

Eve laughed, and tucked a lock of her long black hair behind her ear. 'Charm won't get you top marks in your arithmetic test.'

'But it can't do any harm either, can it?'

'Tell that to Abel Jekyll when he marks your paper.'

Mel sighed. But then a noise outside made him throw aside his unopened schoolbook and race downstairs, just beating their ghost butler to the door.

'Allow me, Mr Marley.'

Mr Marley gave way with a little moan of 'Doom,' wrapped his chains and cashboxes around him, and continued dusting surfaces with his spectral breezes.

Mel opened the front door. 'Can I help you?'

A stout gentleman stood on the step, hand still reaching for the knocker, his black eyebrows raised like exclamation marks in a sensational headline. 'Have I come to the right address?' By his accent Mel could tell he was from North America, which might explain why he thought it acceptable to wear a red-tinted tweed suit in London.

'That depends. Who are you after?'

The man's gaze searched over Mel's shoulder. 'Monsters. I need some monsters.'

Mel stepped back. 'Then you've definitely come to the right place.'

'But you're not -'

Why did people never see the monster in him? Mel held up a finger. 'Don't say it.'

'I was only going to remark that -'

'Exactly. I'm Melchizedek Foster, member of the Monster Resistance. Who might you be? And, more importantly, how did you know where to find us?'

Eve appeared on the landing and the gentleman's face cleared. 'Ah, I *am* in the right place!'

'Is everything all right, Mel Foster?' Eve called over the banister.

'Fine. I was just going to invite our guest inside, once he has given me his name.'

'Forgive me. My name is Sir Henry Baskerville.' The man bowed.

Eve came down to join them in the foyer. She tapped her cheek thoughtfully. 'Did I not read about you recently? You had a little problem with a dog?'

Sir Henry winced. 'A hound, madame, and it was far from little.'

Mel now remembered the story. 'A monstrous hound was terrorising you and your household - but Sherlock Holmes solved the mystery and stopped the creature. The hound is dead.'

'So we thought.' Sir Henry ran his hand through his hair. 'I'm at my wits' end. Although that should've been the end

of the matter, we are now being plagued worse than ever. Boots are going missing, the villagers are being terrified - somehow the hound seems to have come back! Has it returned in ghostly form, or is it another beast entirely - and what does it want? No one dares go out at night on Dartmoor for fear for their life. I want you to find out what is going on and stop it.'

'And Mr Holmes cannot help?' asked Eve.

Sir Henry shook his head. 'No, he says this isn't a problem for him.'

'But he can solve any mystery given enough time with the facts,' said Mel, upset. Mr Holmes was one of his heroes, and Mel followed his exploits in the newspapers.

'I have to admit to being disappointed that he refused the case, but Mr Holmes told me that the world is full of obvious things which nobody ever observes. He said that this time around, a monster mystery needed to be solved by a couple of monster detectives. He recommended the Resistance for the job and told me your address.' Sir Henry examined them both. 'Well, I suppose one monster will do at a pinch. You, mademoiselle, look very capable.'

Mel bridled at the implied insult. He knew he was just as much a monster as the rest of the Resistance. But Eve came swiftly to his defence.

'We work together, monsieur. What makes someone a

monster is more than skin-deep.'

Sir Henry frowned. 'But you'll take the case?'

'A monster hound loose on Dartmoor - danger - mystery?' Mel grinned at Eve. 'We're in.'

The train pulled into the wayside station of Grimpen Village. Mel, Eve and Sir Henry were the only passengers to get out. If anyone else had been thinking of descending there, seeing Eve on the platform had changed their mind.

'It's a long walk to Baskerville Hall so I've asked my new man Crichton to bring over the carriage. Ah there he is - on time as ever.' Sir Henry led them to a wagonette driven by a handsome servant, tall where his master was short. Crichton's steady gaze did not falter once on being introduced to the giantess. *He must be made of steely stuff*, thought Mel.

'I've brought us the monster detectives as promised, Crichton. Please give them the run of the house and help them with their investigations.'

'Very good, sir.' The manservant sniffed, a hint of disapproval. Someone wasn't pleased to see detectives arrive. Did Crichton have something to hide?

'While Crichton manages the driving and whatnot, I guess I should tell you more about the hound.'

'That would be most useful,' agreed Eve, making the springs creak as she took a seat behind Crichton. The

servant silently shifted to counter her weight and clicked the horse into a walk.

'It all started with a dastardly ancestor of mine, Hugo Baskerville. He was a cruel lord of the manor. The legend says that one day he went too far - gave his soul over to the Powers of Evil if they would help him chase some unfortunate girl across the moor. But both man and girl were found dead, and Hugo seemed to have got his comeuppance at the jaws of a giant hound. The uncanny events investigated by Mr Holmes proved to be a monster dog, possibly a descendant of that original hound, trained to terrorise me - but it is dead, and that should've been the end of the story.'

'But something has come back?' asked Eve.

'Exactly. I've heard howling from Grimpen Mire, the very spot where my ancestor met his end.'

Mel frowned. 'So the hound has come back as a ghost?'

'Perhaps - but more physical signs have been spotted as well. Villagers have seen a great shape on the horizon in the moonlight: a four-legged creature as big as a bear.'

'You do not have bears in England?' asked Eve.

'No, we do not, not since Norman times. And in the yew alley in my garden, I saw them.'

'Saw what?' Eve asked breathlessly.

'The footprints of a gigantic hound!'

'Oh!'

'We must see those,' muttered Mel.

'And I believe that it can assume bodily form,' continued Sir Henry, getting quite carried away by his own story. 'While I was leaning over the prints, I felt a hot breath on the nape of my neck. I froze. Something leapt on my back . . . I screamed . . . there was a shot and I turned, but too late.'

'It ran away?' That was a surprise.

'I think Crichton scared it off.'

'Mr Crichton, what did you see?'

'I did not see a hound. I heard Sir Henry's shout and rushed out of the house,' the servant replied in his stiff manner. 'I shot a rifle in the air to alert Sir Henry that I was coming, and in hopes of scaring off any ne'er-do-wells.'

Sir Henry patted Crichton on the back. 'I owe this man my life.'

'I strive to give satisfaction, sir.'

Crichton seemed rather too pleased with himself. Had he set up the incident, revived the story of the hound to make Sir Henry grateful, Mel wondered? No one had actually seen it clearly. Could there be another explanation - could someone be using the legend for their own ends again? Such things as footprints and silhouettes on the horizon were possible to fake. Crichton wouldn't be the first servant Mel had met who had taken over his employer's life by making himself indispensable.

The wagonette travelled along high-banked roads with their tangle of frosted ferns and blackened stalks of cow parsley, and emerged into a different world of bleak moorland, broken by stone outcrops and tumble-down sheep pens, patches of snow lingering in hollows. Grey clouds scouted the horizon looking for spots on which to dump the next fall of snow.

'Dartmoor!' said Sir Henry. 'I lived in Canada most of my life, so coming here felt like coming home.'

Mel had lived in some grim places - in an orphanage, on a ship, in the slums - but he thought this might be the very worst. He preferred a noisy city street any day.

'*Magnifique*,' said Eve, resting her chin on her hand, lost in fond memories. 'It reminds me of the home I shared with my father in the Arctic Wastes.'

'Then you understand - it's the desolation that gets you here.' Sir Henry thumped his chest.

Mel noticed Crichton raise his eyes heavenward. Evidently the manservant shared Mel's view of country versus the comforts of town. Perhaps he wanted to frighten his master into returning there?

The wagonette entered an oak plantation. Chimneys poked above the treeline. They passed through a gateway flanked by statues of two cats holding shields: the entrance to Baskerville Hall.

'Stop a moment!' called Mel, spotting claw marks on the gateposts. 'Eve, come with me. We have some detecting to do.'

Leaving Crichton and Sir Henry in the carriage, the two friends poked around the bottom of the plinths.

'Do you see this?' Mel asked Eve softly so as not to be overheard.

'Oui. Both statues have their tails broken off.' She held up the fragments. 'And they have been bitten to dust. This cannot be the work of a ghost.'

'That happened last night,' called Crichton from the wagonette. 'I'm sorry I haven't had time to have them mended again, sir.'

'Again?' asked Eve. 'How many times have they been broken?'

'Sixteen, miss. Always the tails.'

Mel brushed the dust from his fingers, keeping his back to Crichton. 'Something's not right here. The hound only attacked Sir Henry last time - so why is it wasting its time on stone statues now? Maybe Crichton is doing it himself to worry Sir Henry?'

'Then we must watch him like hawks.' Eve's eyes swivelled alarmingly, blue pointing up and brown focused on Crichton.

'Don't let him suspect anything.'

They got back into the wagonette. Rounding the last bend, they came into sight of an ivy-draped house with twin towers at either end of a steeply pitched roof. Baskerville Hall looked so old it had to be riddled with secret passages and hidden doors – the best place to play hide-and-seek, but also the perfect place to pretend there was a monster.

‘You have rooms prepared, Crichton?’ asked Sir Henry, leading the way into the house. The entrance showed its origin as a baronial hall: stained-glass windows with heraldic symbols and hunting trophies.

‘Naturally, sir. I have put the lady in the Chinese bedroom and the young master next to her, in Sir Hugo’s old room.’

That brought Sir Henry to a stop. ‘But that room hasn’t been used since the hound did for him. The servants say it’s haunted.’

Crichton raised a brow. ‘But you said that our guests were monster detectives, unafraid of anything, sir.’

‘So I did. Are you happy with these rooms?’

Mel rubbed his hands. Was Crichton trying to scare them off too? If so, he had miscalculated. Mr Marley was a ghost and Mel had several more friends among the undead. ‘Don’t worry, sir, we’ll be right at home.’

‘Then I’ll see you at dinner.’ Sir Henry hurried off to his library and shut the door with a bang.