(Actual) Chapter 1

The Thrilling Thwump of Destiny



Emba Oak was scraping squirrel stew splashes off her tunic when she heard a strange noise coming from outside the cave. *Thwump, thwump, thwump.*

She paused, ears straining in the eerie quiet that followed. It didn't sound like the sort of noise Fred would make. Fred wasn't a thwumping kind of woman. And it didn't sound like Odolf either. Besides, Odolf had scarpered straight back into the woods after dinner, as usual, to squeeze in some more hero training before nightfall. For a scrawny runaway blacksmith's assistant, he was very big on hero training.

Thwump, thwump, thwump. A quivery, shivery feeling snaked along Emba's spine as she swapped her tunic-scraping stone for her scaring-off one.

Whoever—or *what*ever—was out there, it was best to be prepared. She was still haunted by memories of the bewitched widower of Nether Mynd, who'd attacked her with his sharpened walking stick after mistaking her for a bloodsucking cave spirit. If it hadn't been for the thick, lizard-like scales on Emba's arms and legs, she'd have been in serious trouble. And now, as she held her breath and listened, Emba had the funniest, tingliest feeling that trouble had found her all over again…

Thwump, thwump, thwump.

It sounded like wet rope whipping against the slimy rock wall—only heavier and more *monstrous*. Emba had a fleeting vision of the eight-legged sea monster from the front cover of the *Tome of Terrible Tomorrows*, but pushed the image away again. What would a sea-monster be doing in Witchingford Wood? Unless it had come to seek the tome's advice… The ancient book of prophecies had an answer for everything, if you were wise enough to understand its riddles (which ruled out everyone except Fred).

Thwump, thwump, thwump.

Emba dropped down onto her stomach and wriggled

through the narrow crawl hole that separated her and Fred's private living quarters from the main body of the cave. The noise reverberated through the stone walls to meet her, echoing round her skull. But no sooner had she reached the other side than the thwumping stopped again, with nothing but the answering thump of her own heart to fill the silence.

She ducked under a row of stalactites and squinted through the gathering gloom. It was an eerie, shifting gloom that seemed to reach into the curves and corners of the cave and then ease itself back again. Almost as if the darkness was breathing…

Ridiculous, Emba told herself firmly. The seasons were on the turn, that was all. Dusk came quickly at this time of year, and the cooking fire was all but out. It was her own silly fault for not bringing a lantern. She crept on towards the cave entrance, her scaring-off stone clenched tight inside her fist.

"Hello," she called, the strange tingling feeling growing stronger than ever. "Who's there?"

For a moment, there was nothing. No answer. No sound. And then…

"*RRRROOOOOOOAAAAAAAARRRRRR*," came a cave-shaking reply.

Emba flung herself back against the wall, eyes clamped shut in fear, her scaled knees trembling. *A bear!* she thought. A growling, snarling GIANT of a bear. Or a boar, like the one that had gouged Odolf's stomach with its tusks the year before. Emba could hear it snuffling and pawing at the ground as it edged closer… and closer…

Please, she begged, too terrified to move. *Please don't hurt me.*

"Rrruhh?" came a softer, more considered kind of roar. "Rrrhur-hurh?"

No, that didn't sound like a boar. Or a bear… and it didn't smell like one either. It smelt of mist and smoke, and a dark glittering rush of something deep and terrible and wonderful, all at the same time. It made the hairs on the back of Emba's neck tingle to attention and sent her stomach spinning.

Emba took a deep breath and opened one eye… and then rather wished she hadn't.

She was right. It wasn't a boar.

It wasn't a bear.

It was impossible—that's what it was.

She opened her other eye, to make doubly sure, and there it was.

A dragon.