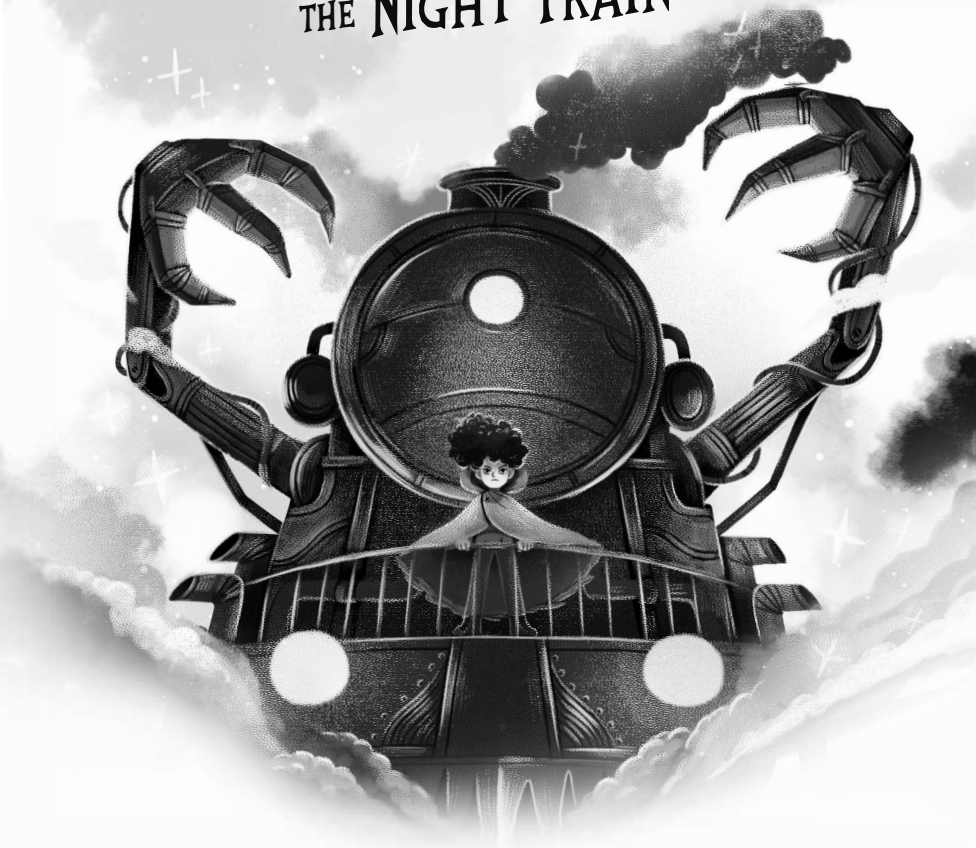
DREAMSTALKERS

THE NIGHT TRAIN



SARAH DRIVER

Farshore

Dark moorland, star-scattered. A wisp – a girl – drifted past a great tor, the rocks damp and iron-cold, even to a dreamer's touch. In the sky, a storm grumbled.

Her favourite dream-creature appeared with the thunder; a creature darker and wilder than night, a patch of deeper dark, with blazing eyes and long, soft fur, and teeth as pointed as daggers. The quiet dark pressed upon her skin, but she felt safe with the dream-creature. A strange thought threaded through her skull. I know I'm dreaming. She knew she could command her own dreamworld. Laughing, she climbed upon the creature's back. Flying across the wild moors, she and the dream-creature were enough to blot out the moon.

She held up her hand, flexing her fingers and marvelling at the power she felt within the dream. I feel like a ghost.

Below them writhed an ocean of ice-tipped grass, a great endless blanket of thistles and gorse and midnight, and Bea recognized the haphazard shapes of Tors dotting the earth.

A dip opened up in the moorland beneath them, like an enormous rabbit burrow. The creature plunged downwards and slipped all the way down the hole.

Beneath the moors a great labyrinth of lamplit burrows ran in all directions. The bones of dead rabbits propped up the walls and made intricate patterns in the flickering light. The girl felt the creature's bones shift, felt it straining against its shape as it sped through the passageways.

Dreamstalking: Essential materials.

Soft-soled dance slippers

Nightmare armour

Scenery-blending shield

Chalk pouch, in case of slime

Earplugs, to guard against malevolent music

A good, sharp blade, inlaid with peridot

A compass (infused with wild magic) to maintain the right-way-upness of things

All-weather aerodynamic suiting, for dreamscape changeability

A heart steeled with courage, and an appetite for adventure.



PART ONE

FIRST SLEEP

ONE
THUNDERHEART

The day after the dreams disappeared, Bea Grimspuddle sat in the eye socket of a dragon skull, draped in a cloak fringed with owl feathers. Her moss-green jumper had been patched so many times that it was nearly a different jumper altogether, and her boots were streaked with so many layers of mud it was hard to tell their original colour. Her tangled curls were pulled into a knot damp with moor-mist. Pip, a small owl who Bea belonged to, heart and soul, sat beside her.

Beneath the skin of the moors below them, the bones of many ancient-ones shaped the hills. In places, whole dragon skulls had unearthed from their graves and sat bleaching in the daylight – though the time of the great dragons had passed. The moors belonged more to the dead than the living, as most places do.

This was Bea's favourite thinking spot. Thea Draper and her cronies wouldn't bother her up here. Other children were afraid of the dragon skulls. To Bea,

they were friends. She didn't care that talking to bones and rocks and owls made her the subject of ridicule. They were better friends than humans.

Dusk fell. Air rushed over Pip's wings as she swooped from her perch next to Bea, extending her talons. Bea tilted her face skyward to watch. If it were possible for thunder to be a hair-colour, an eye-colour, and a temperament, Bea Grimspuddle was a thunder child and as thunder-hearted as the moors she called home.

'I'll keep watch for peregrines, Pip!' she called to the owl.

The dark owl shape swooped towards her prey, and moments later Pip returned to the dragon skull, carrying a limp vole in her talons. Bea lifted her gloved hand. The owl plunged out of the mist and landed on her mistress's knuckles, where she promptly gulped down her meal and grew sleepy, a tail still poking from her beak.

'You know you get too sleepy to fly if you're eating,' said Bea.

In response, Pip's eyes closed. The tail shortened an inch as she managed one more swallow before falling asleep on Bea's hand.

Bea sighed, lifting the owl from her knuckles to her shoulder. She had found Pip as a baby, huddled beneath a particularly eccentric tower of rocks. She and her

mother, Ula, surmised that the fledgling must have been swept across the moor in a storm. That was two years ago. Owl and girl had been inseparable ever since.

Mist settled on her cheeks and in her eyelashes. Thunderheart lore said that mischievous spirits haunted the moors when the mist thickened. But that was the least of Bea's concern.

Every night, she and her mother would spend the time between the first and second sleeps discussing their dreams and all the characters who visited them. Bea then spent the second sleep returning to her dreams for new insights. But last night, they'd had nothing to say. No wisdom or comfort to gain. For her mother's dreams had gone missing last night, too.

Their sleep had been blank.

Bea pressed her face to Pip's feathers and breathed in her reassuring scent. She watched thunderclouds bruise the darkening sky above the moor. A strange, haphazard pile of rocks guarded the hill up ahead; this was the great Tor of Thunderheart, shadowing the gorse: a towering, chaotic assembly of rocks with a jutting overhang near the bottom. Old stories claimed all sorts of things about how the Tors came to keep their watch over the moorland – tales of devils and elves and faeries. In the daytime Bea

believed none of them, at night she believed them all. And she saw them spring to life in her dreams – or she usually did.

Movement snagged the corner of Bea's eye. Just beyond the Tor was the cottage where she lived with her mother, Ula. It sat alone on a ridge above the main settlement.

A shape flickered across the ridge, moving towards her cottage. It paused, surged onwards, a black blot against the grey-green winter moors.

Bea slithered out of the giant dragon's eye socket, thumped on to the ground, and ran towards home. Visitors never called on them. She sprinted through the middle of the settlement, past the great wooden hall and the watchtower and the other cottages, earning herself a few yelled curses and orders to 'Watch where you're rushing, Grimspuddle!'

But she didn't slow down. As she passed the Tor, Bea reached out to brush the cold, damp stone. 'Please, Thunderheart,' she whispered. 'Can you bring my dreams back?'

The mist thickened as it rolled across the moor. Bea pitched forward up the hill, heart thrashing, tearing upwards until she reached the top of the ridge. Pip dug her claws in to maintain her perch. A rippling ghoul peered

in at the cottage window. *Is it a ghost*? thought Bea. *Is it a faerie, come to hex us*? Bea gave an outraged yelp and careened forwards. Her experience traversing the springy moorland meant that the creature didn't detect Bea's advance until she had almost slammed into it.

A face turned towards her, all startle and anxiety. A living face. Bea pulled up short, muttering curses. The face belonged to a girl Bea's own age, with skin pale enough to show blue veins beneath its surface, and hair black and shiny enough to gleam like feathers. Her eyes were rimmed with red, and shielded behind a pair of smeared wire spectacles. She wore a long black oilskin coat, with the hood pulled up.

She was very much not a ghost, and that was almost worse.

Martha Hearthsweep.

'What are *you* doing here?' demanded Bea.

Martha's eyes flashed, wide and damp, making Bea think of deer. 'Why weren't you in Hall?' she whispered. 'Everyone was there, old-ones, young-ones. They're saying no one had a dream last night.'

'No one?' Bea echoed. Her stomach flopped, and a hot queasiness spread through her. This was a bigger problem than she'd thought. Then she wrinkled her

nose as the more likely truth came to her. 'Is this a trick? Did Thea Draper send you?'

Martha had the good grace to look briefly ashamed. 'No, course not! I'm trying to tell you, Bea. There's trouble. A shadow – a something – was seen above your cottage. Some say there's an ill wind.'

Bea scoffed to cover her shock. 'You and your tall tales!'

Martha's face fell. She turned and ran full tilt like a rabbit through the mist, feet gripping rock as she pelted over tussock and down ditch, the leather pouch at her hip bobbing like a misplaced tail.

Bea sagged against the cottage window. She had enough of girls like Martha at the school hall, she didn't want to see her at home as well.

Before Martha disappeared into the fog she turned to look at Bea again. Her shiny black hair swirled around her head like ink spilled in water. Bea felt another unpleasant plunging in her stomach.

Thunder cracked and boomed. The wind gathered strength and slammed into Bea, while rain began to sting her cheeks.

'Come on, Pip,' Bea grumbled, turning towards the cottage. 'This isn't owl weather.'