



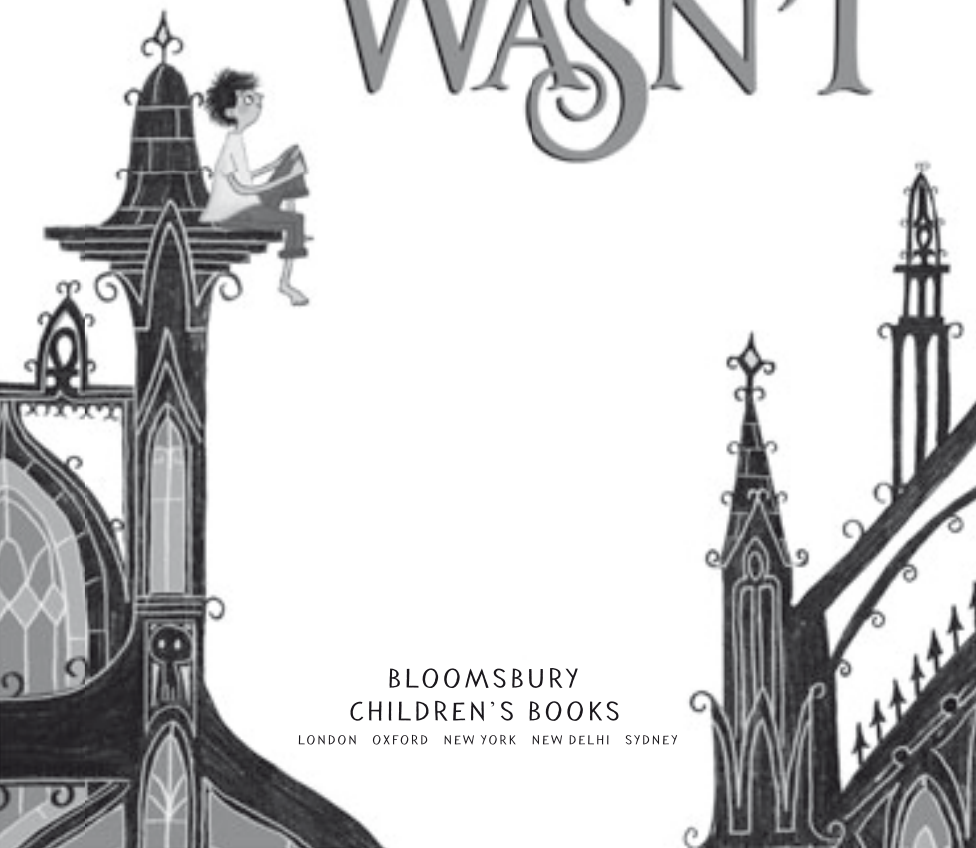
THE MONSTER WHO WASN'T

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It is a well-known fact that fairies are born from a baby's first laugh. What is not as well documented is how monsters come into being.

Monsterkind is divided into three categories. The Great Monsters – identifiable by their huge size – include trolls, ogres, goblins, dragons, abominables and other such monstrosities. The subgenus, Imps, covers all stunted and smaller species – pixies, brownies, leprechauns, sprites, boggarts, gargoyles and so on. And, lastly, of course, there are the Monster Witches: banshees, Baba Yagas, snitches, hags, wyrd sisters (hatched in triplets), and the wet witches like sirens and Jenny Greenteeth.

All species of Monsterkind are born from a human's last sigh, and the vileness of the monster is in direct proportion to the depth of the sigher's regret. Unfulfilled dreams, disappointment and bitterness settle into the human soul like sediment at the bottom of a bottle of vinegar. Once freed, the last sigh grows, turning in the air, solidifying into a dark, resentful shape: as tough as loneliness, hard enough to cut a diamond in two, but as supple as a lie.

After absorbing every bit of misery and loss in a room, a released sigh makes its way to The Hole, the native country of

monsters, hidden in dark caverns of filth. Upon its arrival, the Ogre King breathes on it to begin the hatching process. When great evil has been done by the sinner, the sinner will be incarnated into a powerful and hideous beast. Whereas a life lived happily and full of goodwill generates very little regret, enough to produce nothing more annoying than the smallest of Imps. The Great Monsters are often disgusted by how darling the littlest ones appear.

The breath of the Ogre King also grants the new monster some knowledge of the world. Ogre Kings do not allow their underlings too much insight, as they see knowledge as power and transfer only a few useful bits and bobs into the heads of new monsters: some basic language skills, remedial literacy and numeracy, and a thorough understanding of how to grovel before superiors.

From The Monster Hunters' Journal

CHAPTER 1

Old Samuel Kavanagh studied his granddaughter's face. His son and grandson had brought her for the evening. It took him a lot of work to keep smiling so his boys wouldn't know his thoughts. They worried about him enough. He peered at the sepia photo of his wife on the dusty sideboard. Despite his smile, she'd have seen through him and right into his thoughts. She'd have shared them.

He missed her.

The ten-week-old baby girl lay on his lap. She smiled at him, exposing bare gums. She'd been born with a full head of ebony hair, as they all had. His grandson reclined at his side, perching on the chair's arm. Only two years into his teens, he watched his grandfather with Kavanagh black eyes, the young man he'd become hiding politely beneath the surface.

Then Samuel turned to look at his son – greying at the temples, hovering over his daughter with lines of concern

carved into his forehead. What wouldn't the old man give to lift that load from him?

He sucked his tongue, feeling the air move from that bottomless place in his stomach. He held it back, but the sigh won, hissing out into the room. Regret and misery, pain and weariness blended and solidified.

The baby laughed, and her music bubbled into the polluted air. She watched her laughter turn into a bead of light and circle the old man's head, dancing and casting sparks over his thin hair. The baby reached for it and the sparkle ducked between her fingers, teasing her. It shot upwards joyously and got caught in the toxic fog of the sigh. It hit against the sigh's insides and gleamed through the dark surface.

The blend coughed and spluttered and struggled, but the laugh and sigh stuck together. The mixture sagged, its serpentine tail curling in as the baby giggled again.

Samuel's grandson grinned. 'I've never heard Beatrice laugh before.'

'Ah, Nicholas, it's a wonderful sound, isn't it?' The old man ran a finger over the baby's face.

Unnoticed by the older humans, the muddle turned in the air, tightening into a tiny black lump. The laugh held it in the room for a moment, sparking as it soaked in the loving atmosphere. When it grew tired of fighting itself, it flitted towards the old man's bathroom and slithered down the rusted plughole in the basin.

The visitors didn't stay long. The baby's giggles settled to whimpers, and she began to fuss.

The old man stood to see them off.

‘Sorry to leave you, Dad,’ his son said. ‘Your show’s on next. We’ll let you watch it in peace.’

His grandson kissed him on the forehead.

Familiar music wisped from the television as Samuel waved them out. He saw the glow of their car’s backlights heading south.

He leaned over and picked up his wife’s portrait, setting it on his lap and stroking the picture frame.

‘I don’t know why, but I think they’ll be fine, Annie, my darling,’ he said. ‘And I’m not worried any more; maybe my prayers have been answered.’

He settled to watch his show, but he would never move again. He drifted away remembering his granddaughter’s giggle.

At the window, a pair of pretty green eyes looked in on Samuel Kavanagh. They had witnessed everything. They’d seen with some surprise the sigh rise smoke-like and congeal into a small and scaly cloud, and they had creased into a smile as the old man breathed his last. Then their owner turned away and slipped into the darkness.

The tiny black gem fought with itself as it travelled the pipes, turning a normally quick journey into a struggle lasting days. The laugh itself wanted to burst free, find fresh air, see the sky and head for a bright star singing a singular, irresistible note. But the sigh was heavy; it needed to sink and merge with dark water running through rusted pipes into murky sewers.

It looked odd too. It was not pure regret – not merely loss and wasted opportunity. The laugh had brightened it, and though the nugget was black, like all last sighs, it gleamed. It had held back long enough in its absorbent state to nab the humour, the kindness and the love of a family. It had soaked up a lot of humanity.

It took five days for it to arrive in The Hole.

It zipped over the heads of the monsters gathering in the centre of The Hole's Great Cavern, the huge hub of the monsters' lair, deep under the Earth's surface. One end stretched three football fields from the other. The cavern walls rose high and dingy, so high not even a monster's nocturnal eye could see the roof.

Near the middle, a thunder of ogres played football with a gargoyle's head. The little sigh flew over them and joined the hundreds of other sighs flitting around, gnat-like, into the faces of red-coated leprechauns and pixies wearing newspaper hats and hessian skivvies. The trolls batted at them. Boggarts climbed head first down impossible walls to watch sighs fall into a heap inside a circle of rocks. They were overshadowed by a rough-wrought throne on a raised stone platform.

It was Hatching Day. A day of celebration, a day to listen to cracking and crunching of hard dark shells as the latest crop of sighs spat out grubs and pups of the various monster breeds. The monsters had gathered from every corner of The Hole to see if there were any new members to their packs. Some even came down from the world above, abandoning attics, cellars, bridges, tunnels

and other human-built residences to have a look at the new additions. The stronger the beast, the closer to the throne and the circle of dark eggs they shoved themselves, which annoyed the weaker imps, as they couldn't see much at all.

At the front of the crowd, trolls shoved leprechauns, which in turn bit their toes. One ogre with a head like a damaged pumpkin grinned down at a clutch of shivering pixies and sucked his fleshy lips. Towards the back, a batch of brave brownies waited for their moment. After the goblins and ogres pushed forward and settled, they squeezed between comfortable bums to fill gaps. Being breakable, the gargoyles hung at the rear of the mob, away from ogres' feet, and listened to the few snatches of news that were passed back to them. They readied themselves to rush forward and grab any new gargoyles before ogres crushed in the hatchling heads.

Ogres on guard circled the mob, making sure no one ate anyone else before the new-mades hatched. It was exciting. A festival of sorts. Even the footballers stopped their game and pressed close, elbowing banshees and goblins out of the way.

When the ogre king entered, an avenue formed as the crowd parted so he could ascend his throne upon the flat stone. The king was the largest of all the monsters. He had two fangs like elephant tusks poking from his top lip, and though his left hand was of the same compact muscle and meat as any ogre's, his right curled into a solid stone fist. It weighed on the end of his wrist.

The creatures bowed low, muttering 'Your Majesty' and 'King Thunderguts' under their collective smelly breaths as he passed. A pixie squeaked as a boggart trod on it, desperate to get out of his way.

King Thunderguts blinked at his scraping underlings and took one large step to ascend the platform. As he did, the sighs hiccupped and bumped each other in front of him, rolling, some already cracking in a hurry to become little monsters.

The ogre king's attention was caught by the sight of a sparkle. He studied all the beads and spotted one shining. Even among hundreds of dark jewels it stood out, with its unnatural and (Thunderguts's mouth felt sour as he thought it) *pretty* glow. He shifted from one hip to the other; he knew he should waddle down there and pick it out. It was lovely, and nothing so lovely could produce a half-decent monster. It would be best for all if the thing was destroyed. No point telling one of the underlings to do it. They'd be holding up every bead and button until teatime before they got the right one.

He stepped forward, ready to descend into the pit of sighs to collect the shiny little reject, but before he could, a panting, puffing crone in bedraggled, venom-green rags shoved through the crowd.

'Majesty, Majesty.' The frail creature pushed past a bear-eared ogre. It flinched and stepped aside for her. 'Majesty?' She stood wheezing beside the platform.

The king nodded and a troll with a nose like a cowpat lifted her on to the dais.

Thunderguts leered at the crone, studying her twisted face, and stepped to his throne. He wiggled his huge behind between its long-suffering arms and sat down. His red eyes widened but even the strongest of the cavern's yellow lights could not make them glow.

'What's got you so excited, Crone?' He spoke low, although the crowd's attention had turned back to the black beads in the pit, watching them pop and jump like fleas in a pot.

'It's happened. And the bead, it's a little different. I think this one will take.'

'Well, which one will it be, then?'

The hag looked out over the myriad black stones. She shook her head; there were so many. Then she smiled and pointed at the glowing gem among the dull black nuts.

The ogre king chuckled. 'You're sure it will work?'

The crone sighed and opened a small metal box. It was full of sparkling powder. She took a pinch and snorted it, clicking the tin closed again. 'It has to, I won't last much longer.'

'Well, get down there and grab it before some oaf forgets himself and steps on it.' The king lifted his stone fist on to the arm of the throne and issued an exhausted grunt. 'It's time to hatch these beads!' From the comfort of his seat, he tugged his tongue to the top of his mouth and bellowed his heavy breath all over the new nuggets. Then he watched with the rest.

A goblin helped the crone off the edge of the dais and she hobbled through the mob. The monsters shuffled

aside for her, jostling and pushing and peering back at their ogre king. Thunderguts felt their curious glances on him. His people knew he didn't normally wait to watch the new ones emerge once he had set the hatching in motion.

Crowds of monstrosities and imps huddled closer and raised eyebrows as the first of the black gems snapped and erupted. A dark boulder began hatching before all the rest, expanding as the ogres cheered. Its surface cracked and a claw burst through the top. Two ogres helped the young ogre climb out and they leaned forward to hear its first word.

'Meat?' the confused creature said. Its new pack shouted encouragement and the little ogre tried to grab a yellow-jacketed pixie.

Next a batch of brownies burst out of their kernels like popping corn. *Pop! Crack! Knisper!* Adult brownies gathered them in arms before the trolls could shove them into their mouths. At a safe distance they stopped, pushed together and laughed as the hatchlings struggled to speak.

'Slackle,' one said. The brownies giggled. It tried again. 'Spackle.' The tiny creature looked around to eager faces. 'Sparkle.' The brownies hoorahed and the whelp repeated the new and exciting word.

Leprechaun arrivals received approval for their cries of 'gold', 'profit', 'coin' and 'commerce'. One excited cub yelled 'business' over and over until it vomited. The leprechauns shook its tiny hand.

'Shall we call it Kean?' an old leprechaun laughed.

The fledgling yelled out its name – ‘Kean, Kean, Kean’ – until it vomited again.

Thunderguts’s gaze narrowed. He ignored all the hubbub and excitement, focusing on the sparkling nut. It was one of the last to hatch and the crone almost had it, but as she bent down, a newly hatched pixie grabbed it away. The bead cracked in the little imp’s hand. The pixie yelped in pain and dropped it, staring at its fingers.

The crone held back.

At first, the hatchling grew like many of the other larvae, its shape bubbling and popping. Legs snaked out, arms appeared like worms. It spread the usual pale leaves, although Thunderguts flinched to see the odd budding of straight, slim limbs.

Nearby ogres and trolls squinted at each other. Goblins shifted. Nobody knew what to expect: a puck, perhaps?

Thunderguts raised an eyebrow and smirked as the shiny nugget grew. A head formed: one ear on each side, two eyes facing forward, the nose too short (even for a puck) and a mouth filled with small, even teeth with no sign of a fang. Hair sprouted like dirty wheat from the top of its head, but not its chin. Hands burst from the stumps of arms, small and dainty.

A troll grunted its distaste.

The soft, pale thing opened its eyes, and the monsters nearest him inched back, muttering. Even the new-mades shuffled away.

‘Good grief. It looks human,’ something hissed.

'Let's not start imagining we can hatch our own humans, shall we?' a green-vested leprechaun said, waving calming hands in the air.

'Nummy,' said a small ogre.

Thunderguts grinned, drool collecting on his bottom teeth as the new creature sat up and sneezed.

The crone pushed the other new-mades aside. When she reached the creature she leaned down and kissed it on the mouth, making several brownies yuck and gag as she did so. Kissing was not normal monster behaviour.

They all heard the hiss as a long sliver of fresh air filled the new-made's lungs. Then the crone stared at it, as if she was waiting for something.

Thunderguts's voice carried across the space. 'Is it ... is it ... all right?' he asked.

The crone grinned, her eyes disappearing into the crimping folds of her face. 'It's perfect,' she cried back.

The ogre king laughed. As enormous as the cavern was, his bilious chortle filled it. The noise startled the remaining new-mades and many cried.

'Got nothing to do wivvus. S'not one of ours. S'get outa here,' a goblin said. It bombed past the crone, pushing her out of the way as it snatched up a tiny goblin.

'Let her work!' Thunderguts bellowed, and jumped from his throne. Monsters nearest him backed away, desperate to escape the king's flailing fist. A sprite hustled forward, seized three fresh pixies and fled with them. Other waiting packs, wanting to collect terrified hatchlings, forced themselves in, grabbing at grubs.

In the midst of all the mayhem, a brownie scuttled between the crone's legs. It tripped her as it snatched a pair of soft-haired mewlers. Sprites and boggarts scooped up more pups.

'Oi! Oi!' yelled Thunderguts in growing frustration, and jumped down into the pit. 'Get out of her way. Stop!' He threw his stone fist around and hit an oversized leprechaun in the face. The imp flew backwards into the throne, clanging on to the chair, sending shudders through the ground.

The crone dragged herself up and reached for the strange new-made imp once more. Everyone else was trying not to touch the deformed creature, but the growing pandemonium threw it up and over piddles of pixies and a glut of shivering tommyknockers. The crone crawled towards the new-made imp, but it bumped further away. A gaggle of boggarts tripped in front of her, dragging at hairy cubs. The crone sat back on her bony bum and screamed frustration into the cavern roof.

Thunderguts's bellows reached the crone across the chaos. 'Hurry up and get that ...' Thunderguts could not find a word for the new imp. 'Bring it to me. It's mine.'



CHAPTER 2

The new imp stared at the buffering, battering monsters around him. Things came to him in flashes and flits, skimming the edge of actual ideas. He tried to form words with his ... he put a hand to his lips. What was this thing?

'Mouth,' he said. He smiled at his cleverness, but no one praised him for his first word. The other monsters were busy with grabbing and groping and getting their own new-mades to safety. A pixie gave him attention in the form of a sneer.

Out of the chaos, a huge monster loomed over him and gazed at him with interest. More words sprang up inside the imp's head. A dozen sound pictures all at once. He chose two that needed him.

'Ogre,' he said. 'King.'

The imp assessed Thunderguts's gleeful leer, drool sliding off his bottom lip as he approached. Another creature

was hurrying up behind the ogre. A crone. The one who had ... kissed him? She was wearing a grin that reached to her poisonous green eyes. He didn't like either look – their faces had something in common that told him to back away. None of his new words quite fitted the expressions on the monsters' faces, but he grabbed at the closest.

'Hunger,' the new imp said.

It was a dangerous word, one he didn't fully understand. Other words threw themselves up, vying for use – 'greed', 'desire', 'yearning' – but 'hunger' seemed the best.

His limbs reacted before he'd processed the meaning. He scuttled backwards, trembling as the crone's grasping claws came for him. The next word popped into his head.

'Run,' he told himself. His legs knew a little of the word and shook as they rose under him.

'Don't be afraid kitty, kitty,' the crone said.

'Run,' he told himself again. Then he yelled it. 'Run!'

The word startled the monsters as he pelted by them. They obeyed its command. Brownies gathered up brownies and hurried away. Leprechauns grabbed bearded calves wrapped in swaddling clothes and dashed off.

Thunderguts roared at the sudden stampede. The crowd fled together, their faces twisting at the king's rumbling yells. The imp found himself carried with them, bumping along between frantic bodies.

The imp's feet cycled to make contact with the dirt, and he grabbed his chest, patting at the pumping sound inside. As his toes touched the earth, the rhythm told him to keep running. He shuddered at the king's continuing

bawl. He risked peeking behind, and saw the crone's stringy arm still stretched for him, but her creaking hips and worn knees slowed her. So did the scuffle of bogies at her feet, and a flight of tiny boggarts squealed as the crone stepped on their fingers. When they nipped at her ankles, the shock of their teeth made her shriek and she tripped backwards, clawing the air. She fell hard on to her bony backside again, her ragged dress tumbling around her, and wailed.

He'd managed to slip her grip, so he darted for the wall with the other escaping imps, increasing the distance between himself and the crone.

'Is that a boy?' a brownie asked as the imp followed a pus-eyed boggart into the dark edge of the cavern. The imp didn't stop to wonder what a 'boy' was. A snatch of boggarts rushed into the gloom with him and he found himself surrounded by shaking fur. He peered out to the lit centre of the cavern to see the crone hobble back to the king and hunch next to him. The king's incoherent bellows shook more dirt down on them both.

A new-made boggart tucked under its pack leader's hairy armpit sneered at the imp and licked his elbow. 'Tasty,' it said.

'Don't do that.' The larger boggart cuffed its head. 'He's Thunderguts's dinner. Carn you see? We gotta get as far from him as we can.' They scuttled away along the dark rim of the cavern.

The imp boy scanned the mob for anyone who knew how to get away from the awful noise of the king. Most

of the creatures were changing direction and hunkering where shadows clung darkest. A creature made of stone stomped past, brushing his shoulder, followed by two more. They gathered in front of him and stopped. Even in the dark the imp boy could see moss growing in patches on their grey stone backs.

The first had four legs and a broad face. It looked about with a grimace. 'We all good?' It patted its partner, a creature with a beak and two legs.

'An' all in one piece too,' said the third. This one was also four-legged. Pointy ears stuck through a wash of hair that encircled its big head.

Gargoyles, the imp boy thought.

'Let's get out of here then,' the broad-faced one said.

'Time to make our exit,' pointy ears said.

The gargoyles did not see the imp boy, nor hear him. Their heavy feet drummed louder than the thumping inside him, covering the sound even in his own ears. He trailed them as they ran, using their cacophony for cover.

As the ogre king's rage faded with distance the imp boy began to relax, but even as the bumping inside his body softened, his small mitts wouldn't stop shaking. He shoved them under the crooks of his arms. The imp followed the stone pack out of the titanic cavern, hoping they headed for a nice, quiet exit.

He studied his surroundings as he trotted. Above him, a vast expanse faded into starved darkness, and holes littered the walls. Nasties of every kind crawled up and down like congregating flies. White, bloated faces peered

out of shadows. He copied the gargoyles, who leaned into the dark as the big monsters passed. Great trolls and ogres strode the dimly lit paths, laughing and spitting at flights of pixies skittering along.

The imp boy gasped as an ogre grabbed the gargoyle nearest him, the two-legged one, by the head. It made a disgusted raspberry and threw it across the path. The stone creature clunked on to a walkway fifteen feet away, howling as its foot broke off. He stopped in shock as the broken creature stood up and put its snapped-off foot against the edge of the severed leg. The pieces sizzled and reattached, and the gargoyle hobbled back towards his pack and they all ran on.

The imp boy trailed them, keeping within reach of the feathered tail of the limping pack member. As they passed a herd of imps, the dirt-dressed brownies and pixies in sickly yellow hurled abuse at them. The pointy-eared gargoyle snarled. The pixies giggled.

They ran on again, the imp boy puffing and panting. He started to lag at their breathless pace and almost lost sight of them when they turned into a tunnel. He used the last of his effort to keep up, rushing to where he'd seen them disappear into the dark. It was just a gouge in the wall, but after a breath, he stepped inside. The noise of the Great Cavern cut out with a sharp click and he saw the gargoyles blending into a single shape ahead of him. Their voices were muffled in the tight space.

'Good grief, that was a bit much,' one loud voice said. The imp boy tiptoed closer and saw the hairy gargoyle

with pointy ears speaking. 'Hatching Day shouldn't be such a to-do. Thought the ogres might go on a grab 'n' smash. How's your leg, Spigot?'

The two-legged gargoyle, the one the ogre had thrown and broken, gave a gabbled caw the imp boy didn't follow, but the wide-faced gargoyle nodded as if it understood what it had said. 'Yes, too right. An' Bladder an' me is proud of how quick you did that.'

'Sizzled your leg right back on, you did. You know how to move,' said the pointy-eared gargoyle. Bladder, the imp boy guessed. Its circle of stone hair tumbled around its face. 'What was Thunderguts's problem today?'

'Hush, mustn't talk like that,' the wide-faced gargoyle replied.

'Oh, like His Dirtship's gonna hear us in here. Wheedle, you are soft in the head sometimes.'

Spigot squawked something. It could have been agreement.

The imp went over the names he had learned, happy to be adding to his little store of knowledge. The two-legged feathery one's name was Spigot, and Wheedle had the wide face. Bladder was hairy and pointy-eared and grumpy, although nowhere near as grumpy as the ogre king.

The imp boy's sense of achievement calmed him a little.

'Weren't anyone watching the hatching before all the chaos started?' Wheedle stared at Bladder. 'I thought it was your turn to keep an eye on the beads.'

‘Who can see from the back? Them modern cathedral packs, they’re the ones get all the new gargoyles.’

‘So you weren’t watching?’ Wheedle asked.

Spigot squawked at Bladder.

‘I was not scoffing the toffees,’ Bladder replied.

‘You’re always scoffing the toffees,’ Wheedle said.

‘Almost choked on one when Thunderguts started making that noise,’ Bladder replied. ‘I suspect he spilt his hot mud again. Chucking another tanty. That’s why I hate coming down here. Can’t we give Hatching Day a miss?’

Wheedle scowled. ‘You know what would happen to the new ones if we didn’t come down. We need to be here to look out for them.’

‘Oh, yeah, pushed to the front, you were so eager. It weren’t you two I saw breaking your necks to get to the nearest exit then?’ Bladder said.

Spigot harrumphed.

The imp boy’s legs felt numb as he listened to the gargoyles’ bickering. He slid to the ground, his new limbs trembling. Being away from the noise and the hungry face of the ogre king felt good, but all the other emotions, the wetness and shakiness he’d been pushing down, began to bleed out of him. His eyes oozed water. His mouth leaked moany, groany sobs. Confusing sensations seeped out of his body, and he let them.

The gargoyle pack swung around. Spigot screamed.

Wheedle yelled, ‘What the ... ?’, and the trio shuffled back.

The imp boy did not get up from the ground. He watched them, expecting them to race away and leave him shaking in the dirt. They didn't: they shuffled forward, stepping closer, toe by toe.

They gathered around him, sniffing, growling, mooing.

'Whered it come from?' Wheedle asked. 'It's shaking.'

'More importantly,' said Bladder, 'what in the world is it?'