

Most grown-ups are far too busy to believe in magic. They have newspapers to read, bills to pay, phone calls to answer and – most time-consuming of all – children to nag. But if grown-ups were a little less busy and a little more curious, they might notice some of the things that children see. Unlikely, impossible, extraordinary things. Like portals to secret kingdoms that reveal the truth about how our world actually began . . .

In case you're wondering, it all started with an egg. An exceptionally large one. And when this egg hatched, a phoenix emerged. It wept seven tears on realising it was alone and when these tears fell, the earth's continents were born, forming the world as you and I know it. The phoenix called these lands the Faraway, but they were dark and empty places, so, to brighten things up, the phoenix shed four of its golden feathers. And from these feathers grew secret, unmapped kingdoms, invisible to the people who would go on to live in the Faraway. These kingdoms held all 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, you may have encountered wisdom before: grandparents, for example, are wise, librarians are wise and some (though not all) elephants are wise. A phoenix is wiser still, and this particular phoenix knew that if used selfishly, magic will grow 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 four Unmapped Kingdoms could enjoy all the wonders that its magic brought, but only if they worked to send some of that 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.

Next, the phoenix set about choosing rulers for these kingdoms. And being such a wise creature, the phoenix gave squabbling kings, queens and politicians a wide berth when deciding who to appoint. Instead, the phoenix chose the Lofty Husks – magical beings all born under an eclipse and marked out from the other Unmappers on account of their wisdom, unusually long life expectancy and terrible jokes. In each kingdom the Lofty Husks took a different form, from wizards and golden panthers to ancient elves and snow eagles, but they all ruled fairly, ensuring that every day the magic of the phoenix was passed on to the Faraway through the weather.

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 three Unmapped Kingdoms. There, they were mixed 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.

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 continued to be shared with those in the Faraway.

Time passed, and every five hundred years the Unmappers learnt to watch for a new phoenix rising up into the sky to refresh the Unmapped magic and herald the arrival of another era. Everyone believed things would continue this way for ever . . . But when you're dealing with magic, *for ever* is rarely straightforward. There is always someone, somewhere, who becomes greedy. And, when a heart is set on stealing magic for personal gain, ancient decrees and warnings can slip quite out of mind. Such was the case with a harpy called Morg who grew jealous of the phoenix and its power.

Almost four thousand five hundred years ago, Morg cursed the nest of the phoenix on the night of the renewal of magic in the Unmapped Kingdoms. No new phoenix appeared, so Morg seized the nest as her own and set about seeking to claim all the magic for herself.

But, when things go wrong and magic goes awry, it makes room for stories with unexpected heroes and unlikely heroines. Perhaps you have heard about the girl from Crackledawn who sailed to Everdark to steal Morg's wings, the very things that held the harpy's power? Maybe you know about the boy named Casper who journeyed from the Faraway to Rumblestar to destroy those same wings so that the Unmapped Kingdoms and the Faraway might be saved from ruin? Possibly you have come across the Petty-Squabble twins who travelled from the Faraway to Jungledrop to find a mythical fern that banished Morg from the Unmapped Kingdoms and restored rain to our world? Or, you might just be one of those wise children who sense the ways of dragons and know that they are now roaming the Unmapped Kingdoms, scattering moondust from their wings to keep what is left of the Unmapped magic turning, until Morg dies and a new phoenix rises. And rise it must because the magic is fading every day, despite the dragons' efforts to keep it alive, and it will not be long before it vanishes altogether. For only the arrival of a phoenix can restore what Morg has destroyed and renew the kingdoms to their former glory.

There is still one story to be told, one final adventure

waiting to take us to the Unmapped Kingdoms. The Petty-Squabble twins might have stumbled into Jungledrop, trapped Morg in a never-ending well and saved the world from her dark magic . . . but all things eventually come to an end, even never-ending wells. And from an underground world, Morg has been patiently scratching her way, ever closer, to the Faraway. She knows that if she can get hold of the immortalised tears of the very first phoenix that fell there when our world was born, she can use their power to break back into Crackledawn, an Unmapped Kingdom where she still has followers after a visit she made there many years ago. Then, she can seize control of the Unmapped Kingdoms once and for all.

Day after day, Morg has been following the pull of the phoenix-tear magic and tonight she has reached an entrance to the Faraway. But the harpy is too weak to break the boundary into our world so she waits in the darkness beneath an abandoned theatre on Crook's End, a dimly lit and mostly forgotten side street in Brooklyn, New York. Once, this street boasted a string of restaurants and queues of excited theatre-goers but as the neighbourhood grew rougher and more dangerous, people moved away and the restaurants and theatre closed.

No one lives on Crook's End any more. But all that is going to change because an eleven-year-old boy is on the run and his feet are pounding nearer and nearer. He does not know that it is magic leading him towards this deserted street. But there cannot be phoenix tears, a harpy *and* a

portal to an Unmapped Kingdom close by, without there being consequences.

And though Zebedee Bolt might not be the kind of child who has time for magic, it very much has time for him. Morg needs somebody to let her into the Faraway, and the Unmapped Kingdoms need somebody to kick her out once and for all. Zeb needs no one and trusts no one, and that is all well and good, but trying to escape magic when you're hurtling towards it is like trying to stop eating a doughnut when you've already taken the first bite. Quite impossible. You may as well just get on with it and accept that while magic throws its weight around you're in for a bumpy ride. Especially if that ride involves dragons rather than doughnuts because dragons, as Zeb is about to find out, are even wilder than magic . . .