

Rebecca Blackwell

Thirteen Monsters

She was the sacrifice, given to defeat the monsters of the land. The first monster was the scourge of the South Sea, a huge scaled beast of dimensions measured in houses. It had been awakened by the river festival, and she in turn had been chained naked to the rocks to appease it. When it came for her, however, she sang it a song so sad and sweet that it returned to the ocean floor to sleep for another million years.

The second monster was a wandering ghost, the King of the Restless Dead, who stole people's breath in the night. They locked her in a crypt with only a candle for comfort, but the King's eyes glowed in the dark. She blew out the candle and listened to his story, and when they came to take away the stone he was gone, and she was still breathing.

After that, she started to get the hang of it.

The third monster lived under the bridge of the Great Span and suffered none to cross, taking the understanding of words from any who dared. She climbed under the bridge to talk with the beast that hid in the dark and the stone, and with it traded riddles and puns until its sides were split from laughter, and all the words it had eaten flew free once more.

The fourth monster was bound in the Empress's ring, which would not be removed, and permitted the monarch neither smile nor sleep. She held the Empress's hand and promised to bear the ring herself that it would never be alone, and it slipped from the monarch's hand to her own. After that they banished her, and though none would offer her

shelter, she made no complaint. When she wandered in the five-day storm the ring turned to rust and the rust flaked away.

The fifth, sixth, and seventh monsters were moonhounds, and their every step left a crater in the landscape. Though she reached only as high as the eye of the smallest, she chased them until they turned in great delight to chase her too, and led them merrily until they collapsed in a circle on the grass. Then gazing up at the sky of the new moon, she taught them to read the stories in the stars, and sent them home.

The eighth monster burned in the desert with the soul of a new sun, so that there was respite from neither heat nor light at any hour. She approached the sun soul and whispered to it her secrets, and when the night came they lay down together and the light dimmed also. Then they lay again, and she slept, and when she woke with the sunrise it was gone.

The ninth and tenth monsters were the Red Dragon and the White, whose battle was for no cause of mortals, and had no concern for mortals either. She climbed into the mountains, to the Dragon's Teeth where the land meets the sky, and spoke to each great beast of time and magic. Then she brokered peace between them, and their battle shook the lands no more.

The eleventh monster dwelt in the Great Forest, and none who entered into it were ever seen again. She walked in without fear, carrying bells which rang with her presence, and when she reached the grove at the heart of the forest she laid the bells down upon the stone marker. When the wind blew through the bells she took up the rhythm, and danced for days and nights until they fell silent once more. Then she left, and afterwards all travelled freely beneath the Forest's branches.

The twelfth monster made demons of all who felt its touch, and they too carried it on so that it spread across the land like a plague. She performed the rites and rituals of cleansing and made her way to the first possessed, in a town overrun with demons. Then she boiled water and brewed sweet leaves and served it to each demon that approached her, and when the last drop of tea was drained from the pot, the rage was drained away also, and did not return.

And the thirteen and last, most terrible monster of them all lived in a tower of mirrors and glass, and cast a nightmare shadow over all the tower surveyed. She climbed up stairs made of glass until her feet

bled out, and wandered lost through a maze of mirrors until the words in her mind turned to dust. Then at last she found herself in an empty room, surrounded on all sides by the windows of the tower's highest floor, and she was alone.

Alone, she fell to her knees and wept.