd have no trouble thinking of a cunning plan to defeat the wizard army. Guster felt just like a hero in an old story.

Besides, he had to admit that he was curious. He'd

never met a real-life human before.

"I don't know if I like lemon drizzle cake," he said. "I've never tried it."

"It's homemade," said Miranda. "Gran's own recipe. Gran makes the best cakes in the world."

"Does it have any magic in it?" Guster wanted to be friendly, but he wasn't stupid.

"No, just lots of sugar. It's really tasty, look." Miranda took a big bite – big for a human, that is – out of her own cake slice. Her lips curved in a smile as she closed her eyes and chewed. "Mmmmm, 'ummy 'ake," she mumbled through a mouthful of crumbs.

Guster reached out and carefully gripped the slice that the girl held out for him. He raised the cake to his cavernous nostrils and took a big sniff. A sharp smell zinged inside his nose, and he jerked his head back.

"What is that?"

"That's the lemony bit," Miranda explained. "It's sort of tangy. Good though, especially with lots of sugar."

Guster stretched out his long, pointed tongue and poked the edge of the cake. It was tangy! Not like the tang of fresh blood – being a dragon, Guster usually caught his food as it ran away – but delicious nonetheless. Was this the sort of food chief Alfwyn had served at his feast?

Feeling braver, Guster opened his jaws wide and chomped up the cake in one bite.

It was squishy and greasy and sharp and sugary all at once. Apart from a fluffy, tasteless bit that got caught in his throat, Guster thought that it was very good.

The girl had her hand over her mouth, as if she was trying not to scream again. Guster tried to act politely. Perhaps screaming was normal human behaviour.

“It isn’t bad,” he said, “for human food.”

“Aaaahhh, ha, ha!”

“Are you choking?”

The girl’s cheeks were crimson. Guster had worked out that human faces could change colour much quicker than dragon scales, but he hadn’t yet worked out the

meaning of red cheeks.

“You ate the – you ate – ah, HA, HA, HA!”

The girl gasped for breath, doubled over at the waist.

“What?” said Guster, affronted. “Wasn’t I supposed to eat it?”

“Yes –” choked the girl, “but you – you weren’t supposed to eat the napkin as well!”



An hour later, Miranda was still chatting away to Guster, as they tramped together through the forest. Guster reviewed the information he knew so far: human houses weren’t circles any more, they were usually rectangles; when humans’ cheeks changed colour it was called “blushing” and it happened when they were angry, embarrassed, or laughing so hard they couldn’t breathe; and finally, humans ate lemon drizzle cake, but not the paper napkins.

All in all, his mission was going well. Guster was sure that his ma would be proud when she found out how brave he’d been.

Miranda seemed to find dragons just as fascinating as he found humans.

"What do dragons do for hobbies? You know, for fun?" Miranda asked.

"Well, my ma, she's very traditional," Guster explained. "She hoards treasure, and then spends most of her time polishing it and gloating. I prefer to swim."

"I like swimming too!" Miranda said. After a moment, she added, "I like treasure too. Perhaps when I'm older, I'll start my own hoard."

Guster gripped the Wyrmostooth Crown tight, just in case she got any ideas. She still didn't know that the crown was anything special. "I've never seen a human hoard," he said.

"I suppose most human hoards look different," said Miranda. "Jewellery shops, art galleries, museums. When humans gather a hoard, they like to show it off. Gran took me to the museum in the next valley once, and they have all sorts of ancient artefacts. Nothing like that crown, though." Guster gripped it tighter, but Miranda seemed oblivious. "Do dragons really just keep their treasure in piles?"

"It's a very organised pile," Guster explained. "Ma says that old gold carries energy, and the different sorts of energy have to be able to flow right. It's all very complicated, even if the result ends up looking like a heap." Guster had always thought Redbreath's hoard looked like just a pile too, but he wasn't about to let this small human insult his ma.

"Oh," said Miranda. "You mean like electrical circuits?"

"Eclectical whatsits?"

"Circuits. When you make an electrical circuit, there are these tiny blobs of energy which run around the wire really quickly. That's what makes lights light up." Miranda traced circles in the air with her finger to illustrate.

Guster gasped. "You mean like magic?"

"No, it's science," said Miranda. "Humans can't do magic."

"Nuh-uh," said Guster, shaking his head firmly. "I've seen them do magic. Explosions and sparkling lights. What about those huge beasts that the humans have tamed? How could they do that without magic?"

"You mean like cats and dogs?" asked Miranda, her feet crunch-crunching in the flame-coloured leaves of the forest floor. Guster heard the crunching and tried to make his own footsteps as quiet as possible. He'd show Miranda that a big dragon could be stealthier than a piddling human. "Or are we talking cows?" Miranda continued.

"I mean those creatures with the giant mouths and claws. They look a bit – well – evil."

To his frustration, Miranda had no idea what he was talking about.

"You must have seen them," Guster insisted. "There are at least a dozen in this very valley, helping the wizard army."

"Wizard army?" Miranda rounded on him with wide eyes, agog. "Can you show me? I've never seen a wizard before."

Guster leapt up and down. He loved the feeling of knowing something that Miranda didn't. "They have glowing armour and powerful spells that explode and they can change the shape of the land in seconds."

Miranda frowned. "Where did you see these wizards?"

"By the lake," Guster insisted. "I'll show you." He set off at speed down the hill.

Guster forgot about stealth as he raced onwards, crashing through the forest. Before long, he heard shouts behind him.

"Wait! Wait! You're going too fast."

Guster skidded to a stop. He hadn't realised that while he charged ahead, Miranda's human legs couldn't keep up. Not only that, but the long, striped thing around her neck had wound loose, catching on a spiky tree branch.

Guster leapt back up the hill towards Miranda.

"What is this thing, anyway?" asked Guster, plucking the striped, woven wool from the tree branch.

"It's called a scarf. It keeps my neck warm."

"I don't see why you need it. Humans have very short necks," Guster observed, as Miranda picked twigs and moss from the wool.

"Is that a good thing?" she asked.

"No. In dragons, long necks are considered beautiful. My ma has a particularly long neck."

"Oh, right."

"I've also noticed that humans have very short legs," he said, strutting around in a circle to show off his own long, scaly legs. "I've noticed a lot since meeting humans for the first time."

"Hey, I'm one of the tallest in my class," argued Miranda.

"You're still short."

"Do you have many friends, Guster?" asked Miranda suddenly. Guster stopped strutting and stared. He noticed that Miranda's smiley face wasn't smiling anymore.

"Well... no, of course not. I only know two dragons, me and Ma. Why?"

"Just so you know, people don't always like it when you call them short and ugly," Miranda explained, frowning a little. "Why don't you know any other dragons?"

"They don't exist," said Guster. "Humans hunted dragons and destroyed our homes, until there were almost no dragons left. Ma and I are the only dragons for miles around."

Suddenly Guster realised the weight of what he'd said. Here he was, one of only two dragons he knew of, having a friendly chat with the enemy.

Miranda went very quiet too. She took a deep breath and sighed a long sigh.

"I'm sorry," she said at last. "We humans have been very selfish. Right now, my dad is digging up a mountainside for stone to make houses. He cares about building human houses, but he doesn't care how many animal and dragon homes he destroys. I wish I knew how to help."

Guster nodded. A cool breeze washed over his scales and he realised that it would soon be dusk.

"Come on. If I'm going to show you the wizard army, we'll have to hurry. Climb up onto my back."

"What?" Miranda's eyes were wide.

“Climb up. It’ll be much quicker if I don’t have to wait for your... your taller-than-average-for-a-human-sized legs to keep up with me.”

“Really?” Suddenly, Miranda’s smile was nearly as wide as her whole face.

“Just don’t tread on my wings. They’re delicate.”

It wasn’t easy, finding the best way for Miranda to climb on Guster’s back. First, she grasped the spines down his back, but they were too bendy. Then she asked Guster to give her a leg up, but she couldn’t balance on his claws. At last, she used her scarf. Flinging it round Guster’s long neck, she grasped both ends and tramped up Guster’s side.

Having big rubber boots stamp on his ribs was not a pleasant experience, but Guster tried not to say anything mean about it.

“Ready?” he asked.

“Ready.”

Guster ran through the trees, and Miranda gripped the scarf ends like reins and held on.

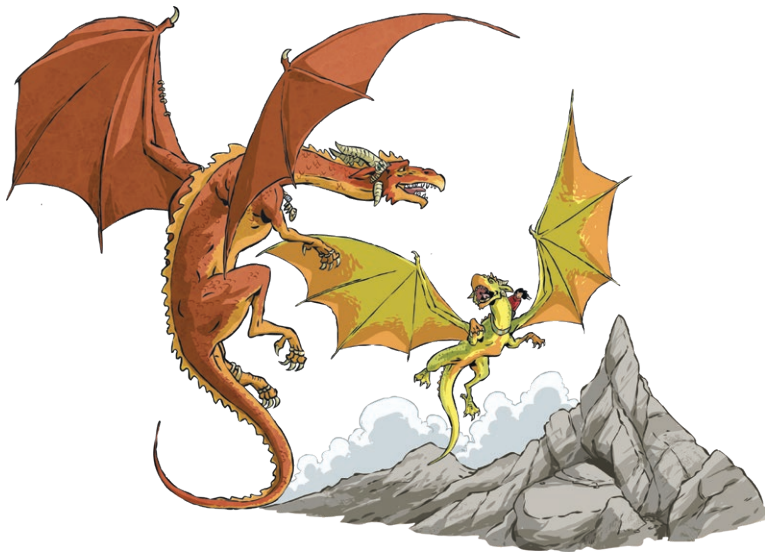
“Woohoooooooo!” she yelled. Guster saw the lake up ahead. It was nearer than he thought. He braced his front feet and skidded – splash – into the lake’s edge. Freezing water sprayed up his side and splattered Miranda. She squealed.

“That was amazing,” she said breathlessly. “Can we do it again?”

But all of Guster’s attention was on the far bank. Half of the hillside had been cut away. How had the wizards changed so much so quickly? How long would it take them to reach his home on the Wyrmostooth Mountain?

“That’s them,” Guster whispered, pointing across the lake to the little yellow human blobs. “I knew humans had magic, but I didn’t realise how powerful it was.”

“Er,” said Miranda, chewing her lip. “That’s not magic, Guster. That’s the start of a new quarry, and my dad is the one building it.”



Chapter Five

Of Plots and Prophecy

Trees flew by in bright flashes of yellow and orange and red, as Guster raced through the forest. Miranda squeezed Guster's scaly sides with her knees. She wrapped the ends of her scarf tightly around each hand and pulled. They burst into a clearing, and Guster skidded to a halt.

"Why are we stopping?" said Miranda. "I thought we had to get to Redbreath urgently?"

After Miranda had explained about quarries and

dynamite and high-vis jackets, Guster had decided that there was no time to waste. Miranda still couldn't believe that she was going to meet two dragons in one day.

"Well, the thing is..." said Guster. He reared up on his hind legs and Miranda squeezed her knees tight to stay on. "I'm maybe, sort of, a bit lost." He teetered around on the spot, surveying the distant peaks. One stood higher and sharper than all the rest: the Wyrmostooth Mountain. Guster dropped onto all fours with a sigh. "It's further than I thought."

"Wait," said Miranda, "you live up there? On Wyrmostooth Mountain? That's so cool! What do dragon houses look like?"

"We live in a cave," Guster replied, beginning to run again.

"Oh, of course," said Miranda. Miranda pictured her gran, small and round, standing in the little cottage kitchen. She heard Gran's voice say, *no getting in the water, no disappearing down any caves, and be back by teatime*. Miranda had already disobeyed one of Gran's instructions by going in the lake – even if it was by accident – so she supposed that another couldn't hurt.

Guster clambered onto a jutting rock.

“Hold on tight,” he said, “this might be a rough ride.” He carefully placed the Wurmstooth Crown between his teeth. Miranda didn’t realise what he was about to do until she heard a sound like a huge flag snapping in the wind. Guster stretched out his wings.

Miranda was fascinated. She stared at the shimmering colours of his scales, green fading to yellow fringed with brown.

He was beautiful.

Guster flapped once, twice. Miranda clung on tight. With one more great flap, he launched off the rock and into the dusk-grey sky.

Miranda felt like her heart had stopped. She was flying!

The wind grabbed her hair, yanking it back. Her eyes streamed and her skin prickled. The wind was icy. She shifted to peer over Guster’s shoulder. Her heart jumped as she nearly slid forward off his back, but she grabbed his neck just in time.

She could see everything.

Below her, the trees rippled like a sea of flames. The golden light of the setting sun glistened on the lake. The mountains spiked the skyline like dragons teeth. They were flying so fast! And so high! And it was so cold!

“This – is – amazing!” Miranda announced to the whipping wind.

In the distance, Miranda spotted a tiny speck circling Wurmstooth Mountain. At first she thought that it might be an eagle, but as they drew closer, she realised that it was much bigger than any bird. Guster suddenly sped up.

“Guster?” called a low and lilting voice through the air. “Oh Guster! My jewel!”

So this was Guster’s mother, Redbreath? Miranda watched in awe as the sleek, orange-red dragon swooped towards them, wriggling like a ribbon across the sky. Her neck was long, her tail flowing and her horns stately. It was only as they grew closer that Miranda realised how huge Redbreath was – big enough at least to fill an entire classroom.

Miranda was so caught up in imagining Redbreath

squashed between the maths display and the whiteboard that she didn't realise what was happening until it was almost too late. Forgetting his passenger, Guster flew at his mother with his front legs outstretched. The pair collided in a huge dragon hug.

The impact juddered through Miranda. She dug in her boots and squeezed Guster's neck. The dragons began to tumble, snout over tail, in the air.

Miranda thought it was like the most thrilling fairground ride ever, exciting and terrifying all at once. Round and round she went, half breathless with the fun of it, half about to be sick.

Finally, they stopped spinning. "Guster, my heart, where were you?" asked Redbreath as the dragons dropped onto the mountainside. Suddenly, Redbreath's face turned from motherly concern to disgust. "And what is that on your back?"

"It's a human," said Guster, spitting out the crown. "Don't worry, she's tame. She's going to tell us how to beat the army. Her dad's the chief, Ma!" As Miranda slid down Guster's scaly side to the floor, she decided now wasn't the time to correct him. Standing in the

shadow of a fully-grown, fearsome-looking mother dragon, Miranda began to feel really scared.

She gazed up at Redbreath. Then, feeling that it was the right thing to do, she sunk into a deep bow. "How do you do, ma'am," she said, hoping that dragons had the same sort of politeness as humans.

Redbreath stared down at the girl with a look so fiery, Miranda expected to feel flames licking her face.

"I foresaw this," Redbreath uttered at last. "I foresaw that a human would come to our cave. But I did not think that my own son would be fool enough to fetch it."

"Well, I did. And here she is!" declared Guster proudly. He couldn't stand still. He leapt around like an excited puppy. "She wants to help us, Ma! She can tell us all about the quarrel."

"Quarry," said Miranda quickly. "It's called a quarry."

"She wants humans and dragons to be friends, and she found the Wurmstooth Crown, Ma," said Guster, hurriedly picking up the slobber-covered crown from the rocky mountainside.

"My crown!" cried Redbreath, throwing her head back dramatically, at the same moment that Miranda gasped.

"That's the Wurmstooth Crown?"

"Er..." Guster looked from Redbreath to Miranda and back again. "Sorry I took it, Ma," he said at last, bowing his head to the elegant dragon. "And, yes. It is the Wurmstooth Crown. I took it from Ma's hoard. It was a clever spy tactic to misdirect her attention, and it worked. Didn't it, Ma?"

Redbreath was already swishing away over a great granite rock and into a dark crevice. Guster clumsily clambered after her, still crowing about how clever he'd been. After a moment's hesitation, Miranda decided to follow.

There was no way round the boulder. Miranda thought about shouting for help, but she didn't want to anger Redbreath even more. Besides, she had been rock-climbing once before. She could do this. Reaching up with both arms, she felt for ledges in the rock. She put her right foot up into a dip, braced her knee and heaved.

Up she went. She felt the rough surface for handholds.

Her left hand grasped the stalk of a bush growing from the rock, but her right hand could only find a thin fissure. It would have to do. She pushed up with her left foot. Her fingers trembled as her right hand began to slip. She tensed her fingers, reached out again over the rock and scrambled with her feet until she was at the top! She rolled onto the boulder, panting. Before her lay a huge cave.

Guster and Redbreath's cavern was bigger than Miranda had imagined. From floor to ceiling, you could fit ten Mirandas standing on top of each other. The floor was sloping and, as Miranda dropped down onto it, she was surprised to find that it was totally smooth and very hard to walk on without sliding. The dragons seemed to manage it with their wide-spread talons gripping the rock and their four legs braced. Miranda slipped and slid into the darkness. She wanted to see Redbreath's treasure for herself.

As she approached, she couldn't help but gasp. Tiaras and diadems, trophies and cups, rubies and emeralds, diamonds and sapphires – she'd never seen anything so mesmerising in her whole life. In the museum in the next valley, she had only seen one crown and a few rusty swords. What the museum wouldn't give to get their hands on this!

Miranda was so fascinated, she barely heard the hissed argument that Guster and Redbreath were having behind her.

"You brought a human here, Guster? A land-ripping, air-poisoning human?"

"Only a little one, Ma, and she's useful."

Redbreath rattled her scales. Her rings clack-clacked as her talons ticked restlessly across the floor.

"It's filthy. It could be carrying all sorts of vile diseases. And what if it makes off with my best treasure?"

"I thought you'd be proud, Ma. I was brave. She can tell us lots of human secrets. And we could – we could even – keep her as a hostage!"

Miranda heard that. She dropped the ring that she was inspecting back onto the hoard with a faint ping.

Riding on Guster's back up the mountainside had seemed like an adventure, like something from Gran's old tales. Suddenly, the situation had turned very serious.

"Hostage?" cried Redbeath. "How could I keep it hostage? I don't know what it eats –"

"Lemon drizzle cake," interrupted Guster.

"– I don't know if it's litter-trained –"

"Hey!" Miranda interrupted. She couldn't let them talk about her anymore, as if she wasn't there. "I can use a toilet, you know."

Redbreath fixed her with an almighty stare. Miranda trembled and wondered whether she was about to become a human-flavoured toasted marshmallow.

"Exactly," said Redbreath. "You can use a toilet."

Miranda felt her face burn red as she realised that dragon caves probably didn't have plumbing, let alone human-sized loos.

She stared Redbreath dead in the eye and took a deep breath. There was only one way she was getting home before teatime. "I know how you can prevent the human army from destroying any more of the mountainside." The words came out in a tumble. "We can use your treasure to stop them quarrying."

“Ha! Another human trick,” said Redbreath turning away. “By Naedre, we won’t be falling for any of your dastardly schemes.”

“Maaaaa!” Guster’s voice wailed up and down like a siren. He trotted nimbly across the cave floor to stand beside Miranda. “Don’t you want to stop the human army?”

Redbreath was clutching her forehead between two talons as if she had a headache coming. “Of course I do, Guster,” she sighed, “but this isn’t the answer.”

“How do you know? You’ve got foresight, haven’t you? Your foresight told you that a human would come to the cave. What does your foresight tell you about Miranda’s plan?”

Miranda watched, fascinated. Redbreath lifted her head and stared – but she wasn’t staring at anything. She seemed to be staring inside herself.

“My foresight shows me,” said Redbreath, in a lower, stiller voice than Miranda had heard her use before, “that the human army will leave this valley, and that one day this place will be a haven for dragons, where they can live and flourish” – Guster began

to leap in excitement, before Redbreath had even finished – “but that humans will take the Wyrmostooth Crown.” Redbreath hung her head, as if exhausted and deeply sad.

“Well, isn’t that a price you’re willing to pay?” asked Miranda, looking between the two dragons, one slumped, the other full of energy. “A crown in return for the freedom of dragonkind?”

“You do not understand, my dear,” said Redbreath. She was looking at Miranda differently now, like a person, rather than a thing. “What I foresee is not a choice. It is fated. Whatever we do, the crown is destined for human hands. Tangleclaw was my great-great-great-great grandmother. This crown was entrusted to me.” Redbreath sighed. “It is a sacrifice worth making to achieve peace, but what if neither of us lives to see it?”



Chapter Six Of Hoards and Humans

Redbreath wouldn't stop fretting.

"King Arthur's lips touched this cup," she said, pacing up and down the cave with the chalice in her claws. "I'm sorry, but I won't see it buried in a hole in the ground."

"It's already in a hole in the ground, Ma," said Guster, snatching the silver cup and shoving it into his leather sack. Miranda was home and safe at her Gran's cottage. After she had explained her plan and promised to meet

the dragons at the quarry in the dead of night, Guster had flown Miranda home. Or as close to her home as he dared.

"This lance was Saint George's," Redbreath continued. "Or at least, it probably was." She picked up the weapon and began to polish it with a cloth. "I won't be the dragon that gives it back to the humans."

"Saint George was a villain who slew a good dragon, Ma," said Guster, taking the lance and adding it to the sack. "We don't want his stupid lance... if it really was his."

"And this necklace belonged to Boudicca!" squealed Redbreath, clutching a circlet of twisted gold. "Boudicca refused to give her treasures to the Romans – why should I give mine to the humans?"

"Ma," Guster snapped, thoroughly fed up. "Boudicca lost that war. We're going to win this one. Now will you help me fill this sack, or shall I do it alone?"

Guster thought that Redbreath really wasn't acting like a hero. It was a good thing that he was there to be brave for both of them.

"We all agreed, Ma," explained Guster. "We have to bury the treasure in the quarry to stop the humans destroying the whole mountain. Miranda says that if the humans find ancient artefacts, they have to stop digging immediately. That's so that the archae... archaeo... the people who study really old stuff can come and investigate the area."

"So we just swap one set of humans for another?"

"But not the type that destroy things, Ma. If we plant the right sort of treasure, they might remember the old times, before humans and dragons were ever at war. That's why we have to give up the Wurmstooth Crown. You foresaw it!"

"I did..." began Redbreath, but she looked uncertain. "But you know that I've never seen as clearly as the ancients did. What if I'm wrong?"

"You were right about Miranda coming to our cave," Guster pointed out.

"Humph," agreed Redbreath, unconvinced.

In the end, Guster shoved as much treasure into the sack as he could, ignoring his ma's wails of protest.

Last of all, he carefully placed the Wurmstooth Crown inside the sack and tied it shut.

Guster scuttled to the cave mouth and looked out at the night sky. Thick clouds had gathered, obscuring the stars. "Ready, Ma?" he asked. When he looked back, he saw that Redbreath was praying.

"Wulf, Hund and Otor, Catte and Naedre. Guide our wings as we embark on this journey against the human foe. Let us not lose the Wurmstooth Crown in vain..."

Guster was about to roll his eyes, but as he gazed out over the black valley to the lit-up quarry on the far shore, he was struck by a strange feeling, like a sudden dread. This wasn't a game or a story. Guster had hoped to be a dragon hero and save his valley from human destruction, but there were real enemies out there, with powers he didn't understand and a grudge against dragons that was a thousand years old. Guster shuddered. All at once, praying didn't seem like such a bad idea.

"Wulf, Hund and Otor, Catte and Naedre," he began, just like Redbreath had. "Humans and dragons have been fighting for ages. It started in this valley and it can end in this valley. Please let us finish it tonight.

Thank you... love from Guster," he said, unsure of how to finish.

Redbreath laid a comforting claw on his shoulder. "Ready, my glittering jewel?" she said, her voice deep and warm.

Guster picked up his leather sack and nodded. "I'm ready, Ma."

Guster and Redbreath swooped through the bitterly cold night air. It was beginning to rain. Below, Guster heard droplets splash in the lake, creatures scuttling for shelter and the forlorn hoots of birds. It was deepest, darkest night.

Miranda had given them instructions about where in the quarry to meet. "It's sort of like a big box with windows," she'd said. "That's the office. It's portable, so they can take it with them when they move to a new quarry. My gran's a deep sleeper. I'll sneak out after her bedtime and meet you at the office." Guster fixed the image of a box with windows in his head.

As they flew closer and closer, Guster's heart beat hard. In the quarry, huge lights hung on stalks, casting a bright white glare over the ruined mountainside and

making the raindrops glow. The sleeping beasts, with their bent limbs and slack jaws, looked particularly sinister in the harsh light and stark shadows. Miranda had assured the dragons that the beasts were just machines – things called diggers and forklifts, cars and cranes – and that they weren't really living. Guster wondered how she could be so sure. Had she seen them up close like he had? Did she know how alive they looked as they crawled over the mountain?

Quiet as whispers, Guster and Redbreath alighted on the gravel road that snaked through the quarry. This was it: the wizard army's headquarters. Miranda insisted that humans didn't have magic, but Guster couldn't quite believe it. If humans didn't have magic, how did they grow lights on stalks which outshone the moon?

"Where did the girl say to meet?" whispered Redbreath. Nervous puffs of smoke curled from her nostrils.

"We have to find the office box," replied Guster.

"Ah, yes, with the windows."

"Let's split up. If we think we've found it, send up a signal flame."

Redbreath nodded.

The dragons crept in opposite directions. At first, Guster kept near to the shore, away from the blank eyes of the metal beasts. But the further he went, the bolder he felt. If Miranda wasn't scared of the beasts, why should he be?

Confidently, Guster stepped up to the nearest beast. Its two white eyes stared at him, unblinking. Its long, jointed arm was folded; the claw was tucked away. Its upper body was strangest of all, made of something transparent so that Guster could see inside. Cautiously, Guster stood on tiptoe to peer in. He saw a surface covered in bobbles and squiggles and dials, with a wheel sticking out.

Perhaps Miranda was right about these things being machines after all.

Behind him, Guster heard a squeak. He spun in time to see haphazard puffs of flame snaking into the air. That didn't look like a signal – it looked like panic.

"Ma!"

Guster bounded across the quarry and rounded a mound

of rubble to find his ma panting and whimpering. Her talon shook as she pointed skywards.

"I saw it move," she hissed.

Guster looked up. Saw what move? A bird? The rain?

"Look," Redbreath said, "at the top of the pole." Guster heard a whirring sound. "There it goes again."

Guster saw it. At the top of the nearest stalk, beneath the blinding light, a small rectangular box manoeuvred this way and that. Then it stopped very still, like a cat about to pounce.

"I don't like it, Guster."

Guster didn't either. Miranda had never mentioned moving boxes.

"I think we should go," said Redbreath.

"No!" Guster tore his eyes from the box. "We have a plan. This might be our only chance to stop the humans before they destroy us. We can't leave now."

"If Miranda doesn't turn up soon..."

"Then we go on without her. We can do this."

"What if it's a human trick?"

"Your foresight showed you. You know that it isn't."

"My foresight showed us giving up the Wyrmostooth Crown to the humans. It didn't show us sneaking into the army's battle camp at night," Redbreath snapped. She jumped as the box whirred again, this time moving to point itself at a shape in the far distance.

Guster gazed over. Was that...

"A box with windows! Ma, I think I've found the office. Come on."

Guster nuzzled his ma to her feet and was just about to run to the office when a new sound cut through the pattering rain. It was faint at first, like an out-of-breath mouse.

EE-ee, EE-ee.

Guster froze, staring around.

EE-ee, EE-ee.

It was growing louder. Redbreath put her trembling forepaws over Guster's shoulders.

EE-ee, EE-ee.

Now it was so close and loud that it echoed around the rain-swept quarry. Guster wanted to run, or hide, or set everything on fire with a single breath.

EE-ee, EE-ee, EE-ee, EE-ee.

Guster peered out from behind the rubble heap. Up the slope stood a small figure with a long, striped scarf flapping around its neck.

"Miranda!" called Guster. Miranda began to speed down the hillside so fast that Guster thought she must be falling. Humans couldn't run like that! How was she doing it?

She sped under the floodlights and came to a stop outside the office with a *scrrreeeeeeech!* As Guster and Redbreath ran over, Guster saw that Miranda wasn't walking at all. She was riding some human contraption. It had two big wheels (one at the front and one at the back), foot-holders and bars which she clung onto.

"Sorry I'm late," Miranda panted, wrapping her scarf back around her neck. The coat that she wore was slick with rainwater. "The cottage is a few miles away, so I had to borrow Gran's bicycle, and you wouldn't believe how rusty and slow it is. Right," she said, looking from Guster to Redbreath. "Have you brought the treasure?"



It wasn't easy for the trio to reach the rock face. The way was steep and slippery. The heaped-up rubble from the explosions created a rough, unstable wall. Eventually, the dragons flew over the top with the sack of treasure, but Miranda had to scramble.

"Don't worry about me!" she called as she crept on all fours up the scree. "I'm – ahh!" she screamed as the rubble gave way beneath her and she slid back. "I've been rock climbing before," she reassured the dragons. "Adventure is my middle name. Miranda Adventure Jenkyns, that's me."

Eventually, she scrambled down the other side of the rocks and loped over the uneven ground to join the dragons. "I think I've scraped the skin off my hands,"

she said. Her palms did look a bit raw. "They're all dusty. Oh well!" She spat on each of her hands, rubbed them together, then wiped them off on her coat. Considering how far human technology had come, Guster thought this a very primitive form of medicine.

"I think we should bury the treasure in the rubble," said Miranda. "That will make people think that it blasted out from the mountain in the explosions."

"You want to *bury* my precious treasure" – Redbreath's voice swung up and down with outrage – "in the *rubble*?"

Guster wasn't listening; he had found something interesting. "How about in here?" he called. As Miranda and Redbreath scurried towards him, he stuck his head into the crevice that he'd found. He wasn't sure, but he thought it was...

"An old dragon cave!" cried Redbreath. Suddenly, a narrow beam of light illuminated the hole. Guster looked down and found Miranda shining a light into the darkness.

"It's Gran's bike light," she explained. "Safety first."

Redbreath stepped unsteadily into the cave. "This is part of the ancient dragon warren that once riddled these mountains," she breathed. "Look at the walls." Miranda waved her light until the beam picked out carvings in the rock. "These are dragon runes," Redbreath continued. "Feel how smooth the floor is. This cave was well-used. It could have been a sleeping chamber, a meeting room or a..."

"Hoard?" suggested Guster.

"If it was," said Redbreath sadly, "the treasures it held are long gone."

"We can fix that, Ma," said Guster. He opened his leather sack and poured the gold and jewels over the cave floor. They clanged and clashed and jangled. Guster dug out the Wyrmostooth Crown.

"There," he said, placing it on top of the heap. "Now they can't miss it."

Redbreath looked at the crown like she might be about to snatch it back. Then she sighed. She put her claw to her mouth, kissed it, then pressed the kiss onto the crown.

"By Naedre, may you bring us peace." As she said it, a coil of mist seemed to float up from the crown – but it was gone in a blink. The two dragons and one human stood in silence together, gazing at the pile of gold. Outside, the rain drummed harder and heavier, but no one noticed. Each was deep in thought.

Suddenly, a terrible, ear-splitting wailing filled the air.

"Demons!" cried Guster.

"Sirens!" yelled Miranda.

"FLEE!" bellowed Redbreath.

Guster didn't need telling twice.

He clattered from the cave, scrambled up the wet scree and flapped his wings once, twice – but his feet skidded. The rubble sank. He tumbled down the slope, caught off balance.

The air was full of water and noise. The wailing was joined by deep, sinister growls, like an army of lions. Guster rolled to his feet. Lights flashed at the edge of his vision. He saw the machine-beasts rolling down the hill. These weren't sleeping like the beasts of the

quarry, and they didn't crawl – they raced. Scariest of all were the blue lights flashing on their backs, whirling round and round. The lights filled the valley with disorienting flickers and shadows.

Guster ran.

"Guster? Guster, my jewel!"

Engines rumbled. Lights flashed. As Guster fled, he felt as though the world was tilting around him. He didn't know whether the rumbling sounds filling the sky were thunderclaps or beastly roars. He didn't know whether the flashing lights were wizard spells or lightning strikes. He didn't know which way led home and which way led him into more danger.

"Guster! I'm stuck, Guster. Help!"

Guster spun around, totally lost. He thought he'd heard Miranda's voice calling him. Was she in trouble?

"Guster, fly, my diamond. Save yourself!"

Guster flapped and flapped. His wing-beats filled the air with a whipping sound which made him feel dizzy. He had to escape. He had to get into the air *now*.

His breath quickened. His heart pounded. Everything was closer, louder, brighter, harsher. Guster took a huge breath. He bent his knees and leapt. His chest burned and his wings ached, but he flapped as hard as he could – and began to fly!

"Guster, help!"

In the air, Guster's confusion ebbed away. He flew above the noise and the lights, circling the quarry, searching. There was Miranda! A little red figure in her big coat. Her escape was blocked by a pile of rubble, and she was unable to climb out.

"Guster, we have to go," cried another voice. Guster looked up to see Redbreath swooping above him. "It's not safe. They've got spells, Guster, evil spells."

"Guster, please!" shouted his new friend.

Guster looked up at his ma. He looked down at the small, helpless human who had done so much to help the dragons.

"I have to rescue her, Ma," said Guster. Before Redbreath could object, Guster dived into the quarry towards Miranda.

As he sped downwards, he saw the human army closing in around her. These humans looked terrifying. Their armour was black and bulky. They held sticks in their hands that Guster was sure were magic weapons.

“What’s that?” cried a human, as Guster grew close.

“It’s not a –”

“Protect the girl!”

The humans surrounded a screaming Miranda. Before Guster could reach her, the humans had her trapped. One pointed his stick up at Guster.

BANG!

The dragon felt a jolt of magic shoot by his wing. His scales sizzled.

“Agh!” he cried, breathing out an involuntary burst of flame. The humans yelled in fear and ran between him and Miranda, zinging more spells his way.

“Guster!” shrieked Miranda. “Leave! Save yourself!”

Guster wheeled away into the night sky, high,

high above the quarry to where his ma waited in the darkness.

“My dear Guster,” cried Redbreath. “It was an ambush. The girl tricked us.”

“I don’t think she knew, Ma –” Guster panted. Every beat of his wings hurt.

“You could have died. We should never have agreed to this plan.”

Guster was too exhausted to reply, but he remembered Miranda’s panicked face as the humans dragged her away. He was sure that Redbreath was wrong.

His insides writhed with guilt. He had left Miranda, scared and alone, in the hands of the wizards. Who knew what they would do to her now?



Chapter Seven **Of Stories and Spirits**

Safe in the cave on Wyrmostooth Mountain, Guster slept fitfully. His wounds hurt. He tossed and turned on the hard floor, trying to get comfortable. His dreams were full of thunder and spells and desperate flight.

Eventually, he woke. It was daylight and cool rain dripped outside the cave. Redbreath was fussing with a mixing bowl. Guster rolled over to watch her.

“Lie still, gem of my heart,” Redbreath said. “I have mixed a salve for your wounds.” Guster lay motionless as his ma rubbed mushed-up herbs onto his burns. “They could have killed you,” she said. “I wish we’d never agreed to this foolish plan.”

“But it’ll work, Ma. You’ve foreseen it.”

“That is beside the point. I should never have let you get involved. You’re too young and too precious.”

Guster huffed. He wasn’t too young. He was the brave one. He was the one who had realised that there was no time to waste; he was the one who had persuaded his ma to keep going when she was scared. He had been a true hero, but he felt too tired and sore to argue.

Later, when Redbreath went out hunting, Guster got up. Gingerly, he padded to the cave’s entrance. On the far side of the lake, the humans in yellow armour were still milling around. Guster watched and watched, searching for any sign of what had become of Miranda. Eventually, one by one, the humans climbed into their machine-beasts and rumbled away over the hillside.

At last, they were gone. Had the plan worked?



The next day, Redbreath said that Guster could go as far as the launching rock.

“I’m fine,” he said, though his burns were still sore.

"The salve is working."

"It's not just that," said Redbreath. "When I was hunting yesterday, the woods were crawling with humans." Redbreath shuddered all over. Her tiara shook and her diamond necklace rattled.

"Crawling?"

"Five! *Five* humans!" she cried, raising her claws in despair. "In *our* valley!"

Guster didn't think five humans was a very big deal but he knew better than to say so. He stared out towards the quarry. "Look, Ma, one of the machines is back."

It was a big machine with a huge mouth on the front. Redbreath scuttled onto the rock beside Guster. "All for nothing!" she wailed, waving her long neck dramatically. "Foolish, foolish plan!"

But Guster wasn't so sure. The machine rolled towards the rubble which blocked the mouth of the treasure cave. With a mighty crunching, the machine gobbled a mouthful of stones, carried them to the corner of the quarry and spat them back out. Again and again, it returned for another mouthful. Once it had cleared a

path to the cave, it rumbled away.

Later, a second machine came speeding down the track. It stopped with a squeal in a cloud of dust. Two tiny human figures stepped out. They potted along the newly cleared pathway and disappeared inside the cave of hidden treasure.

"It must be the archae... the archaeol... the people who study old stuff," said Guster. "I wonder what they're doing in there, Ma."

"Putting their filthy human hands all over my crown," moaned Redbreath, with a sob.

Guster couldn't drag his eyes away. He watched as the humans set up barriers and big tents. He watched as they walked back and forth, carrying tools into the cave and fetching the treasure out. It was nearly dark when the humans left.

"Ma," said Guster. "When you were out hunting, you didn't happen to spot Miranda, did you? In the woods?"

Redbreath pulled a face. "No, thank goodness." She said no more about it.



Nearly four weeks after the eventful night in the quarry, Miranda and Gran stood next to one another in Gran's cluttered bathroom. It was the sort of bathroom that was full of knick-knacks from a lifetime of collecting shells, stones and pieces of driftwood. Miranda thought that it was a bit like a dragon's hoard.

"Now, Miranda, do you want to wear my lucky lipstick for extra-special occasions?" asked Gran.

"Yes, please," said Miranda.

"Pull your lips tight over your teeth then. That's right." Miranda held still while Gran applied the lipstick. "Now rub." Miranda rubbed her lips together. "Press." Gran held up a tissue and Miranda pressed her lips down. A dark red lip print appeared on the paper. "Well, now, don't you look a picture?"

Miranda was wearing her very best outfit. Mum had braided her hair and Gran had ironed her glittery top. Gran was dressed up too, in her best floaty, green velvet dress. They were off to a party at the museum!

Miranda and Gran set off in Gran's rickety old car. It pattered and grumbled over the steep hills, but at last they rolled into the next valley and pulled up in the museum car park.

Even though it was night time, the museum was completely packed. The galleries swarmed with grown-ups drinking sparkling wine, and with reporters carrying microphones and cameras. There, in the middle of the throng, was Dr Augusta Quinn.

Dr Quinn was the lead archaeologist at the site. She had short hair and round glasses, and she hadn't got dressed up for the party. She was still wearing her muddy shirt and jeans from the dig.

"Mrs Jenkyns! Miranda!" said Dr Quinn, as the pair approached. "Are you ready?"

"We're always ready," said Gran.

"Fantastic. There are two seats reserved for you. We're just about to start."

Miranda followed Gran into the grand central hall of the museum. Rows and rows of chairs stretched between the pillars. The pair reached the front and

found their seats. Miranda gazed up at the stage.

Behind the stage was a projector screen. On a cloth-covered table lay several artefacts: a twisted gold necklace, a silver cup, and in the centre, the Wurmstooth Crown! The audience hushed as Dr Quinn took to the stage.

“Welcome, everyone,” she said, her voice amplified by a clip-on microphone. “Today we are here to show off the first of our exciting finds, uncovered only a few miles away, in the Wurmstooth Valley.” Dr Quinn paused as excited whispers filled the hall.

“If you’ve been following the news, you’ll know that my team and I are uncovering all sorts of interesting artefacts: ancient treasure, a warren of caves and sophisticated rock carvings, to name just a few. Our first discoveries are here tonight, and chief among them is the Wurmstooth Crown. A little later, a rather special guest will be telling us more about how the crown was made.”

Miranda nudged Gran, and Gran nudged back. Soon, everyone in the room would know the story of how humans and dragons had quarrelled a thousand years ago.

“You may be wondering what sort of ancient civilisation left these artefacts for us to discover,” continued Dr Quinn. Miranda held her breath. She knew what was coming next. “The answer to that question is our biggest discovery of all. Some of you have probably seen this video already...”

The archaeologist clicked a button on the gadget in her hand, and a video appeared on the projector screen. The image showed a quarry at night in driving rain. After a moment, two lizard-like shapes flapped across the screen and landed. The smaller of the pair walked away. As the larger creature wandered alone, the camera turned to follow it. All at once, the creature stared at the camera with huge eyes. A fireball spluttered from its mouth as it scrambled away. Then the video cut off.

The audience in the museum oohed and aahed, wondering what the strange creatures could be. Miranda’s insides fizzed with excitement. She knew exactly what the video showed: it was Guster and Redbreath, the night that they planted the treasure in the quarry.

Dr Quinn waited for silence before speaking. “In the light of this evidence, it seems that there is no longer

any doubt: dragons really do exist. Not only are they real, but there are at least two living in the Wyrmostooth Valley. That is why I am here: to announce that from now on, the area is to be protected as a Nature Reserve so that these dragons can live peacefully and safe from humankind.”

Miranda grinned. Her plan had worked perfectly.



Guster itched. His back legs and forelegs itched. His belly and back itched. Redbreath said that it meant that the burns were healing. Guster thought that itching felt worse than being burnt. In the twenty-seven suns and moons that had passed since their terrifying night at the quarry, Guster’s autumn scales had come in. He was now burning copper all over.

He watched the valley each day, waiting for a sign – a sign that the humans were gone for good. A sign that Miranda was okay. The more time that passed, the more Guster replayed that moment in his head: the moment when the humans had trapped Miranda, and he had panicked and flown away.

Redbreath wasn’t concerned.

“I don’t know why you’re bothering yourself with that human, my heart’s gem,” Redbreath said. She was preoccupied with arranging her remaining treasure. Her hoard was so heaped up that Guster thought it was hard to tell that a sackful was gone. “Did I ever tell you the story of this sword?” Redbreath held up an emerald-studded blade. “It belonged to brave Sir Gawain, who was dauntless in the face of the Green Knight’s axe.”

But Guster didn’t reply. He was busy staring out of the mouth of the cave at a strange-looking bird, far away across the valley. It was a grey, round bird with spinning wings above its head, and it busied around above the quarry as though it had lost something.

“What do you think it is?” asked Guster.

“Come away from there,” said Redbreath, dragging Guster backwards by his tail. Guster thought, not for the first time, how over-protective his ma had become since this whole wizard army business started. “Now, help me organise these goblets by size and number of gemstones.”

Guster had lined up nearly twenty goblets along the cave floor in size order, when he heard a shout

from outside.

“Guuuusteeer? It’s meeee!”

Without a moment’s hesitation, Guster bounded from the cave, scattering the carefully sorted goblets in every direction.

“Miranda, you’re alive!”

“Of course I’m alive,” she said. “You’re orange!”

Miranda was panting from her long walk up the mountain. Strands of hair flew wildly across her face and her scarf flapped in the wind.

“Of course I’m orange.” Guster preened his gleaming scales. “I change colour every autumn. Camouflage, see?” He leapt down from the rock and capered around her. “How did you escape the evil humans? I thought you were done for.”

“They weren’t evil, they were the police. When they realised I was just a kid, they took me straight home to Gran. Mum was so angry at her, but I told her it wasn’t Gran’s fault that I sneaked out. They forgave each other, and me, eventually. Mum even gave me a

phone so I could call her if I got into trouble.” Miranda pulled a little black rectangle from her pocket and waved it around.

“But how did the *po-lees* know we were in the quarry? Was it magic? Tell me everything.”

Miranda sat against the rock and explained as well as she could. First, she explained that the quarry had security cameras. “I didn’t realise, but there were loads of CCTV cameras. Look – they caught you and Redbreath on video!”

She held up the black rectangle – the *phone* – and showed Guster the footage of him and his ma flying into the quarry.

“Humans all over the world have seen it,” Miranda said. “You’ve gone viral. Did you see that helicopter that just went overhead?” Guster remembered the metal bird that made the sound like a bee. “Well, I reckon that was a TV crew trying to film real-life dragons.”

Guster was busy thinking. “These *seeseetevees*,” he said. “Were they stuck on top of poles? Did they sort of... whirr?”

Miranda frowned. "I suppose the cameras must have been quite high up, and they're electronic so I expect they whirr too."

"We saw them!" he exclaimed, jumping up in excitement. "That's why Ma got scared, because of the seeseetevees!"

"That's not all that's happened," said Miranda. She told Guster all about the party at the museum. "Dr Quinn showed off some of the treasure and the Wyrmostooth Crown was pride of place. She said that they were going to turn the Wyrmostooth Valley into a nature reserve."

"What is a nature reserve?" boomed a deep, musical voice. Miranda jumped. Redbreath was crouched on the stone above them.

"Er, well," Miranda stumbled. Guster realised that she was still a bit frightened of Redbreath. "It's like a special place in nature, er, where there are all sorts of rare species. No one is allowed to, um, build there, and they have to let the animals and... dragons... live in peace."

Redbreath let out a long sigh. Guster knew that it was

not a sad sigh, but a contented one. "My visions can be cloudy sometimes. I know that I am not a strong seer like the ancients, but this time, things have come right." She bowed her head. "Thank you, Miranda."

"You're – you're welcome," said Miranda, in a squeak.

Guster looked around at the valley, at the banks of flaming autumn trees, the still, glistening lake and the proud moot hill island. He was glad that this place would stay the same. "What else happened?" he asked Miranda.

"Well," she said, "when pictures of the Wyrmostooth Crown appeared in the newspaper, Gran wrote to Dr Quinn to tell her the story of Alfwyn and Tangleclaw, just in case Dr Quinn didn't know it. Dr Quinn was so interested that she invited Gran to tell it at the museum. I videoed the whole thing." Miranda fiddled with the phone, and the two dragons peered over her shoulders to watch.

In her swishing dress of green velvet, with a voice that filled the museum hall, Miranda's gran told the whole story. She told of how the human clan and dragon colony had lived in peace in the valley, and how, with Tangleclaw's trickery and Alfwyn's bravery, they

had beaten the barbarians. Then she told of how the Wurmstooth Crown was forged and the troubles that came afterwards.

“Gran actually picked up the crown,” Miranda hissed, pointing. Gran stood proudly, centre stage, holding the Wurmstooth Crown high in the air. “She wasn’t supposed to do that, but no one made her put it down.”

Miranda’s gran went on to describe the three contests, and how at last Tangleclaw realised that the dragons and humans were being tricked by the snake spirit, Naedre.

“And now, at last, the peace that wise Tangleclaw foresaw has come to pass,” said Gran. “The Wurmstooth Crown is returned, not as a sign that humans have won or that dragons are beaten, but as a symbol of peace. A peace between dragons and humans that will last at least another thousand years. Whichever human or dragon was wise and brave enough to return the crown, they are the new hero of this story.”

Miranda’s gran placed the crown upon on the table, and bowed deeply. The audience in the museum were bursting into cheers and applause when the video abruptly stopped.

Guster bounced and whooped and flapped. “That’s me!” he cried. “I’m a hero! A real hero in a story. Did you tell your gran about me?”

“I did tell her,” said Miranda, “but she decided that she wouldn’t mention our names in the story. She said that you didn’t want TV crews hanging around your cave asking questions, because that wouldn’t be peaceful at all.” Miranda frowned. “Don’t forget, I’m a hero too!”

“I think you’ll find that we’re all heroes,” smiled Redbreath, adjusting her tiara.

“We’re like Alfwyn and Tangleclaw,” Guster went on.

“We’ll go down in history,” Redbreath agreed.

Miranda was about to reply when her phone beeped. The dragons jumped and stared at her. “What was that?” asked Guster.

Miranda sighed. “Just my mum asking if I’m safe. She doesn’t really trust me since the whole quarry incident. I don’t know why.”

“I know what you mean,” said Guster pointedly, but Redbreath pretended not to hear. “How did you manage

to get all the way up here?"

"I'm staying with Gran this weekend," Miranda explained. "She knows that I'm here. She said that it's fine, as long as you fly me home before teatime. Oh!" Miranda shrugged off her backpack. "That reminds me." She pulled out three wedge shapes wrapped in napkins.

"Is that..."

"Lemon drizzle cake!" announced Miranda, handing one piece to Redbreath and one piece to Guster.

"Remember not to eat the napkin, Ma," Guster advised sagely, carefully peeling the paper from his slice. He swallowed it in one go, savouring the tangy, fizzy sweetness of the cake.

As the sun began to set, the trio licked sugar from their fingers and claws, and stared out over the valley. Each thought about how peaceful the valley was, and how proud they were that, together, they had saved it from destruction.

At last, Miranda sighed, "I'd better go, it's nearly teatime."

"You'll come back," said Guster, "won't you?"

"Of course. You have to take me swimming in the lake," said Miranda, swinging her backpack on. "We'll go to the isl..."

As she trailed off, Guster followed her gaze. She was staring, open-mouthed, at the island in the middle of the lake. Although the sky was cloudless and the valley clear, the island was engulfed in a dense mist.

"What is it?" said Miranda.

"It's not –" whispered Redbreath.

"It is!" breathed Guster, leaning forward.

As the three watched, the mist shrank into five smoky shapes, each in the likeness of an animal. Wulf raised his head towards the sky in a silent howl which echoed, not in the valley, but in the bones. Then he leapt away. Hund soon followed, wagging her tail and yapping. Otor left by water, leaping in and out of the lapping wavelets. Catte gave her paws a final lick before she too stalked off.

The only one left was Naedre.

The snake spirit uncoiled, hissing faintly, then rolled slowly across the water, as if the lake was a field of grass. At last, he disappeared into the golden light of the setting sun.

Guster, Miranda and Redbreath watched silently.

“I think the spirits just gave us their blessing,” said Guster.

“I think you’re right, my diamond,” sighed Redbreath. Miranda seemed too shocked to move.

“You’ll be late for tea,” stated Guster.

“Oh,” said Miranda. “Yes. Of course.”

“Thank you for the lemon drizzle cake, my dear,” said Redbreath.

“You’re welcome,” said Miranda. Guster knelt, and she climbed onto his back, wrapping her scarf around his neck like reins.

With a leap, and a flap, Guster soared into the sky. They sailed across Wurmstooth Valley together: one dragon, one human, two heroes and firm friends.



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