DRAGONBORN

STRUAN MURRAY



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FROM THE DESK OF
DR ARCHIBALD P. PUPPINSWORTH

If you're reading this, I'm probably dead, and the reason I'm probably dead is that I wrote the thing you're reading.

Ha! How's *that* for an opening? But please, don't worry about me, dear reader, whoever you are. I am very old. Or *was* old – can you still be called old after you're dead? Anyway, I've lived a long, full life, done nearly everything I wanted to do. But I've spent too long keeping secrets. Big secrets. And I just can't be bothered any more.

So, where to begin? As I'm sure you know, twenty-seven years ago I wrote the best-selling book *Myth and Magic in the British Isles: A Guide to Fairies, Giants and Otherwordly Happenings*. It was the work of a lifetime, *my* lifetime, and everything I've done since then has seemed pointless and stupid. But while the book is certainly a masterpiece, there are some things I'd change, had I written it now.

The title is too short, for one (you can blame my editor for that), and my writing style much too serious (not a single joke in over a thousand pages!). But, worst of all, there were too many things I did not – *could not* – include, for fear they would get me arrested, murdered, or worse, made fun of.

While writing the book, I travelled the length and

breadth of Britain and Ireland, gathering stories. There are so many strange tales out there, dear reader, if you know how to find them. If you only *look* and *listen*. Some were scratched on gravestones, or scored on trees. One was carved on a human skull. Tales of monsters, of magic, of a hidden world inside our own. Myths. Legends. Make-believe.

Because that's all they are, aren't they?

What I didn't mention in the book, however, was the fairy wing I found on a beach in Cornwall, or the apple-sized tooth jutting from a boulder in Shetland. The forest I stumbled into near Donegal, which you won't find on any maps, where the trees move after sunset, and wolves as big as horses watched me from the dark. What I didn't mention was the trail of fire I saw in the sky, on the night I almost died.

Because you see, dear reader, it's all out there: the make-believe made real. If you look hard enough, you'll find that the world is much, much bigger than you thought it was.

Yes, yes, laugh, go ahead. Ha, ha, ha. Got it out of your system? Good. Now shut up and listen. The reason I couldn't put any of this in my book is because there are people out there working tirelessly to keep it all a secret. They'd have burned every copy, and made sure I never wrote another word, or drew another breath. They are afraid, you see. Afraid that we might intrude into the Otherworld. Make it angry.

And what, I hear you cry, could be so frightening

about this Otherworld? Should we fear the giants, the goblins, the fairies and their magic? Well, yes, of course you should, you fool! But there is something you should fear more. Much, much more.

I have seen them on my travels. You never get used to them – your heart races at their sheer size, their *power*. The first time I saw one I was laid up in hospital for a week, and it never even touched me. I just couldn't believe it, that such a creature could *truly* exist. The noise it made lingered in my eardrums for a year. The sight of it still haunts my nightmares. They are death given form, given flight. They are the fury of a thunderstorm, bottled inside a living thing. I hope, dear reader, that you never meet one.

Here are some facts about dragons.

Firstly, the basics. They breathe fire – of course they do! – and are covered snout to tail in scales as hard as diamond. They come in many colours, have four legs, and, yes, a pair of mighty wings. Their eyes burn with a fierce intelligence, their teeth each as long as your arm, and their blood is acid: if their scales are somehow pierced, it will spurt forth, sizzling the flesh of whoever was stupid enough to pick a fight with a dragon. Nature shivers at their passing: the air itself hisses and sparks and steams. If you've ever seen an unexpected storm on a cloudless day, chances are a dragon was behind it.

Now, these facts are known to some – the so-called Dragon Scholars who hide across the world. They

could tell you what I have, if they weren't so afraid of the consequences (see above – death, ridicule, etc.). But there are two things I am certain they do *not* know about dragons. Two things I've learned at great cost. Two hidden truths. Two terrible secrets.

Well, are you ready? I'm going to tell you them now. Both of them.

The first is complicated. If I were to write it down in a single sentence you would laugh at me again, so perhaps it would be wiser for me to relate to you a story. The story of someone who came by this secret, and whose life became unexpectedly intertwined with mine. So make yourself comfortable, dear reader. It is a thrilling tale, and I shall tell it well.

It is the story of a girl.

Ah, but before we get started, I promised you a second secret about dragons, didn't I? Well, here it is:

They are going to destroy humanity.



I

It was roaming the forest that night. Three witnesses saw it, and all of them wished that they hadn't.

It was seen first by Sam, a boy, who was woken by the noises it made: a slithering, squelching, grinding, grating sound, like a slab of iron being hauled through mud and stone. When Sam looked out his bedroom window he screamed, which woke his parents, who groaned, and turned over, and carried on snoring. They were always accusing Sam of having too vivid an imagination. In the morning his sheets needed changing.

Next came Mr Lowrie, a farmer, who'd gone to check why his goats were bleating so horribly, and found that one was missing. A reek of smoke turned his head, and in the forest he saw something, wrapped up in darkness. The noise that it dragged from his throat was more horrible than the bleating of his goats.

Finally it was seen by Mimsy, a dog, who'd escaped on one of the frequent nightly walks his owner didn't know about.

He was a small white terrier adored by the town, and he bounded into the forest without a care in the world, certain he'd be back in his kennel within minutes.

When morning came the forest was still. The sunrise painted its frosted treetops in bursts of peach and orange, and there was not a single sound from inside.

Then, small footsteps crunched through fallen leaves. A girl in a grey school uniform, her long dark hair tied back in a ponytail, her pale face expressionless. She walked very upright, very proper, like her every step was under careful examination. She stopped in a little meadow, and glanced around to make sure she was alone.

Then she ripped off her tie, threw back her head, and produced a noise so loud it would have drowned out the screams of Sam, Mr Lowrie, and Mr Lowrie's goats combined.

It was not a scream – it wasn't shrill or frightened enough. But it wasn't deep enough to be called a roar either; too fierce for a cry, too drawn out for a yell. It rang unstoppably through the trees, and would have scared away all the birds if they hadn't been scared away already in the night. It was sad and terrible and painful to hear. It was so much bigger than she was.

At last Alex closed her mouth, and just like that it was gone, fading to echoes, then nothing. She rubbed at her sore throat, and was very glad that nobody had been there to see her.

'Well, that was an odd thing to watch on a Tuesday morning.'

Alex turned, gasping in panic, and found someone standing between two sycamores, wrapped in a cloak the colour

of autumn leaves. He was the largest man she'd ever seen, with dark brown skin, a short beard, and a tall crown of dreadlocks. His eyes shone with a keen excitement, as if his day had just become much, much more interesting.

'Who are you?' said Alex, hurriedly retying her tie as if that might undo the noise she'd made. 'I . . . I don't usually find people in my forest.'

She winced at the slip of her tongue – she only called it 'her' forest in her head. It sounded so childish said out loud.

'Ah, it's *your* forest, is it?' said the man, in a voice like gentle thunder. 'Excellent, I was hoping to talk to the owner.' He pointed over her head, as if the noise was still hanging there. 'What was all that about, then?'

'What was what about?' said Alex, much too quickly.

The man's eyes crinkled in amusement. 'Ah, I see. That's the game we're playing, is it?'

'I was just, um . . . clearing my throat.'

'Of course. When I clear my throat it also makes a noise like a hundred angry, dying cats.'

'You sound Scottish,' said Alex, hoping to change the subject.

'Aye, we've been known to migrate south in the winter. Ever been? Beautiful countryside, lovely people. Did it make you feel better?'

'Scotland?'

The man smiled. 'Clearing your throat.'

'Oh.' Alex shuffled her feet. 'Yes. A little.' She considered the hard, painful knot where her stomach should have been. 'No.'

She noticed the man was holding a poster, with a photo of a little white terrier: */MISSING – MIMSY, £100 REWARD*

'That's Mrs Wiggins's dog. He's missing?'

'Oh, aye.' He stared at the poster. 'Poor thing – found these all over town this morning. Thought I could look for him while I'm in the area.' His eyes grew large with an idea. 'Want to help me? We could split the reward money. Let's say . . . ninety to me, ten to you? That sounds completely, entirely fair, doesn't it?'

Alex managed a small, mischievous smile. 'Sixty–forty. To me.'

'Ha! What's a wee girl need sixty pounds for? Deal. In fact, you know what – I'll give you the whole hundred if you tell me what all that noise was for.'

'Why . . . why do you want to know?'

He shrugged. 'I don't, really. But it seems to me that if you're coming out here to hurl your anger at the sky, then you might not have anyone to talk to.'

Alex rubbed her arms; she suddenly wanted to be far away. 'Sorry, I . . . I should really get going, thank you. Sorry.'

'Nothing to be sorry about – or to thank me for either, for that matter. Besides, I ought to be about my business. I do hope you feel better soon.'

Alex nodded gratefully, and turned to walk down the hill. Then she remembered something; a chance to repay his kindness. 'Um, you should be careful, by the way. A hunter's been coming to the forest – he shot a fox and just left it lying out. I'm hoping to get a good photo of him so I can warn

people. Oh . . .' She glanced at the *MISSING* poster. 'You don't think he . . .'

'Mistook wee Mimsy for a fluffy white badger?' The man nodded grimly. 'Maybe. Though there are worse things that could have found the wee doggie.'

With that the man knelt down, drawing a finger through the mud then putting some in his mouth, swishing it around like a wine taster, then spitting it back out. Alex wrinkled her nose, and once she was far enough away she removed from her pocket a chipped plastic walkie-talkie, covered in faded flower stickers. She whispered into the receiver. 'Weirdos in the forest today, Dad. Over.'

She carried on down the hill, then broke into a run, slipping into the forest like a seal slips into water, hopping over thick roots and mossy rocks and rabbit holes as familiar as the freckles on her arms. The forest was Alex, and Alex was the forest, and it was soon plain to her that something was very different about it. Normally it resounded to a chorus of cheerful birdsong, but today . . . nothing. The air was thick with the sweet smell of rainstorms, even though it hadn't rained in days. The mud churned with beetles and earthworms and fretful ants.

She checked on the bird-feeders by the dried-out well, but found them untouched, then passed the Three Grumblers – a trio of oak trees that stood huddled together. Her dad said they'd once been bitter old men who'd lived in the forest, spreading lies about the people of the town, until the people had had enough, and hired a witch to turn them into trees. Her mum said her dad should stop filling Alex's head with

made-up nonsense, but then one of the trees *did* have the impression of an old man's face in its bark, Alex was sure of it. Today that face looked frightened.

A twig snapped. Alex ducked warily behind one Grumbler, and that was when she saw it.

A dark shadow among the trees.

It stepped down the hill, misty breaths puffing from its snout. It was trying to walk gracefully, but kept staggering, like the time Alex had worn her mum's high-heeled shoes. Finally it paused in full view; not a shadow, but a deer. Down its side was a long and shiny cut, red soaking into its tawny fur. Alex's chest filled with sadness. It was so still and so beautiful and so unreal.

She crept towards it, but the ground slipped right under her. She skidded, fell, then hurtled ten feet down the hill, landing in a prickly rose bush. She plucked the thorns from her bare knees, then saw that the earth around her had somehow turned to ice – no, to *glass* – and she had slid right down it. There was an odd smell too, like a barbecue the day after a picnic.

How could mud turn to glass? Alex thought. She turned round, and her breath caught in her throat.

Before her was the largest tree in the entire forest – the Treasure Tree. It was a fierce and gnarled old oak, her favourite by far. According to her dad's stories it didn't grow strong on water and nutrients like normal trees, but from the gold and gemstones that fairies placed around its roots. When the great fairy king had died, his entire fortune had been buried underneath, and the Treasure Tree had doubled in height.

But someone must have fed it on rusted forks that morning, because now the tree was dead. It had come ripped away, right at the base. Its great trunk lay in the mud.

'No, no, no.' Alex grabbed her walkie-talkie. 'It's broken, Dad. It's broken. What should I do?'

She felt like she was staring at her own severed arm. The trunk had snapped cleanly, except for one jagged spike of wood sticking from the stump, now smeared with bright blood. Alex tried hopelessly to lift the trunk, as if she might be able to reattach it. But it wouldn't budge, and Alex sniffed back tears. She was glad there was nobody there to see her cry.

'Don't worry,' said a voice like gentle thunder. 'That doesn't smell like dog's blood to me.'

The stranger was standing right behind her, brow furrowed in thought, staring at the broken tree.

'It a deer's blood,' said Alex, blinking quickly. 'It must have brushed against it by mistake.'

He cocked his head to one side. 'Never seen a girl so upset over a tree before. You do know there's no batteries in your walkie-talkie, don't you?'

'Yes, thank you very much,' said Alex, her voice sharper than she meant it to be. She carried on quickly down the hill away from him. To her relief he didn't follow, and Alex wiped her face. The Treasure Tree had been one of their best sitting spots – it had a clear view towards the sea, towards the sunset. Alex drew a deep breath, raising her walkie-talkie.

'I'm okay, Dad. I'm okay.'

Could a stray shot from the hunter's rifle have snapped it? No, of course not, but maybe it was those teenagers who carved their names into everything. Or maybe –

She stopped dead as the deer limped right out in front of her. Two things were immediately apparent to Alex. Firstly, that the deer's eyes were so big and pretty and sad. Secondly, that there was a man crouched in the bushes not far away, pointing his rifle right at it.

He was dressed all in green, his broad face glossy and red, as if sculpted from raw meat. He saw Alex, and pressed his finger to his lips, then hefted the butt of his rifle against one shoulder, squinting down the barrel. He stroked the trigger.

Alex shook her head in disbelief. She wanted to run – to throw herself at the hunter, to rip the rifle from his hands. She thrust one foot forward, but the rest of her wouldn't follow. Fear had flooded her body, frozen her solid, and all she could do was watch as the hunter's knuckle turned paper white.

The rifle spat; smoke and red flame. Its roar filled the forest. The deer barked.

Then darted into the woods.

The gunshot rang on and on in echoes. The smoke cleared, revealing the huge cloaked stranger standing right before the hunter, now staggering back on one foot. A hole had been torn through his cloak. Over his heart.

The hunter blinked, his meaty face turning pale, his lips wobbling. He gave a shrill cry, dropped his gun, picked it up again. 'Good morning!' he yelled, then ran down the hill.

'*No, no . . .*' Alex rushed to the stranger's side. She patted his chest, looking for the bullet wound, then ripped

off her school jacket to apply pressure with. 'We need to stop the bleeding!' she cried. 'Lie down. I mean, please lie down.'

The stranger gripped her shoulder tight. '*What* did you do that for?' he growled. 'That was a *deer*. Do you really prize a deer's life more highly than your own?'

'I . . . I . . .' Alex stammered. She found she was suddenly more afraid of the man than she'd been of the hunter. His face was as fierce as a storm. No blood trickled from the hole in his cloak. 'I didn't do anything.'

'You were going to, I saw it. You were going to throw yourself in front of him.'

'But . . . so . . . so were you?'

'No, I *did* throw myself in front of him. But I've been shot before.'

Alex didn't know how that made it better. She stared at the still-smoking hole in his cloak. 'We should get you an ambulance. My mum won't let me have a phone, but I'll run to the post office, and they can call one, so please don't try to move or –'

'Do I look like I need an ambulance?' he said, pulling her closer, glaring at her with dark eyes. 'You're a fool to want to risk your life like that, and a coward for not being able to do it.'

He let go of her suddenly, and Alex stumbled back, heart pounding. 'I . . . I really should be going, sorry. Thank you.'

'Stop thanking me, girl, I called you a coward!' He took a heavy step towards her. 'Now tell me – why would you do something so foolish?'

Alex tried to speak, but her throat was tight with fear. 'I . . . I . . . didn't . . . sorry, thank you.'

'*Thank you, sorry, thank you, sorry*,' he rumbled. 'Are those the only words you can say, coward?'

Alex dug her fingernails into her palms. She drew a deep, icy breath. 'Please don't call me a coward.'

The man smiled, eyes wide and malevolent. 'Coward. Now answer my question—why would you want to throw yourself between a hunter and his prey?'

Angry words tried to wriggle out of her, but by the time they passed her lips they were brittle and small. 'I couldn't let him take another piece of my forest.'

The stranger snorted. 'Haven't you noticed? Something is ripping huge *chunks* out of your forest. Something far more terrible than a silly man and his silly gun. What a strange wee coward you are, wandering a forest by yourself, crying over broken trees.'

Alex's whole body was shaking. She'd had enough of this man; she wanted to shout at him for scaring her, for calling her names, for a thousand other things that weren't even his fault. But when she opened her mouth only whispers came out. 'I'd like to be alone, thank you.'

'Aye, aye. Alone. Alone. Alone. That's when you're happiest, I suppose. Or is it? Maybe that's why you love this forest. The rest of the world is too big, isn't it?' He prodded her shoulder. 'Too big, and much too frightening. Certainly too frightening for a little coward like yourself.'

'STOP CALLING ME A COWARD!'

The words hurled themselves from Alex's lips – not a

scream, or a roar, or a cry, or a yell. Something more terrible than all of them.

The stranger staggered backwards, as if he'd been shot a second time, eyes wide in astonishment. At once a mask appeared to have fallen from him, his temper gone, and it seemed suddenly to Alex as if he'd never been angry with her at all but had simply been testing her. She couldn't tell if she'd passed or failed.

'I was right,' he whispered. 'But you don't know, do you?'

In her outburst Alex had dropped her walkie-talkie. The stranger knelt to pick it up, holding it carefully as he returned it to her, studying her with a gentle intensity. Alex touched a hand to her face. 'Don't know what?'

Then suddenly he was laughing. Great gales of laughter that crinkled his eyes, laughing in surprise, in joy. A tear rolled down his cheek. 'How wonderful. Oh, how wonderful.'

'What is it?' said Alex.

Footsteps came crashing up through the forest from the bottom of the hill – footsteps Alex knew too well. 'What *is* it?' she said urgently, turning back to the stranger.

But he was gone.