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Opening extract from

Darkmouth

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1

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I

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.