

THE MONSTER AND THE CHILD

A thing of nightmares.

BY DOLLY GARLAND

The child hid under the bed while the monster slept, its snores filling the room with a rhythmic sound. The monster turned to its side, and the giant bed — double the dimensions of a king size — groaned under its weight. The child waited, biding his time. The monster had been asleep for only a little while. It needed to be in a deep sleep before the child could complete his mission.

The child, code-named Adam, stayed still. His small, human-boy frame fit easily beneath the monster's huge bed. Trained from birth, Adam knew how to control himself, not to be distracted by random bursts of pins and needles, sneezing or other bodily functions. Each monster destroyed was one more step towards securing humanity's future. And it was up to him, and other children like him — because monsters couldn't smell any threat in humans who hadn't yet reached puberty.

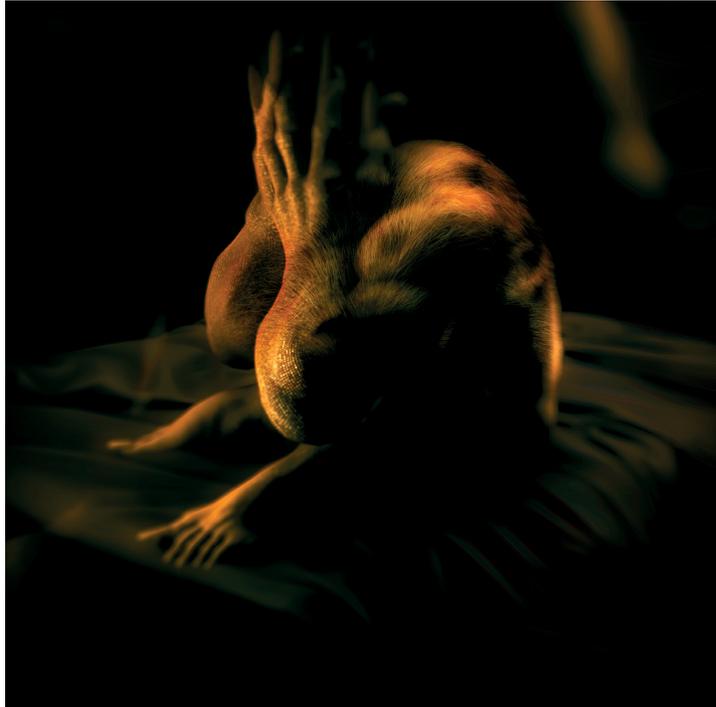
Adam waited.

From beneath the bed, he could see the bottom of the wall, painted purple and decorated with a panel of baby monsters in various poses of play. They were all different creatures, but most were furry, with big teeth that could rip human flesh with ease, and horns that could slice a belly like a knife. Even the baby monsters were dangerous. Adam had seen that in the training vids. This one was barely more than a baby. But you had to get them young. Before they became too dangerous and killed people.

Eventually, the monster's snores settled into a gentler rhythm. It stopped moving about and its breathing became slow and even. Adam eased himself out from under the bed. It felt like a long distance. He pulled a syringe from the toolkit at his belt and edged closer to the monster.

It was sleeping on its left side. Adam bent down, extended his arm, aimed with precision, and pushed the syringe into the back of the monster's furry neck. It was a thick, large needle designed for this purpose and it slid in without a hitch.

The monster's body jerked for a moment; its head swivelled to face Adam; big, round, electric-blue eyes, open in shock, stared



at the human boy. Then as the drug took effect, the monster's jaw went slack, and it fell unconscious.

Adam stood still, making sure the monster was completely under. He pulled out another syringe from his toolkit and extracted the monster's blood.

It was red. He'd known it would be red. The XX-D monsters, classified under category A, all had red blood. Adam had done simulations and was familiar with the monster's biology. But still, it was different seeing it in person. It seemed strange to him that this *thing* shared such a fundamental similarity with humans.

Adam detached the slim tube full of blood and slipped it back into his tool belt. He took out a long, thin strip that resembled a measuring tape, except for the blinking blue and red lights across the top. He placed the strip across the monster's forehead. It extended automatically and plugged its ends into the monster's temples. As soon as it penetrated the skin, lights began to blink furiously all across the strip. Red and blue pinpricks.

The monster stirred, and Adam held his breath. It was rare for a monster to wake up in the middle of a scan, but it *had* happened, and it usually resulted in human casualties. When the

monster didn't move any more, Adam relaxed.

The data were still coming in. The monster's DNA code was being assessed so that the biological weapon could be made to destroy this particular species. It was the most effective way of reducing the monster population.

Adam took out a palm-sized tablet from his pocket and opened an app. The computer synced with the strip; the data began to download from the scanner.

When the process was complete, the scanner beeped once and detached itself from the monster's forehead without leaving a trace. Adam placed the scanner back in his tool belt, put the tablet back in his pocket, and checked to ensure there was no trace of him left in the room.

He turned towards the window to leave and froze at a sound. His heart thumped. A bead of sweat trickled down his back. A wave of fear rolled through his body before his training brought him back under control.

He turned on the spot slowly and saw the monster rocking back and forth on its bed, curled up in a fetal position, its giant claws hiding its face. It was the same position Adam had seen his little sister assume when she was having nightmares.

The monster made a sound again and pressed a claw over its ear. Adam realized it was a whimper.

He knew he should leave. He needed to get the specimen back to the lab, so this particular monster could be eliminated. But he stayed rooted to the spot, watching silently as the monster continued its stifled crying.

The monster whimpered again.

A single tear rolled down its furry face, creating a wet crevice in the fur.

Adam swallowed hard, wiped his sweaty palms on his trousers, and took out his tablet. Against explicit orders, he read the data he'd just gathered on the monster. The first sentence read: *Category A: Native Species.* ■

Dolly Garland started her life in India, and after trying a couple of other continents, now calls London her home. A verified coffee addict, she can be found on Twitter @DollyGarland.

ILLUSTRATION BY JACEY