

DARKMOUTH

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DARKMOUTH

SHANE HEGARTY



Illustrated by James de la Rue



HarperCollins *Children's Books*

For Maeve, who made the adventure possible.



MOUTH



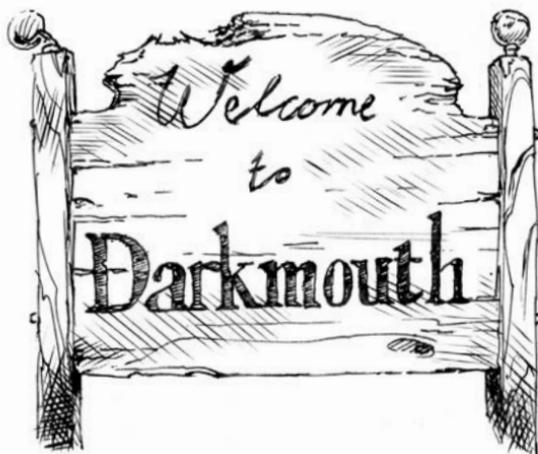


The town of Darkmouth appears on few maps because very few people want to find it. When it is marked on one, its location is always wrong. It'll be a bit north of where it's supposed to be, or a bit south. A little left or a little right. A bit off.

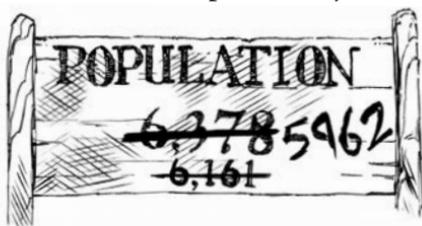
Always.

Which means that visitors to Darkmouth invariably arrive having taken a wrong turn, soon convinced they'll reach only a dead end. They drive through a canopy of trees, whose branches reach from either side to clasp ever tighter overhead, becoming thicker with every mile until the dappled light is choked off and the road is dark even on the brightest of days. Then, just as the wood is almost scraping the paint from their car, and it seems that the road itself is going to be suffocated, the visitors travel through a short tunnel and emerge on to a roundabout filled with blossoming flowers

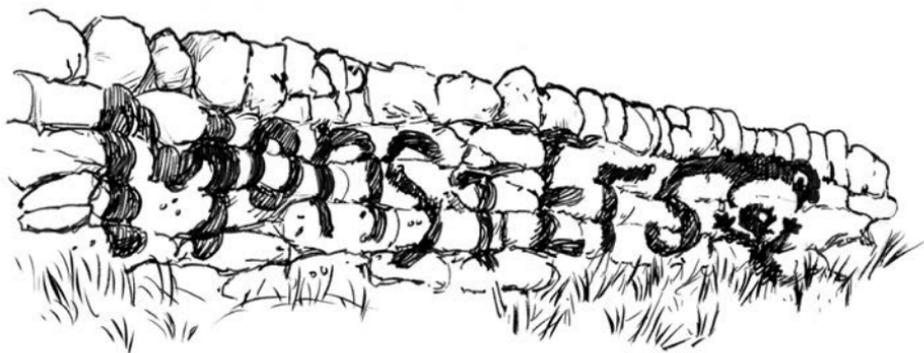
and featuring a sign that reads:



The next line has been updated by hand a couple of times:



On a wall lining the road there is large striking graffiti. It says only this:



Except the last S forms a serpent, with mouth wide and teeth jagged. Visitors peer at it and wonder, *Is that a...? Could it be a...?*

Yes, that snake really is swallowing a child.

The travellers – by now a bit desperate in their search – have finally reached Darkmouth. Their next thought is this: *Let's get out of here.*

So they go right round the roundabout and head back the way they came. Which is a shame, because if they were to stay they would realise that Darkmouth is actually quite a nice little place. It has a colourful little ice-cream shop on the harbour, benches dotted along the strand, picnic tables and fun climbing frames for the kids.

And no one has been eaten by a monster for some time.

In fact, they aren't really monsters at all. They might *look* monstrous, and the locals might refer to them as monsters, but, strictly speaking, they are Legends. Myths. Fables. They once shared the Earth with humans, only to grow envious, then violent, so that a war raged through the world's Blighted Villages for centuries.

Now Darkmouth is the last of these Blighted Villages. And Legends show up only occasionally.

This morning just happens to be one of those occasions.

2

Thinking back on it all later, Finn identified that morning as the time when things began to go badly wrong.

Thinking on it a little bit *more*, he realised he could identify just about any morning of his first twelve years as when things began to go wrong. At the time, though, he wasn't doing much thinking. Instead, he was running. As hard as he could. In a clanking armoured suit and heavy helmet. In the rain. Away from a Minotaur.

Five minutes earlier, everything had *seemed* to be going a bit more to plan, even if Finn wasn't entirely sure what that plan was.

Then it had been Finn doing the chasing, carrying a Desiccator, a fat silver rifle with a cylinder hanging in front of the trigger. He was the Hunter, lumbering through the maze of Darkmouth's backstreets in a black helmet and fighting suit – small dull squares of

metal knitted together clumsily – so that when he moved it sounded like a bag of forks falling downstairs.



It was oversized because his parents had told him he should leave room to grow into it. It rattled because he had made it himself.

From somewhere in the near distance, about two laneways away, he had heard the sound of glass being mashed into stone, or maybe stone being pounded into glass. Either way, it was followed by the scream of a car alarm and the even louder scream of a person.

Darkmouth was a town of dead ends and blind alleys, with high walls that were lined with broken glass, sharp stones and blades. The layout was designed to confuse Legends, block their progress, shepherd them towards dead ends. But Finn knew where to go.

He followed the Legend's dusty trail, emerging on to Broken Road, Darkmouth's main street, where vehicles had screeched to a halt at wrong angles, and those townspeople who hadn't scarpered were cowering in still-closed shop doorways.



And at the top of the street, glancing over its shoulder, was the Minotaur. It was part human, part bull, all terrifying. Finn's heart skipped a beat, hammered three more in quick succession. He took a shuddering breath. He had spent his childhood looking at drawings of such creatures, which were always depicted as mighty, almost noble, Legends. Seeing one



in the flesh, Finn realised they had captured its strength, but had

not really conveyed any sense of just how rabid it looked.

From where its jutting, crooked horns met its great bull's head, it was covered in the mangy hair of a mongrel. As it looked back, slobber dripped from its great teeth

and ran through the contours of muscles bulging along its back, past its waist down to patches of skin as cracked as baked clay. It stood on two legs that tapered down to menacing claws instead of hooves.

The Minotaur was worse than Finn had ever imagined it could be. And he had imagined it to be pretty bad.

It was looking straight at him.

He ducked into a doorway. A woman was already hiding there, her back pressed against the door, a dog pulled close. Her face was tight with fear.

“Don’t worry, Mrs Bright,” Finn told her, his voice muffled by the helmet. “You and Yappy will soon be safe, won’t you, boy?” He petted the dog, a basset hound, with his free hand. It sneezed on him.

The woman nodded with unconvincing gratitude, then paused. “Where’s your father, young man? Shouldn’t he be—?”

There was a smash further up the street. The Minotaur had disappeared round the turn at the top of Broken Road. Finn took another deep breath and moved on after it.

From the other side of a wall, there was a thud so forceful it sent a shudder from Finn’s feet to his brain, which interpreted it as a signal to run screaming in the opposite direction.

But Finn didn't run. He had trained for this. He had been born into it. He knew what was expected of him, what he needed to do. Besides, if he ran now, his dad would be disappointed in him. Again.

I'll be there when you need me, Finn's father had told him that morning.

Pressing a radio button on the side of his helmet, Finn whispered, "Dad? Are you there?"

The only response was the uncaring crackle of static.

A dark, looming hulk crossed an intersecting laneway, tearing along its narrow walls. Finn raised his Desiccator and followed. At the corner, he crouched and peered round. The Minotaur had paused no more than twenty metres away. Its great shoulders heaved under angry, growling breaths as it figured out which way to go next.

It was all up to Finn now. He recalled his training. Focused on what he had been taught. Thought about his father's expert words. Carefully, he aimed his stocky silver weapon, steadied himself, exhaled.

At that exact moment, the Minotaur turned to face him, its eyes like black pools gouged beneath scarred horns. Froth dripped from chipped and jagged tusks. For a second, Finn was distracted by the way drool, blood and rain clung to a crystal ring wedged through the Legend's nose.



The Minotaur roared. Finn squeezed the trigger.

The force of the shot sent Finn tripping backwards. A sparkling, spinning blue ball flew from the barrel of the Desiccator, unfurling into a glowing net as it was propelled towards where the Minotaur had stood only a moment before... and wrapped itself round a parked car.

Finn groaned.

With a flash and a stifled *whoop*, half the car collapsed in on itself with the anguished scrunch of a ton of metal being sucked into a shape no bigger than a soda can.

Finn looked for the Minotaur. It was gone.

He pressed his radio switch. "Erm, Dad?"

Still nothing.

He paused, calmed his babbling mind as much as he could and moved off again through the laneways. Using the ancient methods handed down to him, Finn began carefully tracking the trail of the Minotaur.

He needn't have bothered. The Minotaur got to him first.

3

Naturally, Finn fled.

As he did, several thoughts went through his head, mainly to do with whether he should turn and shoot, or find a hiding spot, or whether he had time to stop and fling aside his clattering armour.

For its part, as it chased him, the Minotaur had only a single thought in its head. Finn was better off not knowing just how many times the word ‘gouge’ featured in it.

Finn ran down the laneway as fast as his rattling fighting suit would allow, his breath hot inside the helmet, his weapon flailing from a strap round his wrist. He spotted a gap and turned into it just before the Minotaur reached him. The creature smashed into a dead end, throwing up a cloud of brick, dust and drool.

Finn pushed on, darting across alleys, stumbling round corners, squeezing through gaps, until it occurred to him that the only sound he could hear above the noise of his

suit was that of his own panting.

With some effort, he persuaded his legs to stop running.

Crouching at a corner, he looked around for any sign of the Minotaur. There was none. He sank down, feeling the rivulets of sweat running down his cheeks, the itchiness of the suit and the thump of his heart in his chest.

There was a rustle close by. The briefest flicker of a shadow.

“Dad?”

The Minotaur burst through a wall in front of Finn, collapsing with dreadful force into the laneway, its horns scraping and sparking off the concrete, before righting itself and looming over him. Finn raised his Desiccator, but the Minotaur reached out a huge arm and swiped it from his hands.

Backed up against the brick, Finn could taste the deathly sourness of the Minotaur’s breath and see the deep blackness of its mouth. He was briefly mesmerised by the radiance of that fat diamond ring lodged in the Legend’s nose.

Finn tried to think of a way out, of a fighting move his father had taught him, a plan, an escape route, anything other than just giving in to the inevitable pounding thought that he was about to die.



As it poised to strike, the Minotaur still had just one thought in its head, although it had evolved to include repeated use of the word ‘maim’.

If this Legend had been a little less single-minded, however, it might have realised that the sliver of time it took to move in for the kill was long enough for a shadow to pass above it and the boy; for that shadow to grow larger, darker; for it to become solid as it bounded across the creature’s great shoulders and landed behind it.

The Minotaur turned. The armour on this new human shimmered; it was hard to focus on. He seemed to be there yet not there. The figure carried a weapon similar to the boy’s, but larger. And the Minotaur knew instantly who it now faced.

This was not *a* Legend Hunter. This was *the* Legend Hunter.

The Minotaur had moved barely a centimetre in attack before it was struck by the glowing net of the Legend Hunter’s weapon. For the briefest of moments, it was frozen in an all-enveloping web of sparkling blue. Then, with a stifled *whoop*, the Minotaur imploded. All that was left was a solid, hairy sphere no bigger than a tennis ball.



The Legend Hunter remained steady, a thin wisp of blue smoke drifting from the barrel of his weapon. “Bullseye,” he said, popping open his visor to reveal a face as solid as the helmet and an obvious delight at his quip.

Finn picked himself up off the ground and glared at him. “Where *were* you, Dad?”

4

Like other Blighted Villages around the world – with names such as Worldsend, Hellsgate, Bloodrock, Leviatown and Carnage – Darkmouth had been home to generations of Legend Hunters, families who swore to protect the world against the unending attacks from what they called the Infested Side.

Except the attacks did end.

Mostly.

Each year had brought fewer reports of humans captured or killed by Legends – and of Legends captured or killed by Legend Hunters.

In Blighted Village after Blighted Village, the attacks had slowly died out. For the first time in thousands of years, our world appeared sealed off from the realm of Legends. After many generations of war, the Legend Hunters could stand down.

Except for one village. One family.

“You were fine,” said Finn’s dad, breezily. “I had you covered the whole time.”

“That thing almost killed me.”

“You know I would never let that happen.”

“It didn’t feel like that.”

“Look, Finn, don’t be so hard on yourself. You did well. A little loose in parts maybe, but you weren’t exactly chasing after a chicken there. And don’t be so sour. Most twelve-year-olds would die for a chance to run around chasing Legends.”

“Die?” said Finn.

“You know what I mean.”

Finn’s father held his gaze for another moment before giving his son a gentle punch on the arm and picking up the desiccated remains of the Minotaur.

Wearily, Finn unhooked the container from his belt and entered a code into a keypad on its side. The lid hissed open, releasing a small cloud of blue gas and the faint tang of what smelled like orange juice. His father placed the round object in the box and pressed the lid shut. “It’ll have a ball in there,” he said.

Finn shook his head in mild disdain.

“Oh, suit yourself,” said his dad as he grabbed the container and began to walk out of the alley. “Get out of

that gear and I'll drive you to school.”

“School? Seriously? How am I supposed to go to school after that? I'm not going. I'm just not.”

But his dad didn't stop, so Finn reluctantly picked up his Desiccator and started to follow. A glint of light in the rubble caught his eye, a tight curve of crystal lying where the Minotaur had been desiccated. It looked like the diamond that had been in the creature's nose.

Odd.

Finn picked it up and examined its jagged beauty. He began to call after his father, but stopped himself. If he was being forced to go to school after all of that, then he wanted a reward.

He slipped the diamond into his pocket before jogging clumsily on, his suit clattering all the way.

They drove through Darkmouth, their car a large black metal block on wheels, its seats torn out to make room for lines of weapons and tools of various shapes and sizes and sharpness.

There were a few people on the streets now, though most had their heads buried in hoods, their faces down, protecting themselves from the drizzle, looking like the last place on Earth they wanted to be was the last place

on Earth where Legends still invaded. It didn't exactly help their mood that Legends always brought rain with them.

"It's always the same when a gate opens," Finn's dad observed. "At least a small gateway means only a light shower. There was a time when the bigger gateways brought terrible storms. The old stories blamed them on the gods. As if, eh?"

Finn didn't answer. His father tutted. The car swung right.

Before jumping into the passenger seat, Finn had thrown his suit into the rear of the car. On his lap were his schoolbag and his Desiccator. He held the canister in front of his face and gave it a rattle.

"It never ceases to amaze me, that trick," said his father.

Finn felt a spark of sympathy for the creature trapped in there. From the outside, the only evidence that a Desiccator net's victim might once have been something living was the way the exterior of the resulting ball was coated in whatever the creature had been wrapped in originally: fur, scales, skin, leather trousers.

"Doesn't it seem a bit cruel to do this to them, Dad?"

"Maybe you'd prefer to tickle the next Minotaur into

submission. Or pet him and offer him a biscuit. Seriously, Finn.” He glanced across at his son and noticed his scowl. “OK, so this morning didn’t go too perfectly.”

“Neither did the last time,” said Finn, grimacing.

“Yes, but—”

“Or the time before that.”

“My *point*, Finn, is that you are learning,” said his dad. “I was the same when I was your age. Did I ever tell you about the time I—?”

“Yes,” said Finn with a sigh.

“And the day I—?”

“That too. All I *ever* hear about are the great things you did when you were my age. You defeated this Legend. You invented that weapon. Unless you’ve a story that ends with you falling down a toilet or something, you’re not going to make me feel any better right now.”

The car pulled up at the school. Finn didn’t move.

His father shifted a little, the armour of his fighting suit creaking in the car seat.

“It’s not all bad news,” he started.

“How is this not bad?” interrupted Finn, dismay in his voice. “My Completion Ceremony is only a year away, Dad.”

“When did you turn twelve?”

“Two weeks ago.”

“So, the ceremony is eleven and a half months away to be accurate, but plenty of time still.”

“What about this morning – did you not see?” said Finn, shaking his head in disbelief.

“Finn, our family has defended Darkmouth for forty-two generations.”

“Well, I haven’t.”

“But you will,” said his dad. “You’re going to be generation number forty-three.”

“I won’t be ready.”

“Darkmouth is going to be your responsibility.”

“It can’t be,” protested Finn.

“It *has* to be.”

His father let a hush settle in the vehicle before continuing.

“Anyway, the Council of Twelve has been in touch,” he said. “They have good news.”

“Does it have to do with me?” asked Finn.

“No. Well, yes. Kind of.” His father paused. “The Twelve have offered me a place on the Council. Forty-two generations, Finn, and not one of our family has ever been invited to become one of the leaders of the world’s Legend Hunters. Sure, most of the world’s Legend

Hunters are sitting at home getting fat right now, but still, it's a huge thing for us, a big honour, and—"

"Hold on," said Finn. "You'll be on the Council of Twelve?"

"Yes, isn't that excellent?"

"Aren't they based in—?"

"Liechtenstein. Small place with big mountains."

"So, you'll be out of Darkmouth?" asked Finn.

"Yes," said his dad. "Sometimes."

"And me?"

"No."

"Oh great," said Finn, feeling a great weight settling on his shoulders. "You'll be gone and the protection of Darkmouth will be up to—"

"You. Exactly. Won't that be cool?"

Finn stared at him as his brain tried to process that notion.

"It doesn't change anything, Finn," said his father. "Not much anyway. You're about to become the first true Legend Hunter to graduate in years. Darkmouth was always going to become your responsibility at some stage after that. And I won't be going straight away. The Twelve say there'll be a process, some checks."

"What kind of checks?"

His dad shrugged. “I don’t know. Background stuff, subject to confirmation of rule 31, clause 14 of the whatever. You know, paperwork. The Twelve love their paperwork. Anyway, it’s happening.” He cleared his throat. “Just as soon as you become Complete.”

“And what if I’m not ready?”

With a squeak of his fighting suit on the car seat’s leather, his dad turned to look at him directly. “Finn, every Legend Hunter in this family had their Completion on their thirteenth birthday. Every single one, as far back as records go. They could have waited until they were fifteen or seventeen or even nineteen, like weaker families, but they didn’t. So, our family – past, present and future – needs you to be ready. I need you to be ready. This town needs you to be ready. You *will* be ready.”

Finn pushed open the car door and stepped out. “I feel so much better. Thanks, Dad.”

As he swung the door shut, Finn saw his reflection in the window. His hair was damp, his skin flushed. He opened his mouth to protest again about having to go to school, but his father cut him off. “We’ll talk about it later.”

Finn stood at the kerb with his bag slung over his shoulder, listening to the low growl of the car as it drove

away. The drizzle tickled his forehead.

In his pocket, he felt the buzz of his phone. There was a message from his mother.

DEEP BREATHS. LOVE YOU.

He took a deep breath, then another, steeling himself for the next challenge.

School.