



The Wurmstooth Crown

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 Wyrmostooth 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.

"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.



Questions

1. Match these nouns with the adjective that describes them.

leathery

impish

familiar

stone

wings

breeze

2. Label these events with the numbers 1-4 in the order that they happened.

- ☐ Guster went outside.
- ☐ Guster was itchy.
- ☐ Guster saw something which looked wrong.
- ☐ Redbreath told Guster that the lake was cold.

3. Find and copy one word that shows that Guster does not move gracefully.

4. Read the last line of the extract. What does the word 'scolded' tell you about Redbreath?

5. Which of these words best describes Guster?

- ☐ miserable
- ☐ tired
- ☐ excited
- ☐ curious

Explain your choice.

6. Why did Redbreath tell Guster to get inside? Explain your answer.

7. Read the paragraph beginning: 'It was a crisp...'. What impression do you get of the place where Guster and Redbreath live? Which words give you this impression?

8. Find four words that Redbreath uses to describe Guster. What do these words tell you about Redbreath's feelings? Explain your answer.

9. Explain what the word 'foresight' means, using the prefix 'fore'. List any other words that you know which contain 'fore'.

10. Summarise the main ideas that this chapter has taught the reader in order to set the story up well.
