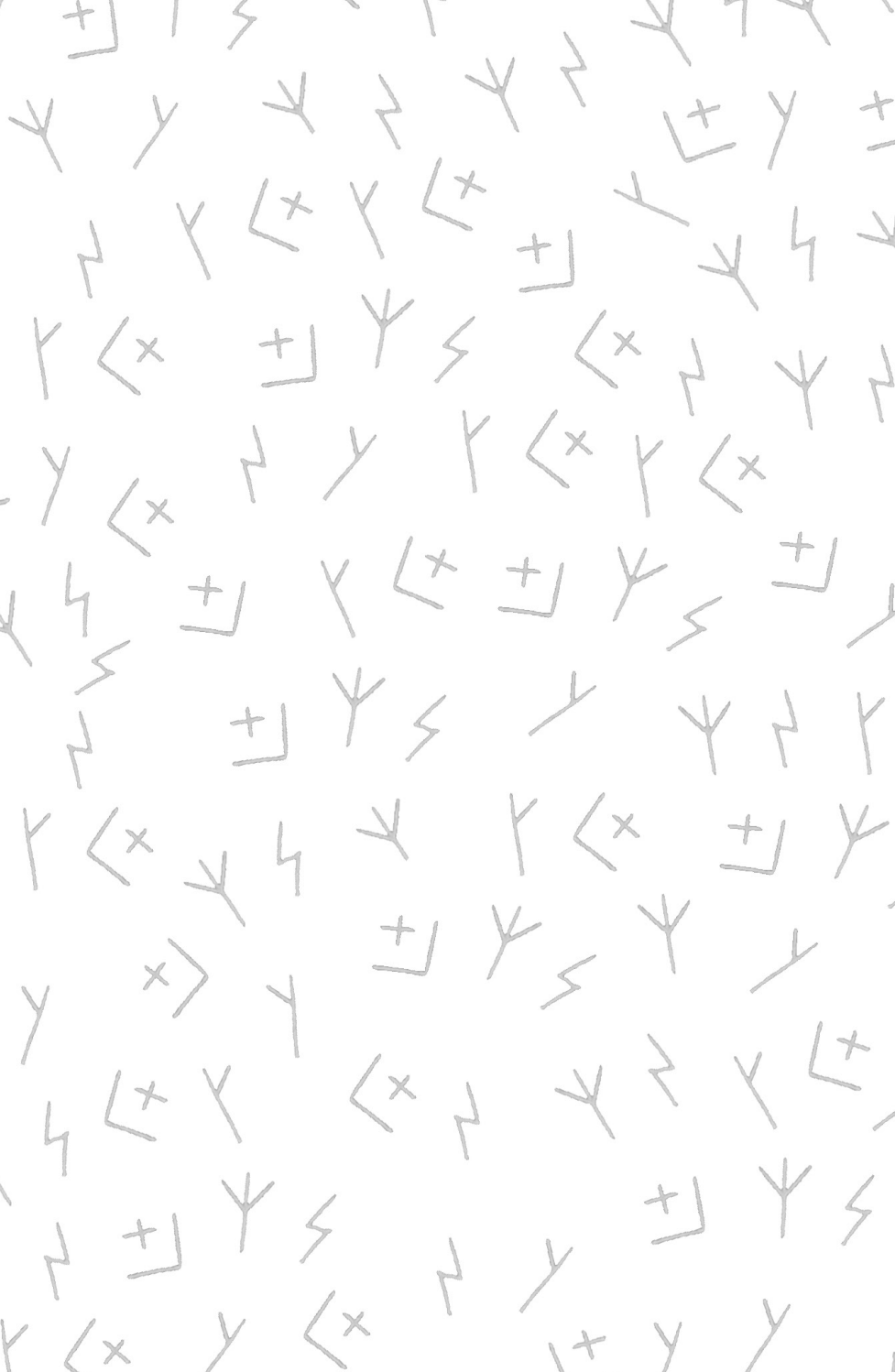
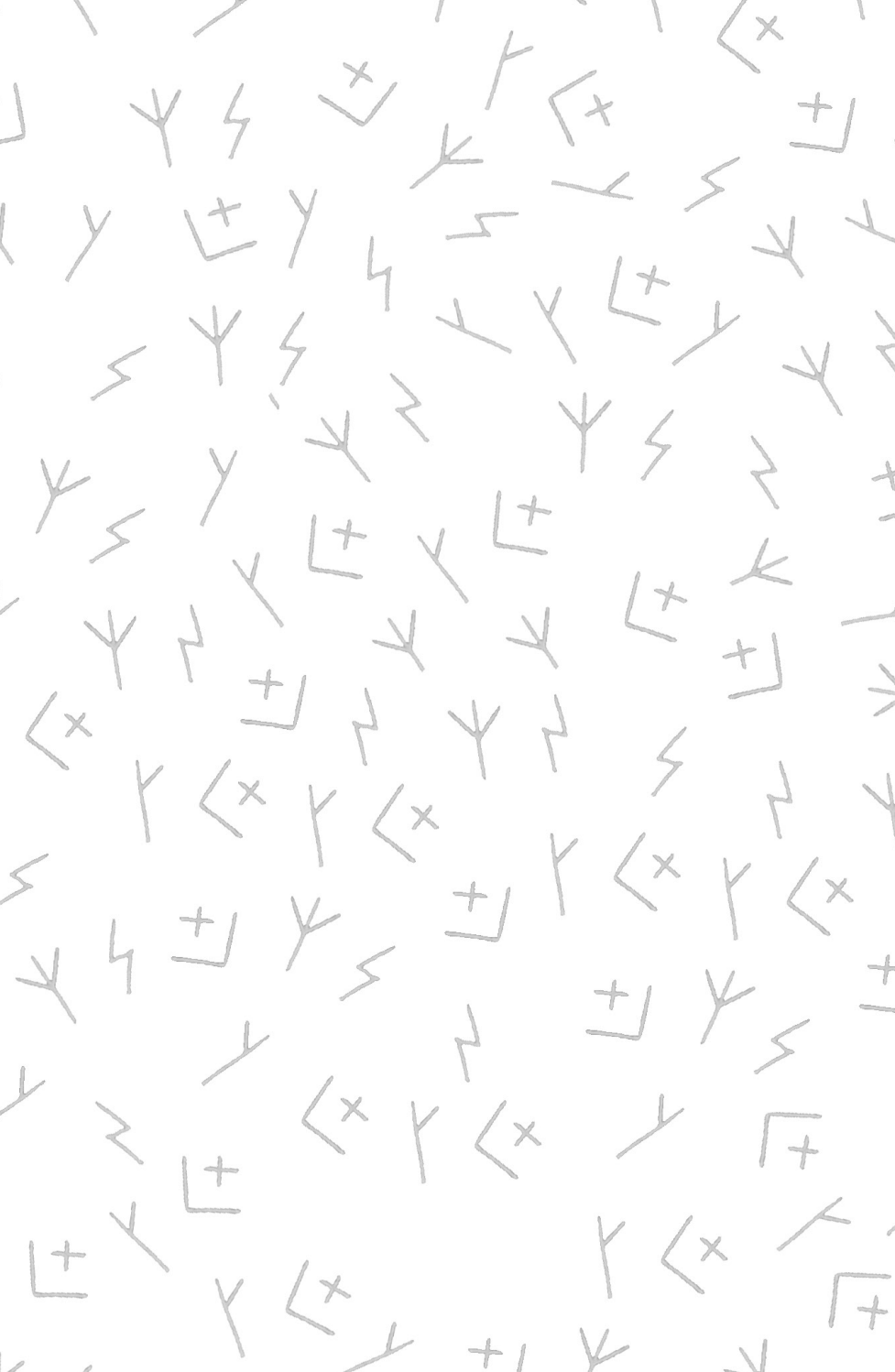
MOSSBELLY MAC FEARSOME

AND THE DWARVES OF DOOM





Mossbelly Mac Fearsome

and the Dwarves of Doom

Alex Gardiner



First published in Great Britain in 2019 by
Andersen Press Limited
20 Vauxhall Bridge Road
London SW1V 2SA
www.andersenpress.co.uk

2 4 6 8 10 9 7 5 3 1

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

The right of Alex Gardiner to be identified as the author of this work has been asserted by him in accordance with the Copyright, Designs and Patents Act, 1988.

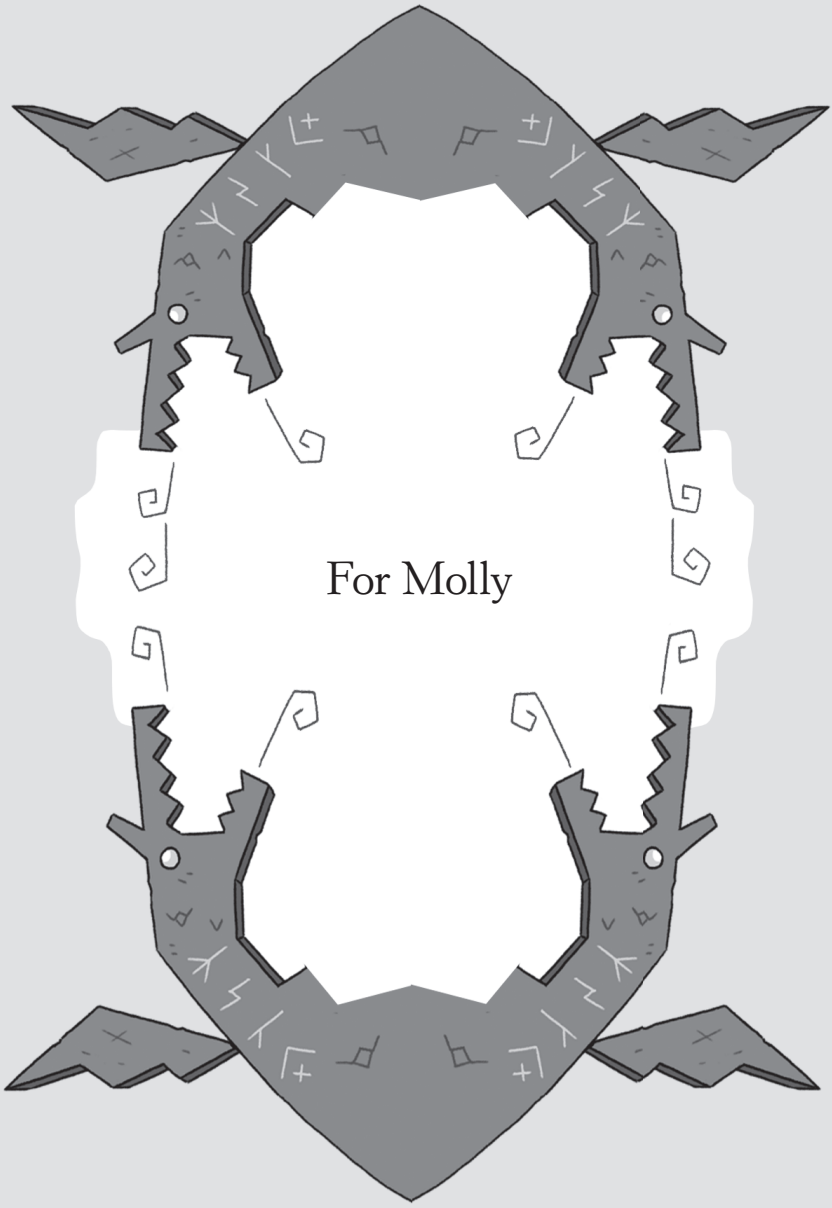
Text copyright © Alex Gardiner, 2019
Chapter header illustrations copyright © James Lancett, 2019

British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data available.

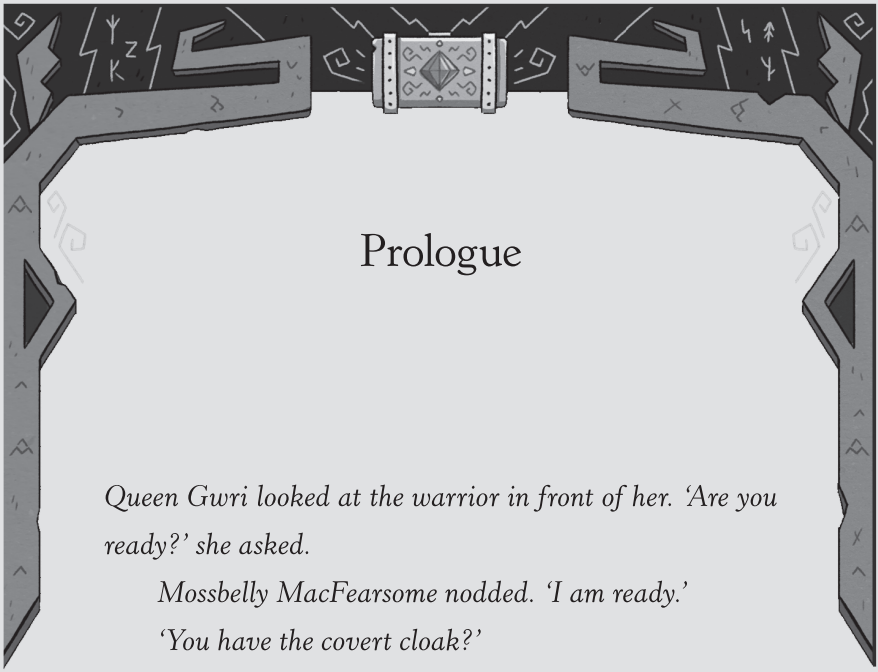
ISBN 978 1 78344 791 6



Printed and bound in Great Britain by Clays Ltd,
Elcograf S.p.A.



For Molly



Prologue

Queen Gwri looked at the warrior in front of her. 'Are you ready?' she asked.

Mossbelly MacFearsome nodded. 'I am ready.'

'You have the covert cloak?'

'In here.' The warrior patted the black satchel hanging over his right hip.

'Is it working?'

'Yes-ish. As well as can be expected. It's a long-ago thing.'

'You should not go by yourself, without companions,' said the Queen.

Mossbelly MacFearsome shook his head. 'I must go alone. You know the reason. No one can know our plan.' He puffed out his chest. 'And I am equal to a hundred companions.'

'But the danger!'

'It must be attempted. I will succeed.'

'You have the hammer?' Queen Gwri asked.

The warrior pointed at the satchel, slapped his chest, and then tapped a finger, twice, on the side of his nose.

'You cannot do the deed yourself,' said the Queen. 'You must find a suitable human to be your Destroyer.'

'I know, I know,' said Mossbelly MacFearsome, nodding.

'And you know where the Witchwatcher dwells?'

'I have the name of her castle.'

'Weapons?'

'Do not worry for me.'

'But I do. He will come for you, to kill you. And I am powerless to help, unless you can destroy—'

'It is the plan, to risk my death at his hands.' The warrior's voice grew deeper. He leaned forward and gently touched the large wart on the end of the Queen's nose. 'Rule well, my beloved. Farewell.'

A tear trickled down the Queen's face. 'Farewell,' she whispered, turning to leave.

Mossbelly MacFearsome, Captain of the Royal Guard, took a deep breath and watched as the love of his life walked away on her backward-facing feet.

CHAPTER
One

Roger Paxton's stomach was churning. He was scared. Hugh Ball was waiting for him at the park, looking for revenge.

It had all started when Roger had intervened as Hugh was twisting another boy's arm. In front of the entire playground, Roger had shouted at Hugh and called him an *unmitigated bully*. He wasn't really sure what *unmitigated* meant, but he had heard someone else saying it. And it had worked. Hugh had stopped his attack on the boy and turned his attention to Roger. Fortunately, before Hugh could inflict any damage, a teacher had intervened and saved Roger. But a message, to meet Hugh at the park at four o'clock, *or else*, had been delivered during the afternoon break.

Roger looked at his watch. It was five past four on Friday. He could turn the next corner and meet Hugh, or he could turn round and go home. Meeting Hugh would end in considerable pain. But going home would only

prolong what he would eventually have to face, on Monday morning, to save Hugh's reputation as the undisputed school bully.

Roger sighed and began walking towards the park. He had only taken a couple of steps when he bumped into something hard and unyielding. He staggered back and stood looking at . . . what? Roger blinked.

There was nothing there.

He held out both hands and felt the empty air. There was a loud grunt followed by the sound of heavy footsteps. Roger began to walk away quickly.

Behind him someone sniff-snorted. Roger spun round.

From out of nowhere, a dwarf appeared. A dwarf, who looked as though he had just stepped out of a fantasy film.

'Where did you come from?' gasped Roger.

The dwarf looked puzzled. 'Can you see me?' he asked, raising his arms and looking down at himself as he turned his body from side to side.

Roger nodded vigorously. He was looking at a dwarf wearing a flimsy, see-through cloak and hood. Under the cloak the dwarf was dressed in a brown leather tunic with matching trousers tucked into scuffed boots. The dwarf was almost as broad as he was tall. He had a wrinkly,

leathery face, covered in faint blue marks, and a long grey beard. There was a sword, dagger and a knobbly cudgel on one side of his waist, and a bulky black satchel hanging on the other side. A two-headed axe was strapped to his lower chest and Roger caught a glimpse of a small black hammer nestling just under his beard as the dwarf moved his body.

'Yes,' said Roger, still nodding.

'Are you sure?' asked the dwarf in a deep, rumbling voice. His accent was of someone from the Highlands of Scotland.

Roger closed his eyes and rubbed them. He opened his eyes. The dwarf was standing directly in front of him.

'Yes!' shouted Roger.

'Bellringers!' roared the dwarf. He began tugging at the clasp holding the flimsy cloak around his neck.

'Please,' said Roger, backing away. 'Don't . . .'

'Don't what?' asked the dwarf, still struggling with the clasp. 'I'm not going to do anything to you, ugly human. Get out of here.'

Roger turned to run.

'Wait!' The dwarf had stopped tugging and was now thumping the clasp with his stubby hands. 'What is your name?'

'I'm . . . Roger.'

'Strong name,' said the dwarf. 'Now go, Roger. And if you ever tell of this I'll come to your sleep room and eat you.'

Roger turned again.

'Wait!'

Roger stopped.

'Why were you dithering just now, and looking at your time dial?'

'I was going to the park,' said Roger, licking his lips. His mouth felt very dry. 'I've got to fight someone. But I'll go home instead. I promise.'

The dwarf stopped banging on the clasp and tilted his head to one side, looking closely at Roger.

'Fight, eh? Who you fight? You win fight? You are a good fighter, warrior?'

'Hugh . . . um, Hugh Ball,' said Roger. 'No, I won't win the fight. He's too big and I'm not a fighter. Actually, I should go home now.'

'No!' yelled the dwarf. 'Do not go home. Go fight Hughumhughball. Go now.'

Just as Roger turned to run, the dwarf banged the clasp – very hard – and vanished.

CHAPTER
Two

Roger ran, arms pumping, head down, round the corner and into the park entrance. A great cheer went up. Roger looked up and saw half the school standing in front of him. In the middle of the crowd was the hulking figure of Hugh Ball.

'Come on, Paxton,' yelled Hugh, thumping his fists together. 'I'm going to smash you for what you said to me. I am *not* a . . . umnittagated!'

Roger slowed to a halt. He stood, panting slightly, looking at the boy in front of him. Hugh was big. The two boys moved closer and began circling each other. The crowd fell silent.

Roger raised his fists, hands trembling and legs shaking.

Hugh stepped forward and swung a fist. Roger gasped and ducked. His legs buckled and he dropped to his knees. Directly in front of him was a large quivering stomach. He let fly with a punch. Hugh didn't even grunt

as Roger's fist hit him and bounced off. Still kneeling, Roger felt a gust of wind as *something* flew past his head and struck Hugh's left foot. Glancing down, Roger could see a large dent in Hugh's shoe.

Roger stood up warily, the palms of his hands resting on his shaking thighs. He looked around. But there was no one else near them.

Hugh was standing absolutely still. His face was completely drained of colour, except for a small graze on the tip of his nose. His mouth was open and his eyes were wide with shock.

Roger raised his fists again.

'My foot . . .' said Hugh, pointing down at it.

Roger watched in amazement as Hugh hopped three times on his good foot, then toppled backwards and lay still.

The crowd went wild.

'Did you see that? I knew Roger would win.'

'That was karate, that was. Did you see the speed of that punch?'

'Fan-tas-tic. Knew Roger would beat him!'

Two of Hugh's followers rushed over and knelt beside him.

'Wh-what happened?' asked Roger, still shaking.

'You've killed him,' said Findlay McNuttal, looking up. 'That's what you've done with your . . . whatever you did.'

'But I didn't do that,' said Roger, pointing at the fallen figure.

'You did!' Martin Plumbly's voice screeched as he stood up and backed away. 'We all saw you. You hit poor Hugh so hard you've killed him.'

Hugh moaned, then his eyes blinked open and he began to cry.

'What's wrong with you?' asked Roger. 'And what happened to your nose?'

'My foot,' wailed Hugh, slowly sitting up. He reached out a hand and gingerly touched his hurt foot. 'You've broken it!' A tiny drop of blood from Hugh's grazed nose dropped on to his shirt. He put his hand up to his face and screamed.

'Oh be quiet!' shouted Roger, bending down and staring into Hugh's face.

Hugh stopped screaming.

Roger turned to walk away, then spun round again. 'And another thing,' he said, his voice almost a squeal. 'If I ever see you bullying *anyone* . . . I'll . . . I'll . . . I'll do something . . . *Understand?*'

Hugh nodded as tears ran down his face.

'Right, then,' squeaked Roger. 'That's . . .' He nodded his head and wagged a finger. 'That's . . . that, then . . . OK?'

'Yes,' sobbed Hugh.

'Good, good,' said Roger. 'That's good.' And he turned and made his way through the cheering, back-slapping crowd.

As he pushed away from the last of the well-wishers, Roger began to feel sick. He started to run. He ran into a narrow lane between some houses, stopped at a wall and bent over just as his stomach emptied.

'What a mess you make,' said a voice, puffing beside him. 'Why do you throw your food out?'

'Who's there?' asked Roger, wiping his mouth with the back of his hand and looking around. 'Where are you?'

'Here,' said the same voice, but now from in front.

'Not *again*,' said Roger. 'Go away, I don't want to see you.'

'Why not? I made you win the fight with Hughumhughball.'

The dwarf suddenly appeared in front of Roger. He was unclipping the flimsy cloak from its neck clasp.

'What did you do to Hugh?' asked Roger.

'Hit him with this,' said the dwarf, indicating his cudgel. 'Well, tried to hit him, but missed because you were in the way.'

Roger stopped wiping his mouth and watched as the

dwarf rolled up the cloak and slipped it into the satchel on his hip.

'If you'd struck his head you might have killed him,' said Roger. 'Your club nearly broke his nose. You skinned his nose! You broke his foot!'

'I am sorry,' said the dwarf. 'Next time I won't miss. I'll break his head for you.'

'No,' said Roger. 'You can't go around killing people.'

'You want to get a pummelling from Hughumhughball?'

'No,' said Roger. 'But you can't—'

'*Sheeesh!*' said the dwarf, raising a dirty, podgy finger to his lips. 'Did you hear a noise?'

'What noise?' Roger looked around anxiously. 'What?'

The dwarf did not answer. He spun round and pulled out his sword and axe. There was a soft *skittering* sound. Something dropped over the wall beside the dwarf.

Roger stared in horror as the thing approached. It was small with a smooth skull-shaped head and a wide grinning mouth. Its skin was a blotchy yellowish-grey, criss-crossed with tiny black pulsating veins. The creature had sunken eyes, a bent back and a forked tail. In its clawlike hands it held a crude wooden spear. The point of the spear was three rusty nails, bound with wire.

'What's . . . *that*?' gasped Roger, backing away rapidly.

'Gorefiend,' said the dwarf, moving forward, weapons swinging. 'Keep out of my way. I'll chop this smellsock into the smallest of pieces.'

'One moment,' said the gorefiend in a polite voice, as it sniffed the air around Roger. 'May I have the pleasure of introducing another of my friends?'

There was the same *skittering* noise and another armed gorefiend dropped over the wall.

'Oh,' said the first gorefiend, 'and more, if you please.'

Two more creatures dropped to the ground and moved towards the dwarf, waving their spears.

'Four, eh,' grunted the dwarf. 'Right, two for sword and two for axe. I'll cut off your heads and break your backs.'

Something caught the corner of Roger's eye. It was a fifth gorefiend, creeping over the wall behind the dwarf. It dropped to the ground and raised its spear above its head.

'Be-be-behind you!' Roger yelled, pointing a trembling finger.

The dwarf's sword arm slashed backwards and the blade caught the gorefiend in the chest just as it lunged forward with its spear. The spear missed the dwarf's back but plunged into his right leg.

'Front!' screeched Roger as the four remaining gorefiends attacked.

The dwarf threw his head back and bellowed, 'King Golmar's Braces!' as he limped forward with the spear still sticking out the back of his lower leg. He swung his axe, taking off the head of the first gorefiend.

'Oh,' said the head as it flew through the air. 'Thank you very much, I'm sure.'

A second gorefiend was dispatched with a sword lunge to the middle of its stomach. 'Nice one, Captain,' it said, as it fell. The third charged, its spear aimed at the dwarf's chest, and was killed by a sidestroke from the swinging axe. The remaining gorefiend threw its spear at the dwarf, who batted it easily to one side and hurled his axe in return. The axe just missed its target and clanged off the wall. The gorefiend sniffed several times then, cackling madly, it scrambled over the wall and vanished.

'Festering fustilugs,' snarled the dwarf, sheathing his sword and limping over to retrieve his axe. 'I should not have missed that one. Come here, Roger. Help me with my leg.'

Roger took a couple of steps. The remains of the four gorefiends began to smoke and spark; yellow gunge bubbled out as flames quickly consumed their bodies. In seconds all that remained was a faint yellow tinge on the ground and an unpleasant aroma. Roger began to feel queasy again.

'Hurry,' said the dwarf. 'There may be more. Quickly. Pull this out.'

'I c-can't,' said Roger, backing away and covering his eyes.

'Do it!' snapped the dwarf, shaking his fist. 'Or I'll let your brains out of your head.'

Roger moved towards the dwarf and took hold of the small spear. He closed his eyes and looked away.

'Now,' the dwarf spoke softly, 'when I say pull, pull as hard as you can. Understand me?'

Roger nodded, his eyes still tightly shut.

'Pull!'

Roger yanked at the spear with all of his strength. There was a slight sucking noise as the spear came free. His arms flew up over his head and he stumbled back into the wall behind him. As he hit the rough stone, he felt the spear he was holding plunge into something soft.

Someone screamed.

Roger let go of the spear and turned round. The spear was sticking in the thigh of a snarling, red-eyed dwarf standing on top of the wall. The dwarf was wobbling violently and waving an axe. Roger reached out and grabbed the corner of the dwarf's wildly flapping cloak. The dwarf steadied himself, and then swung his axe. Roger ducked as the axe whistled over his head and down, cutting through the cloak he was holding. Screaming again, the dwarf toppled backwards. There was a loud

thump, a torrent of jumbled words from the dwarf, followed by several *skittering* sounds, and then silence.

'I knew that blustering whiteliver would be skulking nearby,' shouted the first dwarf. 'The cowardly trundletail would not eyeball me in nose-to-nose combat.' He made a low moan of pain. 'However, my judgement is, as usual, as sound as a badger's belch. I have been searching for a worthy warrior to carry out an act of noble insanity, to face almost certain death. And you are indeed such a warrior! You have no fear in challenging stronger enemies like Hughumhughball. And now you have wounded Leatherhead Barnstorm and attacked him with your bare hands.' The dwarf gave another moan of pain, followed by a chuckle. 'That gave my wink-a-peeps great pleasure.' His voice grew deeper. 'You are the one. I choose you for my Destroyer. So named, so be it.'

'Wh-wh-wh . . .' Roger stared back at the wall. He looked at the piece of material in his hand and then at the wall again. 'Wh-what happened? Who *was* that? What did he say?'

'Ah, nothing, just a death curse.'

'What?' Roger dropped the bit of cloak and pointed at the empty wall. 'What do you mean?'

'Do not concern yourself with it. It's a simple description of how he will kill you. How many days he will take and

the variety of methods he would employ to ensure maximum suffering. That is all.'

'I didn't . . .' Roger could barely speak. 'I pulled it out – it just – I didn't mean to – should I go and look for him?'

'Ah, you want to go after him and kill him!' said the dwarf. 'Spoken like a true warrior. No, he is long gone. Come to me, I need your assistance.'

Roger blinked his eyes several times and went over to the dwarf.

He was sitting on the ground, unfolding a large red handkerchief. He wound it around his leg, pulled it tight and knotted it firmly. The dwarf stood up and stamped his foot, only to give a little shriek of pain and sit down again.

Roger knelt beside him. 'Is there anything I can do?'

'Yes,' said the dwarf, groaning and holding his leg. 'Very sore leg. Must get away from here. Can you get a wheeled carriage to remove me?'

'A what?' asked Roger.

'Wheeled carriage. A carriage with wheels, to put me in. I cannot walk far like this.'

'Oh,' said Roger, looking around. 'Right, hang on, I'll see what I can do.'

CHAPTER
Three

Roger left the dwarf sitting on the ground and ran out of the lane. There was nothing on his side of the road but houses. Across the road was a general store with two empty pushchairs sitting outside the entrance.

Roger crossed the road, grabbed the sturdier-looking of the two pushchairs and wheeled it back to the waiting dwarf.

'Good, Roger,' said the dwarf. 'You steal the carriage?'

'Um . . . borrowed,' said Roger.

'Help me in,' said the dwarf, scooping up some small bits of gravel in his hand.

Roger helped the surprisingly heavy little man get to his feet and then gently settled him into the pushchair.

'I'll take you home,' said Roger. 'My mum's a nurse. She'll know what to do with your leg.'

'First,' said the dwarf, 'give this to the carriage owner.' He held out his fist and dropped several small

golden nuggets into Roger's hand. 'Then we must find the Witchwatcher of Auchterbolton.'

'Is that . . . gold?' asked Roger. 'How did—?'

'Go give, quickly,' growled the dwarf. 'We must leave.'

Roger dodged traffic as he ran back across the road. A puzzled-looking woman holding a toddler by the hand was standing outside the shop; a large shopping bag lay at her feet.

'You lost your pushchair?' asked Roger.

The woman nodded.

'Me and a dwarf have borrowed it,' said Roger, holding out his hand with the golden nuggets. 'He's been injured by a gorefiend stabbing him in the leg with a spear. We need to get away quickly. So we're sorry, but you can buy another buggy with this.'

The woman's mouth fell open as Roger dropped the gold into her palm.

'Oh,' said Roger, looking into the woman's eyes. 'And he killed four gorefiends – they smell awful – and now he wants to find a . . . a Witchwatcher.' He licked his lips as he thought about what he had just said. 'What do you think I should do?' he whispered, staring intently at the woman.

There was no reply. The woman bit her bottom lip and pulled the toddler closer.

'The gorefiends burn up all yellow,' Roger continued. 'And I-I did something really bad with a spear. It was an accident. I didn't mean to . . .'

The woman shook her head. Her mouth opened and closed silently. The toddler tugged at her hand, then kicked over the shopping bag, spilling its contents on the pavement.

Roger took a deep breath, gave a little shudder, and turned to cross the road again. 'OK, thanks anyway. Sorry about your pushchair. Nice wee boy you've got.'

'She's a girl,' said the woman, finding her voice at last.

'Right,' said Roger, and he dashed back over the road, leaving the woman still standing in the same position.

'Onwards, Roger,' said the dwarf as Roger returned. 'Now we go find the Witchwatcher Gwendolena Goodroom, and make our stand against the dark forces.'

'No,' said Roger, pulling out a tartan blanket lying folded in the bottom carry-tray of the pushchair. 'We're going to my house.' He began to cover the dwarf's head and body with the blanket.

'What are you doing?' grumbled the dwarf. 'Waylay this frippery. We *must* go find Goodroom the Witchwatcher. It is urgent!'

'Now, look!' Roger shouted. 'I've had enough. I don't know who or what you are. You suddenly appear and

nearly kill Hugh. You appear again and kill gore-things. And I do something . . . horrible. I'm not doing any more. I'm going home, and if you want to come with me, my mum will help you. If not, then just stay here. I'm off.' Roger turned and began to walk away.

The dwarf grunted. 'Stay, Roger. Wait.'

Roger looked back at the tartan-covered figure almost hidden in the pushchair.

'We'll go see your maternal human,' said the dwarf. 'I need to stop the bleeding and weaken the pain.'

Roger walked back to the pushchair. He tucked away some beard hair sticking out of the blanket and then got behind the chair to push it out of the lane.

'We'll go this way,' said Roger. 'Keep that cover pulled up as far as you can so people can't see your face, so they don't see that you're a . . . that you're different. And tuck your beard in.'

The dwarf grunted, but did as he was told.



Roger tried to avoid people as he pushed the dwarf through the streets. Everything went well until he turned into the road where he lived and walked straight into two of his neighbours: Agnes McKeek and Anna Botting.

'Well, well, Agnes,' said Mrs Botting, breaking off her conversation. 'Look what we have here. The Paxton boy has got himself a baby. Did your father bring that back from the oil rigs, or is he still away, working overtime, eh?'

The two women giggled, snorting and pushing at each other.

'No,' said Roger quietly. 'My dad's not home just now.'

'Whose is it?' asked Mrs McKeek. 'It's too big to be very new.'

Both women moved towards Roger. Roger took a couple of backward steps, pulling the pushchair with him.

'Don't move, Roger Paxton,' snapped Mrs Botting.

'Stay right where you are,' said Mrs McKeek. 'Let's have a look at this child.'

'I can explain,' began Roger. 'It's not what it looks like.'

Mrs Botting and Mrs McKeek leaned right into the pushchair and slowly pulled down the tartan cover.

'Oh, in the name of . . . !' Mrs Botting spoke in a shocked whisper.

'It's a monster!' gasped Mrs McKeek.

The dwarf pushed himself upright on his good leg and shook a gleaming axe at the women. '*Kirkiemachough, you blob-tailed buttermilks!*' he bellowed at the top of his voice.

Mrs McKeek screamed, dropped her shopping bag, and ran across the road, waving her arms in the air. She tripped over the edge of the pavement, pirouetted gracefully, and fell backwards through a small privet hedge. There was a loud *ooof* as she hit the ground. She lay on her back, gasping and whimpering, her legs sticking out of the hedge.

Mrs Botting started running, both hands over her mouth to control a sudden attack of hiccups. She reached the pavement on the far side of the road, jumped over Mrs Botting in the hedge and, without a backward glance, ran across the front garden and disappeared round the side of the house.

'Help, Anna, help,' gasped Mrs McKeek, as her friend vanished. 'I can't . . . hardly breathe.'

At that very second a police car came hurtling round the corner. Two policemen were in the front, and in the back was a woman Roger recognised as Hugh Ball's mother. The car pulled up outside Roger's house and both policemen jumped out, ran up the path and started hammering on the front door.

The door opened and Roger's mother appeared, holding his little sister.

Roger started to back away, but just then Mrs Ball spotted him. 'That's him there, the hooligan,' she yelled,

pointing at Roger and struggling to get out of the police car. 'That's the bully who nearly killed my poor wee Hughie.'

'Rod-ger!' Roger's sister, Hannah, shouted and waved at her brother while his mother stood looking bewildered.

'Come play with me, Rod-ger,' yelled Hannah.

The policemen left Mrs Paxton and began to sprint down the road towards Roger.

At that moment Mrs Ball sprang out of the police car and staggered on to the pavement, waving a large handbag around her head. 'Get him!' she screamed. 'Get the wee—'

The running policemen collided with the screaming woman and her large handbag. All three crashed to the ground. One of the policemen was trapped under Mrs Ball; he appeared to be unconscious.

The other policeman got to his feet and took a few wobbly steps before tripping over Mrs McKeek's legs dangling from the hedge.

Roger, on the other side of the road, looked at his mother and sister for a moment. Then he turned the pushchair round and began to run.