

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 Wyrmostooth 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 Wyrmostooth 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 Wyrmostooth 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 Wyrmostooth 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 Wurmstooth 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 mashed-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 pottered 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 seeseeteeeves!"

"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 Wymstooth Crown was pride of place. She said that they were going to turn the Wymstooth 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 Wyrmostooth 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 Wyrmostooth 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 Wyrmostooth 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 Wyrmostooth Valley together: one dragon, one human, two heroes and firm friends.





BARBARIANS

lane

main road

Quarry  
Here

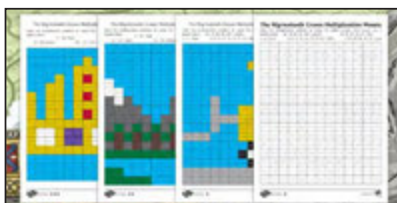
N

DRAGON  
CAVES




We've created a wide range of materials to support teaching on this book.

Visit [twinkl.com/originals](https://www.twinkl.com/originals)







“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?

