

THE MONSTER CHRONICLES:

**The role of children's stories featuring monsters in
managing childhood fears and promoting empowerment.**

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Abstract:

Children's fascination with monsters is a normal part of childhood development. Children's literature reflects this with a wealth of stories featuring monsters, ranging from fairy tales to picture books to books for independent readers. These stories can raise concerns from educators, parents and other sections of the community such as political and religious institutions on the basis that they could be disturbing or harmful to children. In contrast, there is evidence to indicate the potential for managing fears and enhancing feelings of empowerment in children through the reading of stories featuring monsters.

A reappraisal of these stories from a predominantly therapeutic perspective reveals that they may act as agents of positive change in six ways – catharsis, naming, taming, integration, transformation and moral empowerment. Two of these functions, transformation and moral empowerment, are examined further in three case studies of stories for the older reader that feature monsters, *Wolf Brother* by Michelle Paver, *Monster Blood Tattoo, Book One: Foundling* by D.M. Cornish and my manuscript, 'The Monster Chronicles'. The insights from this research have been used to inform the writing and editing of 'The Monster Chronicles' and inherent to that, my goal of creating a children's story featuring monsters that is sensitive to children's fears and their desire for empowerment.

Statement of Authorship:

The work contained in this thesis has not been previously submitted to meet the requirements for an award at this or any other higher education institute. To the best of my knowledge, the thesis contains no material previously published or written by another person except where due reference is made.

Signature:

Date:

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

Keywords	ii
Abstract	iii
Statement of Authorship	iv
Acknowledgements	v
Table of Contents	vi
Introduction	1
<i>The importance of monsters in childhood</i>	4
Literature Review	7
<i>Best practice in managing childhood fears</i>	8
<i>The use of stories in fear management</i>	9
<i>The six agents of change in stories featuring monsters</i>	11
<i>Concerns about stories featuring monsters</i>	15
Case Studies	17
Case Study One: <i>Wolf Brother</i> by Michelle Paver	17
Case Study Two: <i>Monster Blood Tattoo, Book One: Foundling</i> by D.M.Cornish	21
Reflective Case Study: ‘The Monster Chronicles’ by Michelle Taylor	25
Conclusion	32
Cited References	34
Bibliography	38
Manuscript: ‘The Monster Chronicles’ by Michelle Taylor	41

“The mind needs monsters.”

(Gilmore, 2003, p.1)

Introduction

Gerard Jones, author of *Killing monsters: Why children need fantasy, super heroes, and make-believe violence* suggests that all children want to feel secure, happy and strong and that their fantasies can tell us what they need in order to attain these feelings (2002, p. 21). An examination of the fantasy world of children certainly confirms that monsters play a large role. Considering these two premises and that I was drawn to this world due to my long-standing love-hate affair with monsters, I was compelled to consider why stories featuring monsters are so fascinating to children. As my research progressed, I wondered if these stories could act as more than just a repository for children’s fears and whether paradoxically, rather than exacerbate childhood fears, they might exert the opposite effect.

This ‘wondering’ was also shaped by my experience as an occupational therapist treating those with anxiety disorders. The treatment models I followed invariably involved exposure to the source of fear by various methods. Avoidance and denial were rarely recommended. My treatment often employed metaphors or symbols via stories, poems and images. The reasoning for this was that these provided a safe distance for people to view frightening or difficult issues, as well as offering unique insights and opportunities for transforming problems.

The research questions that arose out of these preoccupations and which this thesis seeks to answer are as follows: Can children’s stories featuring monsters help children to constructively manage their fears and gain a sense of empowerment? How can this knowledge inform the writing of my fantasy novel for children which

features monsters? The second research question is deliberately open-ended, not specifying a goal for the creative work other than that it remain sensitive to my findings. My aim was not so much to write a story to help children overcome their fears but to write one that had a fine-tuned sensibility to children's fears and desires, and which achieved this in a large part through the relationships between monster and child characters.

I conducted the research using a number of frames of reference. These included my experience as an occupational therapist in the field of mental health, in particular my work using creative writing as a therapeutic intervention, in addition to educational, psychological, psychoanalytical, literary, anthropological, political, and religious frames of reference.

The exegesis aims initially to establish the importance of monsters in children's lives. This is followed by a literature review which examines best practice in managing childhood fears, the use of stories in fear management, and the particular role of stories featuring monsters to achieve this. In this latter section I propose a framework for understanding the topic. This framework outlines six ways children's stories featuring monsters operate as agents of change: catharsis, naming, taming, integration, transformation and moral empowerment. Attention is then given to concerns raised over exposing children to these kinds of stories.

The literature review is followed by three case studies of children's stories featuring monsters, one of which is a reflective case study of my manuscript 'The Monster Chronicles'. The frames of reference I imposed on the case studies were the respective roles of *transformation* and *moral empowerment* in managing fears. These were chosen because they are functions inherent to the story, as opposed to functions which involve analysis of individual child readers and their responses to stories.

For the purpose of this research I have defined *monster* as a creature of the imagination. I refer to David Gilmore's survey of shared traits among monsters (Gilmore, 2003, pp. 174 – 194) which defines monsters as hybrids, combining for example, human and animal parts or living and dead tissues; of great size and strength; predators or posing threats to human beings; in possession of prominent features for capturing and destroying prey; prone to metamorphosis from one state to another; outcasts dwelling on the fringes of society and an embodiment of evil motives.

I have adopted a broad definition of a *story featuring monsters* which includes fairy tales, picture books and chapter books for middle readers to young adults. I also looked to the origins of the word *monster*, which is derived from the Latin *monstrum* meaning a prodigy or portent from the root *monere*, to show or warn (Cawson in Gilmore, 2003, p. 9). I have employed this definition as a lens for viewing the research which wonders: What can the story featuring monsters show children, and can it show them something truly extraordinary?

For this research *fear* will be defined as 'an unpleasant, often strong, emotion caused by anticipation or awareness of danger', which may involve feelings of anxiety or solicitude (Allen, 2001, p. 315). I will challenge the commonly held assumption that fear belongs to that category of emotions that is undesirable, offering little benefit to the individual and from which children should be shielded. I will make a distinction between the advantages and disadvantages of experiencing fear in the short and the long term. I will argue that one of the potential longer term outcomes of exposure to fears that monsters represent is *empowerment*, 'to give (somebody) the strength and confidence to act on their own initiative' (Allen, 2001, p. 283–284).

The Importance of Monsters in Childhood

Let us return to the two assumptions I spoke about earlier. The first of these is that children's fantasies reveal a great deal about what can make them feel happy, secure and strong. The second is that their fantasy world is littered with monsters. These somewhat contradictory ideas are not due to strange coincidence, as there is a large body of evidence to show that monsters play an important role in normal childhood development.

A child's relationship with monsters begins at the age of two and half to three years when she learns to replace physical objects with mental images of objects, thus allowing her to imagine things such as frightening creatures and animate inanimate objects (Bettelheim, 1976, p. 45–46; Kutner, L. (n.d.)). The majority of preschool-aged children, as high as seventy-four percent, experience fears of monsters or monster-related fears, associated with bedtime, the dark, being left alone, and frightening dreams but instead of fears of monsters subsiding in the first few years of school, these often increase as the child's imagination develops (Jersild, 1943, p. 338; Bauer, 1976, pp. 70–71; Muris, Verweij & Meesters, 2003, p. 2). Although thereafter the trend is for a slow decline in fears, nearly half of eleven and twelve year olds still have fears involving the imaginary and supernatural world (Jersild, 1943, p. 338). In fact, the ability to distinguish fantasy from reality may not be fully developed even in adolescence (Taylor and Howell in Prawat, Anderson & Hapkiewicz, 1985, p. 7).

The prevalence of monsters in a child's psyche is in part, because monsters offer the child 'a tangible symbol for everything that is confusing and scary and that might harm children' (Solter, 2003) at a stage when, developmentally such anxieties

are difficult to define and articulate. The monster is certainly an apt metaphor for one common childhood fear, separation anxiety, which is the fear that a child will be abandoned and left alone to fend for herself and according to psychoanalysis, is the greatest threat in our lives (Bettelheim, 1976, p. 145). Monsters are metaphors for many other things that threaten our security including death, injury, hostility (our own or others), helplessness, isolation, and the uncontrollable (Oelman, 1974, pp. 203, 209, 210). Monsters may represent engulfment and cannibalism (Cohen, 1996, p. 14; Cohen, (n.d.)), destruction, chaos and mental illness (Schneider, 1993, p. 38, 113), deformity or disease, displacement and unknown things (Wikipedia, 2006), and anything evil, including the devil (Knowledge News, (n.d.)).

David Gilmore, Professor of Anthropology at the State University of New York and author of the book *Monsters: Evil beings, mythical beasts, and all manner of imaginary terrors*, explains that authorities use monsters as a metaphor for embodying human qualities that must be defeated, the most important of these being the id forces of aggression and sexual sadism (Gilmore, 2003, p. 4). But in the case of children the monster may be just as likely to represent a host of everyday childhood worries such as whether they will fit in with the other kids at school or whether they will be in trouble with their teacher or their parents for some wrongdoing.

Conversely, monsters do not just stand for a child's worst fears. A monster can be a metaphor for power and passion (Schneider, 1993, p. 33), for human urges to command respect (Zimmerman, 2003, p. 138) and sympathy (McCormick, 1996, p. 4), to exert control over one's destiny (Oelman, p. 207) and to engage in the forbidden (Cohen, 1996, p. 16). Children's attraction to monsters can be understood by viewing the monster as the quintessential child. R L Stine, author of the

'Goosebumps' and 'Fear Street' series recognizes the child like the monster, as an outsider, often feeling different, ugly, overwhelmed by angry feelings or out of control and he feels children can love these terrifying creatures because they can also be comforted by them. (Stine, 1998, p. 66) What better soul-mate than a creature that is bad-mannered and stubborn, and who better to aspire to than a figure that is huge and powerful? (Bayliss, 2001, p. 1). If we consider some of the qualities that both children and monsters espouse such as lawlessness, stubbornness, destruction, chaos, drama, and the urge for power, then we have a match made in heaven, or possibly hell.

Another way of conceptualizing a child's fascination with monsters is to think of monsters as polarized creatures that act like magnets to children. These complex hybrids embody not just good or bad, but good *and* bad, just like the child. The monster echoes the question constantly facing children – "to be themselves or who they are expected to be" (Sychterz, 1999). It has a dual identity as both victim and victimizer (Gilmore, 2003, p. 5). It is a manifestation of the oedipal complex, symbolizing the parent who they simultaneously love and hate, who fosters feelings of both power and helplessness in their child (Bettelheim, 1976, p. 111–115). It is not fully human, not fully inhuman, and as such can mirror our humanity and inhumanities (McCormick, 1996, p. 38). It is a fantasy figure but at the same time it is real to the child, as are the feelings it engenders (Bettelheim, 1976, p. 126). It is not bound by rules yet it is barred from historical time, being caged within mythical and liminal time (Nuzum, 2004, p. 2). It is both a problem and the answer to the problem (Schneider, 1993, p. 2).

Literature Review

This literature review seeks to establish a number of factors, underpinning the idea that stories featuring monsters can help children to manage fear, and consequently feel a greater sense of empowerment. I will firstly examine best practice in the management of childhood fears, before exploring the way stories fit into this model. From here, I will offer a framework for conceptualizing the way in which children's stories featuring monsters may play a unique part in assisting children to constructively manage fear. This framework identifies six agents of change and will elaborate on how each of these plays an important role. Finally, I will acknowledge and address some concerns adults have about these stories.

Best Practice in Managing Childhood Fears

In a comprehensive study of children's fears techniques found to be generally ineffective were ignoring, coercion and ridicule, and even reassurances and verbal explanations were largely ineffective unless accompanied by some more active technique (Jersild, 1943, p. 342). By 'a more active technique', Jersild meant enabling the child to actively engage with the source of fear, incrementally and over time to build up competence at coping with it (pp. 342–343). This practice, known as systematic desensitization, is commonly employed in mental health settings to treat a range of fears, and has also been used to successfully treat night-time fears in children (Muris et al, 2003, p. 2). However, this method is both difficult to apply and has limited effectiveness in decreasing the *imaginary* fears of children (Jersild, 1943, p. 342; Muris et al, 2003, p. 2). Because so many of children's fears inhabit the realm of the imaginary (Bauer, 1976, p. 2; Jersild, p. 341; Muris et al, p. 2) we are confronted with problems if we rely on this traditional treatment model.

Firstly there is the question of how to *gradually* expose a child to an imaginary entity such as a monster, when a child's exposure to monsters is largely determined by *their* imagination and not controllable events in the 'real' world. As Doctor Lawrence Kutner aptly puts it, "his fears reside in his head, not in his room" (Kutner, n.d.). Then, when the monster is actually 'present', the question arises, how should a child *actively engage* with it?

If parents wish to help their children to manage their fears, either real or imagined, what are the best ways to facilitate this? Psychologists suggest adults can help in the first instance by respecting and acknowledging these fears which are very real to the child (Solter, 2003; Kutner, (n.d.); Canadian Paediatric Society, 2004). If their fears inhabit the realm of fantasy, then to help children cope with these our techniques must also enter this fantasy realm..

Certainly the use of monsters as metaphors to remedy a range of fears and anxieties is not new. Dynamic play which incorporates parental interaction, drama and storytelling using monsters as its focus, has been shown to decrease children's fears (Crenshaw, 2001, p. 124; Harvey, 2001, p. 183). The anti-monster letter, essentially a letter telling the monsters that the child is no longer afraid of them, has been successfully used by psychologists to reduce night-time fears in children (Muris et al, 2003, p. 6). Bibliotherapy, which literally means "treating through books" (Pardeck, 1991, p. 58), commonly uses books with frightening themes, including those with monsters, to help children overcome their fears (Paley in Hoogland, 1998, p. 11; Newhouse & Loker, 1983, p. 26; Nicholson & Pearson, 2003, p. 2-3; Pardeck, p. 60-61; Stallcup, 2002, p 12; Canadian Paediatric Society, 2004)..

The Use of Stories in Fear Management

Bruno Bettelheim, the renowned psychoanalyst proffers that our greatest need and our most difficult task is to find meaning in our lives and that for children, this knowledge is obtained in increments and at each stage of development, through a medium which is comprehensible to them (Bettelheim, 1976, p. 3). In *The uses of enchantment: The meaning and importance of fairy tales* he argues that this task falls heavily to stories and that 'fantasy fills the huge gaps in a child's understanding' (p. 61). According to Bettelheim (p. 50) and Piacentini, Director of the Childhood OCD, Anxiety and Tic Disorders Program at the University of California (in McDowell & Geddes, 2003, p. 173) rather than feel she is unable to understand something, a child will feel more secure and satisfied if she projects her fears and imagines something scary. Stories with their language of metaphors and symbols are readily understood by children and work to impose structure onto a child's confusion to stop them from feeling 'engulfed by unmanageable chaos' (Bettelheim, 1976, p. 66).

Many stories embody elements that can empower and educate children.

Bettelheim suggests that for a story to provide a child with an enriching life experience 'it must stimulate his imagination; help him to develop his intellect and to clarify his emotions; be attuned to his anxieties and aspirations; give full recognition of his difficulties, while at the same time suggesting solutions to the problems which perturb him' (1976, p 5). Such stories and the play they promote allow children to express their feelings and to gain a sense of mastery over their world in ways which feel natural, effortless and effective to them (Jones, 2002, p. 101; Hoogland, 1998, p. 1).

When faced with a problem, a child is called upon to think outside her normal experiences in order to solve her dilemma. A story is an ideal vehicle for this kind of

problem solving because the creative cognition of a child easily allows two levels of thinking to operate at the same time, so that the story works to both *inform* and *transform* the reader (Levine in Nicholson & Pearson, 2003, p. 2). According to Levine, a child focuses on the actual narrative at a conscious level, while at an unconscious level the child is performing a kind of search of their personal experiences that parallels the narrative (2003, p. 2). Via this process of identification with characters, children apply what they learn from the characters to their own lives (Newhouse & Loker, 1983, p. 2; Carlson & Arthur in Nicholson & Pearson, 2003, p. 2; Hoogland, 1998, p. 3).

In my experience as a therapist I found engagement with narratives, especially those which were not literal but metaphorical, was a powerful means for people to tap in to their abilities to find creative solutions to their problems. An equally useful aspect of these interventions was the way they empowered an individual with a 'voice' when that person reflected on her stories or articulated them to others. Through these processes, I observed that feelings of isolation, fear, helplessness, confusion and low self esteem were diminished.

In a similar way stories help children to cope with frightening feelings. For the older child capable of reading a story on her own, a story can validate the child's worth and help her explore important themes as she makes connections to the ideas and characters that resonate with them. For the younger child being read to this also applies but with additional opportunities for reflection and support in the company of an adult. Taken a step further, when a story is shared in the classroom a sense of community is created, helping children to cope with feelings of loneliness and fear (Hoogland, 1998, p. 14). To explain this notion metaphorically it is difficult to find

better words than Hoogland's: '...we begin to see that we share the dark with others. There are others in the forest, and that makes all the difference' (1998, p. 14).

The Six Agents of Change in Stories Featuring Monsters

There is a scarcity of non-anecdotal research on this topic but one landmark study of first-graders' responses to the stories of Maurice Sendak, found that monster stories could empower children by offering them a 'voice' and a unique vehicle through which to learn and reconstruct things in their world, and by allowing them to imagine, hope and dream (Sychterz, 1999). I asked the question: What is it about a story that is inhabited by monsters that makes it such a special vehicle for positive change? I went on to identify six ways these stories function to decrease feelings of fear and increase feelings of empowerment in children. These six agents for positive change are catharsis, naming, taming, integration, transformation, and moral empowerment.

1. Catharsis

In the first instance, the monster story offers children the opportunity for *catharsis*. Aristotle argued that drama helped society because it offered "*katharsis*, a release of dangerous emotions" (Jones, 2002, p. 131). Via the monster story, a child is given permission to vicariously exercise antisocial feelings like fear and aggression which society normally demands she keeps under wraps (Jones, 2002, p. 6; Nuzum, 2004, p. 12). As Sychterz explains (1999), the child is ascribed a voice when previously they may not have had one through which to express such feelings. When the problem of the monster is resolved or the monster is finally slain, the stress that was felt initially is transformed to relief and exhilaration (Bettelheim, 1976, p. 122; Jones, 2002, p. 6; Saler & Ziegler, 2005, p. 4). While catharsis can liberate the child

from overwhelming emotions, this does not necessarily equate with empowering a child (Stallcup, 2002, p. 6), and we need to examine the elements of the monster story that may further provide for this.

2. Naming

One way to begin empowering a child is by a process I will refer to as *naming*. The monster story provides an opportunity for discussion focusing on what the child finds interesting about the monster or the story as a whole. Here, it is possible to make a distinction between what Jones describes as the ‘literal and emotional meaning’ of a story (2002, p. 56) and what I will call ‘metaphor versus reality’. The monster provides an ideal working metaphor which may then shed light on the child’s real fears and anxieties on any range of issues from school to confidence to relationships. Once a child’s fears are named or articulated via the story or subsequent discussion, an opportunity is set up for the child and/or adult to begin to deal with them (Hoogland, 1998, p. 9).

3. Taming

Following on from naming, and certainly one means of managing anxieties, is the process I will refer to as *taming*. Sabine Melchoir–Bonnet put it this way, “To represent a monster is to tame him” (Kilbourn, 2005, p. 1). The monster story helps a child to contain her fears by establishing a sense of herself as someone who can think about and experience frightening emotions without being “dissolved into them” (Zimmerman, 2003, p. 17). Being able to explore frightening and destructive urges within the relatively safe and controlled context of a monster story can help reduce the intensity of these feelings (Bettelheim, 1976, p. 122; Jones, 2002, p. 11). Paradoxically, these stories which are steeped in fantasy, actually help children to

better understand the boundaries of reality and the differences between thinking and doing, imagining and being (Jones, p. 11)

4. Integration

Another way the monster story allows children to feel empowered is by offering them opportunities for *integration* of different parts of their personalities. This process is enabled when the child projects different feelings or aspects of their personality onto characters in the story, for example rage and destruction onto the monster, bravery and conviction onto the hero and fear and powerlessness onto the victim. As the story progresses these feelings can be transformed, for example into relief when the victim is saved or a sense of power afforded by the hero slaying the monster. The story may even engender a sense of sympathy and responsibility toward the monster who was possibly abandoned or abused (McCormick, 1996, p. 2). The monster story, with its frequently polarized characters, and notions of good and evil, offers abundant opportunities for readers to begin to come to terms with a range of complex and conflicting feelings. This process of integrating different parts of the self can in turn lead to greater feelings of empathy, self acceptance and understanding, and is an important part of maturing into a well-adjusted person (Bettelheim, 1976, p. 308-309; Jones, 2002, p. 230-231).

5. Transformation

Monster stories also help children to cope with fears via a process I will refer to as *transformation*. By this I mean the ability of these stories to engage with the child's imagination and to offer alternative solutions to problems. Given that the child reader processes feelings through their relationship with the child protagonists and the

monsters in the story, these transformations can relate to the reader's relationship with the child character, the monster character, the interaction between the two, and to the problem presented by the monster in the story.

The process of transformation can be facilitated in a number of ways. Children do not tend to dwell on the terrifying monster but focus more on the story's resolution, so rather than frightening them, these stories can instill confidence and reassurance (Trousdale in Nicholson & Pearson, 2003, p. 3; Paley in Hoogland, 1998, p. 12). Many monster stories offer visions of a world where children do not have to depend on adults to solve their problems (Stallcup, 2002, p. 6), a concept which is an important part of growing up. Conversely, these stories can suggest fantasies that the child is not able to invent for herself (Bettelheim, 1976, p. 111) and as such offer satisfactory endings allowing, especially through the discussion or play which ensues, for children to believe that the things which frighten them can be overcome or transformed (Hoogland, p. 11; Jones, 2002, p. 101). The fantasy story, replete with monsters can also be seen as akin to a dreamscape and just as the dream allows us to emerge refreshed after dealing with unconscious problems, perhaps such stories can allow the child to work through 'unconscious pressures' and re-emerge feeling braver and more able to master the real world (Bettelheim, p. 63).

6. Moral Empowerment

The final way these stories help children to overcome fears is by what I will refer to as *moral empowerment*. Remembering its root *monere*, to show or warn (Cawson in Gilmore, 2003, p. 9), the first step is to ask what the monster represents in the story and then how its engagement with characters and the narrative offers up themes.

These metaphorical struggles deliver the warnings that life is full of challenges. They

provide messages such as hope, courage, commitment, perseverance, resilience and personal development, even empathy and responsibility, all of which help a child to build concepts of themselves and the world they live in which will serve to empower them. As Bettelheim proffers, so often embedded in the monster tale is the idea that struggles against great difficulties are an inherent part of our existence, and that if we meet these head on we emerge victorious (1976, p. 8). These stories engage the child in what philosopher Ernest Becker said was the force behind human beings' greatest achievements – 'the denial of death', and when the child takes on the monster she begins to exert some power over 'life's scariest realities', including death (Jones, 2002, p. 59). If the monster is dealt with or done away with, even though the monster is not real, the good feelings of reassurance and hope that it offers children, are (Bettelheim, p. 126).

Concerns About Stories Featuring Monsters

It would be remiss of me to discuss the benefits of these stories without acknowledging concerns in the community about their negative effects. There is little non-anecdotal research on the effect of a single book or books on children (Stevenson, 1996, p. 3). This has not stopped teachers, librarians and editors from coming under considerable pressure from individuals and lobby groups attempting to remove books featuring monsters from bookshelves across The United States of America (Cech in Sychterz, 1999). According to Jones, established institutions such as education, religion, politics and even the family distrust these stories because the more something 'threatens our control, the more we'll expect to see danger in it' (2002, p. 140). Jones also cites a common preconception: a connection between correlation and cause which leads to the popular belief that violent fantasies like

those in monster stories *cause* violent behaviours (pp. 23 – 44). There is no evidence to support this claim and although children with violent tendencies may be more attracted to these stories, this does not mean they make children more aggressive, and in fact they may have the opposite effect (pp. 23 – 44).

Another reason for adult concern is that we do not like to see children being disturbed. This disturbance may be even more acute for children under the age of eight, as they are still learning the differences between fantasy and reality (Bauer, 1974, p. 70; Jones, 2002, p. 103). This kind of reaction can be countered by avoiding monster stories around bedtime, particularly if a child already has anxieties related to monsters, the dark, going to sleep and nightmares; and by allowing the child to decide whether or not *she* exposes herself to a story that makes *her* feel afraid (Jones, p. 103) However, banning books with monsters does not make the monsters residing in the minds of children go away (Bettelheim, 1976, p. 121; Cohen in Bayliss, 2001, p. 3), nor is it likely to stop children from conjuring up new monsters all on their own.

Monsters, with their evil and destructive urges and their blatant disregard for rules probably pose more of a threat to adults than children. Parents may not like monster stories because they challenge their authority and disrupt the security they strive to create (Bettelheim, 1976, p. 117–118; Stallcup, 2002, p. 3). Educators may view these stories as containing inherent risks because they introduce fear and questionable moral values into the classroom in an era of political correctness, where the classroom is promoted as a non-threatening environment (Hoogland, 1998, p. 12). Many adults are uncomfortable with images of evil and violence and do not like to be reminded of the capacity for this in themselves or their children (Jones, 2002, p. 129; Sanders, 2000, p. 2).

Case Studies

The novels for the two case studies were chosen for the following reasons. They are both intended for the same audience as 'The Monster Chronicles' with each reaching a wide audience including upper readers, young adults and adults. Both books have performed well in the marketplace with *Monster Blood Tattoo, Book One: Foundling* being the first in a trilogy and *Wolf Brother* being the first of six books in *The Chronicles of Ancient Darkness* series. Each of the books appeals to me immensely on the basis of characters, storyline, style and language. Finally, these books offer two alternative constructs of monsters. *Wolf Brother* is the more traditional with a monster that must be destroyed in order for all to survive. *Monster Blood Tattoo* provides a wide range of monsters with varying characteristics, some of which fall outside the archetypal traits of monsters.

Case Study One: *Wolf Brother* by Michelle Paver

Wolf Brother is a fantasy novel for children aged eight years and upward. It is set six thousand years ago in the forests of north-west Europe in a world governed by magic, the laws of nature, the clans and a demon in the form of a monstrous bear. The book's central character, Torak is a twelve year old boy whose idyllic existence is suddenly taken from him when his father is killed by the bear and he is left completely alone. The dying wish of Torak's father is that his son finds the Mountain of The World Spirit. It holds the secret to defeating this monster which will destroy everything and everyone in the forests if it is not stopped. Torak fears that his task is impossible and questions whether he is the right person for the job. Despite this, he honours his father's wish and embarks on a quest to rid the forest of the bear with only a wolf cub as his guide and a renegade clan member, a girl called Renn, for a companion.

Transformation plays an important role in *Wolf Brother* in terms of the child character and solutions offered to problems. The story opens with Torak firmly in the role of victim. He is frightened, alone and barely able to fend for himself in the face of a murderous monster and an impossible pledge. Gradually, he emerges through the phases of his grief – shock, denial, sorrow, bewilderment, anger – and via his struggles against the monster, he goes from the role of boy victim to resourceful and independent young man. With regard to the monster and Torak’s relationship to it, there is little transformation. The bear remains dominant and ruthless through the course of the story, and Torak’s relationship to it is transformed only in the final pages when he destroys the bear.

Wolf Brother contains those transformative elements of monster stories that work to empower the child reader. It offers a vision of a world in which adults are not relied upon for all the answers, a factor in fostering healthy notions of independence (Stallcup, 2002, p.6). Indeed, even people are not relied upon for all the answers and Torak must also learn from his pack brother, a wolf, and the forces of nature. When characters are confronted by the power and horror of the demon bear and it appears there is no way out, this could make the child reader feel anxious. But at these junctures, the story offers another transformative element as described by Bettelheim (1976, p. 111) – alternatives to giving in to the reign of the monster are suggested, solutions that children may have been incapable of coming up with on their own. Finally, if we accept that children focus more on the stories’ outcomes rather than its monsters (Trousdale in Nicholson & Pearson, 2003, p. 3; Paley in Hoogland, 1998, p. 12), then *Wolf Brother* offers imaginative and satisfying resolutions to counter the fears readers may experience.

In terms of moral empowerment, this story of a boy pitted against a monster is layered with messages that resist those of impotence and insecurity. Let's examine firstly the metaphorical constructs of this monster. It is certainly archetypal in its characteristics – both in a physical and a psychological sense. The bear is much larger and stronger than a normal bear and is possessed by a merciless demon. Paver's monster grows larger and more powerful with every kill and, as Renn observes after firing upon it, "Arrows can't bring it down" (Paver, 2004, p. 151). This monster represents the forces of destruction and evil, sickness, injury, death, chaos and uncertainty, isolation and abandonment. The reader is able to engage in a struggle with these fears, as well as those fears within the realm of their own personal experiences which may parallel the narrative (Levine in Nicholson & Pearson, 2003, p. 2). Through this process of identifying with Torak and other characters, children can apply the lessons from these trials to their own lives (Newhouse & Loker, 1983, p. 2; Carlson & Arthur in Nicholson & Pearson, 2003, p. 2; Hoogland, 1998, p. 3).

Torak is an outcast as, quite unusually, he has lived apart from the clans all his life with only his father. He is also an outsider in terms of power due to his age, his physique and his knowledge of magic and spirit laws. For young readers identifying with Torak's status, numerous empowering insights may follow. You can be afraid and brave at the same time but fear does not negate bravery and power. Just because you feel like an outsider, that does not mean you are weak or flawed: you are still capable of achieving your goals. In the longer term, self esteem is not derived from doing what the majority do, but by remaining committed to what feels right for you.

Torak and Renn quickly learn that to defeat this monster, they cannot rely on brute force, a comforting message for any child, especially a smaller one. The characters must rely on a range of resources: knowledge, skills, instinct and wits, and these come in part from the teachings of parents, clan members and leaders, and in part from the lessons they learn on their own. They also learn from a wild creature, a wolf. Although the wolf is traditionally an icon of fear or even the monstrous in children's stories, in *Wolf Brother*, through its intimate relationship with Torak and with nature, Wolf will be an ally and a guide, without which victory could not take place. Thus, child readers gain the idea that they are able to learn from a wide range of 'teachers', and that the things they fear such as wild animals and the forces of nature, are not as frightening when they understand them better.

Wolf Brother is a classical tale of good triumphing over evil, embodied here as the monstrous bear. Child readers can begin to appreciate that it is possible to overcome their fears and their problems, but this may prove to be one of life's greatest challenges. It requires difficult choices, courage, confrontation, pain, self doubt, hard work, unpleasant feelings, knowledge, skill, instinct, wits, perseverance and a little bit of luck along the way. And as indicated by the title, as well as the story, children are offered the useful message that to deal effectively with those things that frighten us, it is often better to seek help rather than go it alone.

Case Study Two: *Monster Blood Tattoo, Book One: Foundling* by D.M. Cornish

Monster Blood Tattoo, Book One: Foundling is a dark fantasy novel marketed as both children's and young adult fiction. It is set in the Half-Continent, a sprawling land where for centuries, its people, who dominate in the cities dotted along the coasts and waterways have been in conflict with monsters who largely inhabit the wilder, less inhabited parts of the country. The central character is Rossamund Bookchild, an orphan boy who has been raised in Madame Opera's Estimable Marine Society for Foundlings. Rossamund dreams of a career full of adventure fighting monsters on the high seas. That is, until the day a stranger visits the orphanage and recruits him instead, into the services of the Empire as a Lamplighter, one who lights the lamps each evening along the highways in order to ward off monsters. In his new role, Rossamund's path will cross a bevy of different monsters, each varying in size, form and regard for human life, as well as those people he has long idolized, the professional monster hunters.

Transformation is at work in this story through the lead character and his relationship to monsters, and via the solutions to the quandaries that beset him. Like Torak, Rossamund sets forth into the world to fulfill his duty with many insecurities and qualities associated with the outsider and the victim. He is teased at the orphanage due to his name, his smaller than average physique, his clumsiness and his propensity to daydream. He is no stranger to disappointments, given that he has been passed over six times by officers from the naval board seeking recruits, and is rendered powerless by Madam Opera's instruction that he takes up the post of Lamplighter. Rossamund does however, come armed with rudimentary skills in dispensing (the art of making potives), a sound knowledge of history, and above all, a thirst for knowledge about monsters.

Rossamund has many encounters with monsters in which he feels fear and inadequacy. Instead of giving in to these feelings, he draws on his knowledge, skills and wits, courage and physical strength to survive. Children may feel empowered as they see the changes in Rossamund, notably his realizations that he doesn't always need to rely on adults (Stallcup, 2002, p.6) and that he is able to think of novel ways of dealing with crises (Bettelheim, 1976, p.111). Although Cornish does not have Rossamund personally slay a monster, monsters are defeated in order for him and the other human characters to survive. In these scenes, each capable of causing anxiety in the reader, the humans escape from the monsters with minimal casualties, offering children reassuring outcomes (Trousdale in Nicholson & Pearson, 2003, p. 3; Paley in Hoogland, 1998, p. 12).

The monsters themselves do not undergo any transformation but Rossamund's relationship to them does. He sets out seeking thrilling conquests, yearning to be a monster slayer and to earn a hero's status. As time passes, although he continues to fear monsters, he starts to feel some sympathy towards them, especially if they are slain when they have not threatened humans. On one occasion, he is even befriended by a monster. Rossamund begins to wonder if there are alternative ways of treating monsters. He becomes a Sedorner, someone who is guilty of friendship or understanding with monsters, a crime punishable by torture or hanging. This thread of the story is possibly one of the more empowering to the child in terms of dealing with fears. It poses the question: Can we befriend 'our monsters', those things which frighten or trouble us most and by gaining greater understanding of them, diminish their scariness?

This transformation in the relationship between boy and monster offers the first of numerous themes that may facilitate moral empowerment. Turning again to

Becker's belief that when a character takes on a monster in a story, this is akin to the child exerting some power over "life's scariest realities" (Jones, 2002, p. 59), what might these monsters be metaphors for? Unlike *Wolf Brother* where there is one monster and that monster is unquestionably evil, the monsters in *Monster Blood Tattoo* are many and varied, not only in size and form, but in terms of individual personalities and motives. A lot of the monsters are outsiders, feared or detested, living on the fringes of society, less skilled or intelligent than humans, and under threat of attack. Rossamund's struggle with these monsters engages children with fears such as death, injury, evil, separation anxiety, but also with mirror images of themselves – their insecurities associated with being outsiders, and as R L Stine recognizes, feeling different, ugly, overwhelmed by angry feelings, or out of control (Stine, 1998, p. 66). These metaphorical struggles show children that we can face our problems and emerge as Bettelheim puts it, "victorious" (1976, p. 8), with knowledge that re-conceptualizes the way we view the world, to in turn empower us.

Rossamund's engagement with monsters and the monster slayers brings other powerful messages. He meets Europe, one of the Empire's most feared Fulgars, or monster slayers. In response to the teasing Rossamund has suffered all his life due to his 'girl's' name, she offers the following advice: 'Things are more than their names' (Cornish, 2007, p. 216). This conveys to child readers rational ways of thinking about fears, reassuring them that they need not afford power to things or people purely on the basis of a name. Another piece of wisdom imparted to Rossamund, this time via Fouracres, an Imperial Postman who befriends the foundling during his travels is, 'But when in straits, yer prove yer mates' (Cornish, 2007, 283). This idea is born out again and again through the actions of characters helping one another, the tables often turning so that even the strong, including the likes of Europe, need

assistance from young Rossamund to survive in a world full of monsters. For children, who often feel less powerful and less competent than adults or peers, this offers helpful insights. They learn that even the most powerful people feel vulnerable, and that we all need help at times in order to overcome problems.

As in *Wolf Brother*, the 'David and Goliath' theme prevails in *Monster Blood Tattoo*. One of the largest monsters, the Ettin, is incredibly strong but not very clever, and the confrontation with this creature results in a relatively easy victory for the monster slayers. On one of the rarer occasions when a monster hunter is killed, it is due to small monsters called Grinnlings cunningly working together. These elements of the story impart a useful message to children in terms of dealing with fears. Size most definitely does not equate to power, and the path to greater confidence and security lies more with intelligence and creativity than the physical characteristics children traditionally equate with power.

Reflective Case Study: 'The Monster Chronicles' by Michelle Taylor

Transformation

In 'The Monster Chronicles' the agent of transformation is inherent in both child and monster characters, their relationships, and the problems that present themselves. The four main child characters, Sasha and Eliza Summers, Jack McIvor and Billy Benson are transported from their world to The Dreamholes, the world of monsters. Here, there are no adults to solve their problems and it is up to the children to find solutions, an empowering concept for the child reader (Stallcup, 2002, p. 6). The responsibilities and power bestowed upon the child characters is taken a step further, when even the Bordercrossers with their superior abilities to think creatively, look to the children to help them solve the crisis that threatens The Monstocracy.

The power of the imagination to transform problems, and to be transformed in and of itself, and put to use to empower rather than disadvantage its owner, is a major theme of this story. This reinforces the aspect of transformation that proposes children dwell more on the resolutions than the monsters, so that instead of frightening them, the story can generate feelings of reassurance (Trousdale in Nicholson & Pearson, 2003, p. 3; Paley in Hoogland, 1998, p. 12). We see this theme at work in the development of the main child character, Sasha Summers. Sasha has been chosen by The Bordercrossers because she is 'The Imaginer', the one with extraordinary imaginative powers, whom monster legend deems as creating more monsters than any other child because of the amount of fear she generates. Until Sasha encounters Balfour, the lead monster character, she has never thought of her imagination as a strength. Instead, she views it as something which lands her in trouble with her parents, or which sets her apart from other kids when she is teased for her sketches of monsters, or which makes her petrified of the dark and terrorizes

her with frightening scenarios. As the story progresses, Sasha is able to see her imagination and even her fears as tools to be valued, listened to, learnt from and used to their greatest potential.

The transformation of monster characters also presents readers with alternative ways of seeing the world and viewing their fears. Through the course of *The Monster Chronicles*, the monsters' personalities are revealed to be as varied and at times as vulnerable as those of the children who create them. The lead monsters move from a position of threatening the children to one where they encourage the children to view their fears and their imaginations as their greatest weapons, to think independently in order to solve not only *The Three Riddles* but the constant problems that confront them, and to expose themselves to that which scares them most via *The Fear Stones*.

Through the transformations that are seen in both child and monster characters, and their relationships, useful and complex solutions to problems are offered, which as Bettelheim (1976, p. 111) suggests, readers may not have been able to invent on their own. As an example, children do not generally think of experiencing fears and understanding these better as something which could empower them. Neither may they think of those, who like monsters are powerful and frightening, as having weaknesses and experiencing problems, just as they do. Nor may they grasp that other paradox, that of their mind being their most powerful possession, able to imagine the best and worst possible scenarios. Perspectives such as these can be very empowering to a child, and can help them believe that things which frighten them can be overcome or transformed (Hoogland, 1998, p. 11; Jones, 2002, p. 101).

Bettelheim suggests a further transformative power of fantasy stories being the way they operate like a dream, affording children the opportunity to work through unconscious problems and emerge feeling braver (1976, p. 63). In 'The Monster Chronicles', The Three Fear Stones symbolize the children's less conscious, and in some cases subconscious fears. When a Fear Stone is held against the heart, the child is immersed in a dream-like landscape where they are confronted with their greatest fears but emerge at the end of the experience in one sense, more powerful. Another way of conceptualizing Bettelheim's point, is to understand *all* of the children's experiences in The Dreamholes in terms of a dreamscape, where they must journey and struggle with fears and uncertainties in order to re-emerge in the 'real' world, The Kingdom of Children, feeling more knowledgeable and confident.

Moral Empowerment

To examine the role of moral empowerment, and the messages 'The Monster Chronicles' might impart to readers, we need to explore the different metaphors its monsters represent. Firstly, we have not one but three types of monsters: The Bordercrossers with their Creed of Mind and Magic, The Wishfulfillers with their Creed of Madness and Mayhem, and The Outlanders with their Creed of Murder and Mutilation. Each Order quite literally represents aspects of the personalities and desires of children. The Outlanders stand for children's desire for power and 'antisocial' traits such as anger, brutality and engagement in the forbidden; The Wishfulfillers stand for children's recklessness, chaos, stubbornness and mischief; and The Bordercrossers stand for feelings of uncertainty, the ability to think creatively and to bring a sense of magic into the world.

In the first instance, these metaphors may validate child readers and their complex gamut of feelings as they relate in turn to different monsters in the story. As I mentioned earlier, a monster can be a metaphor for power and passion (Schneider, 1993, p. 33), human urges to command respect (Zimmerman, 2003, p. 138) and sympathy (McCormick, 1996, p. 4), to exert control over one's destiny (Oelman, 1974, p. 207) and to engage in the forbidden (Cohen, 1996: 16). Through these monsters, a child is also given permission to vicariously exercise antisocial feelings like fear and aggression, which society normally demands are kept under wraps (Jones, 2002, p. 6; Nuzum, 2004, p. 12). To acknowledge not only 'desirable' childhood traits but less socially acceptable ones, empowers the reader by helping them understand that their feelings are normal and simply part of being human.

The monster metaphors are taken a step further as the story unfolds and the reader sees that judgments are imposed and consequences incurred for certain behaviours. For instance, Outlanders occasionally eat children but even within their own Order, this behaviour is frowned upon. It is met with the ultimate punishment of 'death' and eternal imprisonment in The Great Black Sea. Wishfulfillers suffer consequences for their reckless behaviours too. Their territory is aptly titled The Wastelands, as they have destroyed most of their resources through vandalism. The Bordercrossers, with their heightened creative powers, are subsequently rendered more vulnerable than other monsters. Their intelligence prompts them to make plans to save The Monstocracy but at the same time, leads them to experience fears for their survival, both in The Kingdom of Children and in The Dreamholes, where they face the prospect of invasion by the other Orders.

Outside the parameters of their Orders, the monsters in 'The Monster Chronicles'

represent what Becker calls “some of life’s scariest realities” (Jones, 2002, p. 59). The child characters are alone, separated from their parents and up against strangers who are bigger, stronger, older, and more powerful than them. It’s not too great a leap to suggest that this is a situation in which children perceive themselves regularly in daily life. Through their encounters with monsters, the children are confronted with other fearful prospects too: the forces of evil, as well as injury, madness and unpredictability, the possibility of abandonment and death.

The ultimate symbol of the children’s fears is the Fear Stone. Ironically, by exposing themselves to those things they fear most, they are rewarded with powers beyond anything they could have imagined. This offers the message to the reader, that if we face what we are afraid of, we will emerge stronger than if we ignore it. As the child characters engage in struggles with monsters and their metaphorical constructs, they enact this theme over and over. It is the message Bettelheim claims is so important about the monster tale: that struggles are part of our existence, and if we meet these head on, we can emerge victorious (1976, p. 8). Through identification with the child characters, readers can believe that fears need not paralyze them, diminish them, or dictate their actions. By engaging with and acknowledging fears, and by drawing on our imaginations, our personal resources and our relationships with others, we become more capable individuals. Both child characters and readers emerge with renewed feelings of hope, bravery, confidence, achievement and resilience. They learn that self worth and empowerment are not achieved easily, but through confrontation with difficult situations and perseverance in the face of fears, setbacks and hopelessness.

The Creative Work as a Model or Answer to the Research Question

‘The Monster Chronicles’ does not seek to definitively answer the question of whether stories featuring monsters allow children to better manage their fears, and thus feel a greater sense of empowerment. Instead I have tried with this manuscript to be sensitive to the fears and desires of children and to impose this understanding on key elements of the narrative such as the characters (both monsters and children), plot, themes and setting (including the fantasy world and The Monstersaurus), in particular the Dreamholes, in terms of both the physical and ideological world of monsters. I brought to the writing, my awareness that monsters have a unique position as an agent of change as I have explained in detail with regard to transformation and moral empowerment.

I kept returning to the origins of the word *monster*, meaning prodigy or portent, to show or warn (Cawson in Gilmore, 2003, p. 9), and my subsequent lens for viewing this research: Can a story featuring monsters show children something truly extraordinary? I wish to respond with a resounding ‘yes’ to this question. ‘In The Monster Chronicles’ I broke with some of the archetypal traits of monsters, wanting them to more closely mirror aspects of children’s behaviours and desires. My hope was that this might show child readers that people are complex: influenced by a wide range of emotions and motives, and capable of ‘good’ *and* ‘bad’ actions. These more realistic notions of what it means to be human, help to validate children’s sense of self worth and allow them to better negotiate their place in the world.

Having adopted these interpretations of monsters and their metaphorical constructs, I was in a position to deliver some alternative ideas about children and their relationships to their fears. ‘The Monster Chronicles’ has a plot and themes that

diverge from the traditional fairy tale or the stereotypical monster story wherein the hero must destroy the evil monster to resolve the problem. The children in my story are incapable of killing a monster: their best defence is their imagination. In fact, they need the assistance of certain monsters if they are to survive in *The Dreamholes*, to rescue Billy Benson and return home. Reciprocally, the monsters hold a certain respect for children and their fears, needing their help and in particular, The Imaginator's help to ensure their own survival.

These factors combine to deliver a paradoxical theme which has the potential to both shock and empower child readers. No matter who you are, even if you are the most fearful person in the world, you can deal with fears and challenges. (Perhaps even more astonishingly, in the eyes of these monsters you can be both the most afraid *and* the most powerful person in the world.) In doing so, you will most likely experience unpleasant feelings such as anxiety, self-doubt, loneliness and hopelessness, but you can emerge more knowledgeable and confident.

Returning once again to the definition of *monster* as a warning, there are two warnings the monsters in this story offer up. The first is that fears are not necessarily weaknesses, and nor do they disappear by ignoring them. It is by facing them and engaging in this struggle that we become empowered. The second warning is that there is nothing more powerful than the imagination. Resonating with the theme of Sendak's stories, where "the narrative is about a child in danger whose best defense is imagination" (Zarin, 2006, 13), *The Monster Chronicles* reminds us that our lives are limited only by the sizes of our imaginations, and we have the choice to use our minds to our advantage or to our detriment.

Conclusion

One commentator observing her children at Halloween felt that this was a time for her children ‘to be scary instead of scared’ (Jabs, 2001, p. 14). Stories featuring monsters can be viewed similarly. Parents testify that their children can have fun being scared (“Toddler fears”, 1995, p. 66) and academics note that stories with monsters bring a great deal of pleasure to younger readers (Stevenson, 1996, p. 2; Sychterz, 1999). Certainly monsters are frightening to children and represent many childhood anxieties but what they ultimately mean to children depends on context and in this case, story. Importantly, the monster story does not equal *just* the monster. It is as its name suggests – a story with a monster featured within it, interacting with other characters, played out through a narrative against a setting to ultimately deliver certain themes.

I responded to my first research question by examining these stories in terms of whether they may offer children constructive ways of managing fears and thus, greater feelings of empowerment. This led me to propose a framework for viewing these stories. This framework identifies six agents of positive change – catharsis, naming, taming, integration, transformation and moral empowerment. The three case studies highlight in detail how the agents of *transformation* and *moral empowerment* may work within the monster story to benefit child readers. In doing so I have chartered some new territory which matches this specific genre to outcomes. This is an area which has attracted a limited amount of research and the majority of the research available is anecdotal. Suggestions for future research would be to examine one or more of the six agents of positive change and test their effects on children in both qualitative and quantitative studies.

My second research question involved my creative practice. My goal was to use my new knowledge to write a monster story for children which aimed not so much to overcome fears but to have a fine tuned sensibility to children's fears and desires. My research proved integral to the writing of 'The Monster Chronicles', equipping me with a sound understanding of the importance of monsters in children's lives, the ages at which children experience various fears, the types of fears monsters represent to children, the paradoxical relationship children have with monsters, how monsters can work as constructive agents in a children's story, and what all these things can tell us about children's desires, in particular their desires for empowerment.

Just as the monster story does not equal the monster, managing fears does not equal the absence of fear. What is important is how fear is dealt with and the longer term outcomes. Jenkins, a clinical psychologist who uses the children's book *Brave Little Monster* to explore his client's fears, adopts the treatment model: 'if you avoid your fears, they increase...if you face them, they diminish' (Hancock, 2006). This theme underpins both my body of research and my creative work.

Rather than resorting to magical thinking: 'If we don't talk or think about the problem, it doesn't exist' (Crenshaw, 2001, p. 124), or using their imaginations as Sasha Summers initially does in 'The Monster Chronicles' to imagine the worst and fuel her fears, I wondered if monsters could show children a way to feel more powerful, as opposed to a way of not feeling afraid. I hope I have gone some way towards achieving this by demonstrating that monster stories may be 'safe' places for dealing with real fears and that they may offer children alternative empowering ways of imagining the world, themselves and their problems.

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Manuscript

The Monster Chronicles

Book 1:

‘The Imaginer’

By Michelle Taylor

Contents

- 1 To Save the Monstocracy
- 2 Delaying the Dum Dums
- 3 Art and Itchy Grubs
- 4 Dare to Go to the Dumps
- 5 Sasha's Worst Nightmare
- 6 The Aftermath of Monsters
- 7 Billy Benson and the Door to the Dead
- 8 An Incident at Mirknight
- 9 Balfour's Mates
- 10 The Scaredest Kid in the Whole Wide World
- 11 Crossing the Causeway

The Monstersaurus

The Monster Chronicles, Book 2: The Dreamholes

Preview of Chapters

The Monster Chronicles, Book 3: The Door to the Dead

Preview of Chapters

Chapter One

To Save The Monstocracy

It was Mirknight, the darkest hour of the night, and Balfour was waiting in the strawberry fields. The conditions were perfect for monsters. Not only was it Mirknight, it was Night of No Moon, and these elements combined meant the fields were as dark as possible.

Mounds of soil stretched like fingers, creeping their way from the creek bank behind Balfour all the way up to the farmhouse in the distance. On each side of her, were the orchards. Their rows of trees loomed up like walls. If she peered over her right shoulder, she would have seen the moonless outlines of Mount Starvation and Mount Barnaby, eclipsing swathes of stars in the eastern skies.

At that moment, Balfour's Seventh Sense kicked in, making it possible to detect a Sighlen. This was a message, but not one that could be heard. It was something she *felt*, something *monsters* felt, in their bones and their blood.

Several kilometres away, across the main road, beyond the pastures and the dam, an entire field of crickets fell silent. They did so in an instant, like someone turning off a light.

Had the Sighlen she'd sent earlier worked?

Despite this, Balfour felt anything but relief. She dropped onto all fours and pulled back the thorny vines that were her hair.

The day had been long and hot. Even in the early hours of the morning, the dirt retained its warmth. Just to be certain, she pressed her ear to the soil and closed her eyes.

Her Seventh Sense did not lie. It told her The Bordercrossers had received her Sighlen. Now they were sending theirs in return. *They were coming to The Muster.*

Great numbers of them would be leaving their Soul-cases, those objects that hid them during the daylight. Monsters all over the township of Strawberry Hills and beyond would be Humming, coming to life in the dark.

They'd be with her in a matter of minutes. And then she'd have to convince them of what she knew, or risk being turned upon, the same way dogs in a pack turn on the weaker one.

Balfour stood up and made her way to the creek. There, she gathered rocks, the larger the better. At the crest of the bank, she began the task of making a Mook, the Sign of The Monstocracy.

Balfour worked swiftly, each large boulder like a marble in her hand. In no time, a rough pyramid of rocks stood two metres high, reaching just above her waist.

She'd have company any moment. Balfour cleared a patch of earth on which to mark The Sign of Muster. For this sign, she broke a branch from a nearby gum. The branch was the colour of old bone and shone in the darkness.

Balfour snapped it into two with her gnarled hands. With the piece of branch in her right hand, she traced a circle onto the earth on her left side. With the piece of branch in her left hand, she drew another circle, this time on her right side and intersecting the first.

Before she had time to set the branch down, the stillness was replaced with a sensation that filled the sky and the earth and the trees. This sensation was all movement and vibration. It was like a heart beating, but far more intense.

She knew this as the Eighth Sense, or the Sense of Thudder. It meant monsters were very close by.

A shadow swept over the fields, rendering them even blacker. She looked up to witness the first arrivals. They were flying in dark ribbons, criss-crossing the sky with a haunting song – part howl, part scream.

Balfour searched among the outlines for Thaddeus. She looked for the familiar long beak that curved and shone like a sharpened knife, for the smoke that smoldered in the sockets of Thaddeus's eyes, and the wings that rivaled a pterodactyl's.

There was no sign of her. The noisy flock circled the lower fields and the orchards in the west before heading to the cover of the rainforest on the other side of the river. A wave of panic swept over Balfour. She needed Thaddeus, especially if the other Bordercrossers did not trust her.

If Thaddeus did not come, there was still Black'guard, she reassured herself. It was difficult to find a monster more loyal than that great dog. He'd be here soon.

More Bordercrossers made their way toward Balfour. They travelled in a stampede in slow motion.

Some moved through the fields of sugarcane that lay to the east. Others made their way from the west, past the town, and The Dumps and along the old dirt road where the street lights were switched off at midnight on the dot. Some descended the steep slopes of Mount Starvation and Mount Barnaby. They emerged from old wells that dotted the farmlands, and from between trees of avocados, Macadamia nuts, mangoes and mandarines.

One of those making its way across the farmland was a serpent. It coiled through the fields that lay planted with strawberry runners, making them ripple like inky water.

There was one Bordercrosser that was the work of a child with a very warped sense of humour. It had ears that measured twice the length of its body. They dragged behind it – torn from fighting and accidents – accompanied by clouds of flies. It had one tooth that was almost as long as its ears, which it kept tripping over. *Children could be cruel*, thought Balfour.

From the riverbed, rose a monster – half woman, half fish. She was the colour of someone who'd drowned. In her hands she clutched a thrashing fish which she devoured with fanged teeth. She propelled herself the length of the bank using only her tail, trailing riverweed and toads.

Balfour turned her back on the Signs of Mook and Muster, and headed across the old wooden bridge that led to the rainforest. It could just hold her weight if she trod lightly. She crashed her way in to the forest, buckling trees on each side of her before vanishing beneath the canopy.

The smell hit her first – a mixture of bad breath and damp fur, decaying flesh and rotten egg gas. Then there was the unmistakable smell of Felfs, monster farts, which were ten times worse than human farts. So many monsters in an enclosed space, produced enough Felfs to make even *her* eyes burn.

Within minutes, the rainforest looked back at her with blinking eyes of every size and description. Balfour held her head high and opened her pale bloodless eyes as wide as possible.

The eyes, even in darkness, could reveal a lot about a monster.

She saw that some amongst them were skeptical. Others were concerned. To Balfour's dismay, a few were bristling with anger, and looked ready to fight at the first opportunity.

None of those eyes belonged to Thaddeus or Black'guard. Could they have changed their minds at the last minute? If they had, Balfour's plan for the Muster didn't stand a chance. She'd be fighting her way out of here.

There was no turning back now. *I'm not just doing this for the Bordercrossers*, she reminded herself. *I'm doing it to save the whole of the Monstocracy. And I'm doing it for the children. If we don't save their imaginations, there will be no future.*

A dreadful cacophony of sounds filled the air – screeching and howling, moaning, roaring and gnashing of teeth, even some crazed laughter. Eventually, curiosity won out and the monsters' rantings faded to a Dog Whisper, that low rumble of a whisper that only monsters make.

And then finally, dead silence.

Still no sign of Thaddeus or Black'guard. Balfour cleared her throat and took a deep breath. She'd have to begin without them.

Chapter Two

Delaying the Dum Dums

‘Thank you for making this journey. Welcome fellow Bordercrossers, followers of the Creed of Mind and Magic,’ said Balfour in a voice only slightly louder than a Dog Whisper.

Then she added hastily, ‘And welcome to any Wishfulfillers and Outlanders,’ knowing that if she were to be attacked, that attack was most likely to come from a monster of one of those Orders.

She’d been to Musters before. It was normal for Bordercrossers to experience ten or more while in The Kingdom of Children, but she’d never sent a Sighlen for her own Muster, until now.

Doubts rose in her again but she pushed them to the back of her mind. She raised one of her hands. It looked just like the upturned root of a large gum tree. Balfour extended it in front of her in a gesture of good will

‘In the history of The Monstocracy, we’ve never known a time when we’ve been so Fear-pinned. And we know *why* this is happening. Children are losing the powers of their imaginations much earlier. Instead of Kidwinks getting the Dum Dums at thirteen or fourteen, it’s at seven or eight. They don’t fear monsters the way they used to. They stop believing in us, and we’re banished from their world and trapped back in The Dreamholes.’

Balfour tried not to preach, knowing it could insult her audience. All monsters were well aware of how they gained their powers, and the delicate interplay of the Orders and their Creeds.

The Outlanders were the First and most primitive Order of monsters. They lived by the Creed of Murder and Mutilation. They were driven by pure aggression. Unprovoked, they often destroyed anything or anyone in their path. They sometimes even dismembered or swallowed their victims whole.

The Wishfulfillers were the Second Order and lived by the Creed of Mischief and Mayhem. They acted like kids – stubborn, bad mannered, foolish, playful and chaotic. Left to their own devices, the Wishfulfillers caused little harm and were often the butt of jokes invented by Outlanders or Bordercrossers. They were dangerous because of their naivety, easily wooed by The Outlanders and their displays of power.

Balfour belonged to the Third and most evolved Order, that of The Bordercrossers. Their Creed was Mind and Magic. She and her kind were motivated by the powers of the imagination, the possibilities of the mind, and the potential to make magic.

Regardless of their Orders, all monsters were created the same way. They were born in the imaginations of children and that is where they remained, unless the Fear Threshold was reached. When a child's fear was great enough, the monster left their imagination. At that point it slipped through The Causeway from The Dreamholes and into The Kingdom of Children.

Different children created different Orders. Imaginative children created Bordercrossers. More mischievous children made Wishfulfillers. The angrier, meaner children made Outlanders.

'We *know* we need to delay the Dum Dums.' The speaker was hidden in the interior of the forest. Balfour didn't recognize the voice. 'This is not the first Muster where we pledged to save The Monstocracy.'

Balfour saw the nodding of heads. This was followed by a chorus of ‘ayes’ which made even the branches shake.

‘At the last Muster we agreed we’d use all our powers to reignite the imaginations of children,’ said the half woman, half fish. ‘We’re all Monsterring harder than ever.’

‘But that was several months ago, and nothing has changes. Monsters are growing more and more Fear–pinched,’ replied Balfour, knowing she was treading dangerously.

‘It’s those Wishfulfillers and Outlanders,’ said a Bordercrosser with three small heads and many arms. ‘Those Orders don’t possess a brain between them. They spend too much time lazily Swallocking, or snitching things and Pelfing them away.’

A purple serpent with a row of wings and sharp spines along its back, rose onto its tail. It lashed out at the three–headed monster, bearing its fangs. ‘A monster like you couldn’t scare a fly. Kidwinks are more likely to *laugh* at you,’ hissed the Outlander.

‘And never underestimate a Wishfulfiller,’ a hairy green monster snarled in the direction of the three–headed creature. It stood on its two hind legs and draped a purple sequined garment, which it had no doubt Pelfed, around its thick neck. The monster pulled tight on the scarf before flashing two black incisor teeth.

‘We mustn’t fight against one another,’ shouted Balfour. ‘We are up against children. If we don’t work together, they *will* outsmart us.’

The rumble of Dog Whispering died down again.

‘Children are more sophisticated these days. They don’t respond the way they once did to dark shadows and noises in the night. Such Eye–bites and Ear–bites often don’t scare them at all.’

‘That’s a load of Fubbery!’ said a monster with a large mouth that opened like a coin purse to reveal a sinewy throat. ‘Children will always be children. If we do our job well, we *can* save their imaginations *and* The Monstocracy.’

Balfour took a deep breath. With one of her sharp nails, she brushed her thorny hair from her eyes. ‘That’s not true anymore,’ she said.

‘You’ve wasted our energies with this Muster,’ said the monster that owned the sinewy throat. ‘Do you have *anything* new to tell us, or are you just going to insult us?’

‘Everyone in the Kingdom of Children wants evidence these days,’ Balfour responded cautiously. ‘Kidwinks are driven by logic rather than their imaginations. It’s not enough for children to simply *believe* in monsters any more.’

‘So what do you suggest?’ Asked the winged serpent.

‘I suggest we go to The Great Black Sea and bring back evidence to *prove* we exist.’

Balfour expected to hear cries of approval. Instead, she was met with laughter. The laughter grew until thunderous belly laughs swallowed up the forest and made the leaves shake. Cries of ‘Fuzzler!’ and ‘Fubbery!’ filled her ears.

‘Enough!’ boomed a voice, silencing all others. It belonged to a pair of wild red eyes whose owner looked ready to pounce.

‘We can’t bring a child back from The Great Black Sea. Once a child is swallowed by a monster, there’s no chance of survival.’

‘Billy Benson,’ replied Balfour. ‘He was taken from here by an Outlander four weeks ago, and I’m told he’s still alive,’ she continued, keeping her head high and eyes wide.

‘Even if he is alive, there’s no way to get back to The Kingdom of Children,’ said the three-headed monster.

More laughter followed, but this time there was less, and it had a nervous ring to it. Before Balfour could go on, a low growl rolled across the Assembly. She knew that sound anywhere. It belonged to Black’guard.

She turned to see the great beast, his fangs glistening, his eyes full of fury. Then she caught a glimpse of something flashing behind him. It was a beak. She saw the eyes, two shallow pools of smoke.

Balfour dared to speak again. ‘The Majuscules tell us that when a child is stolen by an Outlander, that child is imprisoned in The Great Black Sea for eternity along with the monster that took them. That is unless –’

‘You don’t mean?’ said the monster who was half fish, half woman.

Balfour nodded. ‘I have found ‘The Imaginer’.’

Silence fell over The Muster. Bordercrossers occasionally spoke of ‘The Imaginer’, a child with extraordinary imaginary powers, whose levels of fear were high enough to create great numbers of monsters. In the last few decades, with children’s imaginations shrinking, it was generally accepted that this was a myth, a far flung fantasy.

‘She is my Creator,’ stated Balfour. ‘She created Thaddeus and Black’guard too. Many monsters have crossed The Causeway from The Dreamholes to The Kingdom of Children because of her. No doubt, she created some of you, and no

doubt she has snatched an Eyebite or an Earbite as you Night Tripped in the darkness.’

‘How can you be certain this child is ‘The Imaginer’?’ asked the monster with the angry red eyes.

‘Call it a monster’s intuition. My Sixth Sense tells me. Yours will too. You can detect her Goosebump breath from here. I’ve never sensed so much fear from a child.’

Balfour opened her clawed right hand and extended it once more toward the monsters, pleading with them to trust her.

‘I can’t return to The Dreamholes with ‘The Imaginer’’s powers alone. I’ll also need your powers to transport us back across The Causeway. If there was any other way, I would choose it. But now, only ‘The Imaginer’ can help us. I am as certain of this, as I am certain that the Monstocracy will fall, if we do not journey to The Great Black Sea and bring back Billy Benson.’

Chapter 3

Art and Itchy Grubs

Sasha Summer's imagination was going wild on the page as she added the finishing touches to her most recent drawing. She shaded the dark mossy cape that draped across Balfour's enormous shoulders.

Even though she'd drawn Balfour at least fifty times, the monster she imagined rising up out of the strawberry fields beyond her bedroom window still gave her the creeps, even in broad daylight.

She added a few more hairs to the head of the boy cowering beside the monster. Then she carefully drew in dark circles beneath his eyes to capture the perfect look of terror on his face.

Some people might think that Sasha Summers was obsessed with monsters. Others may have said that it was a worrying habit for a girl her age to compulsively draw these creatures that stalked her imagination.

Sasha herself wasn't so sure although she could certainly think of better ways to spend her lunch break on the first day of grade six than drawing cartoons in her sketch book in the corner of the library. She gazed out the window at the groups of girls gathered in conversation or sharing a joke. Beyond them she saw teams of children playing netball or soccer, shouting as balls flew and goals were scored.

She watched a small crowd of children gathering beneath the paper bark trees in the corner of the oval. Sasha ran her fingers over the red oval rims of her glasses. She hated those glasses.

But she needed them to draw and read and write. It was due to some disease with a big name, which she always forgot but which she knew was serious enough to

warrant her eyes being tested every six months. It normally meant new lenses every six months too.

Her eyesight was getting worse faster than expected. Sasha could spend hours worrying about what would happen to her eyes in a few years as her field of vision shrunk and more and more of what she saw was blackness. The thought of spending the rest of her life in total darkness terrified her.

She took off her glasses and waited for her eyes to adjust. Jack McIvor was under those trees in the corner of the oval. That could only mean trouble. She squinted and strained to see.

Her younger sister, Eliza was there too. What was she doing with *him*?

Even though Jack and his mother were their closest neighbours, Sasha did her best to avoid them. She was just grateful that her family lived on a farm large enough to put a good acre between their houses.

Sasha pressed her nose and its little spray of freckles up against the glass. No! She thought, as she watched Jack McIvor push her sister to the ground. Get up, Lizey! Get up! She willed Eliza silently, but Eliza did not move.

Sasha remained at the window, her face still hard to the glass and her heart jumping in her chest. She knew what she *should* do.

Instead Sasha put her glasses back on and returned her attention to the page in front of her, back to the monster and the boy that she was bringing to life with ink and pencil. She made several rushed strokes with ink, adding clouds to block out the moon that hung above them.

Sasha wiped a droplet of sweat from her forehead and brushed the blonde wisps of her fringe from her eyes. The next time, she was not quick enough to stop a

bead of sweat rolling off her brow and dropping right on to the boy's legs, making them blur on the page.

Aaagh! Sasha gasped. She knew she had to look back out that window. She reluctantly removed her glasses and pressed her forehead against the window pane. Sasha didn't know if she could lift her eyes to see if Eliza was still there. What if something had happened to her sister? She would be to blame.

Sasha gradually lifted her gaze up and across the oval. She rubbed her eyes in disbelief. Eliza was still on the ground but now, Jack leant over her. He raised his arm and waved it around her head.

Sasha covered her eyes and sucked in a deep breath. Then she did something that shocked even her.

She shut her sketch book and slipped it under her arm. She didn't stop to collect her pens and pencils. Instead, she turned and sprinted through the library, knocking over several chairs as she went, much to the horror of Mrs Munt, the librarian, who knew Sasha at all times to be a quiet and obedient student.

As Sasha hurtled across the oval to its far corner, she wished that she was a better athlete. By the time she reached the crowd huddled around Jack and Eliza, her skinny legs were aching and she was completely out of breath.

The sight that greeted her as she made her way through the onlookers, was one that not even she could have imagined. There were hundreds, maybe thousands of them. Hairy caterpillars, or as she liked to call them, itchy grubs. The sort that made your skin come out in hot welts if you touched them.

They were in a line. The procession began high up in a paper bark tree. It continued in a grey coil that wrapped around the lower trunk of the tree several times on its descent to the ground. From here it crept in strange swirls across the dirt and

leaves until it reached a huge spiral that Sasha could only describe as a furry pinwheel.

Jack hadn't noticed her yet. He was busy with a small bottle, carefully dousing the line of caterpillars with its contents. He was careful not to miss a single one of them with the clear liquid.

It was not until Sasha finally stopped panting, and took a deep breath through her nose, that she understood exactly what Jack was plotting.

She could smell Kerosene. That's what the clear liquid was.

When Jack finished soaking the grubs in the stuff, he reached into his shorts pocket and pulled out a box of matches.

He was going to light them like a fuse and watch them go up in flames. When they reached the huge furry pinwheel at its end, the poor creatures huddled together would explode in spectacular fashion.

Jack laughed. He was joined by a couple of large boys who stood in the background and cheered him on from time to time. Nobody else dared to speak.

Except Eliza.

'Don't,' she said, still on the ground. 'They did nothing to you.' Eliza's knee was grazed and bleeding, and there was dirt all over her school shirt.

Please don't say any more, Eliza, thought Sasha. There was no telling what someone like Jack McIvor might do next.

Jack took a match from the box and walked over to Eliza. 'Don't. They did nothing to you,' he mimicked. The two big boys laughed along with him.

'You're pathetic,' said Eliza.

Sasha held her breath, as Jack stooped down toward Eliza and grabbed one of her long brown plaits.

The combination of sweat and heavy breathing fogged up Sasha's glasses but she hardly dared to breath, let alone wipe them clean.

'Oooww,' cried Eliza. 'You're hurting me.'

Jack pulled even harder on Eliza's plait. She was forced to crawl on all fours, as he tugged her toward the paper bark tree and the caterpillars.

'Maybe I'll light your plait instead,' laughed Jack.

It was a laugh that made even the two big boys behind him, *stop* laughing. A laugh, that sent a cold sensation right down Sasha's back, even though she'd just run all the way across the oval in the midday sun.

Sasha hung her head. She could hear Eliza crying. Then she heard the striking of the match. Sasha wished she was someone braver. She wished very hard, but she could not bring herself to utter a word. She couldn't even bear to watch. She parted her lips and was surprised to hear –

'That's my sister!'

But Sasha hadn't spoken those words. It was Eliza, and her little sister was pointing straight at *her*.

Jack McIvor marched towards Sasha, the match still alight.

Even through fogged glasses, Sasha saw the large freckles that stood out angrily on his cheeks and nose and arms. Most of them were dirty-looking, like squashed flies on his pale skin. He had a head of dusty curls which reminded her of the soil on their strawberry farm, a mix of red and browns.

But the thing that stood out on Jack McIvor more than everything else, was his scar.

It was a frightening thing that stretched down his left shin, almost the entire length, from his knee to his ankle. Nobody at school knew the truth about that scar. And Jack refused to tell anyone how he got it.

Sasha's eyes were drawn to the pink line of thick scar tissue that divided his scrawny leg into two, even though the last thing she wanted to do, was to irritate him any further.

Jack threw the lit match to the ground and stomped it out at Sasha's feet. She was slightly taller than him. How she wished at that moment that she could shrink to nothing.

'Anything to say, Summers?'

Sasha felt the eyes of every child upon her, including her younger sister. She decided to look down at Jack's scuffed shoes instead of his scarred leg. She stared so hard, that she noticed each little tear in the stitches.

'Well?' said Jack. He kicked the dirt with his left shoe and sent gravel flying around Sasha's legs.

Her legs stung, and her glasses were beginning to slide down her nose. But Sasha couldn't move to push up her glasses, nor could she open her mouth to speak.

She could only shake her head from side to side. She lifted her eyes slightly. There was Jack's crooked smile as it opened into a long husky laugh, chorused by the two big boys.

'What?' The angry cry brought the laughter of the three boys to a sudden halt. Jack spun around and sent a cloud of dust into the air.

Eliza, thought Sasha, unsure whether to feel ashamed, embarrassed or afraid of what Jack might do next.

Eliza stared back at Jack, as she slowly rose to her feet. ‘Aren’t you going to say anything, Sasha?’ yelled Eliza, without looking at her sister.

Jack walked over to Eliza and tilted his head to one side. ‘What’s the name of that stupid mongrel of yours?’ he sneered.

‘Ransom is not a stupid dog,’ stated Eliza, placing her hands on her hips.

‘Ransom,’ echoed Jack, with several nods of his head. ‘I’m going to teach it a lesson next time I see it.’

Jack reached out and grabbed both of Eliza’s plaits. With his grubby fist, he pulled her back down to the ground. He grinned and shook the box of matches like a warning with his other hand.

‘Eliza’s only in grade four, and Ransom wouldn’t hurt a fly,’ blurted Sasha, her voice cracking with those words.

They were the words she both wanted to say, and to keep from saying. The words that she would definitely regret speaking.

Jack instantly threw the matches and Eliza’s plaits into the air. He stormed over to Sasha. Without warning, he snatched the book of sketches from beneath her arm.

‘What’s this?’ He said, flipping carelessly through the pages with his filthy fingers.

When he tore one of the pages, Sasha feared he might tear the entire book up in front of her. Then he seemed to be struck by another idea. ‘How about we burn this too, along with the hairy grubs and your little sister’s plaits?’

Sasha froze. ‘Please,’ she begged.

Jack ignored her. He began to study the torn picture. ‘It’s a drawing of Billy Benson...and the great big MONSTER that stole him away!’

Jack laughed his horrible husky laugh so hard, he had to hold his stomach. The two big boys laughed as well. They were joined by the crowd of children, the laughter growing louder as Jack moved amongst them and paraded Sasha's drawing.

'No, wait,' shouted Jack, swivelling around toward Sasha. 'I've got an *even* better idea. How about I show this sketch book of yours to everyone in the school so we can all have a good laugh...and then, I'll burn it.'

Sasha closed her eyes. She felt her cheeks turning hot and red. She was a sorry sight with her shoulders slumped, trying to block out the scene around her. She despised herself for being such a coward. And she couldn't help but think that her imagination had landed her in deeper trouble than ever this time.

Why did she have to draw those stupid cartoons of monsters? They were for little kids, weren't they. And it was just a sketch book, after all. Couldn't she just let Jack do with it what he wanted?

Suddenly, the laughter was drowned out by the ring of the school bell. When Sasha opened her eyes, she saw children scattering across the oval. The crowd around her split up and bolted toward the school buildings. Eliza saw her chance too. She sprang to her feet, and ran past Sasha and Jack.

'Run, Sasha! Run!' yelled Eliza as she glanced back toward her sister and Jack, the only two left standing among the ropes of itchy grubs.

'Before you run off like that little chicken sister of yours, I'll tell you how to save your precious book. You're going to give me the raft you and your sister made.'

OK, thought Sasha. Eliza would kill her, because they'd worked on it for days to make it ready to take down the creek, but she'd make up for it somehow.

She slowly nodded her head at Jack.

‘There’s more, I’m afraid. You’re going to help me make a little trip to The Dumps to find a few things to give *my* raft the final touches it needs,’ smiled Jack, as he rubbed his dirty palms together.

Sasha shook her head from side to side, first slowly and then quickly in little frenzied bursts.

Anywhere but The Dumps, she thought.

‘I’ll see you tonight at midnight on the bridge to the rainforest.’ With that, Jack turned and ran across the oval, laughing and waving Sasha’s sketch book in the air.

Chapter Four

Dare To Go To The Dumps

Sasha Summers knew it was forbidden. The Dumps were out of bounds unless she was accompanied by her father and they were certainly out of bounds when the gates were locked, and the sun hadn't come up over the twin peaks of Mount Barnaby and Mount Starvation.

She sat on the end of her bed and watched her digital clock blink another minute closer to midnight. On her lap was the old biscuit tin that normally held her sketch book.

Gone was the book she'd spent years filling with the monsters that inhabited her imagination. These were the same monsters she imagined coming to life all over Strawberry Hills when the sun went down. Sasha had sketched every last detail of them.

These monsters were so real to her that each night, after shutting her sketch book inside the tin, she slid that tin beneath her bed. On top of its battered lid she then placed her father's Oxford Dictionary, an enormous book that could probably crush a baby.

She did this every night without fail for fear that if she did not, the monsters of her drawings *may* just come to life. But tonight all she could do was slip the empty box beneath her bed. As she did she was greeted by Ransom's tongue licking her hands.

'Good boy,' said Sasha, giving her dog a rub under the chin. 'But there's nothing in there to guard tonight.'

The thought of Jack McIvor and today's events filled her with rage. Not only was she going to give up hers and Eliza's raft. Now she was going to help him deck it out.

But even more than the anger, was the feeling of dread that coursed through her body. Jack was a time bomb. No one ever knew what horrible thing he would do next and when he would explode. And as for The Dumps, who knew what awaited them there, lurking beneath layers of rubbish.

And to make matters as bad as they could possibly be, was the fact that there was no moon tonight. There was something about the dark that set Sasha's imagination off and had her thinking that each shadowy outline beyond her window – the mango tree, the clothesline, the old wooden dunny – were not those things at all.

That they had lives of their own and turned in to the monsters of her sketches in the dead of night.

Sasha thought once more about backing out of Jack's dare but she couldn't face the thought of her sketch book being shown to everyone at school.

And besides, it was strangely like a best friend. She confided all her greatest fears to its pages in the beautiful detailed drawings. That book needed to be back safe in her hands, locked away from Jack McIvor.

Before she headed into the night, she pulled out the drawer of her bedside table, where earlier she'd stashed fresh Birds-eye chillies and cloves of garlic.

She'd been on the internet that afternoon and learnt about *apotropaics*, objects to ward off evil spirits. For vampires, you used garlic. Sasha figured, chilli was even stronger, so the two of them should be a powerful combination.

She took a clove of the garlic and one of the red chillies and squashed them in her palm. Then she smeared the potent mix across her bed head and her bedside drawers, and along her window sill.

Lastly, she rubbed the chilli and garlic across her forehead. It stung her skin momentarily, but it was worth the pain. It was a long shot, but what did she have to lose? Only her pride, perhaps, and she'd already lost most of that on the school oval today.

Sasha dropped the remaining handful of red and white weapons into her shorts pocket. Her family were all asleep now. It was time.

She wouldn't risk going out the back door and risk waking her parents as she trod past their doorway. She climbed onto her bedroom windowsill. She kept low and tucked, then allowed herself to drop nearly two metres to the ground.

Sasha waited in the shadows of their old Queenslander for several long minutes. When the coast was clear, she bolted as fast as her skinny legs could carry her. Past all those things that in the day were just *things*, but which at night turned into hideous creatures in her imagination...

The rotary clothesline that became a winged beast with a beak like a knife. It creaked as a gentle breeze spun it, and sent her mother's lavender dress gliding through the darkness.

Then there was the old dunny at the end of the path. She was sure her father's old jacket flapped ever so slightly on its hook as she passed by. When she wasn't looking, it would change in to a monstrous dog that hid its incisors and beady black eyes beneath a red hood.

Finally, she reached the mango tree. It housed the worst monster of them all. This monster rose up from the depths of the fields, like someone rising from the

dead, and draped itself in a mossy cloak crawling with maggots and worms. Sasha sensed the branches moving as she ran past the old tree. Suddenly, three or four flying foxes swooped out of the foliage, and flapped only centimetres away from her face.

Sasha ducked and muffled a scream. She felt as though at any moment she might stop breathing. She'd never so much as ventured out on her own in the dark past the dunny, let alone going through the fields. And then the unthinkable – on to The Dumps.

Jack was waiting at the footbridge when she arrived, shaken and out of breath. 'Thought you weren't coming,' he said with a pleased smile. 'And what is that smell?'

Sasha ignored Jack, and looked around for Ransom.

'We never agreed to bring that dog,' Jack protested. Even in the darkness, the freckles stood out on his face.

Trailing Sasha, nose to the ground and sniffing non-stop, came Ransom. He was a bitser – a bit of Beagle, a bit of Labrador, a bit of something else. No one really knew for sure. Sasha found him two years ago, in a hessian sack on the side of the old dirt road heading west out of Strawberry Hills. Since that day, they'd been inseparable.

'I tried to sneak out,' said Sasha, apologetically. 'He follows me around like a shadow.'

'Are you sure *he* follows you around, Summers? Maybe it's the other way around. You need your little guard dog with you all the time,' said Jack, as he planted a swift kick into Ransom's ribs.

The dog yelped and cowered, then ran off to the cover of the rainforest with its tail between its legs.

If the look on Sasha's face could have spoken, it would have said, 'Don't be so mean!' Through gritted teeth, she said something else. 'You never know who we might come across out here.'

'Oh, yeah,' laughed Jack, pushing his face so close that Sasha could see every freckle on Jack's face and every curl on his head. 'You think that scrawny mutt's going to come in handy if we come across the bogey man that took Billy Benson?'

'That's not funny,' said Sasha, pulling her face away from Jack. A cold shiver travelled the length of her spine in a split second.

Every kid on the hinterland knew about Billy Benson. He *was* an eleven year old boy from Strawberry Hills. He'd lived on the other side of town to the farms. Kids at school called it the posh side of town, where they drove new cars and lived in big houses. He was in Sasha's class but they had little to do with each other. That was because Billy was good at everything – school work, baseball, athletics – and Sasha excelled at none of these.

Four weeks ago Billy went to bed as usual. His mother tucked him in, then checked on him before she went to sleep. That was the last anybody saw of him. The police were no closer to solving the case. Some people thought Billy was taken by something otherworldly. At school, kids talked about monsters and aliens, and joked that if you did something wrong, you'd disappear, just like Billy.

'Let's go,' said Jack. 'But I'm warning you, if that dog makes a single noise...'

At that moment, Ransom let out a long low growl. It was followed by relentless barking. Sasha knew all of Ransom's barks and what each one meant. *This*

was the sort associated with an intruder. Someone or *something* was out there. Even Jack sensed it.

Both children froze. They looked at one another and saw the whites of each other's eyes grow larger. Then they did something they'd never done before. They nodded... in total agreement – a signal they both understood.

They ran as fast as possible. They sprinted the length of the rainforest. At the borders of the pastures, they scrambled beneath the barbed wire fences, which tore at their skin and clothes. They ran through fields dotted with dozing cows, past the dam and the old well, not stopping until they reached the dirt road whose lights had now been switched off. There, the tall wire fence surrounding The Dumps stretched in front of them.

'There was something back there,' said Sasha, gasping for breath and pushing up her glasses. She turned and looked behind them.

'Probably another dog,' puffed Jack. 'You've always got to make something out of nothing, Summers. And what is that stuff on your forehead?'

Sasha sniffed and cursed herself silently, as she turned away from Jack's glare. *You fool, Sasha Summers. Can't you do anything right?*

The beads of sweat on her forehead had sent the chilli and garlic streaming in to her eyes. She couldn't even wipe her eyes because her fingers were still impregnated with her 'secret weapons'.

The burning in her eyes slowly eased. Eventually, she was able to make out Ransom's shape about ten metres behind them. As Ransom approached, Sasha noticed something protruding from his muzzle. Ransom whipped his tail from side to side and dropped the thing in his mouth. It was an old bone, a very large old bone.

'What has that mongrel dragged with him? A horse bone?'

‘A horse bone is way bigger than that,’ said Sasha, pleased to get one up on Jack for the first time that night, and possibly, the first time ever.

But this bone *was* big and awfully strange looking. And it smelt *very* bad. Normally, it would’ve had Sasha’s imagination bristling with wild scenarios but there was no time right now for distractions over some stupid bone. First light would be spreading through the fields in a couple of hours and she just wanted to get back home well before her father started work on the farm.

‘Whatever it is, it stinks like nothing on earth,’ said Jack, screwing up his nose. ‘I knew that dog would be trouble. Just keep him quiet while we go over.’

Sasha used the diamond formations of the wire as footholds and began to scale the three meter fence. Jack did likewise, but found it easier going, being the smaller of the two. Jack was first to reach the top. He leant inward, using his weight to bend the fence forwards, until it was low enough for him to jump the remaining two metres.

Sasha tried to copy Jack, but her weight bent the fence more. The wire beneath her buckled and began to pull away from the pole. Sasha clung on and swayed on the flailing wire panels, before jumping the full three metres.

Her left shoulder crashed into the ground as she lost her balance. Sasha’s shoulder throbbed, but the horror of being inside The Dumps helped dull the pain. Thankfully, Ransom remained quiet during all of this, content now to chew on his bone.

‘Remember, it needs seats and something buoyant. And no torchlight. I don’t want to get busted.’

Sasha nodded, well aware of what the raft needed, given that she had made it. ‘The manager’s meant to be a psycho.’

‘Summers, get real. Do you honestly think someone is going to *live* at The Dumps? That guy’ll be tucked up in bed right now.’

With that, they quickly set off in different directions. The Dumps were vast, covering several square kilometres. Sasha could make out hills of garbage directly in front of her and to her right. To her left, the ground seemed to lower into an enormous ditch.

She headed for the tall mounds in front of her, fossicking for something, anything, to get out of there. The dump stank of mould and rust and decay of every kind, but strangely, it didn’t stink as much as the bone Ransom had dragged along. After searching for some time, she decided there was nothing useful in these mounds of rubbish.

Sasha headed back, this time toward the ditch, and leapt in. The top of the ditch rose up to shoulder level and above that, she could see the stars and an occasional cloud drifting by. Inside the ditch, she made out the shapes of a bath tub, some old suitcases, a broken chest of drawers and the bottom part of a guitar.

It wasn’t long before Sasha found two plastic chairs. Not the entire chair, just the seat part. That would do. She carried each chair back to the fence and waited for Jack.

He arrived back moments later, carrying two plastic cylinders almost as long as himself, one tucked beneath each arm. Perhaps they’d stored fertilizer or feed. Jack surveyed Sasha’s chair seats. ‘Suppose they’ll do,’ he said.

The children propelled their finds up and over the wire fence, then climbed over. On the other side, Jack pulled Sasha’s sketch book from his back pack and threw it at her feet.

Sasha retrieved her book before Jack had time to change his mind. Without a word, she slipped it under her arm and the two of them headed for home. Ransom trailed behind them. Thankfully, he'd dumped the stinking bone.

Sasha sensed an unusual stillness as they walked with their bulky loads. It was as if everything slept, even the crickets. As though if anything happened to her and Jack and Ransom at that moment, there wouldn't be a single witness, not even an insect.

She tried to reassure herself that it was simply the time of the night, but her mind was spinning. It filled with images of strange creatures entering Billy Benson's room and stealing him away.

At the rainforest, they made their way in along a well worn path. The interior was near black but Sasha knew the forest as if it were her back yard. When they reached the right spot, she and Jack finally set down the seats and the cylinders. Breathing heavily, Sasha reached out and found what she was looking for.

It was the base of the raft. As she moved her hand along its length, she felt a distinct break in the outer branch. She took her pencil torch from her pocket and shone it on to the raft.

'No way,' said Sasha, in utter disbelief.

Jack surveyed the raft in the torchlight. It looked like someone had snapped it across their knee, as though it was a bunch of twigs. But these were hardwood branches, bound together twelve across with rope. All of them were broken in exactly the same line along its width.

'Give me that book back, Summers.'

'But I didn't do this.'

Ransom appeared in the torch light, sniffing madly. His hackles were raised from his head to the tip of his tail. His fangs protruded and a growl issued from deep in his chest.

'Let's get out of here!' Sasha pleaded. Without waiting for Jack's say so, she turned and fled, with her sketch book tucked tight under her arm.

'Chicken,' yelled Jack after her. But in a moment, he was running too.

Sasha's light criss-crossed the darkness in front of them. They bashed into low branches that hung across their path, but they didn't stop. Ransom followed at their heels, barking like a maniac.

They were almost at the edge of the forest. The trees thinned as they approached the creek. A wave of relief flowed over Sasha as she caught a glimpse of her house in the distance. She'd left her bedside lamp on earlier, and hers was the only room aglow.

Jack was a few footsteps behind her. They crossed the footbridge and raced up through the fields of strawberry runners.

She knew the route Jack would take. He'd run as far as the mango trees then head off to his house from there. It was the shortcut, and it also happened to be the route closest to the houses...just in case there was something out there.

Soon she'd be back in bed, safe, her book locked away. Ransom would curl up on his rug beneath her bed. They'd both fall asleep, and this would all seem like a very bad dream.

Ransom, thought Sasha, as she bolted toward the mango trees. He'd disappeared.

Above her own panting and the rush of blood in her ears, she heard Jack, several paces away. In fact, it was more what she didn't hear that frightened her. Jack had come to an abrupt halt.

Sasha swung around to see Jack, stopped in his tracks. The look on his face was one she'd never seen before. No longer the mean, powerful Jack with that smug look she knew only too well. In the dark, all she could see well were the whites of his eyes. But that was enough.

For the very first time, she saw Jack look completely and utterly terrified.

There was no way she was going to stop. Sasha instinctively pushed her glasses firmly onto her nose and tore through the rows of strawberries, all the time focusing on her bedroom lamp, like a poor moth magnetized toward the light, unaware of the danger that awaited her.

Chapter Five

Sasha's Worst Nightmare

A few more breaths, that's all it took. Sasha focused on the line of mango trees and as her eyes adjusted in the dark, her heart sank. Her legs turned to jelly and refused to take another step. Now she knew why Jack and Ransom had stopped.

The largest of the trees, the one directly opposite her bedroom window, the one that she'd imagined night after night turning into Balfour, seemed to be moving.

Sasha shook her head and tried to blame her overactive imagination. She heard her father's voice in her ears. 'You have too vivid an imagination, Sasha Summers. It's going to get you in to trouble one of these days.'

Dad's probably right, she told herself. On both counts. Your stupid, stupid imagination is just trying to scare you like it always does.

But for once, her imagination was not to blame. What Sasha saw, only metres in front of her, was real.

The earth began to move beneath her feet. The huge mango tree waved its branches in the air. Its leaves shook, as if they were alive. Mangoes dropped like dull bombs onto the ground.

Without any warning, a group of flying foxes shrieked their way out of the foliage and headed for Sasha's face. They surrounded her from head to toe. They flew so close, she felt their silky black wings and the fur of their bodies brush against her bare skin. As suddenly as they appeared, they vanished again into the tree.

This was exactly how she'd imagined Balfour coming to life – rising up out of the fields, out of the dirt and the cold stones, dragging with it, all those things that were forgotten and buried – the worms, the maggots, the bones.

What Sasha saw was unmistakable. She was staring at something she'd seen many times before. She was face to face with her worst nightmare.

Sasha felt cold. The feeling came over her all of a sudden. It caused the hairs on her arms and legs to stand up, and sent a violent shiver through her body. She felt a strange urge to go to the toilet right there and then. She somehow managed to hold on, for now at least.

She couldn't move, not even her eyes, not even to glance at Jack or Ransom, although she heard her dog making a few soft whimpers and she could hear Jack's shallow breaths.

Drowning out everything, was the beating of her heart. Strangely, it seemed to be drumming in her ears rather than her chest. It was a deafening beat.

I recognize this monster, she wanted to tell Jack, but she had no voice.

There were the eyes, the size of windows. They appeared to be made of pale marble pierced with dark emerald pupils. They sat beneath hooded lids that never blinked, lest they lose sight of their victim. And they were partially covered by thorny vines – the monster's hair – which hung in knots that almost touched the ground.

The most disturbing thing about Balfour's face was the mouth. It was as dark and as deep as an open grave. Her teeth were like broken tombstones – some chiseled sharp, others chipped or sticking out in strange directions.

Somewhere inside that mouth, Sasha knew what was hidden. Instead of a tongue, a poisonous snake curled itself at the back of her throat.

Balfour's body was made of earth, and her skin had the appearance of cracked clay. An enormous cloak of moss covered her body. She knew that velvety

cloak wasn't as beautiful as it looked. If you looked closer, it was swarming with worms and slugs and maggots.

The cloak swept across impossibly wide shoulders and trailed down to the ground, behind two feet the size of boulders. The legs were as wide and sturdy as the trunks of large gum trees. Her hands were more claws made from wood, and they ended in sharp green talons that could shred a child in to little pieces with one swipe.

Sasha knew what she was looking at, but she couldn't believe it. Now she understood why the temperature had dropped all of a sudden. Balfour rose up from the depths of the earth. Chill blood coursed through her body, causing all the air around the monster to turn cool.

Sasha reached into her pocket, and curled her fingers around the chillies and the cloves of garlic. How on earth would these help her now? She thought.

Jack whispered, 'Let's make a run for –'

He was cut off by a noise somewhere between a moan and a roar. It sounded like nothing Sasha had ever heard, but it *was* as Sasha had imagined. The noise startled her and sent the chilli and garlic in her palm flying into the air.

'I am Balfour,' said the monster. 'I know you fear me because my Sixth Sense detects more Goosebump Breath than I've ever smelt in my life. And by the way, what is that other terrible smell?'

'Garlic and chilli,' whispered Sasha sheepishly, astonishing herself that she was even able to speak.

Balfour lifted her head backward and her mouth grew even larger. A full-throated laugh rose out of it, coming in waves to shake the trees.

Sasha covered her ears to try and keep the noise out, but it was impossible. It filled her entire body, like breath. All of a sudden, she had an overwhelming desire to

vomit. She bent over, but nothing came out. She could only dry reach, leaving that sick feeling burning away in the pit of her stomach.

‘What is *Goosebump breath*?’ Jack asked.

‘Your fear,’ said Balfour, composing herself again.

‘Who said we’re afraid!’ Jack piped up, stepping towards Sasha.

‘Shut up,’ said Sasha, whose right leg had begun to shake. She forced her heel down into the dirt, to stop it becoming noticeable.

‘Sasha,’ boomed Balfour. ‘The reason you know me so well, is because *you* made me. I will not harm you, for you are my Creator. This is one of the Common Creeds. Never harm your Creator. But you may be in danger, and there is no time to lose.’

‘What do you mean, I may be in danger?’ She asked, her sketch book still wedged beneath her arm.

‘I’ll explain later. Let’s just say, there are a lot of desperate Fear–pinched monsters out there right now.’

‘I don’t understand. How... did I *make* you?’ asked Sasha.

‘I am your monster. You imagined me into being. When your fear is great enough, the Fear Threshold is reached, and the monster you imagine leaves your imagination. It crosses from our homeland, The Dreamholes into The Kingdom of Children, or what you like to call, the world.’

‘Nice work, Summers,’ whispered Jack, before turning to look at Balfour.

‘And what about me? Am I in danger?’

‘It is not in *my* nature to eat children,’ replied Balfour, lowering her enormous eyes.

‘That’s a relief, I think,’ said Jack.

‘You have made monsters too, Jack. You have made Outlanders.’

‘And do they eat children?’

‘Occasionally,’ replied Balfour, ‘but they pay a high price. It’s like your bees.

When an Outlander eats a child, it dies. It is banished to The Great Black Sea for eternity.’

The Great Black Sea, The Dreamholes, children being eaten by monsters. .

This was too far-fetched even for Sasha’s wild imagination.

‘Have any of my monsters eaten a kid?’ Jack piped up, momentarily filled with confidence at the thought of creating a monster. ‘Hey, Sasha, I should set one on to Terence Milburn. He’s had it coming for a long time.’

‘Silence!’ decreed Balfour. ‘This is not a game. A great deal is at stake. We monsters have a problem. Children everywhere are losing their imaginations, or as we say, getting the Dum Dums, at younger and younger ages. This means they are also losing their fear. And *we* need fear to survive. It’s our food, our air, our water. Monsters everywhere are growing weaker.’ Balfour paused and her mouth turned upward into a smile, the odd tooth sticking out over her dark lips. ‘But why should you care?’

Sasha and Jack both shook their heads slightly. Sasha’s imagination was going crazy. She imagined Outlanders eating children in a single mouthful. She pictured towering serpents that swallowed children while they were still alive, and the forms of those children kicking and punching from inside the creatures, trying hopelessly to escape. She imagined a were-octopus strangling children, reaching in to their beds from open windows, tentacles covering their mouths and noses, slowly suffocating them.

Stop it! she told herself. She was still cold, but a few droplets of sweat now trickled down her back.

‘Why are you telling us all this?’ said Sasha, cautiously, not wanting to offend Balfour and risk – who knew what.

‘Strawberry Hills and the towns around here create more monsters per child than anywhere else in the world.’

Sasha felt Balfour’s gaze fix upon her, rendering her paralyzed. She fought back tears.

‘And of all those children, *you* have made the most monsters, Sasha. *You* are *‘The Imaginer’*. And *you* are the one with the power to change our fate. You will not only save the Monstocracy, you will save the imaginations of children everywhere.’

The words rolled off Sasha. She had no idea what Balfour was talking about. She couldn’t even save her sketch book from Jack McIvor. There was no way she was the one Balfour wanted for this *mission*.

‘There are ears and eyes everywhere in the darkness, so we must act quickly. Both of you will meet me tomorrow night at midnight on the footbridge,’ said Balfour.

‘What did I do? Why do you need me?’ Jack protested.

‘I’d rather not take you,’ responded Balfour in an icier than usual tone as she stooped in Jack’s direction. ‘But I need a Creator of each of the three Orders of Monsters. You’re a Creator of Outlanders. Sasha, you are a Creator of Bordercrossers. And I need a Creator of Wishfulfillers. That means, I’ll need your sister.’

‘Eliza?’

‘If we’re to stand a chance.’

‘A chance of what?’ asked Sasha.

‘A chance of bringing back evidence from The Dreamholes. We’ll prove to children that monsters really do exist.’

‘What evidence?’ Sasha asked, afraid of the answer she’d receive.

Balfour draped her mossy coat across her body before she spoke. ‘Maybe you know him. He was taken some weeks ago – eaten alive by an Outlander that crept into his room at night. And for some reason, he survived. His name is Billy Benson, and he’s all the proof we need.’

A gasp escaped from Sasha’s mouth. Her heart skipped a beat. Before she could ask any more questions, Balfour spoke again.

‘You’ll bring back Billy Benson. Children will listen to other children. Then the imaginations of Kidwinks everywhere will never sleep again.’ Balfour paused. ‘Go home now,’ she said, pointing one of her talons in the direction of Sasha’s glowing bedroom window.

‘What if we don’t believe you? And even if we did, I don’t want to go to these Dreamholes and help you,’ said Jack.

‘I’m *sure* I can convince you both. Don’t forget, I am a monster and I was put on this earth for one thing above all else – to strike fear into the hearts and minds of children.’

Balfour laughed the same terrible laugh as before, then added, ‘Meet me on the footbridge at midnight tomorrow night. And don’t bother bringing any of your chilli and garlic next time.’

Chapter Six

The Aftermath of Monsters

Sasha and Jack parted without a word. Jack peeled off, heading east along the river bank toward the foothills of Mount Starvation. Sasha crossed the footbridge in a few giant steps and raced through the lower fields in the direction of home, her fear making it almost impossible to breathe.

There was still no colour creeping into the sky above Mount Starvation and Mount Barnaby. At least she'd made it home before her father was up.

She'd be slightly safer inside the four walls of her room, with the light on, with her family in the adjoining rooms. Sasha took the back steps to the house two at a time, and gently pushed open the screen door, which she'd unlatched before going to bed.

She tiptoed through the kitchen and down the hall. It was alright. The house was still silent.

Her relief vanished in an instant as she walked into her room. There, on the end of her bed, with his arms crossed, sat her father.

'I went to The Dumps. It was a stupid dare. I just wanted to see if I could find anything...interesting.' Her voice trembled, just like the rest of her body.

David Summers remained seated at the end of Sasha's bed. He shook his head. On his face – a mixture of disbelief and fury. It was a look Sasha had seen before, and she'd learnt to fear it.

‘You do *not* go roaming about in the middle of the night, young lady. It’s called trespassing. If you’re lucky, you’ll be attacked by someone’s dog. If you’re not, you’ll be shot.’

The house began to stir. Sasha’s mother, Valerie, appeared in the doorway. Then came another set of footsteps. A brown plait swished across the doorway, before Eliza poked her head in.

‘You’re going to stay right here, Sasha Summers, until I come back for breakfast,’ said her father. He left the room and walked down the hallway, followed close behind by Valerie Summers and Eliza.

Sasha couldn’t sleep. Too much was going through her head after the events of the last twenty-four hours. More light gradually filled her room. Everyone was up and about except her. Her father headed off to work on the farm. Her Mum was in the kitchen preparing breakfast.

Eliza poked her head around Sasha’s doorway again. She munched on a piece of toast spread with butter and homemade strawberry jam. ‘What stinks in here?’ She said, screwing up her nose.

Sasha didn’t answer. Normally she would have taken the bait, but today she was too exhausted to explain to her annoying little sister why she’d smeared garlic and chilli all over herself and her room.

‘Shame you can’t leave your room. You can’t even have any breakfast.’ As she grinned, she revealed two large top middle teeth that protruded slightly. Eliza giggled, and her plaits danced around her shoulders.

‘Leave me alone,’ scowled Sasha.

Eliza brushed the crumbs from around her mouth with a buttery hand.

‘You’re unbelievable sometimes! Why didn’t you tell me?’ she asked, her grin now gone.

‘Tell you what?’

‘That you were going to The Dumps, and that you were going to give Jack McIvor *our* raft?’

‘How do you know that?’

‘Overheard him telling some kids after school.’

‘*You* couldn’t have stopped him.’

‘I would have at least tried, which is more than you *ever* do! And I have the perfect way to get back at that little creep. Next time he’s at swimming lessons, I’ll be sneaking some of those hairy grubs into his underpants.’ Eliza squealed with laughter.

Sasha wished she could laugh too, but knowing what she knew now, she wondered if she’d ever laugh again.

‘And I’ll just leave you with one more piece of advice. If you’re going to get up to mischief, make sure you don’t get caught.’

‘What’s that supposed to mean?’ said Sasha, inviting her younger sister to lecture her, yet again.

‘Well apart from being busted by Dad coming in at three in the morning, you’ve been fossicking in my jewellery.’

‘I have not. I don’t even wear jewellery, at least not all that sparkly stuff *you* wear.’

‘My mother of pearl bracelet is missing, and I’m going to tell Mum and Dad you’ve taken it!’

Sasha took her pillow and aimed it straight at her sister. Eliza jumped out of the way, just in time to avoid being hit.

‘Temper. Temper. I’m out of here,’ said Eliza.

When Eliza left, Sasha reached under her bed and pulled out the biscuit tin. She’d slipped her sketch book inside when everyone left the room earlier. She ran her fingers along its dented lid and then prized it open.

From the outside, the book looked ordinary – a foolscap sketchbook with a hard red cover. Inside, it was anything but ordinary. It bulged with artwork Sasha had done over the last few years.

She opened it at the first page and flicked through, her hands shaking. Some pages were done in ink, others in pencil, a few were in charcoal or painted in watercolour. Many of them had been worked into cartoons, with captions and speech bubbles.

But all the drawings depicted the same thing. Monsters.

She leafed through until she found *Black’guard*, the monster of her childhood nightmares. The name had many meanings, but the one she liked best meant ‘*a great fighter*’. As long as she could remember, she imagined that the wolf from Little Red Riding Hood could escape the pages of the story. When he leapt off the page, he grew and grew to a size where he filled a doorway.

His coat was the deepest and shiniest of blacks and his teeth gleamed whiter than snow. When he opened his mouth, four enormous incisors flashed, each the size of Sasha’s forearm. In the picture that lay beneath her palm, she’d drawn the monstrous dog with the red cape he’d stolen from Little Red Riding Hood.

Sasha turned the page. The caption at the bottom read: *The bird monster, Thaddeus*. She’d chosen the name *Thaddeus* because it sounded like *thunder*, and

the monster's huge wings could fill the sky, just like thunder. Its beak was sharper than a kitchen knife and the eyes were drawn as empty sockets full of smoke.

Each night, Sasha imagined these monsters coming to life. The clothesline with its shiny steel arms, that creaked and turned on its hinges, became Thaddeus taking flight.

The old wooden outhouse down the path was merely a disused dunny in the day time. It was only used by her and Eliza and visiting friends in games of hide and seek, or at night to play *dare* and each person would have to run down the path and knock on the door three times. Sometimes, they'd play *double dare*. You'd have to open the door and shut yourself inside, and count to ten before opening the door again.

Much to Sasha's dislike, Eliza had managed to count to five with the door closed. Sasha hadn't even managed to close the door yet. And some nights she couldn't even win *dare*. She'd have to turn her torch on, just to make it to the door.

On the side of the old dunny wall, were a few hooks where her father hung a hooded all-weather jacket. It was in the darkness that the outhouse and her father's over-sized jacket, morphed into the monstrous hooded wolf, Black'guard.

Sasha shivered. She knew what waited for her on the next page – the monster she feared the most, the one she'd imagined rising up out of the strawberry fields when everyone else slept, the monster that inhabited the old mango tree closest to her bedroom window, its branches stretched like arms and its foliage draped over them like a ghastly cloak.

Balfour.

She'd drawn Balfour so many times. The thought that now, something born in her imagination had taken shape and become real, was incomprehensible. Sasha slowly turned the page.

Staring back at her was Balfour. She appeared in the sketch, exactly as she had last night in the fields – made of earth and all the creatures that fed on dead things below the ground, dressed in a long mossy cloak with hair made of thorny vines.

Behind the crooked rows of teeth, almost as an after thought, she'd drawn the deadly snake slithering out from deep inside Balfour's mouth. Oh, why had she imagined that part?

Sasha traced her pointer finger along the inscription beneath – *Balfour, meaning 'of the fields'*. She studied the drawing further, looking for something – a clue, perhaps.

She slid her finger around Balfour's ink outline. As she moved across Balfour's cloak, coloured in dark green pastels, Valerie Summers literally ran into her room.

'I don't know what is going on around here at the moment. My silk dress is missing! I hung it on the clothes line last night, and now it's gone!'

Sasha opened her eyes wide, but she didn't open her mouth.

'You know, the lavender one with the sequins and lace around the hem. You haven't seen it have you, Sasha?'

Sasha shook her head from side to side, feeling guilty for a crime she didn't even commit.

Her mother was just about to storm off down the hall, when she turned back.

‘You know, Sash, I’m not happy about your escapade last night. It’s not like you. You’d tell me if there’s something I should know, wouldn’t you?’

Sasha nodded, half-heartedly.

‘If something’s wrong, there’s always a way to change things. Nothing’s set in stone, you know.’

Sasha nodded again. She wished her Mum would go away. Her advice made Sasha want to cry, and she didn’t have time for tears right now.

‘And maybe you should put *that book* away. Your father’s coming in early for some reason. You know how he feels about you getting carried away with your imagination... and your drawings.’

Sasha slammed her sketch book shut and hid it back in the tin. She slid the tin beneath her bed just as her father’s heavy footsteps came to a sudden stop.

‘Sasha!’

David Summers filled the doorway. His head almost touched the top and his broad sun burnt hands were square on his hips. It wasn’t time for breakfast yet. The sun was only creeping up past the mango trees and beginning to scatter light though the leaves into the backyard. Certainly no more than fifteen minutes had passed.

‘What is the matter with you? Do you know how hard I work to keep this farm going?’

There was no opportunity for Sasha to answer. Her father took her by the arm and practically lifted her out of bed. Not a word was spoken as they marched together through the strawberry fields.

The sight was devastating. Row after row of strawberry runners were torn from the soil. Everywhere Sasha looked, runners lay tangled and broken, cast off like useless pieces of thread. Their leaves were already withering in the first sunlight.

The destruction continued the full length of the fields all the way out to the orchards. The more Sasha saw, the sicker she felt. She thought about the raft lying broken in the rainforest. She thought about Ransom barking madly at someone or something, and the strange stinking bone he'd found. And of course, she thought about Balfour.

'I didn't do it, Dad,' said Sasha, as they reached the border of mandarine trees. 'I know it looks that way. If I were you, I'd think I did it too. But why would I want to ruin our crop?' She tried to reason, but the more she said, the guiltier she sounded.

'Who was with you?' demanded her father.

'It was just me.' Sasha wished she was a better liar. She just hoped her body language didn't give her away on this occasion.

'It was that trouble maker from next door, wasn't it?' said David Summers, looking Sasha straight in the eyes. 'Jack McIvor.'

'I don't even want to *speak* to Jack McIvor, let alone hang out with him. It was just me,' repeated Sasha, not at all sure why she was trying to protect a boy, who only yesterday had threatened her and her sister, and their dog.

Nothing she did or said seemed to make sense any more.

David Summers removed the Akubra hat that perched at a tilt on his head. It revealed a tanned face with crows' feet spreading from the outer corners of each eye to his hairline. He was already sweating, and his dark hair stuck to his forehead. He wiped his brow with the stained leather hat and brought his hands up to cover his eyes.

This gesture disturbed Sasha more than anything else that had happened these past hours. A sense of shame came over her.

‘Please believe me,’ pleaded Sasha.

‘More than anything, I’d like to believe you. But I caught you red-handed. I knew by the look on your face, you’d been up to no good. I warned you about trespassing on *other* people’s property. But to do this to your *own* property? Things like this go beyond you and me, Sasha. If I hadn’t seen you tearing up to the house this morning at dawn, I’d be on the phone right now to the police.’

‘But I didn’t do it! Why won’t you listen to me, Dad?’

David Summers threw his head back and looked up at the sky. For a moment, Sasha thought her father might even laugh. Slowly, he lowered his chin, but there was no sign of humour in his eyes. ‘I’ve listened enough! You are grounded, young lady.’

Without looking at his daughter, David Summers flicked his right wrist in the air, gesturing in the direction of the house.

Sasha obeyed and walked back to the house, unable to believe that in the space of one day, her life had gone from bad to worse and worse and worse.

Chapter Seven

Billy Benson and The Door to the Dead

Even Billy Benson's dreams had been stolen, but very occasionally, he slept a peaceful sleep and travelled somewhere far away from this evil place.

He was running. It was the one hundred metres race and his legs felt powerful. Children on the sideline cheered and waved his house flag. He glanced to each side but there was no one in the lanes. Billy was way ahead of his opponents. The breeze whooshed past his ears as he pumped his arms and legs toward the finish line.

At the line, he spread his arms wide open. He let his head drift backward and lifted his eyes to the sky. Victory felt wonderful. He wanted to do it again, but he couldn't.

Before he knew it he was home, throwing a baseball with a team mate on his front lawn. The sweet smell of the leather glove filled the air. He pummeled it with his right fist, waiting for the next ball.

Something distracted him at that moment. He removed his hand from the glove and ran his fingers through his short brown hair.

There were shadows moving in the windows of his house. He strained to see. He had the overwhelming feeling that there was somebody, or something in his house that wanted to harm his parents. He had to warn them.

'Mum! Dad!' he shouted.

'Hi Billy,' answered his mother. She came to the window and waved. In the window of the next room, his father appeared, smiling.

That was a relief. But wait. What was that shadow in the background, so large it cast darkness across both rooms? The faces of his mother and father turned ashen.

‘Don’t leave us,’ they cried. ‘Please, Billy. Don’t leave us behind.’

Billy shook his head. ‘It’s OK. I’m coming! I’m coming!’ he yelled at the top of his voice.

He charged toward the front door but was stopped short. *The baseball!* He didn’t see it from behind. It landed with incredible force against the back of his head.

When he woke, his face was wet with tears. He felt instinctively for his head, checking if it was alright. There was no pain or swelling. He wanted to close his eyes and return to the dream, to see the faces of his parents again, to play baseball on his front lawn, to win the sprint on sports day.

He remembered the strength he felt playing sport. He was invincible. He’d told his father he was going to be a professional sportsman when he grew up, and not a doctor like him, or an accountant like his mother.

His father had not entirely discouraged him from a career in sport, but suggested he also concentrate on his schoolwork. He recalled the exact words his father had used. *Bodies reach their use by dates a bit earlier than brains.*

That had set Billy thinking. *Why not be good at sport and school work? I can do anything, if I want to, if I work hard enough.*

He wished he could still think that way, but the person he used to be inhabited another world and another time. Now, he didn’t have the confidence to think he might find a way out of here.

He didn't know exactly how long he'd been trapped in this place. It was more than a couple of weeks, possibly a month. Even the word *dungeon* was too good to describe this pit at the bottom of the world, where he was all but forgotten.

Shafts of light filtered down to his prison. He thought it might be moonlight. Often it was pale but sometimes, it was a strange purple colour. Rain also made its way down, pattering around his head and shoulders if he sat in the wrong spot.

In the beginning, he remained positive. He tried to forget every detail of the creature that appeared at the end of his bed in the middle of the night. It was so huge, it had to curl its head and shoulders to fit in his room. It had a body like a dinosaur's, covered with enormous rust-coloured scales the size of roof tiles. Down the middle of its back ran a row of fins. These were black and oily, and reminded him of the fins on sharks.

The monster stood on two powerful haunched legs. It had eyes like a lizard's, each with a black line running down the centre of a vivid red eyeball.

Hardest to forget, were its teeth. They were large, but it wasn't their size that scared him most. It was their shape, jagged and chiseled to sharp points. They reminded him of the pieces of broken glass, fixed to the top of security fences to deter intruders.

These were the last things he saw in his room that night. The monster stooped and grabbed him with its cold steel claws. He struggled, but he might as well have been a fly in that thing's hands.

The monster gave him a red blink, its eyes hovering above his sheets.

He remembered his baseball bat. He always kept it right beside his bed, next to his glove and ball. Billy twisted as much as he could and reached out with his right hand. He fumbled in the darkness for his bat.

The monster began to tear his sheets away. Billy felt himself being lifted into the air. Where was the bat? He lunged toward the side of his bed in one last attempt to locate it.

He felt the familiar grip. Billy tightened his hand around it, determined not to let go. He raised the aluminium bat as high as he could, in preparation for a swipe at his captor.

He was at the level of its mouth. Billy struck out at the teeth, hoping they might just shatter, the way a glass window might.

As he did so, the monster dislodged its huge jaws in a sideways motion, leaving Billy to swing the bat into thin air. The monster looked as though it was smiling from ear to ear, taking great pleasure in the thought of swallowing him alive.

It forced Billy past its serrated teeth. He came so close to them, he feared they'd shred his skin. Then he fell deep into the belly of the beast.

It felt like the 'Black Hole' ride at the water slide park. He went speeding through the pitch black, not knowing which way to turn, wondering if he'd ever get to the end and see the light again.

Only now, could he scream. He'd opened his mouth earlier when the monster loomed up at the end of his bed, but terror had stolen his voice back there. Now his screams echoed all around him.

Finally, his descent stopped. Something similar to sludge broke Billy's fall, except this stuff was thicker and stickier, and it stunk like old mud. *Could he really be inside the monster's gut?*

He started to dry retch from the smell. His head ached too, perhaps from the fumes. It was blacker in there than any place he'd ever been. He thought of the baseball bat that remained clenched in his hand.

He couldn't see, but there was no way he was giving up without a fight. He took the baseball bat and swung it as hard and as wildly as he possibly could. Again and again, he smashed the insides of the monster, sometimes hitting against what felt like flesh, other times against something more solid.

Many minutes passed. Billy was close to exhaustion and certain defeat.

He stopped to catch his breath. After a matter of seconds, a wave of violent convulsions lifted him upward. Every part of his head and body crashed against the monster's innards. He somersaulted and twisted, before being spat out.

Billy was greeted by a disgusting retching noise as he flew backwards past the rows of teeth and into mid air. For the briefest moment, he caught sight of a dazzling purple light. It looked to be coming from a large jewel that hovered above him.

In an instant, the jewel vanished.

The air filled with hissing and snarling and gnashing teeth. Billy couldn't get his bearings. *What was going on? Was it the monster making these horrible noises? Was there more than one monster?*

Suddenly, he was sucked downwards again. A great door slammed closed above his head, and the noise and chaos of a moment ago were swallowed up. He was in another dark tunnel. The ride was over in a few seconds.

Once more, there was a sickening sludge to greet him at the end of his fall, and he was trapped. His only consolation was, he seemed to have escaped the belly of that first monster. At least here, there were no other monsters...for the time being.

That was history now, and it felt like *he* was history too. On nights when his prison filled with gloomy moonlight, Billy could see the distance from one end to the other. It was about the size of a baseball diamond. Its stone walls rose up into a cave

that encompassed him. He could also see the strange seaweeds, mushrooms, and things in shells that he ate to survive, and the rock pools that held a soupy liquid, which he drank whenever he could stomach it.

It was hard for Billy to decide what was worst about his prison – the thought that he might be here forever, that he'd never see his parents again, the way his body had grown weak, or the way his hopes were gradually vanishing.

Maybe it was the agonizing silence of this place. It was the same silence possessed by the monster at the end of his bed. It stood there with an evil grin on its face, and it didn't make a sound before it stole him away.

At times, it was the lack of light that troubled him. It played tricks with Billy's eyes and mind. He saw menacing shadows. Sometimes they circled and teased him. Sometimes they remained half-hidden, half-glimpsed, dreamlike and ghostly. Other times, they loomed up, blackening a wall, growing larger, and casting their darkness over him like a death veil.

Right now, *something* broke the silence. The hairs on his neck stood up. *That* noise left him in no doubt about the very worst thing in this place. It was worse than all those other things combined.

The noise came from a distance. It was the cry of a child. It reminded him of his own lonely sobbing since he'd fallen into this prison. It was so terrible to listen to, he thought about covering his ears.

The cries only lasted a couple of seconds, and stopped as quickly as they'd begun. Billy wondered if he was going crazy. Perhaps he could no longer tell the difference between reality and fantasy. He asked himself one more time. *Did I imagine those cries or is someone else down here?*

Deep down, he knew the answer.

Chapter Eight

An Incident At Mirknight

Sasha sat up in bed, worrying. Her left shoulder throbbed from her fall at The Dumps, but that was the least of her concerns. She still couldn't believe she'd *made* Balfour. That Balfour had stepped out of her imagination and into the world.

And even more incredibly, before the next hour was up, she was supposed to enter Balfour's world, The Dreamholes, and somehow save Billy Benson.

Her mind raced. She was nearing a point where she found it difficult to know what was real and what was imagined. The one thing she *did* know for sure was, she wasn't going to take Eliza with them.

Sasha had caused enough problems, and she didn't want to be blamed for any more. She just hoped this decision wouldn't prove to be like most of her others, and come back to haunt her.

She'd told her parents she was going to draw for a while. It was an excuse to keep her bedside light on. Sasha knew all about vampires and their fear of the light. The lamp was a very long shot, but it was worth a try to ward off monsters, given that her chilli and garlic experiment had failed miserably.

Out of the corner of her eye, she detected a flash of light. Lightning. An electrical storm had passed through an hour earlier, moving southward. The thunder was mere rumbling in the distance now and the lightning was faint and far away.

Sasha leant down and reached under her bed for the biscuit tin. She felt Ransom's warm tongue brush against her hand. She heard the happy *thump thump* of her dog's tail, and was reassured that nothing could be lurking down there with him around.

She just hoped there weren't any more of those sketches that were going to come to life. She added another heavy book – her Encyclopedia of Australian Native Animals – on top of the Oxford Dictionary. It all seemed a bit futile, now that Balfour had explained the way monsters are made, but this habit made her feel just the slightest bit safer.

It was almost midnight. She walked over to her bookshelf and picked up a framed photograph, the earliest photo of her. It was taken when she was adopted. She was four years old and Eliza was two. Her mother and father held Eliza in their arms in front of the mango trees, while Sasha wielded a new toy sword, fighting off some imaginary enemy.

Even then I was a tomboy, she thought. And even then, my imagination was getting me in to trouble.

Sasha Summers had always *felt* a bit different, even *within* her family, but this photo was proof that she *was* different. Eliza was the spitting image of her parents with her dark eyes, brown hair and olive skin. Sasha on the other hand, had blue eyes, blonde hair, and a fine spray of freckles across her nose.

She'd never forgotten the day that photograph was taken, even though she didn't understand everything that had gone on. *Poor little thing. You are so lucky to have parents like these. You have a good home now.*

That's what everyone was saying. Everybody wanted to caress her blonde locks, and kiss her chubby cheeks. All *she* really wanted was the jellies in the clear plastic cups. They were yellow and green, and in each sugary little pond swam a chocolate frog.

The mournful cry of a curlew brought her back to the present. Sasha immediately thought of Thaddeus. She stared at her wrist watch. 11.44. It was time to go.

She'd thought about leaving a note so her parents wouldn't worry, but each time she'd tried to write it, the words sounded too unbelievable. And besides, this was probably something any normal person *should* worry about. Sasha just hoped it would all be over quickly.

She took a long breath, then jumped through her window. Ransom snuck out the back door which she'd left ajar and followed hot on her heels, his nose to the air. Sasha desperately wanted to turn on her torch, but she couldn't afford to wake her parents or Eliza. She figured she'd rather make it to the footbridge to Jack and Balfour, and take her chances. Rather that, than be stuck at home grounded *and* terrorized by Balfour.

Sasha crossed the damp fields and reached the footbridge. The burning sensation was back in her stomach, but again, she couldn't throw up. Jack was running late. It had just gone midnight. Sasha wondered if her enemy was just full of hot air. Whether, when it came to the crunch, he would put his money where his mouth was.

After all, she and Jack hadn't spoken since they parted last night. They'd both lost the power of speech by the time Balfour sent them home to contemplate their fate. All day at school they'd avoided one another, in class and at lunch breaks. She hadn't even dared to give Jack eye contact, in case he mentioned what had gone on in the strawberry fields.

The rustling of leaves underfoot interrupted her thoughts. It was Jack. As he walked, Sasha caught the reflection of something at his waist height. There was a

brand new slither of moon in the sky and there was just enough light to see the outline of what looked like...a rifle. Jack held the weapon awkwardly against his body.

‘What are you doing with *that*?’ whispered Sasha.

‘I’ve shot an air rifle before,’ said Jack.

‘That’s not what I mean.’

‘It’s them or us, Summers. Do you have any better ideas?’

‘You’ve seen how big Balfour is. She’s made of stones. That’s about as much use against Balfour as... Ransom,’ said Sasha.

‘Get down,’ ordered Jack. ‘It’s coming from the fields. Can you see anything?’

‘No.’ Sasha’s heart pounded so violently against her ribs, she thought it must surely be making a noise. But for once, she wanted to do something Jack suggested.

‘And by the way, where’s your baby sister?’ said Jack.

‘I didn’t tell her.’

‘What? That monster told us to bring her. We’re dead thanks to you. I’ll get you back if it’s the last thing I ever do.’

The last thing she wanted, was reminding of how she *hadn’t* obeyed Balfour. She still didn’t know if she was stupid or brave by not dragging her sister in to this. Right now, she was feeling closer to stupid.

Sasha’s right leg began to shake. She pushed it against the ground to try and still it. The ground beneath them was cool but rather than the usual smell of damp soil, Sasha smelt something horrible. It reminded her of the dead rabbit she’d found in the middle of the road, several days after it’d been squashed by a car.

And the smell also reminded her of the stench that proceeded Balfour last night.

Jack knelt on his left knee, with the gun balanced on his right. Something *was* coming towards them from the lower fields.

Sasha sensed a faint vibration in the ground. Perhaps it was creeping, for Sasha couldn't make out a silhouette, even when a flash of lightning lit up the sky. Was it one of the child-eating serpents of her imagination?

Ransom started to bark madly in the distance. Before she could manage another thought, whatever it was rose up and charged at them from across the footbridge.

The gun went off beside her. Sasha couldn't see or hear a thing for a few seconds. When her hearing returned, Ransom's barking filled the darkness again. It was even more frantic this time. Maybe whatever it was had been hit. Perhaps Jack's idea had been a good one, after all.

Sasha and Jack barely drew a breath between them as they waited and waited for what seemed like minutes. Sasha refused to move. Jack crawled forward slightly and looked around. The coast *seemed* clear. Adrenalin pumped through his body, urging him to go against common sense – to cross the bridge and see what was there.

He tugged at Sasha's shirt and pulled her up against her will. As they walked slowly across the bridge, Sasha heard the faint sound of breaths entering and exiting the night.

At the far end of the bridge, Sasha could just make out something slumped on the ground. Was it moving? Perhaps it was writhing in pain, with a bullet lodged in it?

Step by cautious step, they approached. When they were close enough to see the form that lay in the darkness, it stopped both of them in their tracks.

This was worse than anything Sasha could ever have imagined. Lying in front of her, was Eliza.

Chapter Nine

Balfour's Mates

'Eliza,' whispered Sasha. She gently brushed a plait to each side, and pushed her face close to Eliza's. 'Please be alright. Please be alright,' she half-sobbed, half-chanted.

Sasha felt her sister's quick breaths against her cheek. Eliza was alive, but how badly was she injured? Sasha reached into her shorts pocket and pulled out her pencil torch. She shone the beam of light over Eliza's face. Her sister's eyes were wide open and there was a strange smile on her face.

'Eliza, have you been hit? Are you in pain anywhere?'

Her sister was in shock. Her eyes didn't blink and the expression on her face didn't change. Sasha moved the torch down Eliza's body and across her limbs, looking for a wound. Then she saw the dark stain. There was blood on her left shin.

'Give me your shirt, Jack,' said Sasha, without looking up, too terrified to realize that this was quite possibly the boldest thing she had ever said to anyone, let alone Jack McIvor.

Jack must have been in shock too, for without hesitating, he took off his t-shirt and handed it to Sasha. With Jack's shirt, she gently wiped around the wound. It was difficult to see, but Eliza thought she should press down firmly to prevent any more bleeding.

'Ooww!' screeched Eliza, suddenly waking from her dazed state. 'What are you doing?'

'You were... shot, Eliza,' Sasha explained, as she released the pressure on Eliza's leg.

'It's all your fault, Sasha,' blurted Jack, crouching down next to Eliza.

'Shot? Is that you, Jack?' said Eliza.

'I thought you were someone else, *something* attacking us,' Jack replied.

'Jack, help me by shining the torch on Eliza's leg,' said Sasha.

Sasha wiped the blood from her sister's leg, apologizing for hurting her as she did so. Eliza didn't complain this time. She just kept asking for their mother, in between the odd small sob.

'I'll take you to her in a minute,' promised Sasha.

'Look,' said Jack, waving the torch over a spot just below Eliza's knee. 'It's just a graze. There's no bullet.'

Eliza's leg had almost stopped bleeding. Sasha could see in the torchlight what looked like a bad scratch on the top layers of her skin.

'I'll go and get help,' offered Jack, starting to turn and run before he'd even got the words out. He started off across the bridge and broke into a sprint when he reached the strawberry fields.

Eliza looked up at Sasha and smiled. 'Do you reckon that's the last we'll see of him.'

Both girls laughed nervously. 'It'll be alright,' Sasha insisted, as much to reassure herself as her sister. 'So why did you follow me, Lizzy?'

'You're the last person to go traipsing around at midnight. And to do it two nights in a row. Of course, I'm curious.'

Sasha pulled the pink hood of Eliza's sleeveless track top up around her ears, creating a cushion of sorts for her head. Then she lay down beside her sister. They both stared up at the sky. The stars seemed to flicker more than normal after the storm. Off to the right, Sasha saw the moon behind a small band of drifting clouds.

She hoped Jack would be back any moment with her parents. She thought about yelling at the top of her lungs but doubted the noise would carry all the way to their house. She'd just have to trust Jack, even though the idea seemed almost as crazy as the idea, that Balfour must be out there waiting for them.

The only good thing about this whole incident, was it had knocked some bravery into Sasha. There was nothing like an emergency to focus on what's important, on what's real and not imagined. Balfour would have to wait.

'Is that smoke?' asked Eliza.

'Where?' said Sasha.

'I think it's coming from that big bird above Mount Starvation,' said Eliza.

The bird headed toward the rows of mandarine and lemon trees on the eastern side of their property. Sasha saw the smoke trail too. And finally, she saw that it was not a bird at all.

It couldn't be. She wished her parents would hurry up. She heard Jack yelling in the fields. Strangely, Ransom had gone quiet all of a sudden.

'She's here! She's here!' shouted Jack.

Sasha couldn't see Jack. His voice seemed to be coming from about a hundred metres off, somewhere on the other side of the footbridge. Had Jack reached the house? Were her parents on their way?

'Jack!' screamed Sasha. 'Where *are* you?'

'I didn't make it to your house. They cut me off at the top of the strawberry fields, ambushed me from the mango trees.'

'They?'

'There's more of them,' he shouted. The shadowy windmills of his legs and arms pumping as fast as they could go, suddenly came into view.

'What do you mean?' demanded Sasha, feeling sick from what she had just heard and seen.

'I mean Balfour is here, and she's brought her mates!'

Chapter Ten

The Scaredest Kid in the Whole Wide World

‘What are you both talking about?’ asked Eliza.

‘I’ll explain later,’ said Sasha, trying not to disintegrate into total panic. ‘Can you walk?’

‘I think so.’

Sasha helped her sister to her feet and led her to a hiding spot just inside the rainforest. ‘Stay right here,’ she said, then turned and ran back to the old wooden footbridge. She heard Eliza’s cries of protest chasing after her but she did not turn back. Jack was waiting for her at the bridge.

‘Balfour was right. Maybe we *are* in danger.’ Sasha shook her head, trying to gather her thoughts together.

‘Your parents’ll be out here any minute with all the noise. Your Dad won’t take any rubbish from these mongrels. He’d better hurry up though’, said Jack, before adding, ‘where’s Eliza?’

‘I’ve hidden her at the edge of the rainforest. There’s no way Balfour’s going to drag her into this.’

‘And what happened to the gun?’ asked Jack.

‘I threw it into the rainforest.’

‘Why’d you do a stupid thing like that?’

‘Because I thought you might want to do a stupid thing like...like use it again!’

Sasha looked up. The bird monster was heading straight for them. It was just like her drawings. Its beak glinted, its hollow eyes trailed smoke, and its wings were as large as tents flapping across the sky and blocking out the stars.

‘I suppose you made that too.’ Jack spoke softly this time, the sarcasm barely detectable.

Sasha nodded. ‘It’s Thaddeus.’

‘What – eus?’

There was no time to explain. ‘Let’s run for it. This way!’ Sasha pointed westward up the river bank.

The two children ducked as Thaddeus swooped overhead, making the night turn blacker around them. As she flew closer, Sasha saw her enormous claws – like long fingers, stripped of skin. They reminded her of the hands on the skeleton that stood in the corner of their science room.

Thaddeus’s sickening screams made Sasha’s stomach turn. Covering her ears didn’t help. The sound seemed to slice her open and lodge deep inside of her, as though it was trying to get at her soul.

Sasha kept her eyes on Thaddeus and ducked to avoid her clutches. The monstrous bird lunged. She felt its bony fingers brush against her back.

Suddenly, she crashed into something directly in front of her.

‘Aaahh’ she yelled, instinctively pushing up her glasses, and taking a step backward.

Black’guard. The gigantic wolf gave a blood–curdling howl, and she felt its warm stinking breath on her skin. Sasha’s fear spiked again.

Black'guard's red cape was so huge, it trailed just above his hind legs. The red hood hid his face. All that was visible was the muzzle with its great fangs, and two beady eyes that shone ominously.

Rather than pouncing, it walked directly over both Sasha and Jack, creating a kind of jail with its legs. It growled, and large drops of saliva fell from its jaws.

Through the wolf's legs, Sasha saw beams of light combing the strawberry fields. She heard the desperate calls of her parents. '*Eliza! Sasha! Where are you?*'

'Here!' screamed Sasha, as loud as she could. At the same time, she grabbed Jack's arm and pulled him through a gap in Black'guard's legs.

'Sasha!' shouted Eliza.

'This way, Jack!' yelled Sasha, running in Eliza's direction.

Just before she entered the forest, she shouted at the top of her lungs 'Mum! Dad! We're in the rainforest!'

With her right hand, Sasha grabbed and found Eliza's hand. With her other hand, she shone her torch in front of them, its light frantically slicing the trees in their path.

Large drops of water fell from the leaves onto Sasha's back. *It's from the thunder storm earlier*, Sasha told herself. But in the back of her mind, she was thinking wild crazy thoughts. Maybe it's blood...

'Stop!' demanded Jack. 'Where are we going?'

'Away from *them*,' cried Sasha, continuing to head deeper into the trees.

'There could be monsters in here too,' replied Jack, who reluctantly kept up with the two girls.

'Sasha, you're scaring me. What *monsters*? When are you going to explain everything,' asked Eliza.

'Later. Right now, we have to escape. But I can't help thinking we need to find Balfour to do that,' said Sasha.

'Get real!' said Jack. 'She's the one who got us into this mess.'

'I know, but she has a plan. She has to protect us, if she wants us to bring back Billy Benson.'

The forest was crashing in behind them. It sounded like there were more than just Black'guard and Thaddeus on their trail.

'Shhh,' whispered Sasha, slowing down for a moment. 'See anything?'

'Nothing,' said Jack.

'Wait. Look over there.' Eliza pointed to a spot about twenty metres in front of them.

Sasha focused her torchlight in the same direction. 'Balfour?'

'Who's Balfour?' asked Eliza. 'Sash, I'm scared.'

'It's alright, Lizzy. She'll help us.' Sasha could barely believe the words coming out of her mouth.

Balfour's huge bloodless eyes gave off a strange light that lit up the interior of the rainforest. Eliza drew a deep breath. Sasha threw her hand over her sister's mouth, fearing Eliza would scream and alert the entire forest to their presence.

'You can't hide,' boomed Balfour. 'My Sixth Sense detected your Goosebump Breath ages ago. The others have smelt your fear too. They're on their way.'

Sasha took her hand away from Eliza's mouth. Her sister didn't utter a word. But Eliza was shaking. She nuzzled her head into Sasha's shoulder and peered out with her eyes barely open.

‘You never said there’d be other monsters.’ Sasha regretted uttering the words as soon as they’d left her mouth.

Balfour lowered her head, bringing it level to Sasha’s. The air around Sasha turned cool, making goosebumps stand to attention all over her skin.

She saw Balfour’s horrible face up close for the first time. It looked to be made of mud. Moving in and out of the clay mounds of her nostrils and around the cracked corners of her mouth, were beetles and worms, even a spider. A bat appeared above Balfour’s left shoulder and flapped its wings across Sasha’s face, before ascending.

Sasha’s right leg began to shake uncontrollably, like it had so many times in the past day and night.

‘I sent a Sighlen, a message, asking all the local monsters to attend a Muster here tonight. Those monsters you met are simply doing their job. Think of it this way. Fear is our fuel. We need as much of it as possible to make the journey back across The Causeway to The Dreamholes,’ explained Balfour.

‘We don’t want to go,’ shouted Jack.

‘He’s right,’ blurted Sasha, on the brink of tears. ‘Eliza’s hurt. She needs a doctor.’

Balfour lifted her head and grew to her full height. ‘The Creed of Bordercrossers is Mind and Magic. We have the power to heal wounds. Once we get to The Dreamholes, we’ll see to Eliza’s injury.’

‘We still don’t want to go,’ protested Jack, his voice markedly quieter this time. ‘You can’t make us! Right, Summers?’ He stared at Sasha, hoping for at least a nod.

Sasha couldn't look at Jack. Her eyes remained level with the stumps of Balfour's legs. She eventually lifted her head towards Balfour's eyes.

'We don't want to go,' said Sasha, her voice wavering, and her leg continuing to shake. 'We don't know where these Dreamholes are and I'm not this... *Imaginer*. I'm just a kid, and as you already know, I'm not a very brave kid. I want to help Billy but I think you need someone else.'

'I know you're not a brave child,' replied Balfour. She almost seemed amused as she added, 'in fact, you are the most fearful child I have ever known, and *that* is precisely your strength.'

Sasha shook her head from side to side, unable to speak on account of the enormous lump in her throat.

A great smile crept across Balfour's face. 'I'm sorry if I gave you the impression you had a choice in this matter. You see, I've called my fellow monsters out here tonight. I think you've already met some of them. I've told them, *you* hold the key to their survival. You don't want to disappoint them, do you? You never know what they'll do if they get cross.'

Sasha pulled Eliza closer to her. She wished she could stop her right leg shaking. Now her teeth were chattering so hard, she had to close her mouth and push her tongue between her top and bottom rows of teeth to prevent them from making a noise.

'It's almost Mirknight, the time when our powers are greatest. Follow me,' commanded Balfour.

As she turned, she flung her cape about her shoulders, scattering the flying foxes that perched there. Her thorny hair swayed and rustled across her back.

The three children obeyed and moved toward a clearing in the middle of the forest. Each of them stole a glance at one another as they followed Balfour and the shaky wand of light made by Sasha's torch.

All Sasha could think was, *Why me? Why on earth would a bunch of monsters need someone who was the scariest kid in the whole wide world.* None of this made sense.

'Welcome, fellow Bordercrossers, followers of the Creed of Mind and Magic. And welcome also to the Wishfulfillers and Outlanders among you,' announced Balfour.

With that, the trees grew eyes. There were eyes of every description – dark purple, greens of horrible shades, smoky grey, fierce orange, red, sickening yellows. Some blinked. Others remained wide open. The eyes looked down at the three children from every direction and cast a circle of multi-coloured light. They were surrounded.

Out of the corner of her eye, Sasha glimpsed a swathe of lavender fabric. *Mum's dress*, she thought to herself as she studied the monster with several extra arms and heads. It had her mother's dress, draped as a scarf, around one of its necks.

'Pelfing,' said Balfour, referring to the many-headed monster. 'Sometimes we monsters are just like you humans, and can't resist objects of beauty.'

'Hey,' said Eliza, pointing to a smaller monster on the opposite side of the circle. 'And there's my mother of pearl bracelet.'

Balfour shot a quick glance at the furry blue monster with great floppy ears. It had a nose like a pig's, and threaded through the end of it, was Sasha's missing shell bracelet.

‘Two monsters must accompany us on this quest,’ said Balfour. ‘I’ve chosen Thaddeus and Black’guard. Thaddeus has the gift of flight, which may prove helpful on our journey to The Great Black Sea. Black’guard is a great fighter, and his Sixth Sense is highly developed. He knows the scent of the Kidwink we seek. He stands the best chance of locating The Door To The Dead behind which Billy Benson is held captive.’

Thaddeus and Black’guard appeared out of the darkness and took up positions on each side of Balfour. They lowered their heads in a kind of nod to the great monster of the fields.

Sasha had to know. Something stronger than fear prompted her to ask. ‘You said Billy’s still alive. He’s your *evidence*. You want us to rescue him, to prove to children that monsters *do* exist. But’, she hesitated, ‘We’re just kids. How do you expect us to do that?’

Without hesitating, Balfour responded. ‘You’ll just need to use your imaginations.’

Chapter Eleven

Crossing the Causeway

‘Mirknight is upon us. As The Majuscules dictate, we have the Creators of the three Orders. Amongst them is ‘The Imaginer’. Bordercrossers, Wishfulfillers, Outlanders, summon all your fearful powers to open The Causeway to The Dreamholes. We will save Billy Benson! We will save the imaginations of children everywhere! And we will save The Monstocracy!’ Balfour chanted.

The eyes that filled the forest inched toward Balfour, Black’guard, Thaddeus and the children. The closer they came, the more Sasha could make out their hideous forms. None of the monsters spoke, nor did they moan or howl or shriek. They crept in complete silence, a silence which carried with it, a dreadful foreboding.

Sasha felt fear moving in her like a beast, like a live animal snared in the headlights. In fact, *fear* was no longer the best word to describe how she felt. It was more like *terror*.

The feeling swelled inside her body until it grew so huge she thought she would burst. And then she did ...with a scream that sent shivers down her own spine.

‘No!’ The word howled through her body, like a haunted breath.

Sasha felt Eliza’s hand clamped inside hers. She felt Jack’s arm brushing up against her. When she stopped to breathe, a new noise filled her ears. The encroaching monsters had found *their* voices.

The silence was replaced with a cacophony of evil sounds. Growling and snarling. Screeching and shrieking that tore through the darkness. Moaning and howling noises that made Sasha feel like death itself was about to pounce on them.

Sasha screamed. This time she was joined by Eliza, and Jack. But the three of them were drowned out by the monsters only metres away.

She thought she heard her mother and father calling her name above the din. The cry came floating towards her through the leaves, as if in a dream. And could she hear Ransom barking away in the distance?

Within seconds, a great storm began to brew. The wind picked up. It sent sticks and leaves whipping against her bare calves, but Sasha was too numbed by fear to feel her legs stinging.

As the storm intensified, so did Balfour's stature. The monster of the fields reached into the air with her hands. She looked ready to claw down the stars. Then she opened her mouth and the great expanse of her throat filled with noise.

Balfour roared a single deafening roar that tore open the rainforest. It was a roar, so pure and powerful, it rendered everything else non-existent for a few moments.

The canopy of trees fell away to reveal a sky smothered in low purple clouds. Blinding flashes of light flew in every direction.

The wind blew Sasha off her feet. She instinctively reached out for Eliza... or Jack. It was no use. They were being swept away too, as were Balfour, Black'guard and Thaddeus.

Up, up, up they went – the three children and the three monsters – past the tops of the trees, above the farms and the houses. They cut through the clouds at break-neck speed, making a near-vertical ascent. Sasha kicked and screamed, as did Eliza and Jack, but their efforts were futile.

As they flew towards the stars, Sasha couldn't help but feel that each star twinkled at them in a menacing way. And then there was the moon. As she came

almost level with it, she could have sworn its upturned fingernail of light smiled a wicked smile back at her.

We must be travelling through The Causeway, thought Sasha.

They were carried along not only by a great wind, but a noise. The noise was like that of a choir, singing a low lullaby. It filled Sasha with a strange sense of calm, and it must have done the same for Eliza and Jack, for no one yelled or screamed, or fought against the magnetic pull of The Dreamholes.

The lullaby and the wind sucked them into a tunnel made of swirling shadows – blues and reds and purples. The colours were achingly beautiful, and terrifying, at the same time. They were certainly enough to distract Sasha, momentarily, from what lay just ahead.

But she would see it soon enough.

Directly in Sasha's path, was an enormous mouth carved into a face of stone. The face looked like that of a skeleton's. So too, did its mouth, except the teeth were oversized and pointed at their tips.

Was this the entrance to The Dreamholes?

Sasha thought of her mother's words. She'd said them only this morning, but now that moment seemed like weeks ago.

There's always a way to change things. Nothing's set in stone.

Right now, it seemed, nothing could be further from the truth. Her future was literally set in stone.

They were traveling at such speed, they'd all be flung against the stone face and killed. There was no way to stop. Sasha's feet were just metres from rocks.

She held her breath and screwed her eyes tight, preparing for the impact, preparing for everything to end.

A couple of seconds passed. There was no impact. There was no pain. Sasha opened her eyes in time to see two rows of gigantic incisor teeth, parting to allow safe passage into the mouth.

It was as if everything had been reversed. The incredible speed at which they had been traveling, slowed to nothing. It was as if now, they were suspended, not only in space, but in time.

Just as they were about to be swallowed, Sasha opened her own mouth... to scream. But nothing came out.

Then, everything went pitch black.

End of Book One



A

B

Balfour A *Bordercrosser*, whose name means ‘of the fields’, and whose *Creator* is Archie Summers, ‘*The Imaginer*’. As Archie’s monster, she inherits some of his extraordinary imaginative powers, and uses these to devise a plan to save *The Monstocracy*.

Batterfanged / Batter Fangs A complimentary term, used to indicate that a monster is a messy eater or lacking in manners.

Black’guard Another *Bordercrosser* created by ‘*The Imaginer*’. His name means ‘a great fighter’ and he is one of the monsters chosen by Balfour to accompany her on the quest with ‘*The Imaginer*’ to save *The Monstocracy*.

Blood Moon The coloured moon in each of the Lands of *The Dreamholes*. These moons glow with the different colours that make up blood. In *The Cavellands* it is

blue, in *The Wastelands* it is red, and in *The Darklands* it is purple. Monsters sleep while it is in the sky for this is when their powers are weakest.

Bordercrossers The first *Order* of Monsters, who live by the *Creed* of MIND and MAGIC. They are wise and imaginative. They are feared by the other *Mobs* because of the powers of their minds, and their ability to think creatively and make magic.

The Bordercrossers are the only order that have a society with any sort of organization, system of rules or communal living. Although they cannot read, they have an oral tradition which has kept the stories of monster legend alive within their Order. Bordercrossers have *Creators* who, above all, tend to be imaginative.

Breach A *Breach* occurs when a monster breaks one of the *Creeds*. This may result in other monsters turning on that monster, even if they belong to the same *Order*.

C

Call The noise made by a monster to announce itself, defend its territory, send a warning or frighten children. It can vary from a howl to a shriek or a roar, for example, depending on the monster. Although to children, Calls may sound similar, each Call is as individual to a monster, as a voice is to a human being.

Causeway, the This is the pathway that connects *The Kingdom of Children* to *The Dreamholes*, and monsters travel via it when entering or exiting their homeland.

Children are unable to travel The Causeway, except in accordance with monster legend, in rare cases involving *'The Imaginer'* or *The Eunan Tide*.

Cavelands, the The land or territory inhabited by the *Bordercrossers*. It is so named because key features of its landscape are cave-like. These include The Troglodyte Towers, The Cave of Mind and Magic, and The Catacombs. *See map*.

Creator A child becomes a Creator when he or she reaches the *Fear Threshold* and gives the monster the *Heart quakes*. Essentially, a Creator imagines the monster into being in *The Kingdom of Children*. One child may be the Creator for more than one monster, but any monster can only have one Creator. Many children are not Creators even though they may experience some fear of monsters. This is because they must have very high levels of fear to reach the Fear Threshold.

Creed A system of beliefs. Some Creeds are common to all monsters, while others apply specifically to each *Order*.

D

Darklands, the The land or territory inhabited by the *Outlanders*. It is so named because it is home to *The Great Black Sea*. Its landscape is dominated by numerous

water features including The Moat of Quicksand, The Mires, The Seven Lochs and The Glacial Ranges. *See map.*

Darklight hours The darker hours of the night, when monsters are more active. In *The Dreamholes*, this is when the *Blood Moon* is in the sky. In *The Kingdom of Children*, this is the time when there is enough darkness to allow monsters to *Hum*.

Daylight hours The lighter hours of the day, when monsters are less active. In *The Dreamholes*, this is when the *Milk Moon* is in the sky. In *The Kingdom of Children*, this is when the sun is in the sky, and in these hours monsters are holed up in *Soul-cases*, where they are rendered inactive and powerless, with the exception of the ability to dream.

Daymare The nightmares monsters have. These often involve scenarios such as being banished to *The Great Black Sea*, or being trapped either in *The Dreamholes* or in *The Kingdom of Children* indefinitely with no means of returning to the other world.

Dog whisper The type of whispers monsters make. Dog whispers are very low, almost like a growl, and louder than human whispers.

Door To The Dead, the Monsters and the children they have eaten are banished to the depths of *The Great Black Sea* via this door.

Dreamholes, the The homeland of monsters. It is divided into three territories, *The Cavellands*, *The Wastelands* and *The Darklands*, the respective homes of *Bordercrossers*, *Wishfulfillers* and *Outlanders*. Monsters live out most of their lives here, spending only around ten years out of every one hundred years in *The Kingdom of Children*.

Dum Dums When a child loses the powers of their imaginations, and thus the ability to create monsters, they are said to have the Dum Dums. (Also known as *Over Empty*) This usually occurs in early adolescence, but with the imaginations of children shrinking, it is setting in much earlier, in some cases as young as seven or eight. Generally speaking, nearly all adults have the Dum Dums, except for a rare few whose imaginations remain vivid and unchecked.

E

Earbite When a human manages to hear the noises made by a monster. Contrary to some beliefs, monsters are creatures of stealth, and are very good at sneaking about silently when they do not wish to make their presence known. Monsters can only be heard by humans who do not have the *Dum Dums*.

Eclipse Any eclipse, be it solar or lunar, is an important event to monsters in *The Kingdom of Children*. Solar eclipses are rare and may allow only a brief period for monsters to escape their *Soul-cases* during the *Daylight hours*, however lunar eclipses occur more often and may see monsters partying for hours until the dawn.

Eunan Tide, the A ten thousand year flood recounted in monster legend. Although monsters have exceptional memories, and the ability to recall events, names and places over thousands of years of travel between *The Dreamholes* and *The Kingdom of Children*, their memories start to fade after several thousand years. This means that no monster can recall the events of the last Eunan Tide. Monster legend states that when The Kingdom of Children is plunged into darkness and evil rules, an enormous tide will sweep across *The Great Black Sea*. This will unleash a great flood and with it, the most evil Outlanders from the depths of The Great Black Sea. *The Causeway* will burst its banks and monsters of every kind will enter The Kingdom of Children en masse.

Eyebite When a human manages to get a glimpse of a monster in the dark. Of course, only humans who do not have the *Dum Dums* are capable of Eyebites. To those with the Dum Dums, monsters are invisible.

F

Fear-full When a monster's *Creator* has frequent and strong feelings of fear about their monster, the monster is said to be *Fear-full*, and as such, is very powerful.

Fear-pinched When a monster's *Creator* grows less fearful of her monster, over time that monster becomes Fear-pinched and its powers start to weaken. A Fear-pinched monster can become desperate and when it has the energy, it will crop up at

every occasion, trying to frighten its Creator. Although monsters need only fear to survive, and not food and water, some desperate Fear-pinched monsters try eating food, raiding refrigerators or fields of crops. *Outlanders* occasionally kill animals to eat and in the worse case, swallow whole children alive in a futile bid to spend more time in *The Kingdom of Children*.

Fear Stones Three stones of monster legend. There is one hidden in each of the three lands of *The Dreamholes*. Their whereabouts are determined by *The Three Riddles* which are written in the Cave of Mind and Magic. Each Fear Stone is activated by a different Creator holding it to his or her heart, whereupon it will reveal the Creator's greatest fears in terrifying detail. It can then be passed to a monster, to enhance that monster's powers. The third Fear Stone is the most powerful and also has the ability to return children to The Kingdom of Children, but its powers can only be released by 'The Imaginer'.

Fear Threshold The very high level of fear that a child must experience when thinking about a monster, in order to give that monster the *Heart quakes*.

Felf When a monster breaks wind, they are said to Felf. Imagine the smell of rotten egg-gas mixed with raw sewerage, vomit and an animal that's been dead for at least a week, and you'll have some idea of the intensity and disgusting nature of a Felf. Even humans, who have a poorly developed sense of smell compared to monsters, can smell a Felf at a distance of fifty metres away.

Feodore The *Outlander* that eats Billy Benson.

Fubbery Generally used in the following way, ‘That is a load of *Fubbery!*’, meaning that it is not to be believed. Just as monsters can sense fear, they also have a keen ability to sense lies.

Fuzzle To make a lot of fuss about all they have done, when in fact, the monster has done very little.

G

Giggle trots When a monster should be keeping quiet, but finds it difficult to stop laughing, they are said to have a case of the Giggle trots. This behaviour is most commonly observed in *Wishfulfillers*.

Goosebump breath The fear that humans give off which is detectable by monsters’ Sixth Sense. This term is slightly misleading as it is not just the breath that monsters sense. They detect fear emanating from every hair and every pore on the skin, and even from deep down in the blood and bones of a person.

Great Black Sea, The A vast and treacherous sea of black waters which lies at the very edge of *The Dreamholes* in the furthest reaches of *The Darklands*. When a monster eats a child, it is banished for eternity to its depths, which constitutes death for that monster. The child who was stolen from *The Kingdom of Children* is also

trapped here. The sea is patrolled by one of the most feared monsters in The Dreamholes, *Molloch*, the five-headed sea monster. *See map.*

Grogan A monster burp. This is naturally much louder and more stinky than a human burp.

Guardian of The Great Black Sea This role is the most prestigious and powerful an *Outlander* can hold. It is decided upon approximately once every ten years. When the current Guardian experiences the *Heart quakes* and is transported to *The Kingdom of Children*, the remaining Outlanders fight to take on this role. This fighting is ferocious and can last for days until a victor establishes itself as the new Guardian.

H

Heart quakes When a monster is brought to life in *The Kingdom of Children*, they are said to have the *Heart quakes*. The monster will begin to feel these in *The Dreamholes* as a rapidly beating heart and / or the heart occasionally missing a beat. (This same feeling is often experienced at the same time by the child who is their *Creator*). Then the monster is transported via *The Causeway* to The Kingdom of Children. As it travels through The Causeway, the monster will alter its form and identity, but not its mob, to arrive in The Kingdom of Children as the monster imagined by its Creator.

Hum When there is sufficient darkness, the monster's powers are returned. In The Kingdom of Children, when it leaves its *Soul-case* and becomes active, it is said to *Hum*. The monster can then engage in monster activities such as *Night tripping*, *Swalloking*, *Shimshanking*, *Monsterring*, *Ruc'rumpusing* or *Pelfing*. Although the word Hum suggests a noise, monsters do not make a humming noise. The noises we hear are when they *Dog whisper*, *Felf*, clumsily step on or break things, or make one of their own specific monster *Calls*.

I

Imaginer, the The child who is the *Creator* of a very large number of monsters. This child will have a tendency for very high levels of fear, especially toward monsters. In order to have developed such levels of fear, this child will possess an extraordinary imagination. 'The Imaginer' is always a Creator of *Bordercrossers*. An Imaginer is a very rare type of child, the likes of which generally tend to crop up only about once every century.

Inkle To see in the dark. All monsters have this ability to lesser and greater degrees.

J

Ja'boogering When monsters snore, they are said to Ja'booger. A monster's snore is quite similar to a human's – it is just much louder and far more disgusting.

K

Kidwinks An affectionate term that monsters use for children.

Kingdom of Children, the The term monsters use for planet earth.

L

Lollock To lounge or laze around. This is a very common past time for monsters of all *Orders*.

M

Majuscules, the Monster lore, which includes the *Creeds* and monster legend.

Milk Moon This is the counterpart to the *Blood Moon* found in *The Dreamholes*. It is similar to the moon observed from earth. It can be white, opaque, or at other times yellow, but the light it casts is strong. When it is in the sky, monsters are at their weakest and tend to sleep.

Minuscules The small creatures that inhabit *The Dreamholes* along with monsters. In *The Cavellands*, these tend to be creatures similar to slugs, worms, beetles, moths and cockroaches. In *The Wastelands*, these include snakes, spiders, and locust-like insects. In *The Darklands*, they are more adapted to wetter climates, and include eels, amphibians such as toad-like creatures, and crabs and fish and squid of different sizes and unusual forms.

Mirknight The darkest hour of the night. This tends to fall somewhere between midnight and dawn. It is the time when monsters' powers are greatest, and when the greatest numbers of monsters emerge from their *Soul-cases* in *The Kingdom of Children*.

Mob Another term for *Order*.

Molloch The *Guardian of The Great Black Sea*. Molloch is a much feared, five-headed monster of the sea.

Monsterful Absolutely amazing or wonderful

Monsterring To create fear in the hearts and minds of children. Different monsters will have their preferred ways of Monsterring. This might include lurking around houses and bedrooms when children are going off to sleep, making strange noises and Calls in the dark, especially those that sound like the wind or wild animals, teasing children with shadows made on walls and windows by playing with curtains and branches of trees, and cunningly moving objects around so that children cannot find them.

Monstocracy The entire population of monsters, which at any point will be distributed between *The Dreamholes* and *The Kingdom of Children*. It can also refer to the social organization (or lack of organization) of monsters.

Mook (Also **Sign of Muster**) This is to announce a *Muster*. The monster who calls the Muster makes the sign by drawing two intersecting circles. Normally these are traced onto the earth, carved into a surface or painted onto rock. The method for drawing these is important, and involves the right circle being drawn with the left appendage, and the left circle being drawn with the right appendage. These circles are thought to symbolize the two worlds that monsters inhabit.

Moon-blink When the moon comes out from behind the clouds. Monsters must be wary of *Moon-blinks* on cloudy nights, because the light of the moon can reduce their powers.

Muster When a group of monsters gather for a specific purpose. By nature, monsters are rather solitary creatures. The practice of calling a Muster is normally found among *Bordercrossers*, the most sociable and organized of the Orders. The average *Bordercrosser* might attend one or two Musters a year, generally to celebrate an *Eclipse*, or more rarely, to discuss some issue affecting their *Mob*.

N

Night of No Moon When the moon cannot be seen in the sky.

Night tripping This occurs in *The Kingdom of Children* when monsters leave their *Soul-cases* and go out exploring their surroundings in the *Darklight hours*.

Nooning hour The brightest hour of the day. It is the safest time of the day for humans, the time when all monsters have retreated into their *Soul-cases*.

O

Order Also *Mob*. There are three different Orders of monsters which make up the *Monstocracy*, each with their own *Creed*. These are the *Bordercrossers*, the *Wishfulfillers* and the *Outlanders*.

Outlanders The third and most primitive *Order* of monsters, who live by the *Creed* of MURDER and MUTILATION. They are ruthless and evil, and are feared by the other *Mobs*. They do the darkest of deeds and have been known to cause death, dismemberment, destruction and disease without even the slightest shred of remorse. Outlanders have *Creators* who tend to be, above all, aggressive.

Over empty Another term for the *Dum Dums*.

P

Pelf Not to be confused with *Felf*, it is the term used when a monster hides or secretly acquires the belongings of humans for their own use. This is most common among the *Wishfulfillers* who can get up to mischief hiding anything from socks to keys. They have a weakness for luxury items to adorn themselves, especially those which glitter or shine, and have been known to acquire jewellery, as well as satin sheets and silk dressing gowns from washing lines.

Poultice Small pouch filled with Miniscules, which has magical powers. There is a healing poultice which is worn against wounds in order to speed up their healing. There is also a poultice that feeds on the fear of a child in order to mask the child's *Goosebump breath*.

R

Riddles, the Three These form part of monster legend. Because monsters are unable to read, these can only be read by '*The Imaginer*' when they are illuminated at *Mirknight* in The Cave of Mind and Magic. Solving these riddles offers a clue to where each *Fear Stone* is located.

Ruc'rumpusing To celebrate or party. This is most often done when there is an *Eclipse*, and involves dancing, games, singing, and much child-like behaviour such as showing off by climbing trees, doing back flips, juggling or seeing who can make the loudest Call. This is normally followed by much *Ja'boogering*.

S

Senses Monsters have five extra senses. These are

Sixth Sense, The Sense of Fear – This detects fear (*Goosebump breath*) emanating from the bodies and minds of people, and which is generally strongest from children.

Seventh Sense, The Sense of Sighlen – This detects the inaudible vibrations made by a *Sighlen*, and indicates that monsters are on the move. It is marked by an eerie stillness, as all other creatures tend to become still at this point.

Eighth Sense, The Sense of Thudder – This detects that a monster or monsters are very close by and is marked by increases in movements and vibrations.

Ninth Sense, The Sense of Death – This detects that a monster has swallowed a child and is being transported back to *The Dreamholes* to meet its death in the depths of *The Great Black Sea*.

Tenth Sense, The Eunan Sense – This sense is rarely used as it detects the one thousand year tide known as *The Eunan Tide*.

Sighlen This is made to initiate an *Assembly*, and is picked up by a monster's *Seventh Sense, the Sense of Sighlen*. A *sighlen* cannot be heard, and instead, is sent and felt as a series of vibrations from deep within a monster's being. A *Sighlen* is often answered by other monsters with their own *Sighlen*. When a *Sighlen* occurs in *The Kingdom of Children*, it causes a phenomenon where all other creatures tend to fall silent.

Sign of Muster (also Mook) This is to announce a *Muster*. The monster who calls the *Assembly* makes the sign by drawing two intersecting circles. Normally these are traced onto the earth, carved into a surface or painted onto rock. The method for drawing these is important, and involves the right circle being drawn with the left appendage, and the left circle being drawn with the right appendage. These circles are thought to symbolize the two worlds that monsters inhabit.

Sign of Monsterhood Often made at a *Muster*, or when encountering other monsters or entering new territory as a sign of coming in peace. It involves the building of a rough cairn made from rocks or similar material .

Snirp When a monster's *Creator* falls victim to the *DumDums*, the monster snirps and returns via *The Causeway* to *The Dreamholes*, where it is likely to remain for the following ten years or so until it next experiences the *Heart quakes*.

Soul-case The object that houses the soul of the monster in *The Kingdom of Children*. Monsters inhabit these in the *Daylight hours* or when there is too much artificial light in the *Darklight hours* for them to *Hum*. When a monster enters a soul-case, it essentially disappears from view and is rendered powerless until sufficient darkness returns. Being creatures of habit, monsters tend to return to the same *Soul-case* every day, although it is not unheard of for them to swap around. Monster legend says that on very rare occasions a monster can inhabit a living creature, but this is only possible with extreme cunning, and involves dark practices generally only employed by *Outlanders*.

T

Thaddeus A *Bordercrosser* created by 'The Imaginer'. She is one of two *Bordercrossers* chosen by Balfour to accompany her on the quest to save *The Monstocracy*.

Thunder The movements and vibrations that indicate that monsters are close by.

Tooth music The noise that people or monsters make when they grind their teeth in their sleep. In the case of monsters, this noise can be incredibly loud.

Trinkle To eavesdrop or spy on humans or other monsters. Like *Lollocking*, this is in a monster's nature.

W

Wastelands, the The land or territory inhabited by *Wishfulfillers*. It tends to be dominated by vast areas of land which have been neglected or deliberately vandalized by *Wishfulfillers*, often through fire-lighting or demolishing of trees, resulting in features such as The Dead Forest, The Valley of Extinction, The Burnt Plains and The Salt Pans. *See map.*

Wishfulfillers The second *Order* of monsters, who live by the *Creed* of MISCHIEF and MAYHEM. They have a dislike for authority, a love of mindless pranks, and they have very bad manners. They are known for their stubbornness and at times, lack of brains, as well as their chaotic, child-like and decadent behaviours. Wishfulfillers have *Creators* who tend to be, above all, mischievous.

The Monster Chronicles, Book 2: The Dreamholes

- 1 Troglodyte Towers, Tooth Music and Ja'boogering
- 2 Imagining the Bridge of Rune
- 3 The Cave of Mind and Magic
- 4 The Three Riddles for the Three Fear Stones
- 5 A History Lesson Worth Remembering
- 6 The Narrowest Corridor in the Catacombs
- 7 'Out Snuffs the Light'
- 8 The First Fear Stone
- 9 Escape from the Great Black Sea
- 10 When a Monster Loses its Head
- 11 A Little More Magic
- 12 The Wishfulfiller's Moon
- 13 Don't Wake the Monsters
- 14 Descent into the Valley of Extinction
- 15 What Billy Wished He'd Never Seen
- 16 Eliza's Greatest Fear
- 17 Inside the Mouth of a Monster
- 18 The Sunken Sky
- 19 'Life in the Heart of Decay'
- 20 The Second Fear Stone
- 21 To The Darklands

The Monster Chronicles, Book 3: The Door To The Dead

- 1 A Change of Plan
 - 2 Jack's Greatest Fear
 - 3 The Journey to the Great Black Sea
 - 4 To Cross the Moat of Quicksand
 - 5 The Many Mouths of Molloch
 - 6 Clinging to Hope
 - 7 The Door to the Dead
 - 8 The Third Fear Stone
 - 9 Sasha's Greatest Fear
 - 10 Before the Blood Moon Sets
 - 11 Return to the Kingdom of Children
- Epilogue