Mossbelly MacFearsome and the Goblin Army

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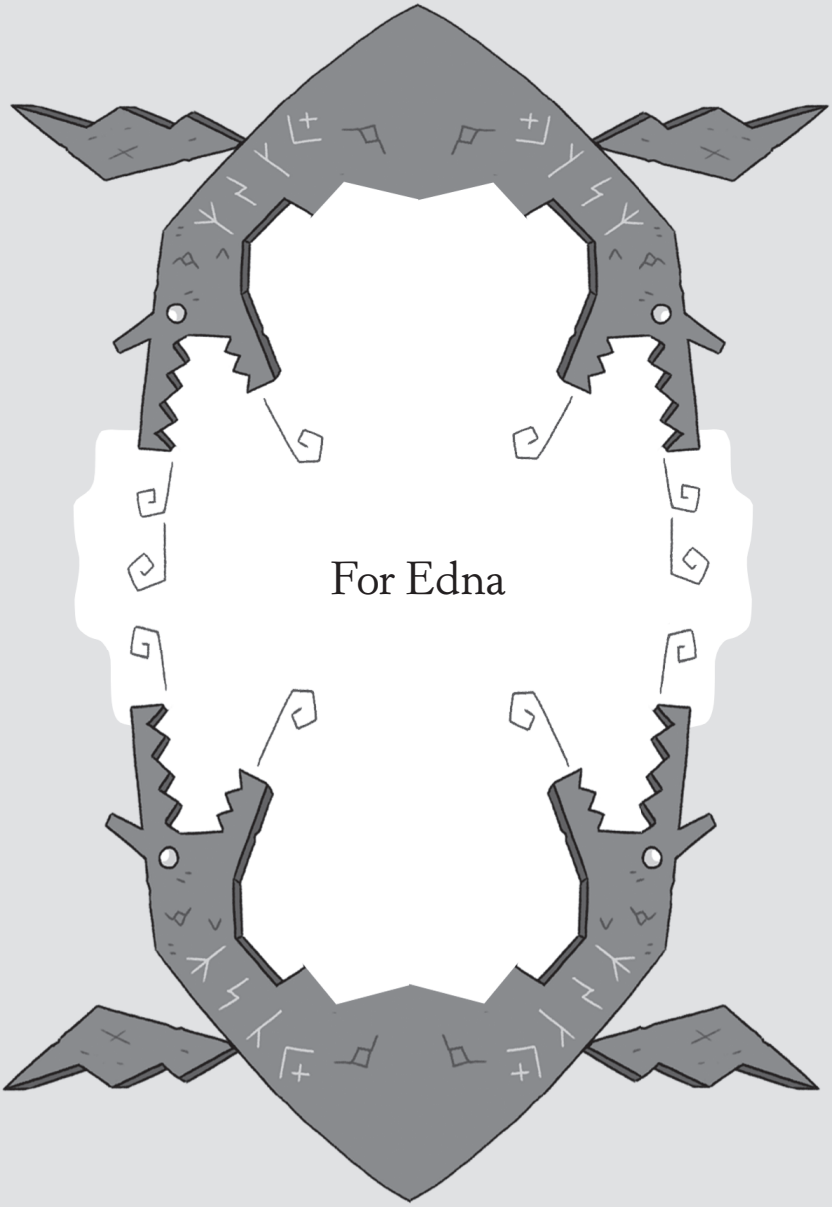

For Edna

Prologue

'Still no word from our tracker, Bloodbone Knottenbelt?' Queen Gwri looked at the High Judge.

'Nothing, your Majesty,' said High Judge Turbid Syllabub. 'Bloodbone is always reliable, one of our best. But there has been no word from him for several days. And we have read reports in one of those human paper-tablets of shrieking and strange blue lights emanating from his last-known area.'

The Queen glanced seriously at the other dwarf in the room, before addressing the High Judge again. 'And you think this means that the Goblin Chief has returned to Yester Castle to open the portal?'

The High Judge nodded gravely. 'Since the goblin Redcap was accidentally released from his incarceration by the human children, Roger and Maddie, the trackers searching the lands far and wide have found no trace of him – until Bloodbone's last message.'

Queen Gwri lifted the small piece of paper from the table in front of her. She held it close to her eyes. 'I cannot make out this writing; it is blurred from wetness. You are certain that it says, "I have found him"?'

'Yes,' said the High Judge.

Gwri nodded, then turned to the third dwarf. 'You know what this means?'

'I do.' Captain Mossbelly MacFearsome's face was grim. 'Our wedding ceremony is delayed – again.'

'More to the point, the portal!' snapped the Queen. 'Everything indicates that Redcap has returned to the area of Yester Castle. And the blue light could mean that the dodecahedron is already in place! If this is so, the portal will open at midnight on All Hallows' Eve and the accursed goblins will invade Earth, once more!'

Moss pulled his shoulders back and slapped his chest. 'I shall now go to do the impossible, in the shortest possible time.' He turned to leave.

'Wait,' said Queen Gwri, following after Moss on her backward-facing feet. She placed a hand on his arm. 'Take the children and the Witchwatcher with you. They must be involved in this for their part in the goblin's release, but inform them of the danger, the terrible risk. Protect them.' The Queen raised her other hand and gently touched Moss's beard. Her face was grim. 'The portal – it cannot be opened.

Not again! You understand the consequences should this happen?'

'I do,' said Moss, looking into the dark eyes in front of him. 'Death and destruction would follow.'

'Or worse,' said Queen Gwri, 'much worse. Now go, with all haste. Stop the portal from opening. Destroy it.' She broke eye contact with Moss and looked down at the floor. 'And in case something goes amiss, I'll be ready to recall the army from the north. The polar dragons could not have chosen a worse time to go on a rampage.'

Moss bowed. 'I shall not fail. Farewell.' He turned on his heel and walked out of the Queen's chamber. The door clicked shut behind him.

There was silence for a few moments.

'Ahem,' said High Judge Syllabub. 'May I leave as well, your Majesty? Only thing is . . . you're standing on my cloak.'

The Queen did not answer. She stared at the closed door, and spoke quietly to herself. 'I fear that it is already too late . . . much too late.'

CHAPTER
One

Miss Runacres was talking, but Roger was only half listening. He was lost in thought, miles away. His lack of attention had nothing to do with his teacher; he liked Miss Runacres and enjoyed her lessons. Roger was thinking back to when he and his friends had saved the world from the evil dwarf Leatherhead Barnstorm and his deadly gorefiends. It had been a great adventure – but terrifying at the time.

It was now the end of October, and he had last seen his friends during the summer holidays, when he had started his training as a Warlockwatcher at Auchterbolton Castle. Not that he had done much training or acquired any knowledge of even the simplest spells; he had spent most of his time playing games with Lady Goodroom's legally-adopted ward, Maddie. Lady Goodroom had been too busy looking after her husband who was recovering from his gunshot wound. And Wullie, now working full time for Lady Goodroom, had

been busy overseeing the builders working on the wrecked library.

But now Roger was about to see all of them again. He glanced at his watch; in slightly over two hours Wullie was coming to pick him up at the school gates and take him to Auchterbolton Castle for Halloween. His backpack, with a change of clothes and Halloween costume, was hanging beside his anorak in the cloakroom. He was very excited and finding it difficult to concentrate on his lessons.

Roger rubbed his forehead – he felt a slight irritation – and began thinking about the one who had launched him into his great adventure after their accidental meeting: Captain Mossbelly MacFearsome, the grumpiest, most troublesome, aggravating . . . strongest, bravest, *maddest* dwarf he had ever met. A dwarf with the ability to turn pebbles into gold and words into nonsense, the one who had named Roger as 'Destroyer', a name he was secretly quite proud of.

Roger gradually became aware that there was silence in the classroom. Miss Runacres had stopped talking. He blinked his eyes and looked round. To his utter astonishment he found that he was standing up. The teacher and the entire classroom were staring at him.

'Roger?' Miss Runacres smiled, and then waited expectantly.

'I need to go – *now*!' Roger heard himself speaking, but had no idea why he'd said the words.

'Fine, Roger,' said Miss Runacres, slowly nodding her head. 'But you know that you don't need to stand up, just raise your hand when you need to go.'

'I *don't* need to go,' said Roger, feeling very bewildered. His brain and his mouth did not seem to be working together. He sat down again.

There were a few titters from the class.

'It's all right, Roger.' Miss Runacres smiled knowingly. 'If you've got to go, you've got to go – that's fine – off you go.' She flapped a hand at him. 'Go on, Roger, go now.'

Roger rubbed his head again; he was feeling very uncomfortable. 'No, honestly, it's OK; I really don't need to go. I'm fine, I'll just sit here . . . carry on.'

There were a few gasps and more giggles.

'Oh, *thank you*, Roger,' said Miss Runacres, taking a deep breath. She had stopped smiling. 'If you're sure it's all right for me to . . . *carry on*?'

Roger's face was quite red as he nodded.

There was a lot more laughing.

'Now then, stop that,' said Miss Runacres, looking round the classroom. 'Settle down.' She gave Roger a grim look. 'So, *you're* happy for me to continue with the lesson?'

Roger immediately bounced to his feet, he knew *exactly* what he had to do, and stepped out from his desk. 'I want to go outside,' he bellowed, pointing at the door, '*now*!'

The classroom burst into loud laughter.

Miss Runacres gasped and stepped back. 'Roger Paxton!' she shouted over the noise. 'Stop this nonsense at once! Return to your seat immediately, or I'll take you to see Mrs Carmichael.'

'Oh, I'm sorry, Miss,' said Roger, lowering his arm and looking round sheepishly. 'I didn't mean that. I don't know why I said it.' He went back to his seat, sat down and stared at his desktop. *What's happening to me*?

'Quiet, children!' Miss Runacres held up both hands as the laughter continued.

'Please Miss, please Miss!' yelled Harry Caplan, sitting at the front beside the window.

'*Quiet, children*!' thundered Miss Runacres, and then she stamped her foot.

The classroom fell silent.

'That's . . . that's better.' Miss Runacres smoothed her skirt and glared at Roger. Her face was bright red.

'Now then—'

'*Miss, Miss*!' Harry Caplan waved frantically at the teacher.

'*Not now*, Harry!' snapped Miss Runacres.

Roger could feel something happening to him again. *A strange sensation*. He stood up. 'I've definitely *got* to go,' he said. The sensation faded, and he sat down again.

The children collapsed: Oliver Taylor started braying like a donkey, Aisha Shad fell off her chair and sat on the floor giggling hysterically, and Cameron Sharpe made *mumming* sounds as he rocked back and forth. The only pupil in the class *not* laughing was Harry Caplan. He continued to gaze out of the window with a look of utter joy on his face.

Miss Runacres put both hands over her bright red cheeks. She began taking sharp, short breaths.

'*Miss, Miss*!' Harry Caplan's high-pitched voice cut through the laughter.

Miss Runacres looked at Harry. '*What*? What is so important, Harry? *What* can't wait? Have I not got enough—'

Harry Caplan stood up.

'Not another one!' gasped Miss Runacres.

Harry pointed at the window beside the emergency door. 'Look there, Miss,' he said, a huge, happy smile on his face. 'There's an intergalactic, alien mega-being from outer space standing there. I think he's just landed and wants to come in!'

The entire classroom turned to look.

A dwarf was pressed up against the window – a ferocious-looking dwarf bristling with weapons and wearing a helmet. He had a wrinkly leathery face, covered in faint blue marks, a long grey beard, and he appeared to be about as broad as he was tall. And he looked as if he had just walked off the set of a fantasy film. The dwarf stepped back from the window and bowed. There was a large, two-headed axe strapped to his back.

Harry Caplan bowed back.

Miss Runacres began breathing faster; she made a noise like squeaking air escaping from a balloon as she hyperventilated.

The dwarf, still bowed over, suddenly charged forward and crashed through the window.

Miss Runacres collapsed in a dead faint.

'Invasion from outer space!' screamed Harry Caplan. 'They're not friendly! Run for it!'

The classroom erupted. Tables and chairs went flying as children fled towards the door. Within seconds the classroom was empty apart from Roger, still sitting at his desk, and Miss Runacres lying on the floor.

The dwarf marched over to Roger, shaking off the shards of glass from his shoulders and helmet.

'What are you doing here, Moss?' asked Roger, desperately trying to remain calm. 'Is that a new hat?'

Mossbelly MacFearsome rapped his knuckles on the helmet covering his head. 'It is not a *hat*, it is a battle-helmet!' He glanced down at Miss Runacres, grunted, and then looked round the classroom. 'Come,' he said to Roger, 'for we have no time to be wasted, we are once again to be boonfellows on a vital undertaking.'

'Actually, I'm going to stay with Maddie for a few days at the castle,' said Roger, drumming his fingers on the desk. 'My mum and dad said it was OK. So I can't go anywhere with you.'

'You are not going to the castle,' said Moss. 'The matter we have is grave and the time we have is—'

The school fire alarm started ringing.

'What *is* that infernal noise?' roared Moss, pulling out his sword. 'Have they loosed the bell-ringing bear from the Bass Rock?'

'It's the fire alarm,' yelled Roger, jumping to his feet, no longer feeling calm. 'Could you not have opened the door like a normal person?' He glared at Moss. 'Look at the mess you've made.'

Moss gave two loud sniffs. 'I smell no smoke and see no fire. The alarm is false.'

'It's for you!' screamed Roger, staring directly into Moss's face. 'Someone has pressed the fire alarm because of you!'

Moss looked down at himself. 'I am not on fire.'

'Oh you—' Roger stepped back. 'Did you do something to me just now? Something to my mind?'

'Not I,' said Moss. 'But Lady Goodroom was attempting to draw you out by using a command-spell. It did not work on your brain-head, your power of will must be too strong, so I came to get you as time is of the utmost importance.'

'Lady Goodroom's here?' shouted Roger over the deafening ringing.

'Yes,' he said impatiently. 'Come now, we must depart.'

'Is Maddie with her aunt?'

'She is,' nodded Moss.

'Oh. Well, just let me get my backpack and anorak.' Roger started towards the door, and then stopped. '*You*, stay here. Don't move; the cloakroom is just around the corner. I'll only be a second, OK?'

Without waiting for an answer Roger ran out of the classroom. The corridor outside was full of children running along in single file. Most of them were laughing excitedly. He pushed past the line of children and opened the first door on the right, unhooked his anorak from its peg and slipped it on. The zip stuck as he pulled it up.

There was a burst of yelling and shouting from the

corridor. Roger grabbed his backpack and flew out of the cloakroom – straight into Moss. It was like hitting a brick wall. He bounced off the dwarf and would have fallen over if Moss hadn't caught him. By now, the orderly line of children in the corridor had turned into a screaming mob fleeing in both directions.

'Come,' said Moss, shaking Roger by the shoulder, 'I have told you that we must hurry! We must capture or kill the Goblin Chief, Redcap, before the portal opens.'

'And *I* told you to wait where you were,' said Roger, pushing back at the dwarf and pointing at the now empty corridor. 'Now look what you've done.'

'I see nothing,' said Moss, looking up and down it.

'Exactly!' shouted Roger. 'You never see the trouble you cause.'

'No time for your idle chatter,' said Moss. 'We must leave.' He turned round and walked back to the classroom just as Miss Runacres came stumbling out of the door.

Moss stopped to let the teacher pass.

Miss Runacres gave Moss a groggy, lopsided smile. 'Thank you, young man,' she said. 'It's a lovely day.' She staggered past Roger without looking at him. 'I'm just going home to have a nice hot bath. Maybe a bit of cake to help with this noise ringing in my ears.'

'Look what you've done to that poor woman,' shouted

Roger, as his teacher slowly walked along the corridor mumbling to herself.

Moss shrugged. 'A touch feather-headed perhaps, but otherwise she has a pleasant disposition.'

Roger and Moss went back into the wrecked classroom and out through the broken window to the playing field at the side of the building. They started walking towards the school gates as children came pouring out of their classrooms and began lining up in rows in front of the school. The fire alarm was still ringing.

'What did you say we had to do?' shouted Roger. He had stopped in the middle of the playing field and was angrily pulling at the stuck zip on his anorak.

'Capture or kill the Goblin Chief, Redcap, before he opens the portal,' answered Moss. He pointed to a car at the school gates.

'You're crazy!' said Roger, as the zip came free at last. 'I'm not doing anything like that.'

'It is your blame that he was allowed to escape,' said Moss.

Roger stood, thinking for a moment. Behind him someone was shouting his name. Roger glanced back. Hugh Ball was running over.

'But then you lost track of him,' said Roger. 'You dwarves were going to find him. That's what you told us!'

'There is no time for you to fight with Hughumhughball,' said Moss, using his mistaken name for Hugh. He pulled out his sword. 'I'll dispatch him quickly.'

'No, no!' yelled Roger, holding up both hands at Moss, as Hugh Ball skidded to a halt in front of them. 'It's OK, Moss, we're not enemies any more, leave him alone.' He turned to Hugh. 'What do you want, Hugh?'

'Erm . . .' Hugh was staring at the sword in Moss's hand. 'I just wondered if you needed . . . any help?' He took a step backwards. 'That's . . . that's all. Just wondering . . .'

'No, thanks, Hugh,' said Roger. 'Um – this is my . . . my grandfather. Grandpa Moss . . . topher. He's come to collect me. We're going to a Halloween party.' He could see the look of shock on Hugh's face and couldn't help smiling to himself. 'He's a great fan of all that *Lord of the Rings* stuff; likes dressing up as them.' Roger raised his voice. 'Don't you, Grandpa Mosstopher?'

Moss just stared at Hugh. There was a ferocious expression on his face.

'Bit deaf,' said Roger.

'Oh, right.' Hugh licked his lips. 'Mosstopher? That's a very unusual name . . . He's very . . . It's a great costume . . . That sword looks so real . . . and sharp. Hope you have a nice . . . party.'

‘You better go back, then,’ said Roger. ‘Thanks again, Hugh.’

Hugh Ball obediently turned and started running back towards the school building.

Moss muttered and sheathed his sword.

Roger could see the substantial figure of the head teacher, Mrs Carmichael, heading towards them as Hugh passed her going very fast in the other direction. ‘OK, Moss,’ said Roger, starting to run. ‘Let’s go.’

‘Stop! Come back!’ Mrs Carmichael shouted, wobbling dangerously on high heels.

Moss grunted and trotted after Roger.

‘Don’t get in that car,’ screamed Mrs Carmichael, tottering along at her top speed.

The rear door of the car was open, and Lady Goodroom was hanging out of it waving her hands. Roger and Moss finally reached the Jaguar, climbed inside, and slammed the door behind them. As the car moved off, Roger turned to look out of the rear window.

The head teacher had stopped running; she was standing, gasping, with her hands on her hips, staring after them. There was a puzzled look on her face. Then she turned away, looked up at the sky, and scratched her head.