

THE LORD OF
BEASTS
JUSTIN ELLIOTT

SCHOLASTIC
AUCKLAND SYDNEY NEW YORK LONDON TORONTO
MEXICO CITY NEW DELHI HONG KONG

First published in 2008 by Scholastic New Zealand Limited
Private Bag 94407, Greenmount, Manukau 2141, New Zealand

Scholastic Australia Pty Limited
PO Box 579, Gosford, NSW 2250, Australia

© Justin Elliott, 2008

ISBN 978-1-86943-880-7

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic, mechanical or digital, including photocopying, recording, storage in any information retrieval system, or otherwise, without prior written permission of the publisher.

National Library of New Zealand Cataloguing-in-Publication Data

Elliott, Justin, 1967-
The lord of beasts / by Justin Elliott.
ISBN 978-1-86943-880-7
[1. Dogs—Fiction.] I. Title.
NZ823.3—dc 22

9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

8 9 / 0 0 1 2 3 4 5 / 1

Publishing team: Christine Dale, Penny Scown and Annette Bisman
Cover design: TO BE ADDED
Model: TO BE ADDED
Typeset in MyriadPro 10.5/16pt by Book Design Ltd www.bookdesign.co.nz

Printed and bound in Australia by McPherson's Printing Group



ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

For Allison whose support and love I am forever grateful for, and Jareth who shows me everyday what true imagination is. Thanks to the editorial team at Scholastic. They worked to make this story as good as it could be, and made what at first seemed a scary prospect fun and enjoyable. Thanks, I could not have worked with a better team.

CONTENTS

1	Bullies	7
2	New Arrivals.....	17
3	Voices.....	30
4	The Keeper Revealed	41
5	The Warning.....	53
6	Feygate Hill	63
7	The Barghest	71
8	Feygate	84
9	Into Faerie	92
10	The Rat Boys	105
11	The Dagda	114
12	The Guardian.....	126
13	The Plain of Fire	138
14	The Salamanders	155
15	Forest of Ice	167
16	The Norn.....	181
17	The Domed Path.....	197
18	Ankou	207
19	The Tooth of Oroborus	220
20	Reggie and Thomas.....	231
21	The Athame	242
22	Halloween	254
23	Time to Die.....	260
24	The Aftermath.....	269
25	Back to the Feygate.....	276
26	The Last Meeting	280

CHAPTER ONE

BULLIES

Hunter Greenman could hear the pounding footsteps of his pursuers echoing behind him in the damp alley.

“Gonna pound ya harder for running, Greenman, ya half-wit!” The nasal bellow could only belong to Brick Thompson.

Hunter ran in silence, conserving his energy, unlike those who chased him. Half-wit! He snorted. He was the first to admit he was no whiz at school, but a half-wit? He toyed with the idea of stopping and showing Brick just how much of a halfer he was, but then it wasn’t just Brick after him. It sounded as though Brick’s whole gang had joined in the chase. The gang had received a one-month detention thanks to Hunter blowing the whistle on their lunch money scheme. He could only guess the payment that they would extract from him in return.

Hunter lengthened his stride. He had no desire to

find out how close to the mark his guess was. Despite being small for a fourteen-year-old, Hunter knew that he was a good runner; quick, and able to maintain his speed for a long time. He was confident he could outpace his pursuers.

He turned right into Main Street without losing speed. Now he had a choice to make. He could continue down Main, then into Pike until he reached Centennial Park. From there it was an easy jog through the playing fields until he reached the back fence and sanctuary of his home. But, while this longer option would offer him the protection of the village streets, it would also give the gang more opportunity to catch up to him.

The other way was much quicker, but involved crossing the scrap yard. It had a bad reputation with the kids in the village of Feygate, and Hunter had heard stories of what happened to those who dared cross it. He didn't believe most of them, but he had seen the bite marks on Johnny Styles' arm with his own eyes. Even so, Hunter decided the scrap yard was his best chance of escape.

By the time he turned off Main Street into the alley, he'd widened the gap on those chasing. A tall wire-mesh gate blocked the entrance to the scrap yard at its far end. Hunter could make out the faded, hand-painted signs that hung from it:

TRESPASSERS WILL BE BIT!

and

NO ENTRY - THIS MEANS YOU!

With his feet splashing in the deep puddles that littered the uneven surface of the alley like a minefield, Hunter sped on. The late afternoon sun struggled to light the narrow, confined space created by the tall buildings on either side of him. Hunter ran through shadow that seemed to darken around the dumpsters that occupied the right-hand wall.

He was halfway through the alley when he saw movement within one of the shadows. His feet skidded on the slick, hard pavement as he stopped. Two figures emerged from the darkness. Hunter felt as if a lead weight had just settled in his stomach. He recognised them as members of Brick's gang. One, a squat but powerfully built boy who appeared to be neckless, his head resting on his shoulders like a cherry on a misshapen blob of ice cream, turned and smiled at his companion. "What d'ya know, Whippet? Ol' Brick was right. Greenman did come this way."

His much taller and thinner friend returned the smile. "Yeah, Block ... but he'll soon wish he hadn't."

Reece 'the Whippet' Clements was the fastest sprinter at school, while Len 'Blocker' Smith was supposedly one of the hardest rugby forwards the town had ever produced.

Hunter took a couple of hesitant steps backwards as the two approached. Triumphant yells sounded from behind him and he spun about to see the rest of the gang spilling into the alley, blocking off any chance of escape.

Hunter swore and sprinted forwards, heading straight for the wide-open arms of Len Smith.

"That's right, squealer. Come to ol' Block."

At the last minute, Hunter threw his weight onto his left leg and leapt high and to the right. He sailed out of Blocker's grasping arms and landed on the top of one of the dumpsters. He ran across it before leaping to the ground and speeding towards the scrap yard.

"How the hell did he do that?" Reece Clements's high-pitched voice sounded from behind.

"Don't stand there gawping, Reece, get him!" belted Blocker.

Hunter risked a quick look behind as he neared the fence. Blocker was lumbering after him, but the Whippet was living up to his name, streaking down the alley, which now echoed with the calls and bellows of the others. Reece was too far away, despite his speed, and Hunter knew that he was home free as he leapt for the top of the fence. The rattle of the fence as he hit just below the top of its three-metre height, almost drowned out Blocker, yelling from behind. "Don't let him get away!"

"Don't worry!" came the Whippet's reply, as Hunter

pulled himself to the top of the fence, then jumped ...

A sharp, blinding pain erupted in the back of Hunter's head. His vision flared red for a moment, and he was dimly aware of his arms flailing as he fell. Air erupted from his body as he struck the ground and a new pain lanced through his right wrist.

He was aware of the sound of someone climbing the fence although he couldn't remember who they were, or why they were after him. Purely on instinct, Hunter levered himself to his feet and stumbled away from the noise.

Black spots flickered before him and, as he forced himself to move, his vision narrowed into a swirling tunnel. Somebody tackled him from behind, and Hunter fell with a splash into a deep, rust-tinged puddle. As he lay, in pain, he heard dogs barking; a deep baying that promised sudden violence to anyone stupid enough to let the dogs catch him. Hunter was also aware of voices that seemed to be reaching him from a great distance.

"Good throw, Whippet!"

"Damn, it's those wolves the old man keeps. Better scarper!"

"What about Greenman?"

"Leave him – he deserves everything he gets."

Hunter grunted as a parting kick struck him just below the ribs. He hardly felt the pain. To his senses everything was fuzzy and remote, except the barking that grew in volume and intensity until it sounded like

thunder.

With a major effort, Hunter managed to turn his head. The spinning tunnel of his vision shrank further, and dimness began to leach colour from what he saw. The last thing he did see, before giving in to unconsciousness, was two huge dogs rushing towards him, fangs bared.

He was unsure for how long he had been able to hear the muffled voices. They invaded the dark peacefulness of the place in which he had been floating. Against Hunter's wishes his mind concentrated, locking onto them. The conversation appeared to take on the form of light that moved around him, faster and faster, until he was looking into a spinning vortex.

"You are sure this is the one? It is so ... small." The voice was deep and gruff, giving the impression of a throaty growl.

"The Keeper of the Gate said that it was so. That is enough for me." This voice was higher than the first.

"For me also. Its injuries do not seem bad."

"I shall fetch the Keeper."

"Hurry, it is coming back to wakefulness ..."

Hunter could see only light. A light that split into swirling colours, creating a blurred kaleidoscope. As he became aware of his body and the pain pulsing within his head, the colours formed into the discarded piles of junk, the fence, mud, and rust puddles of the junkyard

– and the dark, hulking form of the huge mastiff sitting before him.

The dog's deep brown eyes reflected Hunter's image as it stared at him. It sat so close that Hunter could feel its damp, warm breath on his face. The dog appeared large even for a mastiff. Its strength and power were unmistakable.

Hunter had always been comfortable around animals, and, as the dog was just sitting there, he began to turn his head. He gasped as he moved and gently touched the impressive lump he found just behind his right ear. Gritting his teeth, he looked from one side to the other trying to find the owners of the voices he had heard. From his position on the ground, he could see little. Slowly, he started to sit up. A deep growl stopped him.

The dog that had been stationary since Hunter's return to consciousness surged to its feet; a quivering mass of muscle, teeth bared, ears flat. Hunter lowered himself. The growling stopped, and the dog returned to a sitting position. Hunter's heart raced, not only in response to the dog's threat. The simple act of attempting to sit had taken its toll and, though he felt overly warm, he began to shiver and his teeth started chattering.

"Okay, Kris, step away. I'm here."

The voice sounded cracked and wheezy, as if it were coming to the end of its use-by date. The owner

shuffled into Hunter's view. The old man's general appearance matched his voice – battered and overused. His grey hair stood in spikes radiating from his oversized head. He had the pointiest nose that Hunter had ever seen. If he ran his hand along it, Hunter thought that he might cut himself on its sharp tip.

Puffing and wheezing, the old man crouched over the boy. As Hunter's eyes tried to refocus, the image of the old man wavered and, for a moment, Hunter could have sworn that he had seen an ape of some kind bending over him. Shutting his eyes, Hunter shook his head ... and immediately wished that he hadn't, as red, blinding pain shot through it.

"Here, lad, you better be okay. Don't want you cluttering up me yard."

Hunter opened his eyes. His tongue felt the size of a gobstopper, making it hard to form words. "Hit my head," he mumbled.

"Did you now?" said the old man. He leant forward and probed at the back of Hunter's head with his long, thin fingers. Hunter yelped in pain. At least he tried to, but what came out sounded like a growl. The old man rocked back onto his heels.

"Now that ain't good. Ain't good at all."

"What ain't ... isn't good?" asked Hunter. He couldn't keep the worry from his voice. "My head ..."

"No, no lad. You've a hard head there. Lucky that it took the blow. Though you'll have a lump the size of an

egg, and pain to match.”

“Then what’s not good?” With a nervous look at the dogs, Hunter levered himself into a sitting position. His head at once started to swim, and he felt sick.

“You’re not supposed to do that yet. It’s too early. The boss ain’t going to like this at all,” grumbled the old man. “Not at all.”

“I don’t understand ... do what?” Hunter moved, and pain lanced through his head again.

“Come into your—”

“No, Keeper,” a new voice interrupted the old man.

Hunter looked around, squinting against the pain, but couldn’t see who had spoken. One of the dogs whimpered, and the old man looked at it with a start, before saying, “Come on, lad, let’s get you home.”

Hunter allowed the old man to help him to his feet. He swayed and had to lean against the man’s thin body for support. Although it looked as though the man could barely support his own weight on his spindly legs, it felt to Hunter as if he were leaning against stone.

Hunter waited for his head to clear a bit before asking, “Come into my what?”

The old man shook his head. “Not now. Come see me later, if you want. We can talk some more then.”

Hunter didn’t know if it was because of the blow to his head, but none of this made any sense. He allowed the old man to half carry him home in silence. It didn’t

THE LORD OF THE BEASTS

occur to him until he was home in bed, with his mother fussing over him as they waited for a doctor, to wonder how the old man had known where he lived.