

SHANE HEGARTY

BROONIE  
AND THE  
DAY BEFORE

DARKMOUTH

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BROONIE  
AND THE  
DAY BEFORE

# DARKMOUTH

SHANE HEGARTY



HarperCollins *Children's Books*

*'The Hogboon'*  
From  
*A Secret Guide to the Legends, Vol. 16*



Many years ago, gateways between our world and the world of the Legends stopped opening... everywhere but the town of Darkmouth. No Hogboon has been seen since. Or, more accurately, heard. Because these small, green, long-eared Legends are known as complainers. Whiners. Moaners. They never made good soldiers because they were forever complaining that their enemies were too violent, or their swords too stabby.

It is now rumoured that the giant who rules over all Legends, Gantrua, uses legions of Hogboons to dig for crystals that will open more gateways. Apparently, he believes that Hogboons are only good for sacrificing. Although it is also said that their bones make quite excellent toothpicks.







**B**efore Broonie met the human boy Finn...  
Before he came through a gateway to  
Darkmouth...

Before he was dragged to the hall of fires, thrown at the feet of Gantrua, the great Fomorian, and given a crystal where his finger used to be...

Broonie had an encounter that would change the course of his life. It began in the most horrible of all imaginable places.

A Hogboon's nostrils.

Broonie half opened an eye.

Light was creeping in under the door of his hovel and piercing the slats boarding up its rough windows. This meant it was daytime and, because Hogboons are nocturnal, it was not yet time to get out of bed. Why, then, had he woken?

Through his grogginess, he tried to remember. Ah yes, he realised, something was tingling the hair that hung in clumps from his nostrils.

At first he presumed it was just the spiders that sometimes made webs in his nose while he slept. But no. There was something else. A smell.

He sniffed. Sniffed again.

The odour was close. Very close. And it was acrid too. Nasty. A bit like burning.

It *was* burning.

Something near his nostril hair must be on fire. Then



it occurred to Broonie that his nostril hair might actually be on fire, so he leaped out of bed, slapping at his nose to put it out.

He quickly ascertained that his nostril hair was not on fire. He knew this because he could not only see the fire, now that he'd opened both eyes, but also realised that the small but raging flame had legs and was running round the floor of his hovel.

It was some kind of small creature, ablaze, and it scampered in panic between the dry mud walls, round the edges of the rough dwelling, looking for a way out, or a way to put itself out. Or both.

Watching the blazing animal ring the room in a blur of great dismay, Broonie reached for the wooden pail of stagnant water he kept by his bed and waited for it to loop past him again. When it did, he tipped the water into its path. From the dousing emerged a stunned, soaked rodent, shaking beneath a bulging puff of smoke.

Broonie squatted and examined the creature. Pressed on to its back was a ball of sticky kindling moss, of the sort Hogboons used to light their fires when they wanted to cook dredgeworms for their dinner. He plucked a piece of the kindling from its back, to reveal a small patch of singed fur.

“They did this, didn’t they?” Broonie said to the rodent. Of course, he knew the rodent could not possibly talk. That would be utterly absurd. Only the rodents in the Deep North did that.

“The Hogboons from three mounds over threw you down that smoke hole in my roof, yes?” Broonie continued. “Nice try, you puss-eyed swamp slitherers, but you have to do better than that to catch Broonie out.” He pondered for a moment. “Not too bad, though, I must admit.” He hadn’t thought that they’d be capable of such a revenge prank: to throw fire and smoke into the hole that was supposed to let fire and smoke out.

The rodent wasn’t paying much attention to him. Instead, it had found a corner of the hovel where it could scratch its back, lick itself and generally recover from having briefly been a four-legged fire-log.

“You’re lucky I had water here,” Broonie told it, picking the pail off the dirt floor. “I keep it handy for cleaning between my toes when things start to grow there.”

The rodent shook itself, possibly in disgust.

Broonie stepped towards the little animal again. It backed away, scratching itself in self-pity, perhaps worried about what this Hogboon might do. “That is terribly cruel,” Broonie muttered. “To do such a thing to

a defenceless creature.”

The rodent stopped scratching itself for a moment and glared at the Hogboon through wide brown eyes.

“OK. And it’s terrible what they did to you too,” admitted Broonie.

He stood again beneath the chimney hacked into the hard earthen mound above, from which Broonie had long ago dug out his home. He tilted his neck and gazed upwards. The chimney disappeared into a curve in the black earth, but he could feel the stale air of the world above leaking in. It carried with it the unmistakable sound of Hogboon giggles.

Pressing the drooping lobes of his ears up to the hole, Broonie seethed at the laughter invading from outside. He became even angrier when a large scumweavel dropped from above too, landing in his ear so that he danced round the hovel, swatting at one side of his head while slapping hard at the other until, eventually, an ugly blob of an insect flopped on the floor, righted itself and burrowed into the ground for safety.

Broonie went to his door and pulled it open so sharply that the already splintered wood almost fell apart. He clambered up the scrubby mound to the roof, sharp stones prodding at his leathery feet. He saw the retreating figures,

two green bodies already at the second mound over and scampering away fast. “Right! No more messing around!” he shouted at them, even as they kept going without even looking back, laughter trailing behind them. “You’re in for it now. You want a prank war? You’ve got one!”

Actually, it had been a prank war for a while now, having started as just a bit of a prank scrap, before developing into a prank skirmish, followed by a prank battle, until eventually full-scale prank hostilities had broken out. When one Hogboon pranked, the other was allowed to respond. That was the rule. The only rule.

But now things were getting out of control.

If Broonie was honest with himself, he had been responsible for the escalation when, a few days ago, he had concocted something very fiendish using ivy, sharpened sticks, a large hole and a bag full of beetles. He’d been very proud of that, chuckling himself to sleep every day since. He had been sure the neighbouring Hogboons wouldn’t come up with anything as brilliant as that in response.

Broonie slid back down the rounded wall of the hovel and again faced the recovering rodent as it shivered in shock just inside the door. “OK, I admit it,” he said. “Throwing you down the chimney was kind of clever of them. If not much fun for you.”

He paced up and down the hovel, gesticulating to no one in particular, frantically trying to figure out his response. “Oh yes,” he announced. “I’m going to come up with something so fantastic, so brilliant, so mind-bubblingly ingenious that they’ll never be able to top it, even if they live until their warts grow to be longer than the toes they sprout on!”

The rodent just stared at him.

“What are you still doing here?” Broonie barked at it and reached for the door, motioning for the rodent to leave. After a quick scratch, it scurried out, leaving behind only thin shreds of smoke and the bitter smell of burning.

Broonie slammed the door shut and went back to his bed, exhaling as he sat on the rough mattress of giant’s bladder stuffed with scrawny feathers.

He was going to concoct the greatest plan yet. Sure, he had no idea what that plan would be, but he knew it was going to be brilliant. It was going to be spectacular. And he would not stop until he had his revenge.

Once he had slept a while longer, of course.

# 3

Night had drawn in, bringing deep darkness to an already bleak world. Night-time was Hogboon time. It was when they woke, when they ate and – if necessary – when they planned epic revenge pranks on their neighbours.

But, as Broonie left his hovel, he felt very tired. After the rodent incident, he had slept the rest of the day with one eye open, just in case the Hogboons from three mounds over tried anything else nasty. But he could only sleep with one eye open by keeping his right eyelid propped open with a long pebble. It hadn't been ideal.

But now it was time for revenge. He could smell it in the air. Or was that just the leftovers of his lunch rotting somewhere in his backyard?

“A burning rodent? No subtlety...” Broonie whispered to himself as he moved across the fields, pushing through the hard reeds that stabbed like spears from the stony

ground. “I’m going to come up with a prank so good it’ll make the wax jump right out of their ears.”

He searched the ground, looking for something that might fit the bill. He didn’t know what exactly, but it would hit him when he saw it. As long as nothing else hit him first. Because night-time wasn’t just Hogboon time. It was the time a lot of other Legends came out, some with long claws and short tempers.

Then Broonie stumbled on something large in the cracked earth beneath his feet. Stooping, he picked up the object and turned it in his spindly fingers, inspecting it with eyes adapted to see in dim light. He sighed. It was just a rock. No more. No less. Flat and smooth. In its shiny surface he could see his own wide nostrils, his blemished green skin, the dark circles of his eyes, the chipped tooth poking from the corner of his mouth. “By the hairiest mole in my grandmother’s nose,” he sighed, “I am a very handsome Hogboon.”

He hurled the rock over his shoulder.

In the unforgiving scrub behind him, there was a noise. A rustle. It was a distance away, but his heart gave a jump and his legs began to move before his brain had even told them to.

Still hurrying away from whatever was following him,

Broonie quickly approached the edge of the field, where an imposing forest reached up towards the low roof of uniform cloud that squatted on this world. Actually, to describe this as a forest would be generous. It was really the blasted remains of a forest, a ghost of one. Its many trees had thick trunks that pierced the clouds, but they had long ago been stripped of all vegetation. Instead, they were frozen, petrified skeletons of trees, with their branches jutting from trunks like jagged blades. These trees were as hard and glassy as the rock Broonie had stumbled on.

Having hastened to this point, Broonie now moved forward cautiously. He generally avoided going into the forest at night-time. It was, after all, called the Forest of Woe and there were good reasons for that. Broonie wanted to get his own back on his neighbours, he really did – he just wanted to do it without losing his life in the process. Because that would almost certainly mean the Hogboons from three mounds over had won.

Where the scrubby fields stopped and the looming trees started, Broonie paused for a moment.

The noise behind him stopped a moment later.

Broonie snatched a fallen branch from the ground and spun round, wielding it like a dagger. “Come out!”



he shouted in the direction of the rustling, although he really didn't want it to.

Something burrowed through the hard reeds, shoving them aside so they bent at new, sharp angles.

"Show yourself, you coward," Broonie demanded, the shaking in his voice and the even greater shaking in his knees giving away the fear bubbling inside him.

A noise behind him.

Broonie spun round while swinging the branch.

"You!" he said, looking down at the rodent. It had obviously followed him from his hovel and now twitched its nose while staring at Broonie through saucer eyes, as if hoping it might be adopted.

"You're lucky I didn't turn you into mouse meat," Broonie told it. "Now go on with you. Scram."

The rodent did not scam.

Broonie stepped past it into the forest. "You do not want to come in here – it's not safe. It's only for the very brave."

The rodent followed him, stopping a couple of metres away every time Broonie turned to address it.

"This is not a place for the weak of spirit," Broonie continued, refusing to look back as he carefully worked his way round petrified trees, and over the sharp roots and

frozen tendrils carpeting the forest floor.

The rodent appeared at his feet, causing him to almost jump out of his skin.

“Stop following me!” Broonie shrieked at it as he turned towards the depths of the ghostly trees. “You’ll get hurt.”

He paused. A good distance away, through the thick branches, he noticed something at odds with the rest of the forest. High in the agonised canopy was a fat trunk, carved to a fierce point and swinging gently as it hung upside down, ready to drop on anyone unfortunate enough to wander carelessly beneath it. It was clearly a trap of some sort. Set by something very strong and used to large meals.

“See that over there?” he told the rodent, pointing at the trap. “That is proof of how dangerous this place is. It’s not somewhere you can just skitter about without paying attention. Danger lurks all around. It’s no place for a little thing like you who clearly doesn’t understand that you cannot drop your guard even for a single moment.”

With that, Broonie put one foot forward and, with a bemused yelp, disappeared straight down a very deep and very large hole.

# 4

Broonie's father had warned him about this. Actually, Broonie's father had warned him about many things, most of which Broonie had ignored or forgotten. Or forgotten that he'd forgotten.

But right now, lying bruised on the floor of a very deep hole dug in a dead forest, Broonie remembered one suddenly relevant piece of advice given to him when just a boy. His father had fixed him with pink eyes that glared from behind his long eyelashes, and even longer eyebrows, and said: "Never put your foot somewhere without putting your eyes there first."

In Broonie's mind, this advice had been delivered calmly – but, given that his father was saying these words because he had just stood in Cerberus poo, there was probably nothing calm about it at all.

And, come to think of it, his father might have used a few more swear words too. Either way, it was wisdom

Broonie now desperately wished he had heeded.

He had flailed and bumped his way down the hole for some distance before, eventually, in near-total darkness, crashing to the bottom, where he now lay, trying to decide which bits of him were broken and which were merely horribly bruised. Once he reckoned he was able to, he twitched his legs, which were propped painfully against the wall above his head.

He reached his thin arms out either side and his hands immediately touched the crumbling roots of long-dead trees, roots which had years ago given up trying to push any further in search of nutrients.

Far above him, at the top of the empty hole, he saw the gap he had fallen through, a circle of night and surrounding trees.

Underneath him was different, though. He pawed at the uneven, uncomfortable ground and, as he shifted about, it moved with him, rolling beneath his backside. He realised he was on top of something hard and loose, but even when turning face-down he couldn't quite make out what it was, as his eyes hadn't yet grown used to this particular shade of darkness. So he pushed at the hard, curved objects below him, while his vision improved. He weighed a long piece that felt light but solid in his hand.

A branch perhaps. A severed root. A...

“...Bone!” squealed Broonie and leaped to his feet, finally seeing what he held in his hand.

He dropped it in disgust and the bone cracked against what he now saw was a mattress of bones that littered the bottom of the pit, forming a thick layer that masked the true depth of the hole itself. There were tail bones. Leg bones. Skulls. Teeth. Fangs. Horns. Long bones. Short bones.

“Bones,” he muttered, quieter now as he tried to take in his predicament. “So many bones.”

When Broonie moved, they squeaked. When he shuffled, they cracked.

He became aware of the skeleton in his own body. How fragile it was beneath his skin. How he was just a bag of bones that could so easily be added to the ones he was standing on.

He had fallen into a trap. He felt terribly annoyed and cursed himself, mumbling every swear word his grandmother had ever taught him.

A squeak far above him shook Broonie from his self-pity. At the edge of the hole, he could just about make out the twitching silhouette of the rodent. “Squeak,” it said. “Squeak, squeak.”

“Oh, now you’ve found your voice!” Broonie yelled up at it. He couldn’t decide if the rodent was telling him to pull himself together or if it was just laughing at where he’d ended up. But, whatever it was squeaking about, it had interrupted his misery, forced him to refocus. Which was lucky because then he had a flash of inspiration.

“By the rampant ear lobes of Grand-uncle Plopsiflop!” he exclaimed. “I am a very clever Hogboon.”

It was, indeed, a very clever escape plan. It simply involved strength, determination and getting over his disgust at handling the bleached limbs of long-dead Legends.

# 5

“Urgh,” grunted Broonie as he thrust a sharp bone into the exposed soil of the pit wall, pushing its fine point in as deep as he could, until he was sure he could drag his weight on it and lever himself further up the long funnel.

“Squeak,” said the rodent from the hole far above Broonie. It was watching all of this intently, apparently willing him on.

“Urgh,” said Broonie again, seeking out a hold on a root with his right foot, pushing himself up and stabbing the soil with a second bone he held in his right hand, releasing the one he held in his left and repeating the process as he inched his way towards freedom, so that with only two bones he could make a sort of ever-moving ladder. That was the idea anyway.

He had chosen the sharpest bones he could. One appeared to be a leg, the other an arm. What creatures

they belonged to he couldn't be sure. What he could be sure about was that they weren't going to need them back.

Still, it was tough work. One careful move at a time. Making sure the bones were firmly planted in the soil before moving up. Using roots whenever possible, but checking they didn't come free whenever he gripped one firmly with his toes. And all of this in near-total darkness. His body dotted with bruises, pain repeatedly shooting through him. And his hold had already slipped free of the crumbling soil a couple of times, almost sending him tumbling back to the bed of bones below.

Still, after climbing for some time, he reckoned he was at least halfway.

He fixed on his goal, focused on his escape. The only thing intruding on his determination and fear was a nagging thought about the bed of bones, a thought he couldn't quite place. Something about it bothered him. Something apart from the fact it was a bed of bones, that is, which had bothered him enormously in the first place.

And yet Broonie found the task exhilarating. This was an adventure and, while he couldn't ignore how grumpy this whole situation had made him, it had also introduced proper excitement into his life. Excitement did not come



readily to the average Hogboon. And, if it did, it tended to involve that great Fomorian, Gantrua, who ruled this world and who was determined to gut every mine in the Infested Side in search of crystals to invade the Promised World of the humans. Gantrua wasn't going to pull the ground apart himself. He needed slaves to do that for him and many of them were Hogboons. Broonie was familiar with a lot of them and he knew that when a Hogboon slave didn't pull the ground apart successfully, Gantrua was as likely to pull them apart as punishment.

That was the kind of excitement no Hogboon craved, least of all Broonie.

But falling down a big pit and escaping, using only his wits and someone else's bones? Now that was an adventure he could live with. Provided he didn't die in the process.

"Urghhghhh." Broonie reached his right leg out towards a root peeking from the soil, but couldn't quite touch it, no matter how much he strained. "Urghhggg—"

The arm bone broke and he nearly plunged all the way back to the floor of the pit. He grasped at the leg bone still wedged into the wall, grabbing hold with both hands and hugging the wall as tightly as he could.

"Squeak," said the rodent from the circle of night high above him. "Squeak."

“Yes, I am aware of the problem,” Broonie called up at it. “And I swear on the putrid souls of my ancient forebears, I’m going to give you a piece of my mind when I get out of here.” The soil crumbled at his toes. “If I get out of here,” he mumbled to himself.

With that remaining bone, he carefully pulled himself upwards again, wedging his feet against the remnants of roots, feeling for finger-holds in the earth. Carefully, with chunks of dirt falling away into the grim dark below him, he pulled out the leg bone and stabbed it in a little further up. He then hoisted himself up as quickly as his flimsy arms would let him and, having tested it very carefully, sat on the protruding bone for a brief rest.

“Squeak,” said the rodent above, with, what seemed to Broonie, like approval.

“Don’t think I’ve forgiven you for ruining my day,” Broonie complained to it as he restarted his climb up the sheer wall. “But yes, I agree with you. I am brave.”

He certainly felt brave and he didn’t always feel like that. Or, at least, he didn’t often put himself in situations in which bravery was required. But, right now, he thought of how proud his grandfather would be of him.

When Broonie was very young, his grandfather used to regale the family with tales of his courage during

great battles gone by.

He told of the time he felled a very angry Hydra by scampering round the Legend until its seven heads became entangled.



He told of the time he faced the needle-sharp teeth of a flying serpent and not only defeated it, but used those long teeth as chopsticks for many years afterwards.

And his grandfather told of the times he had encountered that most evil and dangerous animal of all – the human. How their cunning and duplicity had, for so long, prevented the Legends of this world from taking their rightful place in the Promised World. And he told of how, time and time again, he had sent the humans back to where they came from, screaming all the way.

His grandfather also, it turned out, told lies. Big ones. Pretty much all of the time.

This became clear only as Broonie became a little older and started to question his grandfather's claims to have built the mountains with his own bare hands, or to have invented fingers. But, despite the obvious fibs, those grand tales of great bravery in the face of peril had impressed Broonie when he was just a fresh-warted Hogboon. Now, as he climbed up this pit, escaping from a slow and certain death, he thought of how proud his grandfather would be of him showing actual bravery while in actual danger.

Then, Broonie almost lost his grip on the remaining bone and grasped at it while his feet hung precariously

in the void. He swung his body back against the wall, digging his toes in hard to gain purchase.

He was so close to the top he could feel the frigid, stale air of the outside world wafting on to his face and could smell its rotting stench. It was so good.

The rodent was scampering around at the surface, squeaking loudly now, in what Broonie guessed was encouragement.

“I have to say,” said Broonie, looking down at the great distance he’d put between himself and the deep bottom of the pit, “I’ve done well. So many creatures have been trapped in here and not escaped. Except for me. A Hogboon. One quite brilliant Hogboon.”

The rodent was sprinting about in great excitement.

“Except,” continued Broonie, the exhaustion making his joints ache as he prepared to put one last effort into hauling himself upwards and out, “I can’t quite understand why none of the poor souls who perished there thought of this idea first.”

He pulled hard on the leg bone, brought a knee up to his face to get a foothold on a fat root. Just one more hoist and he’d be free.

The rodent was going wild now.

“All I can conclude,” he said, as he found his breath

and searched for the last reserves of his strength, “is that I’m just cleverer than those doomed fools.” He checked his grip on the bone, tensed his foothold on the roots. “Although something else does occur to me as I say that.”

“Squeeeeak!” squeaked the rodent, quite urgently now.

“There is the slight possibility,” Broonie continued, “that it wasn’t a trap.” He summoned every last great effort and finally hauled himself high enough for his chin to pop out of the hole and flop on to the edge and glorious freedom.

The rodent was dancing about.

Broonie frowned. “Maybe... maybe... the poor creatures down there did not fall into the pit... At least not when attached to the rest of their bodies.”

“Squeeeeak, squeeeeak!” The rodent was going totally crazy.

“Maybe... it was a pit into which some horrible creature threw the bones of his victims after eating them,” Broonie said, as he reached out to grab the forest floor, lifted a leg to the very edge of the hole, placed a chin on the ground and emerged finally from this death trap. “Like a great big bin.”

The rodent had stopped running, and was instead

staring at him, eyes wide. But now Broonie realised it wasn't excitement and encouragement that had sent it into a frenzy.

"It is a monster's pit, isn't it?" he said, his head far enough above the edge of the hole so that he was eye-to-eye with the rodent.

"Squeak," agreed the rodent.

"And the monster's right behind me, isn't it?"

"Squeeeek," confirmed the rodent.

Broonie turned his head, just in time to see a Minotaur grab him with great clawed hands.

**H**aving worked so hard to get all this way to the top of the pit, Broonie travelled the next few metres in a matter of milliseconds. His ears led the way.

The Minotaur had gripped hard on those long lobes, lifting him high as the Hogboon yowled in pain. It felt to Broonie like his ears were going one way and the rest of his body the other. Which, as it turned out, was precisely what was happening.

“Leave off my lobes,” he demanded, pain crackling from the sides of his head through every part of his body. “You’ll stretch them.”

The Minotaur lowered him just a little so that he could glare properly at Broonie and, for the first time, the Hogboon had a chance to fully appreciate the terror of the foe he faced. The gnarled horns that twisted to deadly points. The fur, mangy and scratched, like a rug



put through a mincer. And those eyes – blacker than the night, blacker even than the pit Broonie had just come from. Light was creeping into the sky now as morning limped into the Infested Side, but all Broonie could see was the bottomless pit of those eyes. He realised they might be the very last thing he'd ever see. Even death would not be as black as those eyes.

“I didn't know they were your bones down there,” he pleaded with the Minotaur, flinching as steam from its fierce, angry breaths smacked him in the face. “I didn't mean to damage your pit, I promise.”

Having observed him for what seemed like an age, the Minotaur snorted, then roared long and loud in Broonie's face.

Broonie cursed his grandfather for giving him such foolish ideas about bravery and courage and strength in the face of certain death. Right now, he just wanted to run as fast as his shaking legs would let him and not stop until he had put several mountain ranges between him and this creature.

From below there came a great rumbling. It was the sound of continents moving and of great acid lakes burbling. Even after it settled, the sound echoed through the forest for several seconds until finally dissipating in

the early morning gloom.

“That was your rumbling tummy, wasn’t it?” Broonie asked. He took the Minotaur’s continued hot breaths as agreement. “And the few scumweavels I might offer you in exchange for my life aren’t going to make a dent in your hunger, are they? You’d need something more substantial. Like, say,” he gulped, “a lost Hogboon.”

The Minotaur held him out a little further, looked him over, deciding which part of the Hogboon he was going to start on first.

“We’re very stringy, you know,” Broonie warned him, desperation making his voice high-pitched, his legs kicking uselessly at the air. “Not tasty at all. I really wouldn’t bother eating me.”

But the Minotaur *was* going to bother. It licked its boiled, chapped lips – Broonie thought they looked like humungous slugs – then opened its mouth to reveal layers of ragged, hellish teeth.

Broonie stared into the chasm of its gullet, where he was about to find a new, but very temporary, home.

“Our bones get stuck in the teeth!” he said.

And then something occurred to him. Until now, he had been so fixed on his terror, and on the electrifying pain in his pulled ears, that he’d forgotten he was still

holding the leg bone he'd used to drag himself from the pit.

Just as the Minotaur was about to crunch down on him, Broonie swung the bone, cracking it off a tusk and sending a sliver of ivory leaping into the grey light. The Minotaur groaned. Then, seemingly realising little damage had been done, it focused again and wrapped its teeth round Broonie's body.

But Broonie had learned a lesson.

This time he jabbed the Minotaur in the ear.

It dropped Broonie to the ground, landing him on his backside on the cracked ground at the edge of the pit. And, as the Minotaur bellowed a thunderous howl of pain, Broonie thought of everything his grandfather had said about bravery, and fortitude, and calmness in the face of certain death, and decided he couldn't be bothered with any of that.

He legged it.

7

It is extraordinary how fast a scared Hogboon can run when it puts its worm-riddled mind to it, legs whipping across the ground, dodging through undergrowth, jumping over topgrowth, avoiding fallen trees, sprouting trees, any tree in general.

Unfortunately, to even the swiftest Hogboon, it is even more extraordinary how fast a hungry Minotaur can catch up with them.



The horned monster didn't have to dodge through undergrowth, jump over topgrowth, worry at all about the trees. It just barrelled through it all, a wrecking ball aiming straight for Broonie. He heard the crash of the pursuing Minotaur and cut a sharp right into the trees, in the hope of shaking it off.

It kept coming, closing on Broonie as it pounded across the forest floor.

Broonie took another sharp turn, swivelled round one large tree, then wove between a succession of others, trying to confuse the Minotaur so he could buy himself some time to figure out how to get out of the forest.

But still the creature followed him, relentless in its craving for Hogboon meat.

Panting hard, Broonie looked round as he ran full tilt. He didn't see the long root looping out of the ground ahead of him and, catching it with a trailing big toe, he went sprawling face first into the dirt. The air belched from his lungs as he hit the ground, and he slid on for a few body lengths until his nose rested gently on another root, which hovered over the forest floor in an unusually straight line.

It wasn't a root.

It was a rope.

Broonie carefully swivelled his eyes to follow its path along the ground to a tree, and saw that the rope climbed, taut, up its slick trunk before angling straight out again along a branch, beneath which hung... the large, upside-down, pointed trunk he had seen earlier.

The trap he had passed on the way into the forest.

Broonie held his breath. Swinging slowly, precariously, the enormous sharp trunk was directly above him, ready to drop straight down should he so much as breathe on the rope beneath his nose.

He jumped up and away from it. Then he hopped carefully over to the other side as the fierce, snarling Minotaur smashed into view almost on top of him.

Then it was beneath the trap. And Broonie had his foot on the rope.

“I am a clever Hogboon after all,” Broonie said as he stamped down on it.

The rope snapped.

The trunk above the Minotaur plunged.

Then it stopped just as suddenly, the rope snagged on the nub of a petrified branch. Broonie’s triumphant grin was wiped immediately from his face.

“Look,” he said to the Minotaur, “that probably didn’t look good. Allow me to explain...”

Now it was the Minotaur who appeared to be grinning in satisfaction, slobber dripping along its tusks, pooling at the corners of its mouth.

Broonie looked round for a way out and saw a wall of trees. He knew he could not outrun this determined, hungry brute. But something else caught his eye: a small furry creature with a burnt patch on its back that was licking its claws while watching from beside the tree with the rope snagged on it.

Broonie subtly, but urgently, nodded towards the rope.

The rodent stopped licking itself and stared at him.

The Minotaur was beginning to shuffle forward, savouring its next meal. But still the huge Legend was standing underneath that great tree trunk.

Every muscle in Broonie's face was making it clear that the rodent needed to gnaw the rope. Now.

The rodent glared at Broonie. Then at the rope. Then back at Broonie.

"Now!" called Broonie.

The rodent turned tail and scurried away.

"Oh well, that's just great!" Broonie called after it. "Coward!"

The Minotaur moved towards him, away from the menacing shadow of the sharp trunk, forcing Broonie to

back against a tree. The giant loomed over its tiny prey, with its bleak eyes wide and its cavernous mouth even wider.

Broonie knew this was the end. He was about to be a pile of bones at the bottom of a pit.

And then the strangest thing happened.

Or, more accurately, didn't happen.

The Minotaur stayed right there. In that same position. Arms wide, claws bared, teeth poised.

But it did not move. Did not so much as blink. It just stayed like that until Broonie realised he needed to stop waiting for something to happen and get the hell out of there.

So, he slid away from the Minotaur and the tree, stepping gently over the Legend's massive hoof. Still it did not move. It seemed unaware of anything, as if all consciousness had left it in an instant.

Rounding the Minotaur, Broonie saw something embedded in its neck. A dart. Long, straight, and ending in a burst of tiny yellow feathers.

As Broonie admired it and wondered where this might have come from, another dart whizzed by his head.





The dart clanged off a tree over Broonie's shoulder. He ducked out of the way after it had passed by, keen to avoid anything else that might be aimed at him.

"Stand still so we can hit you!" shouted a deep, angry voice from the forest.

Broonie dashed into the undergrowth, belly first on the spiky ground, and peeked out from behind a wide tree.

"Those feathers on your crossbow are faulty, Cryf," Broonie heard another equally rumbling voice say.

"We'll send the dart-maker to the mines, Trom," replied the first voice.

From the trees emerged two Fomorians, lumbering giants with great hunks of metal plate at their shoulders, knees and elbows. Each had slightly undersized helmets squashed down on their scalps. The one who must have been Cryf was carrying a hefty crossbow.

The two confidently approached the Minotaur, apparently without any doubt that they had disabled the great beast.

“Good shot, Cryf, I must say. Even if it’s a big target.”

“Years of training, Trom. Special finger exercises. They’re also very relaxing.”

As they reached the paralysed Minotaur, Trom removed a thick length of rope from his belt.

The Minotaur snorted and slumped face first into the petrified bark of the tree before beginning a horrible slide down the trunk.

“I’ll tie up this lump, Cryf,” said Trom, working his rope round the Minotaur’s bulky but useless legs. “But maybe we should play it safe and give him another—”

Cryf shot the Minotaur with a second dart, which buried itself up to its yellow feathers in the bovine brute’s almighty shoulder.

“That should do it,” said Trom.

They worked quickly, despite their lumpen hands, tying the great sleeping Minotaur at the legs, wrapping the rope round their chests, under their arms, and readying themselves to haul it through the forest.

“Gantrua has special plans for you,” said Trom to the comatose Legend as he tested the rope one last time.

“Very special,” agreed Cryf. “When you wake up, it’ll be to the smell of human blood. You’ll better be ravenous.”

From the Minotaur’s stomach, a rumble of hunger grew, rolling through its belly in a great gurgle that shook the earth.

A small branch cracked from the tree, below which Broonie was hiding. It clonked off his crown, causing him to yelp.

The Fomorians looked up.

“You go check the woods for the Hogboon,” Trom suggested to his companion. “Gantrua wanted one of those too.”

Cryf loosened the rope around his chest and walked forward a little, lifting his gnarled crossbow and bellowing in the general direction of Broonie’s yelp. “In the name of the great and merciless Gantrua, I command you to show yourself so we can punch you in the head and send you to the mines.”

He waited for a response. Broonie held his breath, praying he couldn’t be seen.

“OK!” bellowed Cryf. “We’ll agree to a deal. We’ll only slap you in the head. No punching.”

The Fomorian cocked the hole on the side of his head that functioned as an ear and waited for a reply.

“Do you think he’s gone?” Trom called to him.

“I would be,” said Cryf.

At that, they heard a sound in the forest away to their left. Cryf swung round, pulling the trigger on his crossbow. The arrow cut through the air and its perfect point buried itself deeply in the hard bark of a tree, quivering beside the head of the still-singed rodent that had made the noise in the first place.

“Just a rodent,” said Cryf.

“Not worth picking our teeth with its bones,” said Trom.

“Why has it got kindling moss on its back?”

“Hogboons?” wondered Trom.

“Hogboons,” agreed Cryf. He looked back out towards where Broonie had made his escape. “We’ll see that one again.”

A great snort from the Minotaur reminded them of the job they needed to get back to.

Meanwhile, grateful for the distraction caused by the rodent, Broonie ran. And ran.

Behind him, a great rumble emanated from the Minotaur’s insides. It quaked across the forest, shivered through the hard ground, and only eventually dissipated as it reached the forest’s edge where the small Hogboon

was still running.

Broonie kept running through the scratching scrub of the fields, across the hard dirt and uneven stony soil, across mound after mound, until he reached his hovel.

When he was finally home, Broonie didn't bother sliding down the hill and opening his door. He just leaped straight down the chimney.

# 9

In his hovel, Broonie collapsed on to his bed. He was sweating, fat blobs dampening his green skin. That had been a close-run thing. An adventure he could have done without. A near-death experience he hadn't expected.

Then he realised something. He was alive.

Broonie gently touched his ears, his beautiful ears. He tugged at the lobes, wondered if maybe they were a bit longer than they were since the Minotaur had used them as handles.

He had climbed out of a Minotaur's bone pit, outwitted the creature, escaped the Fomorians and lived to plan a revenge prank on the Hogboons three mounds over.

Tomorrow was another night. He would figure out the plan. He would come up with something brilliant. He would have his revenge. And he would try and do it without any further encounters with death. No

Fomorians. And definitely no Minotaurs. At least he could be sure of one thing: the Minotaur was gone, a victim of Gantrua. And he would never see it again. Not a chance.

And, with that pleasing thought at the end of a very trying night, Broonie fell asleep.

The day drew on. Broonie's snores grew deeper. The snorting sounds of his slumber drifted upwards through the hole in the hovel roof and into the world beyond.

On the fringe of the forest, where the humble clearing met the dead trees, a rodent snuffled and scampered across the cracked ground.

It was the same once-blazing rodent who had dropped into Broonie's hovel, but was now returned to its own home in a black ditch between the woods and the mounds where the Hogboons lived. The home from which it had been grabbed earlier and used as a pawn in a prank war. On its back, the scorch mark had faded a little already, but the creature had not forgotten its experience. Not one bit. It paused before scuttling into the open, twitched its nose, shivered its fur, and decided instead to play safe by staying under the cover of the forest and skirting the Hogboon hovels at a distance.

It scurried home.

In the darkness of the trees, the tiny path the rodent had carved was obliterated by the boots of two hulking figures. They came with a mission in mind. And a large bag in hand.

“It looks like following the rodent brought us to the right place,” said Trom.

“It smells like the right place anyway,” said Cryf, raising his nose to the air.

“Remember, Gantrua wants the Hogboon alive for his mission to the Promised World.”

“We should just grab him then, but not clobber him in case we break him.”

The Fomorians trudged into the clearing towards Broonie’s hovel, stopping outside to listen to the snorts and whistles of Hogboon snores rising through the chimney.

“On second thoughts,” said Cryf, “let’s clobber him.”

And, with a nod to each other, they kicked down Broonie’s door.

THE END

**Broonie’s adventures continue in DARKMOUTH...**