

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 glowing figure that followed me through the mountains of Skye. 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 clouds, 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 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. And their teeth – oh, such dreadful teeth! Inky black, sharper than any knife on this Earth. So sharp they can cut through solid rock.

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 a cold October morning, and Alex Evans was doing fine, really. Absolutely fine.

She got up and made her bed – perfectly, sheets as smooth as a frozen pond – then brushed the knots from her hair until it was perfectly straight. She went to her desk, triple-checking her homework from the night before and dividing it between two plastic trays – one labelled ‘school homework’, the other ‘home homework’. She noticed her bed sheets had come loose at one corner and went to fix them. A voice called from next door:

‘Did you make your bed, darling?’

‘Yes, Mum,’ she replied calmly.

Alex circled today’s date on the calendar that took up one wall of her room; months, weeks, days, hours, all filled in with her mum’s red handwriting. Today’s first instruction read: *6:30 a.m. – violin practice, 15 minutes*. She glanced at her violin where it leaned haughtily against her bedside table.

STRUAN MURRAY

She noticed her sheets had slipped again and went to fix them.

‘All fine,’ she said, calmly, and then practised her smile in the mirror – perfectly, teeth showing, eyes slightly crinkled. She spotted a smudge of pen ink on her lip and kept rubbing at it until it went away. She put on her school uniform, adjusting her tie until it was perfectly tight.

‘Did you remember to do your tie properly this time?’ came her mum’s voice again.

Alex pulled her tie tighter, her collar digging into her neck.

‘Yes, Mum,’ she said, very calmly. She went to get her blazer but tripped on the leg of her desk, violin shuddering in outrage as she knocked into her bedside table. She winced, rubbing her toe.

‘Everything okay, my dove?’

‘Fine,’ she said, very, very calmly, and hopped towards the mirror. ‘Everything’s fine.’

She put on her blazer; button one, button two, button three. Button four flew off, pinging from the mirror and striking her on the nose. She stared at her reflection. Her eyelid twitched. In the mirror she noticed her bedsheets had come loose again.

Alex took a deep breath.

She turned, walking silently from her bedroom, down the stairs, out the front door, into the cold morning light. She walked up the empty street, towards the old forest at the edge of town. She walked through the trees – straight-backed, blank-faced, perfectly, perfectly calm. Finally she

## DRAGONBORN

came to a stop in a little clearing. And for a moment she did nothing.

Then, Alex ripped off her tie, threw back her head, and screamed as loudly as she could.

It was like a bomb had detonated in her chest. The noise rang unstoppably from her lips, scratching her throat, sad and terrible and painful to hear. Yet with each second she felt lighter, cooler inside. As if poison was being drained right out of her.

Finally, when Alex had no more scream left to give, the sound collapsed to a tiny moan, and she fell against a tree, catching her breath in little gulps. She was extremely glad that nobody had been there to see her.

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

Alex gasped, turning to find a man standing behind her, wearing a cloak the colour of autumn leaves. He was the largest person she had ever seen, with dark-brown skin and a tall crown of dreadlocks, and his eyes sparkled with curiosity, as if his day had just become much, much more interesting.

Alex took a step backwards. ‘Who are you? What are you doing in my forest?’

‘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. What was all that about, then?’

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

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

STRUAN MURRAY

‘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 in her stomach. ‘For a bit.’

‘Anything you’d like to talk about?’

She shook her head. ‘I’m fine. Everything’s fine.’

‘Aye, people who are fine always say, “I’m fine, everything’s fine,” while their left eye twitches. It’s not good to keep things bottled up, you know. You might do something weird, like march into a forest and scream at a stranger.’

Alex rubbed her nose. ‘It wasn’t weird,’ she muttered quietly.

The man’s face scrunched into an expression of great discomfort. ‘It was a *little* weird.’

‘Yeah, well . . . you’re weird. Who dresses like that?’

‘What do you mean?’ He looked down at himself in affront. ‘These are my best travelling clothes. At least I’m not trapped in some itchy grey prison of a uniform like you. You’re missing a button, by the way.’

‘I *know*,’ said Alex.

## DRAGONBORN

‘Ah, you still seem a wee bit angry. Do you need to scream again?’

‘What are you doing here, anyway?’

‘Hunting.’

‘*Hunting*? Hunting for what?’

‘Umm . . . bears.’

‘There’s no bears in Britain.’

He shrugged. ‘Depends where you look.’

Alex wrinkled her nose and checked her watch. Her day had taken a very strange turn and it wasn’t even seven o’clock. ‘I need to go home.’

The man gazed over Alex’s head, as if her scream was still hanging there. ‘Are you sure home is the best place for you?’

Alex turned away. ‘I’m fine. I just have to . . . stay focused. Everything will be fine if I just do as I’m told.’

‘Hmm . . .’ The man studied her. ‘Never seen a bird so eager to lock its own cage before.’

Alex glowered at him, wanting to argue but lacking the words and the bravery. The man’s face lit up in a smile. ‘Well, I best be going, important business to attend to.’

‘Yeah.’ Alex raised an eyebrow. ‘Those bears aren’t going to hunt themselves.’

‘No . . . no, indeed, they should be careful. There’re lots of strange things in this forest today.’ The man pulled his cloak about himself, watching her with a shrewd expression. ‘You have a nice day now . . . *feeling fine*.’

With that he turned and marched deeper into the forest, unnaturally quiet for someone so large. Alex shivered, shaken