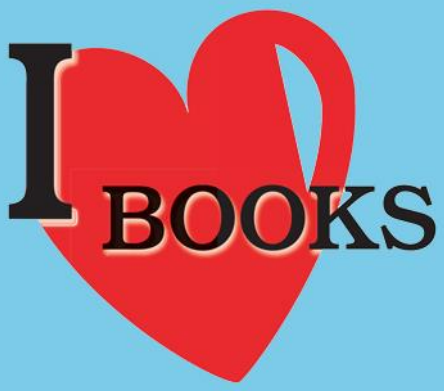


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Opening extract from

Chaos Descends

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Published by

HarperCollins Children's Books

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First published in hardback in Great Britain by HarperCollins *Children's Books* in 2016
HarperCollins *Children's Books* is a division of HarperCollins*Publishers* Ltd,
1 London Bridge Street, London, SE1 9GF

The HarperCollins website address is: www.harpercollins.co.uk

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HB ISBN: 978-0-00-754568-1
TPB ISBN: 978-0-00-816542-0

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Printed and bound in England by Clays Ltd, St Ives plc

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Previously in Darkmouth

Ten months after returning from the Infested Side, Finn still had to be careful where he sneezed.

If he sneezed in the kitchen, the microwave went *ting*.

If he coughed too hard, the television changed channels.

One night he snored so loudly it woke him with a terrible start and the sound of thunder in his ears. He sat upright, calming his breath, convinced he had caused something, somewhere to explode.

Things had, after all, exploded before. *Everything* had exploded. Gateways. Caves. Worlds. People. Finn.

While trying to find his father, Hugo, he had accidentally thrown himself, Emmie and Estravon the Assessor into the Infested Side. There Finn had discovered that he had the ability to *ignite* – to explode with devastating power, sending out a wave of energy

that laid waste to everything around him. Although he had found this out only once he had exploded.

He had been further astonished to find it left him in one piece. More or less. A scar across his chest reminded him of what had happened. As did the occasionally problematic sneezing fit.

So much else had happened on the Infested Side. He had walked with the enemy, blown a giant hole between worlds, found his long-missing grandfather, Niall Blacktongue, become involved in a Legend rebellion and, to the loudest complaints of all, ruined Estravon's best trousers.

He'd done all of this having landed in the right *world*, but three decades too early to find his father. It meant he could add time travel to the list of things he hadn't meant to do.

Yet, despite this, his father had been rescued and the Legends had been defeated at Darkmouth's Cave at the Beginning of the World.

Ten months on, and that same energy occasionally welled inside him, unexpected, uncontrolled, but otherwise all was quiet in Darkmouth.

Finn sat in his classroom, paying little attention to the teacher, looking instead at the empty chair where Emmie

used to sit. With her father, Steve, she had been sent to spy on Finn, but had ended up sharing these adventures with him. When all that was done, she'd had to return to the city with her dad.

Life was quieter without Emmie. He missed her. Not that he'd admit that to her.

Finn stared out of the school window for a while. There wasn't much to see. No Legends. No gateways. Darkmouth had not been attacked by a single Legend since and was becoming just like any other town. His family was in danger of becoming just like every other. And even the Savage twins sitting here in his class, two bad attitudes and one chewed ear between them, had stopped bothering him and instead treated him with as little interest as they did the rest of the kids.

The collapsed section of the cliffs, where the gateway to the Infested Side had been opened and then dramatically closed, was covered now with tall green grass, bringing a sense of new growth following destruction. The people of Darkmouth wondered if their town might join those others around the world that used to be plagued by Legends, but which were now free from that blight for the first time in a thousand years.

Finn's birthday was approaching. His thirteenth. A big

one, especially for an apprentice Legend Hunter like him: it was the age at which he could finally become Complete. That was something Finn had always dreaded. But, as he gazed out of the school window, he let his mind dwell on dangerous questions. Would he now live an ordinary life, free of the responsibility of being a Legend Hunter? Was the war actually over? Was it *this* from now on in? No destiny. No prophecies. Just life. Ordinary, everyday, Legend-free, unexciting life.

He might have dwelled on these questions some more except he had to sneeze.

"Bless you, Finn," said his teacher.

Finn quietly blew through his cheeks, relieved he hadn't set off the school bell.

What he didn't realise was that three rooms away the sprinkler system had burst into life, drenching twenty-five panicked kids, one surprised teacher and two very twitchy class hamsters.



The hotel room was quiet and still, untouched for years by anything but the light that sliced through the torn curtain. Its sheets bleached of colour, a bed stood in the corner. It had not been slept in for a very long time. Over the sink, a thin green line of slime hung from the tap. A chair sat at an awkward angle by the wall; a snuffling silverfish carved a track across its layer of dust.

A thump rattled the room, shook the dust, sent the silverfish scurrying for safety.

There was another louder thud, from the other side of the closed door. With one final crunch, and an accompanying grunt, the door swung inwards, crashing against the corner of a small writing table. In the darkness stood the silhouette of a very large man, his green eyes lit by the strip of daylight, a kilt settling about his knees.

Once he had assessed the room for a few seconds, the

man bent and entered. Beneath a cracked brown leather jacket, the hem of his kilt danced about hairy legs and his metal sporran clanked under the weight of the seven knives slotted along the top of it. He drew a whistling breath through his whiskers, ran his finger along the writing table's dust.

A tiny spider pushed through the grime on his fingertip and leaped towards the carpet.

"This room is perfect," said the man.

He was Douglas, from the Scottish Isle of Teeth. He came from an ancient family of Legend Hunters, whose deeds still echoed through the annals. But Douglas's deeds did not echo. He was unlucky enough to have been born into an age when Legends bothered only one town and one Legend Hunter family. It meant that he was a Half-Hunter, with the blood of a Legend Hunter, but no Legends to fight.

Instead, Douglas was a pastry chef. This way, he at least got to use knives at work.

Every day, Douglas longed to spill the blood of the Infested Side's Legends, to prove himself in battle and earn his place in a line of great warriors. But right now, in this room, he had only one very important question.

"What time is breakfast served?"

A stooped woman shuffled in from the dimly lit hallway, carrying an extremely fluffy yellow towel and some shampoo in tiny plastic bottles. She pushed past Douglas and placed them roughly on the bed. This was Mrs Cross, the hotel's owner, and her name was an appropriate one.

"We haven't had guests in this place for thirty years," she complained, "and as soon as I open again you lot demand a slap-up feed served to you as soon as you wake. Isn't it enough that I brought shower caps?"

She dropped a crumpled plastic hairnet onto the towel.

The Half-Hunter glared at her, decades of pent-up frustration simmering behind his eyes.

"Breakfast is from seven until eight thirty every morning," Mrs Cross sighed. She shuffled back out of the room, grumbling as she went. "If you're even a minute late, you can suck on the towel for all I care."

She pulled the creaking door behind her, until it stopped ajar on the rucked carpet.

Alone in the room, Douglas stood at the bed and, one by one, pulled the knives from his sporran. A short blade. A fat one. Bone-handled. Wooden-handled. Serrated. Smooth. A delicate one that was very useful for cutting apple pies.

He lined them up in a neat row next to the towel, then rummaged further in his sporran and placed a toothbrush alongside the knives.

Behind him, he heard the creak of a floorboard.

"Ah, porter," Douglas said, not looking around, but fishing in his sporran for something else. "You must ha' brought m'bag. You can put it in the corner there."

Douglas pulled a comb from his sporran and added it to the bed's line-up. Behind him, the unseen porter didn't move.

"I said to put it over in the corner. Oh, you'll be wanting a tip, I suppose?" Douglas turned while searching for change. "I coulda just carried the bag up m'self—"

In the shadows of the room, a figure was taking shape, pouring from a floating mouth as if formed by a scream. It filled out between feet and head. What might once have been hair was now a writhing mass of oozing tar. What might once have been a face was now a shifting landscape of scars in which sat eyes fiery with blood. What might once have been human was something even more horrible.

"Is that *you*?" asked Douglas, pushing up his leather sleeves in anticipation of trouble.

In the shadows, the figure remained. Silent. Watchful. Eyes ablaze.

"They said you were dead," said Douglas, the edge of his mouth curling in anticipation of a fight. "But ne'er mind, because it's gonna be a pleasure to send you back to whatever hell you've come from."

The figure held out charred hands, as if in a show of peace. Beneath the depthless black of its hair, those pupils were fixed islands on coursing rivers of blood.

Douglas ducked and grabbed a carving knife, spun while swinging the blade at the figure before him.

The weapon passed uselessly through the phantom.

The horrifying apparition waited until it could see the realisation cross Douglas's face, a look that said: *All the pastry knives in the world wouldnae be enough for this fight.*

Then the phantom struck.

In a brief, desperate bid for safety, Douglas gripped the curtain, tore it from the window, so that a burst of light shocked the room.

The curtain did not help.

Douglas was gone.