

Andy Shepherd

The Boy Who Sang with Dragons

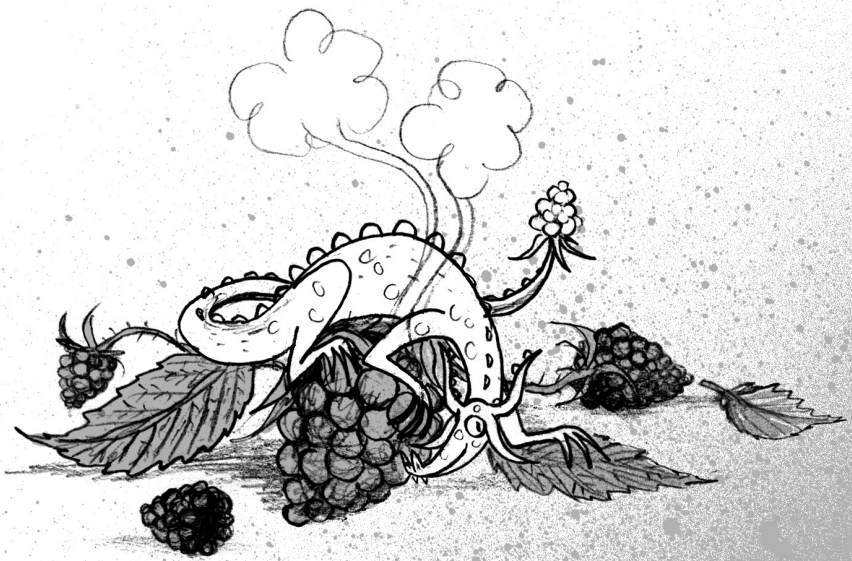
Illustrated by Sara Ogilvie

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Here in Grandad's garden, the air crackles with magic. In between the runner beans and raspberry bushes, dragons flit. Scales shimmering. Eyes glittering. Hot breath steaming.

I stand, feet rooted in the soil like a plant. Growing tall and strong as tiny dragons settle on my hands, my arms, my head.

An orange dragon with silver-tipped wings brushes my face. A turquoise dragon with black spines and a bright yellow tail scratches my palm. An electric-blue dragon with threads of silver clings to my back.



And when I tilt my head upwards to the stars and close my eyes, I see the shining ruby shape of Flicker, huge and bright like a glowing constellation come to life.

Here in Grandad's garden, I am the dragon whisperer. The dragon protector.





1
Super-Sticky Slimo

'Incoming slime,' Ted yelled. And we all ducked as a green and brown-speckled dragon dived at us.

A splat of sticky goo landed on Liam's head.

'Eww! This stuff stinks,' he groaned. 'I thought only slugs oozed slime.'

'It's probably a defence mechanism,' Aura said. 'It must be scared.'

'Yeah, like hagfish,' Ted piped up, a bit too gleefully. 'They can squirt out a litre of slime if they feel threatened.'

'Well, this dragon must be terrified,' Liam said.

'We're going to be wading through the stuff soon.'

'You couldn't wade through this,' Kat said. 'It's super-sticky.' She waved her hands at us – they were covered in fluff from her efforts to wipe them clean.

'I think it's us who should be scared anyway,' Kai pointed out. 'Have you seen what those others are doing now?'

Two dragons with dainty feathery frills protruding from their elegant necks were hopping in circles in front of each other. Their heads bobbed and their frills fanned out, like those birds of paradise doing elaborate dances that I'd seen on TV.

'I think they're the least of our worries,' I said.

'Not those,' he said. '*Those*.' And he pointed to a pair of golden dragons with long curled horns and strange corkscrew-shaped tails. 'They're drilling holes in the cricket pitch!'

'And scorching the grass,' said Kat.

'And leaving muddy mounds like molehills,' said Ted.

An area of the neatly manicured pitch suddenly ignited.

'And then there's the explosive poo of course,' I added.

This particular band of dragons were certainly proving to be more of a handful than most of those who ventured out of Grandad's garden.

'We're not going to be able to see them soon,' Liam said. 'Let alone catch them.'

He was right – it was almost dark.

'Can you give us a bit of light?' I whispered to Zing, who was resting his head over my shoulder, claws digging into my jumper and tail swishing back and forth.

His sky-blue scales flared brightly and the tip of his zigzag tail pulsed white as it flicked out. A crackle of little blue sparks leaped from spike to spike along his back. I felt my hair starting to stick up, as a familiar buzz ran through me. Then he rose into the air.

He flew up and landed on one of the floodlights that lined the edge of the cricket pitch. The bulb blazed

into life, illuminating the grass and the drilling dragons. I thought for a minute that might be enough to make them all fly off into the night. But no.

You've got to love my optimism, haven't you? You'd think I'd know better by now. Because let's face it, life with dragons is *never* easy.

As the light came on, the two dancing dragons started twisting and twirling even more wildly, as if this was the spotlight their dramatic display had been waiting for. But it was too alarming for the slime-



splattering dragon, which dripped its way over the top of the drilling dragons and then disappeared into one of the holes they'd made.

The next second it shot out of another hole a few feet away.

'They really have been burrowing,' I said. 'They must have made tunnels under there.'

The drilling dragons really didn't like their hard work being invaded. But Slimo was too quick for them. We watched as he dodged them and disappeared back down yet another hole.

'We need to do something,' Kat said. 'Or this cricket pitch is going to be more full of holes than a piece of Swiss cheese!'

'Everyone, stand guard over a hole,' I said. 'Get ready to grab hold of it next time it pops out.'

Now if you've ever played that game 'whack-a-mole' at school fetes where you have to whack a sock full of newspaper as it drops out the end of a pipe, you'll know that this was not as easy as it sounded.



Especially when the 'sock' in question was covered in slime and had wings and sharp claws!

It wasn't helped by the twirling dragons getting in on the action. They slalomed their way between us, getting closer and closer to our heads, as if they were in a competition to see which of them could make us flail about the most. The smaller one won, by sending Liam lurching backwards. He stumbled over one of the heaps of dirt they'd made and landed bottom first in a hole. Which was undignified enough, except then the hole collapsed into the tunnel underneath and he was left wedged into the ground, his arms and legs sticking up in the air.

'Help!' he wailed.

Kai hurried over and started trying to pull him out. I could see he was stifling a giggle. Liam looked less amused.

'Sorry, but you look like a hermit crab,' Kai said, as he managed to pull him out a few inches, only to give up and let go.

He turned to the rest of us. 'It's no good, I need a hand,' he called.

Kat joined in pulling Liam's other arm. And Aura and I each grabbed a leg.

'*And they pulled and heaved and yanked and tugged, but still the enormous turnip would not move*,' Kai chanted, and the stifled giggle finally burst out and infected us all.

'Ha ha!' Liam said crossly. He shook us all off and started wriggling, arms and legs all squished together and waving madly, making him look like an irate squid. Which just made us laugh even more.

It also had a strange effect on the slime in the tunnel.

'Er, guys,' Ted said. 'I think the suction from Liam's bum is causing a reaction.'

We all turned and looked. And to our horror we saw that coming out of the hole at the other end of the tunnel was a super-stretched slime bubble. And it was growing bigger by the second. Snot bubbles had nothing on this monstrosity.

