

Creatures of the In Between by Cindy Lin

Discussion Questions

1. Jin's favorite subject is monsters and Whispering, which is the art of handling and communicating with them. But there are other subjects that he must study, even though they bore him silly. Later he finds himself glad that he had to learn things that he thought useless at the time. Do you have a favorite subject in school? What's your least favorite? If you could study only one thing, what would it be? Do you have to be good at something to like it?

2. Though Jin doesn't have many friends at the palace, he's close to Old Fang, the commander of the special guards known as Imperial Beaststalkers. Old Fang teaches him boxing and lockpicking, which are not skills that crown princes are generally known for. What skill do you think is fun and would like to learn? (Cooking, martial arts, juggling, archery, ventriloquism, woodcarving, dance, playing instruments -- the limit is your imagination!)

3. All his life, Jin has been raised with the expectation that he will become emperor. Are there any expectations that you feel from family, friends, or other people around you? Are the expectations of others helpful, or do they make things harder?

4. Jin most admires and longs for a dragon as a companion, while his grandmother has an ill-tempered pet phoenix that does her bidding. But there are many other creatures that can be found on the island of monsters known as Whisper Island, all with extraordinary abilities. What sort of powers would your ideal monstermate have?

5. Even though Jin is the crown prince, he still gets in trouble and receives punishment from his grandmother. When he is grounded, he is confined to his rooms and unable to go out. Have you ever been stuck at home and unable to go anywhere? How did you pass the time? What did you miss most when you had to stay home?

6. After a lifetime of being served at the palace, Jin must learn to do things he hasn't done before, like using a map to get around, paying for items himself, making travel arrangements, building a fire, cooking, and doing messy chores that leave him stinky. Could you find your way around if you got lost? How? What if you didn't have a cell phone? If you were hungry and alone at home, what would you do? Are there any chores that you find particularly unpleasant?

7. Jin has been looking forward to the Monster Festival, but he finds it not as enjoyable as he thought. What makes him change his mind? What do you think bothers him the most?

8. Shishi is a little dog that becomes Jin's constant companion, and he loves her even though she's an ordinary beast. Do you have any pets of your own? What do you think is the best animal companion for you?

9. The twins, Masa and Mau, are Whisperers with the ability to communicate with creatures. They are suspicious of Jin, and have trouble believing what he says about himself. How does he win them over?

10. The piyao is a type of winged lion and is considered the fiercest fighter among uncanny beasts. It tells Jin that it's possible to be brave even when you feel fear. Have you ever been scared to do something but tried anyway? What happened? When you're afraid, what makes you feel better?

Activities

- Draw a map of what you think a refuge for monsters like Whisper Island would look like. Would it be mostly forest? Tropical jungle? Desert-like, or mountainous? What types of creatures would you find, and where on the island would they be found?
- Make your own bestiary, or a page from one! The imperial bestiary is Jin's favorite book at the Palace of Monsters, and it lists and describes every known fantastical creature in the Three Realms, with detailed illustrations. Create a bestiary entry, complete with a drawing or diagram. Choose from any group of creatures: household pets, wild animals, marine life, domesticated beasts, mythical monsters, and the like. Compile multiple entries into a bestiary of your own.
- Create a fortune-telling game that you might find in a festival fortune-teller's tent, like the one that Jin and Bingyoo visited. Write fun fortunes for players to receive after they've done something to make a selection, such as picking a card, choosing a number from a hat, throwing a token on a colored grid, spinning a wheel, flipping a coin, and so on. (Tip: fortunes that make people happy -- or at least laugh -- are the most fun to get and make people want to play more!)

