Rumblestar



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Prologue

The trouble with grown-ups is that they always think they're right – about bedtimes and vegetables mostly, but also about beginnings. And, in particular, about the beginnings of our world. They have all sorts of ideas about big bangs and black holes, but if they had come across the Unmapped Kingdoms (which they wouldn't have because secret kingdoms are notoriously hard to find), they would have learnt that at the very, very beginning there was just an egg. A rather large one. And out of this egg, a phoenix was born.

On finding itself alone, it wept seven tears, which, as they fell, became our continents and formed the earth as you and I know it, although to the phoenix all this was simply known as the Faraway. But these lands were dark and empty, so, many years later, the phoenix scattered four of its golden feathers, and out of these grew secret – unmapped – kingdoms, invisible to the people who would go on to live in the Faraway, but holding the magic needed to conjure sunlight, rain and snow, and every untold wonder behind the weather, from the music of a sunrise to the stories of a snowstorm.

Now the phoenix, being the wisest of all magical creatures, knew that if used selfishly, magic grows strange and dark, but if it is used for the greater good it can nourish an entire world and keep it turning. So the phoenix decreed that those who lived in the Unmapped Kingdoms could enjoy all the wonders that its magic brought, but only if they, in turn, worked to send some of this magic out into the Faraway so that the continents there might be filled with light and life. If the Unmappers ever stopped sharing their magic, the phoenix warned, both the Faraway and the Unmapped Kingdoms would crumble to nothing.

The phoenix placed the Lofty Husks in charge of each Unmapped Kingdom – wizards born under the same eclipse and marked out from the other Unmappers on account of their wisdom, unusually long life expectancy and terrible jokes – and, although in each kingdom the Lofty Husks took a different form, they ruled fairly, ensuring that every day the magic of the phoenix was passed on to the Faraway.

The four kingdoms all played different roles. Unmappers in Rumblestar collected marvels – droplets of sunlight, rain and snow in their purest form – which dragons transported to the other kingdoms so the inhabitants there could mix them with magical ink to create weather scrolls for the Faraway: sun symphonies in Crackledawn, rain paintings in Jungledrop and snow stories in Silvercrag. Little by little, the Faraway lands came alive: plants, flowers and trees sprang up, and so strong was the magic that eventually animals appeared and, finally, people.

Years passed and the phoenix looked on from Everdark, a place so far away and out of reach that not even the Unmappers knew where it lay. But a phoenix cannot live for ever. And so, after five hundred years, the first phoenix died and, as is the way with such birds, a new phoenix rose from its ashes to renew the magic in the Unmapped Kingdoms and ensure it was shared with those in the Faraway.

Time went by and the Unmappers grew to understand that every five hundred years another era would begin and, as long as the new phoenix showed itself to them on the night of its rising, the magic would be renewed and all would be well. Everyone believed things would continue this way forever . . .

When you're dealing with magic though, *forever* is rarely straightforward. There is always someone, somewhere, who becomes greedy. And when a heart is set on stealing magic for personal gain, suddenly ancient decrees and warnings slip quite out of mind. Such was the case with a harpy called Morg who grew jealous of the phoenix and its power.

Seeking to claim the magic of the Unmapped Kingdoms for herself, Morg breathed a curse over the nest of the last phoenix on the very night of the renewal of magic two thousand years ago. The old phoenix burst into flames, like the rest of its kind had done before it, but this time the flames burned black and no new phoenix appeared from the ashes. And so, Morg claimed the nest as her own.

But when things go wrong and magic goes awry, it makes room for stories with unexpected heroes and unlikely heroines.

Which is exactly what happened next . . . That same night, Smudge, a young girl from the kingdom of Crackledawn, was somewhere she ought not to have been, and she saw Morg tear across the sky in the place of the phoenix. With the fate of the Unmapped Kingdoms and the Faraway in her hands, Smudge, together with a monkey called Bartholomew, journeyed to Everdark, a place no Unmapper had been before. And it was there that Smudge tracked down Morg and locked the harpy's wings, the very things that held her power, inside an enchanted tree deep in the forest.

The Unmapped Kingdoms and the Faraway were saved, but without the magic of the phoenix, the Lofty Husks in each kingdom had to set about searching for a way to preserve what was left of the old magic until the harpy died, or was killed, and a new phoenix rose from Everdark. The answer, as it happened, lay with the dragons that roamed the skies and the seas. Never before had these beasts heeded the call of the Lofty Husks – for they were wilder than the rest of the magical creatures – but they could sense the threat to the Unmapped Kingdoms and the Faraway, so they promised to scatter their sacred moondust every night, and though it didn't grant as much magic as before, it was enough to keep things turning.

And that could well have been that until Morg died and a new phoenix rose. Except it wasn't. Because when a harpy is set on evil, she doesn't just slope away and give up. She plots and she plots and she plots until before you know it, she has hatched a new plan to steal the magic of the Unmapped Kingdoms . . .

But I am getting ahead of myself, and a certain eleven-year-old boy from the Faraway wouldn't approve at all. At least, Casper Tock wouldn't have approved *before* the Extremely Unpredictable Event happened, because up until then he very much lived his life according to his to-do lists and timetables. Admittedly, the lists often only included one item – *grow up quickly* – but his timetables were much more detailed, from the five minutes he allowed himself before breakfast each morning to straighten the pictures on his bedroom walls to the half hour he spent before going to sleep every night refolding all of his clothes.

Casper liked to keep a tidy bedroom, an organised mind and a tight schedule. That way, fewer things went wrong and there was less chance – or so he thought – of wandering into the clutches of school bullies Candida Cashmere-Jumps and Leopold Splattercash.

But no matter how many lists you write and no matter how many timetables you create, you cannot be responsible for your parents. They forget keys, lose handbags, misplace spectacles and drop phones down the loo. In fact, once you reach the grand old age of eleven, you can start to realise that your parents are hopelessly out of control.

Such was the case with Casper's parents, Ernie and Ariella Tock. They had been out of hand for quite some time and they were, in fact, largely to blame for everything that happened to Casper that dreary afternoon in March. Because if Ernie had come home on time that day and if Ariella had remembered

her handbag, then perhaps the Extremely Unpredictable Event might never have happened at all.

But sometimes it is when people are late and handbags are forgotten that magic begins to unfold . . .