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Opening extract from

Muddle Earth

Written by

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Name: Joe Jefferson

Occupation: Schoolboy

Hobbies: Football, TV, arguing with his sister

Favourite food: Anything not cooked by Norbert

Name: Randalf the Wise
Muddle Earth's leading wizard

Occupation: Um . . .
Muddle Earth's leading wizard

Hobbies: Performing spells
(I think you'll find that's spell! – Veronica)

Favourite food: Norbert's squashed tadpole fritters

Name: Henry

Occupation: Joe's dog

Hobbies: Walkies, chasing squirrels, sniffing strangers' bottoms

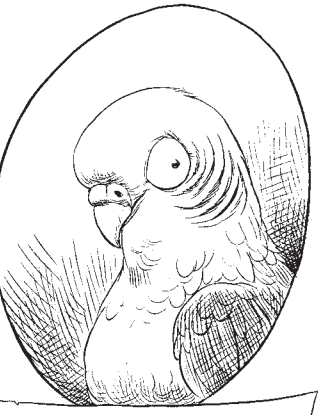
Favourite food: Dog food, obviously

Name:
Norbert the Not-Very-Big

Occupation: Ogre

Hobbies: Thumb-sucking, cooking – especially cake-decorating

Favourite food: Everything

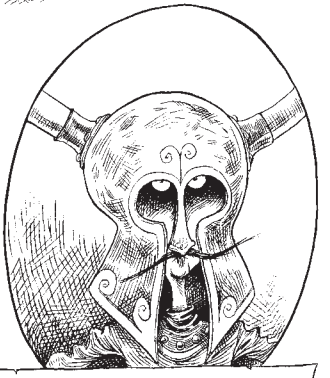


Name: Veronica

Occupation: Familiar to the great wizard, Randalf the Wise

Hobbies: Being sarcastic

Favourite food: Anything not cooked by Norbert



Name: The Horned Baron

Occupation: Ruler of Muddle Earth and husband to Ingrid

Hobbies: Ruling, and doing whatever Ingrid tells him

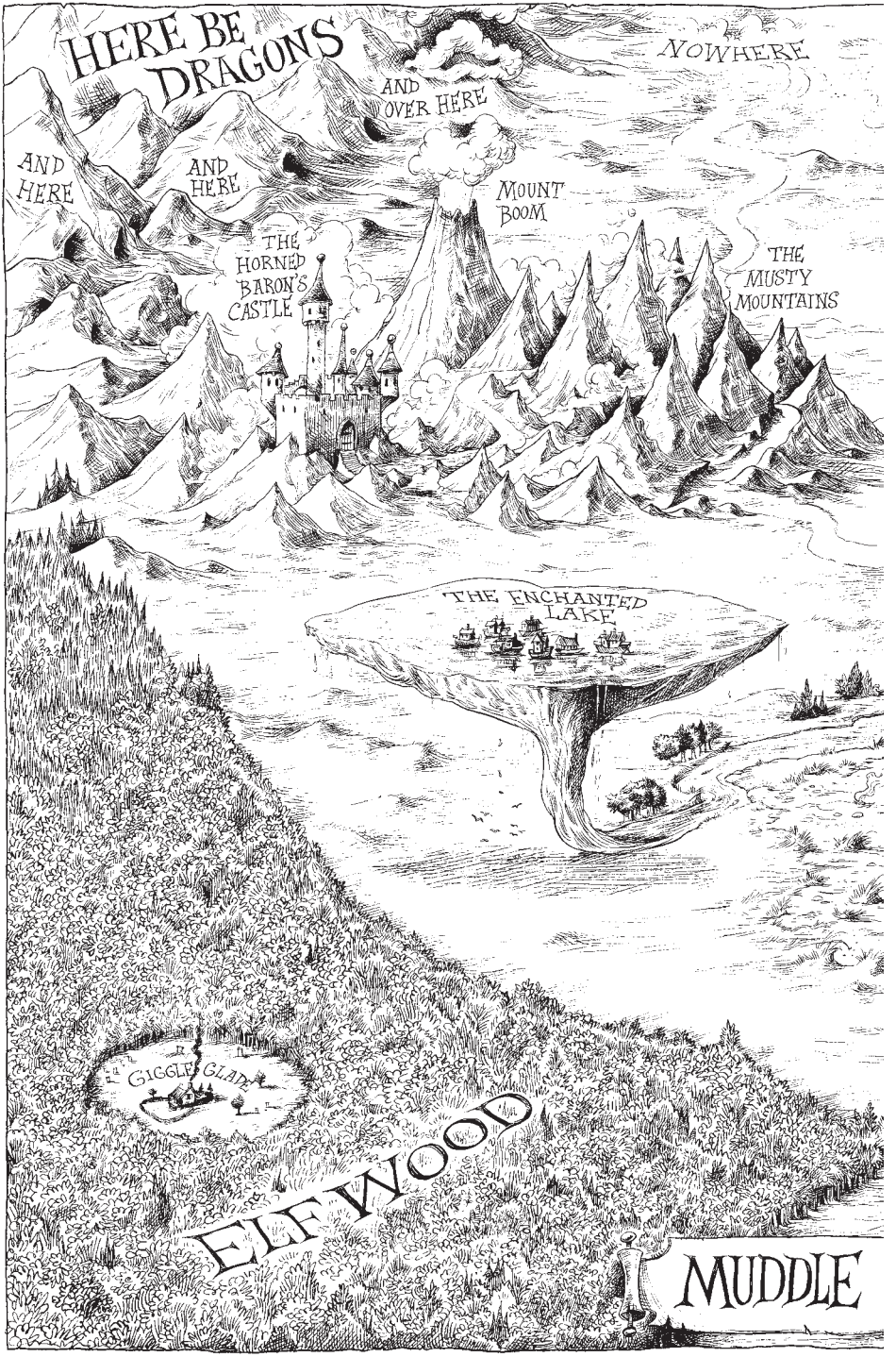
Favourite food: Bad-breath porridge

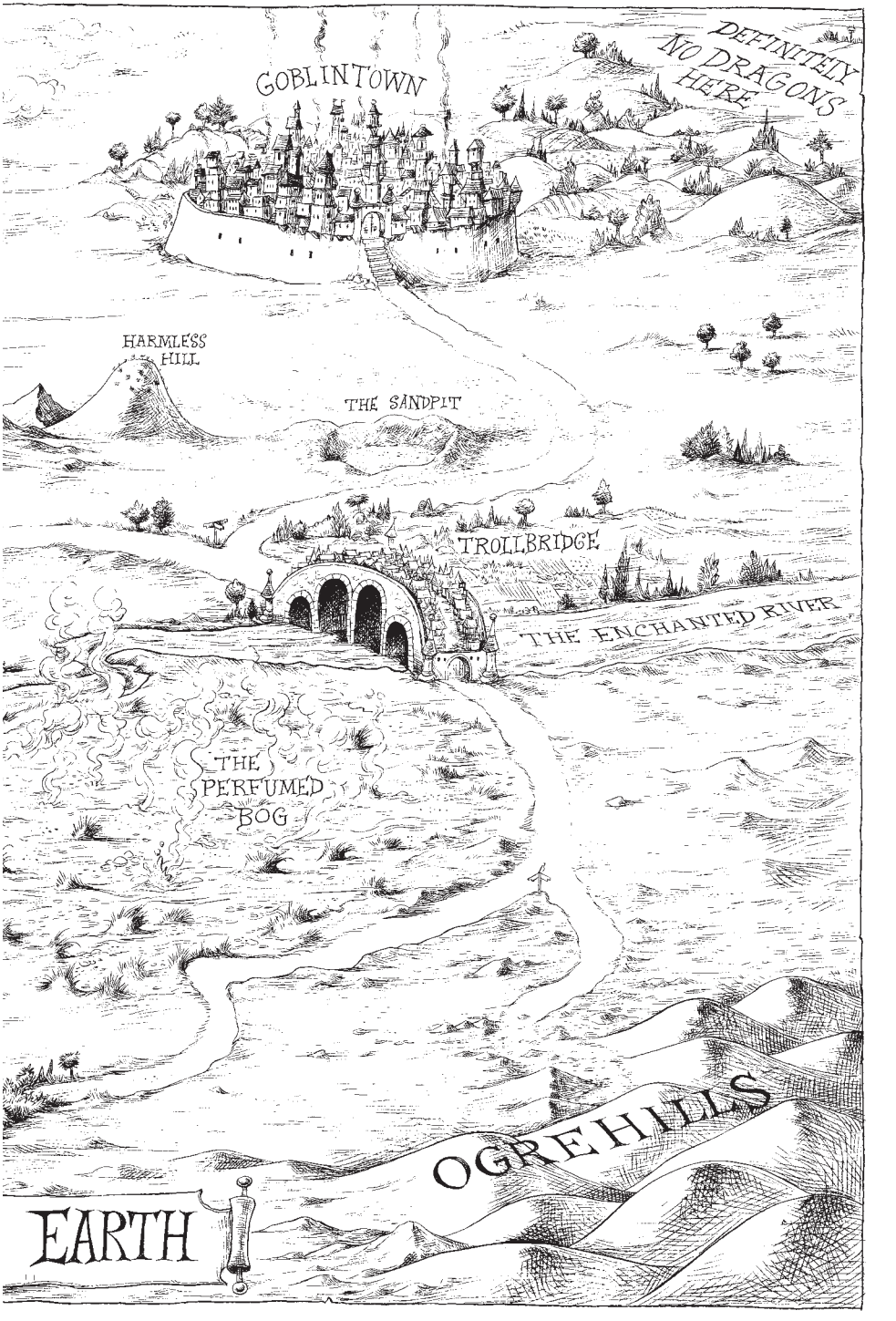
Name: Dr Cuddles (Sshhh! Don't say his name out loud!)

Occupation: (SSHHH! No one even knows he exists!)

Hobbies: (Didn't you hear what I just said?)

Favourite food: Snuggle-muffins


HERE BE DRAGONS
AND HERE
AND HERE
AND OVER HERE
NOWHERE
MOUNT BOOM
THE HORNED BARON'S CASTLE
THE MUSTY MOUNTAINS
THE ENCHANTED LAKE
GIGGLE GLADE
ELFWOOD
MUDDLE


GOBLINTOWN
DEFINITELY NO DRAGONS HERE
HARMLESS HILL
THE SANDPIT
TROLLBRIDGE
THE ENCHANTED RIVER
THE PERFUMED BOG
OGRE HILLS
EARTH

Book 1

Engelbert the Enormous

Prologue

Night was falling over Muddle Earth. The sun had set, the sky was darkening and already two of its three moons had risen up above the Musty Mountains. One of these moons was as purple as a batbird. The other was as yellow as an ogre's underpants on wash day. Both were full and bright.

The land was full of noises as the day creatures (such as tree rabbits, hillfish and pink stinky hogs) said goodnight to the night creatures (such as stiltmice, lazybirds

and exploding gas frogs), who were just getting up. High above their heads, the batbirds had left their roosts and were soaring across the purple and yellow striped sky. As they bumped into each other, the air filled with their characteristic cry: '*Ouch!*'

In Elfwood, the trees bowed and bent as a chill wind howled through their branches. In the Perfumed Bog the oozy mud bubbled and plopped. In the far-off Ogrehills, there was the slurping sound of a thousand thumbs being sucked and a thousand sleepy voices murmuring '*Mummy!*'

Twinkling lights were coming on throughout overcrowded Goblintown and, as the goblins prepared their evening meals, the air was filled with the smells of bad-breath porridge and snotbread – and the sounds of too many cooks.

'Have you spat in this?'

'No.'

'Well, go on then, before I put it in the oven.'

By contrast, Trollbridge was cloaked in cold, dank darkness. The trolls who lived there could see nothing of the cabbages and turnips they were eating for supper. Their deep voices rumbled up from their dwellings beneath the bridge.

'Has anyone seen my mangel-wurzel?'

'It's over here.'

'*OW!* That's my head!'

As the purple and yellow shadows swept down from

Mount Boom to the Horned Baron's great castle below, a loud, piercing voice ripped from the windows of the highest tower. Another of the inhabitants of Muddle Earth seemed to be finding it hard to tell the difference between a root vegetable and a head.

'Walter, you turnip-head! WALTER! Where *are* you?'

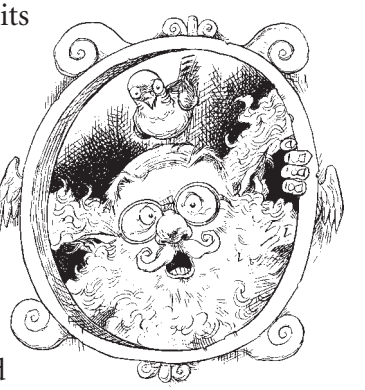
It was Ingrid, wife of the Horned Baron himself, and she was far from happy.

'Coming, my sweet,' he called out as he climbed the circular stairs.

'I've just seen something I really want in this catalogue,' Ingrid continued. 'Singing curtains. It says here, "No self-respecting Horned Baron's wife should be without these enchanted window hangings to lull her gently off to sleep at night and sensitively wake her with song the following morning." *I* want to be lulled to sleep by singing curtains, Walter. *I* want to be woken with song. Do you hear me?'

'Loud and clear, love-of-my-life,' the Baron replied wearily. 'All *too* loud and clear,' he muttered under his breath.

The next moment the third moon of Muddle Earth – a small, bright green sphere which only seemed to appear when it felt like it – sailed up in the sky to form a perfect equilateral triangle with its yellow and purple neighbours. The three moons lit up the Enchanted Lake, which hovered high up above the ground, and the seven magnificent houseboats bobbing about on its glistening waters.



Six of the houseboats were dark and deserted. The seventh was bathed in an oily, orange lamplight. A short, portly individual by the name of Randalf was staring out from one of its upper windows at the configuration of coloured moons. A budgie perched on his balding head.

'Norbert,' he said at last to his assistant. 'The astral signs are auspicious. My pointy hat, if you please. I feel a spell coming on!'

'At once, sir,' said Norbert, his voice gruff yet well-meaning. As he stomped across the floor to the wizard's cupboard the whole houseboat dipped and swayed. Norbert the Not-Very-Big was a fairly weedy specimen, as ogres went – but he was still an ogre. And ogres, even weedy ones, are big and heavy.

'You feel a spell coming on?' said the budgie, whose name was Veronica. 'No, don't tell me. It couldn't be the spell to summon a warrior-hero to Muddle Earth by any chance?'

'It might be,' replied Randalf defensively.

Veronica snorted. 'Some wizard you are,' she said. 'You've only got one spell.'

'Yes, yes, don't rub it in,' said Randalf. 'I do the best I can. With all the other wizards . . . *errm* . . . away, I've got to hold the fort.'

'This is a houseboat, not a fort,' said Veronica. 'And the other wizards aren't *away*, they're—'

'Shut up, Veronica!' said Randalf sharply. 'You promised never to mention that dreadful incident again.'

The houseboat lurched once more as Norbert strode back across the room. 'Your pointy hat, sir,' he said.

Randalf placed it on his head. 'Thank you, Norbert,' he said, trying hard to overcome his irritation with Veronica. She was *such* a know-it-all! Why couldn't he have had something nice and sweet for a familiar like an exploding gas frog or a slimy bog demon? True, they might have been a bit smelly, but at least they wouldn't have answered back all the time. Not like this infernal budgie. Still, he was stuck with Veronica now, and he'd just have to do what he always did in these situations – make the best of it.

He carefully removed a piece of paper from the folds of his cloak, delicately opened it up and cleared his throat.

'Here we go,' came a muffled voice from under his hat as Randalf began to recite the incantation from the piece of paper. '*Hail, oh Triplet Moons of Muddle. Shine down on these Words of Enchanting, now I utter . . .* um . . .'

'That's all very well and good,' Veronica's voice broke in, 'but it's the last bit you need to concentrate on.'

'I know that,' Randalf muttered through clenched teeth. 'Be quiet now. I'm *trying* to concentrate.'

'That'll be a first,' Veronica commented, wriggling out from under the brim of the hat.

Randalf stared down at the spell miserably. Much as he hated to admit it, Veronica was right. He *did* need to concentrate on the last part of the spell. The trouble was, the bottom of the piece of paper had been torn off, and with it, the all-important words of enchantment for the warrior-hero-summoning spell. Once again he would have to improvise.

'*Creator of Wonders, Master of Intricate Arts, Possessor of Breathtaking Skills . . .*' he began.

'Don't overdo it,' Veronica cautioned. 'You said something like that last time you summoned a warrior-hero. Do you *want* another Quentin the Cake-Decorator?'

'No, you're right,' said Randalf. He rubbed his beard thoughtfully. 'All right,' he said at last, 'how about this?' He took a deep breath.

'*Strong . . . and loyal . . . and . . .*' He gave Veronica a dark look. '*Hairy. Oh, Triplet Moons, on these words shine clear.*

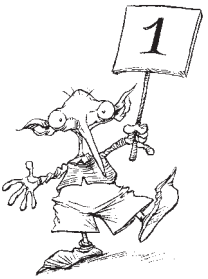
Let a mighty warrior-hero now appear!'

There was a bright flash, a loud crash and clouds of purple, yellow and green smoke billowed from the fireplace. Randalf, Norbert and Veronica spun round and stared, open-mouthed – and beaked – at the figure which appeared amidst the thinning smoke.

'What is *that*?' said Norbert.

Veronica squawked with amusement. 'I've just got one thing to say,' she chuckled. 'Come back Quentin the Cake-Decorator, all is forgiven!'

'Shut up, Veronica!' said Randalf, 'and stop sniggering. Everything's going to be fine! Trust me, I'm a wizard.'



Joe slammed down his pen angrily and clamped his hands over his ears to shut out the surrounding din.

'This is hopeless!' he bellowed. 'Hopeless!'

The noise was coming in from all directions – above, below, the room next door . . . It was like being stuck in a giant noise-sandwich.

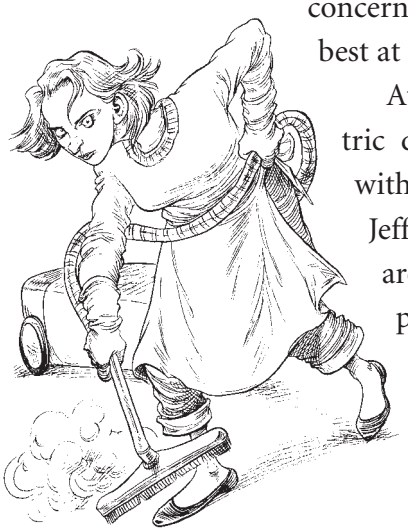
On the desk in front of him, the title of his English assignment – 'My Amazing Adventure' – headed a blank piece of paper. It was early evening at the end of a sunny midsummer Sunday, and if Joe was to get the homework finished and ready to hand in on Monday morning then he needed to get down to work. But how *could* he, with that infernal racket going on all round him?

Joe Jefferson lived in a small brick house with his mum, dad, older sister, younger twin-brothers and his dog, Henry. To a casual observer, the Jeffersons seemed like a nice, quiet family. It was only when you stepped in through the front

door that it became clear that they were anything *but*.

Mrs Jefferson worked in a bank. She was tall, slim, dark and fanatically house-proud. Mr Jefferson – a travelling sales-rep by day and a DIY freak at night, weekends, holidays and any other spare hour he could find – was short, stocky and never more happy than when clutching a power tool in his hands.

Over the years, Mr Jefferson had constructed a garage, converted the loft, knocked rooms through, put up shelves and cupboards, built a conservatory, landscaped the garden and was currently working on a kitchen extension. At least, that was what *he* would say. So far as Mrs Jefferson was concerned, the thing her husband was best at was making a mess.



At this precise moment the electric drill was busy battling it out with the vacuum cleaner as Mrs Jefferson followed Mr Jefferson around the kitchen – attachment pipe raised high like a light-sabre – sucking up the dust from the air before it had a chance to settle.

As the noise vibrated up through his bedroom floor, Joe shook his head. He'd never get his homework done at this rate, and if he didn't, he'd be in serious trouble with Mr Dixon.

He wondered wearily why his dad didn't take up a nice quiet hobby – like chess, or embroidery – and why his mum couldn't be just a little less obsessed with cleanliness. And why his sister, Ella, who had the converted attic-room above his head, had to do everything – from flicking through a magazine to putting on mascara – to the accompaniment of loud, pounding music. And why the twins' favourite game was chasing-up-and-down-stairs-screaming.

Joe opened the drawer in his desk, pulled out his earplugs and was just about to shove them into his ears, when Henry let out a bloodcurdling howl and started barking furiously.

'That's it!' Joe yelled. He leapt up from his desk and stormed across the room. 'Henry!' he called. 'Come here, boy.'

The barking grew louder. It was coming from the bathroom. So were Mark and Matt's squeals of delight.

'He's in here, Joe,' they shouted.

'Henry!' Joe called again. 'Heel!'

Henry came bounding on to the landing and stood in front of Joe, tail wagging and tongue lolling. The twins appeared behind him.

'He was drinking the water from the toilet bowl again,'

they shouted excitedly. 'So we flushed it!'

Joe looked down at the water dripping from Henry's hairy face. 'Serves you right,' he laughed.

The dog barked happily and held out his paw. Upstairs, Ella's door opened and the music grew louder than ever. Ella's angry voice floated down.

'Shut that dog up!' she yelled.

From downstairs, the sound of the electric drill was abruptly replaced by loud hammering.

'Come on, boy,' said Joe. 'Let's get out of this madhouse!'

He turned and, with Henry at his heel, went down the stairs, grabbed the lead from the hook by the door and was just about to leave when his mum noticed him.

'Where are you going?' she shouted out above the sound of the vacuum cleaner and hammer.

'Out,' Joe replied. He opened the door.

'Out where?'

But Joe had already gone.

The local park was deserted. Joe picked up a stick and threw it for Henry, who chased after it, retrieved it and dropped it back at his feet for another throw. Joe grinned. However exasperating his life became, he could always count on Henry to cheer him up. He ruffled the dog's ears and tossed

the stick a second time, then set off after Henry.

Across the grass they went, past a cluster of trees and down the hill. As they approached the stream, Joe whistled for Henry to return and clicked the lead into place. If Henry ended up splashing about in the dirty water again, his mum would go mad!

He patted the dog's head affectionately. 'Come on, boy, we'd better get back. That essay won't write itself.' He turned to go. '*My Amazing Adventure*,' he muttered. 'What a stupid title . . . Henry, what's wrong?'

Henry was standing stock still, the hairs along his back on end and his ears and nose twitching.

'What is it, boy?' Joe knelt down and followed the dog's intent stare.

Henry strained on the lead and whimpered.

'What can you see?' Joe muttered. 'Not a squirrel, I hope. You know what happened last ti . . . *aaargh*!'

Unable to remain still a moment longer, Henry suddenly bounded forwards. Head down and following his nose, he dashed straight for a massive rhododendron bush, pulling Joe along behind. The good news was that Henry was heading for a hole in the dark foliage. The bad news was that the hole was only dog-height.

'Henry! Henry, stop!' he shouted and tugged in vain at the lead. 'Stop! You stupid . . .'

The rest of the sentence was lost to a mouthful of leaves as Joe was dragged into the bush. He ducked down and tried

his best to shield his eyes with his free hand as Henry dragged him deeper and deeper inside.

All at once, the branches and leaves began crackling with silvery strands of electricity, the air shimmered and wobbled and filled with the sound of slow mournful music – and the smell of burnt toast.

'What on earth . . .' Joe gasped as, the next moment, he was pulled headlong down into a long flashing tunnel. The music grew louder. The smell of burning became stronger and stronger until . . .

CRASH!

'Aargh!' yelled Joe. He was still falling, only now he could feel the sides of the tunnel grazing his elbows and bashing his knees as he continued to drop. And it was black – pitch-black. Joe cried out in fear and pain and let go of the lead. Henry disappeared below him. What seemed like an eternity later, he tumbled down out of the long vertical tunnel and landed with a heavy thump on the ground.

Joe opened his eyes. He was sitting on a tiled floor, bruised, dazed, surrounded by a thick cloud of choking dust and without the faintest idea what had just happened.

Had he fallen into a hole beneath the bush?

Had he cracked his head on a branch so hard he'd knocked himself silly?

As the swirling dust thinned, Joe found himself in a fireplace behind a huge pot, which was suspended on

chains. He peered out into a dimly lit and exceedingly cluttered room.

There were tables against every wall, each one covered with pots, papers and peculiar paraphernalia. There were stools and cupboards and bookcases stacked high with boxes, bottles and books. Every inch of the walls was taken up with shelves and cabinets, maps and charts and countless hooks laden with bundles of twigs, roots and dried plants, dead animals and birds and shiny implements that Joe couldn't even begin to guess the purpose of. As for the floor, it was crowded with bulging sacks, earthenware pots and various angular contraptions made of wood and metal, with springs, pistons and cogs – and in the middle of all the chaos, two individuals with their backs turned.

One was short and portly, with bushy white hair and a blue budgie perched on the brim of his tall pointy hat. The other was hefty, knobbly and so tall that he had to stoop to avoid knocking his head against the heavy chandelier above his head.

'He doesn't say much, sir,' the hefty, knobbly one was saying.

'Obviously the strong, silent type, Norbert,' the portly figure replied.

'Unlike Quentin the Cake-Decorator,' said the budgie.

The portly one bent down. 'Now, don't be shy,' he said. 'My name's Randalf. Tell us your name.'

Joe climbed to his feet. This wasn't happening. You don't

take your dog for a walk one minute, fall into a bush the next and end up in somebody's kitchen. Do you? Joe closed his eyes and shook his head. Where was Henry, anyway?

Just then, the dog emitted a short, sharp bark.

'Rough?' said Norbert, puzzled. 'Did he say "Rough", sir?'

'Yes, Rough!' replied the short character, nodding enthusiastically. 'Of course. An excellent name for a warrior-hero, being both short and to the point.' He leaned down and added conspiratorially, 'Rough the Strong? Rough the Slayer? Rough the . . . Hairy?'

Henry barked again.

'Henry!' Joe called.

The dog appeared from behind Norbert, tail wagging furiously, and bounded over to the fireplace. Joe bent down and hugged him tightly. It was so good to see a familiar face, even if this was a dream.

'Who are *you*?' came a strident voice.

Joe looked up and stared back at the two individuals staring at him. The short one had a bushy white beard. The tall one had three eyes. Both of them were standing stock-still, eyes (all five of them) wide and mouths agape. It was the budgie who had spoken.

'I said, who *are* you?' it demanded.

'I . . . I'm Joe, but . . .' he began.

'Don't you see, Veronica?' Randalf exclaimed. 'That must be the sidekick,' he said, pointing at Joe. 'All good

warrior-heroes have a sidekick. Mendigor the Mendacious had Hellspawn the goblin, Lothgar the Loathsome had Sworg Bloodpimple . . .'

'Quentin the Cake-Decorator had Mary the poodle,' Veronica muttered.

'Shut up, Veronica,' Randalf snapped. 'You'll have to excuse my familiar,' he explained to Henry. 'She's been getting a bit big for her boots recently.' He turned to Joe. 'I'm right, aren't I? You are Rough the Hairy's sidekick. His sword-carrier, perhaps? Or his axe-sharpener?'

'Not exactly,' said Joe, in a dazed sort of voice. 'And his name is Henry, not Rough. I was holding his lead when . . .'

'So you're his *lead*-bearer,' Randalf interrupted. 'Joe the lead-bearer. *Hmm.* Unusual, admittedly, but not totally unheard of.'

The budgie, who was wearing small yet sturdy lace-up boots, coughed. '*I've* never heard of it,' she said.

'Shut up, Veronica!' he said, and brushed the bird off the brim of his hat. 'We're forgetting our manners,' he went on, turning back to Henry. 'Let me introduce myself properly. I am Randalf the Wise, Muddle Earth's leading wizard.'

'Only wizard, more like,' said Veronica, settling on his shoulder.

'And this,' Randalf went on without missing a beat, 'is my assistant, Norbert – or Norbert the Not-Very-Big, to give him his full title.'

'Not very big!' Joe blurted out in astonishment. 'But he's gigantic.'

'Taller than you or me, I grant you,' said Randalf, 'yet for an ogre, Norbert is a small and rather weedy specimen.'

'You should see my father,' said Norbert, nodding. 'Now he *is* gigantic.'

'But back to the matter at hand,' said Randalf. 'I have summoned you here, Henry the Hairy, great warrior-hero, to . . .'

'Warrior-hero?' Joe interrupted, 'Henry's not a warrior-hero. He's my dog!'

Henry wagged his tail and rolled over with his legs in the air.

'What's he doing?' said Norbert, his three eyes open wide and panic in his voice.

'He wants you to tickle his tummy,' said Joe, shaking his head in disbelief. 'Any minute now, I'm going to wake up in hospital with a big bandage on my head.'

'Go ahead, Norbert, tickle his tummy,' said Randalf.

'But, sir,' said the ogre weakly.

'Tickle!' said Randalf. 'And that's an order!'

As Norbert bent down, the room gave a lurch. He gently stroked Henry's tummy with a massive finger.

'Go on, go on,' said Randalf impatiently. 'He won't bite.' He smiled at Joe. 'It seems there's been a slight misunderstanding,' he said, stroking his beard.

'There's always a misunderstanding with you,' chirped

the budgie.

'Shut up, Veronica. I was under the impression that Henry the Hairy was the warrior-hero I had ordered – strong, loyal and . . . errm . . . hairy. But if, as you say, he is in fact a dog, then *you* must be the warrior-hero . . .'

'He doesn't look very strong, or for that matter, very hairy,' said Veronica dismissively. 'If *he's* a warrior-hero, then *I'm* Dr Cuddles of Giggle Glade!'

'Veronica,' Randalf snapped, 'if I've told you once I've told you a thousand times *never* to utter that person's name in my presence!'

'Brings back memories, does it?' Veronica taunted, and flapped up into the air. Randalf tried to swat her.

'Ow, watch where you're flying,' Norbert shouted, taking a step back as the budgie booted him in the ear.

Joe clung on to the great hanging pot as the whole room seemed to tilt to one side.

'Button it, you great lunk!' Veronica shot back.

'You and whose army?' Norbert countered.

Joe watched in open-mouthed amazement as the wizard, the ogre and the budgie rounded on one another angrily. This was absolutely crazy. Who were they? Where was he? And most important of all, how was he going to get home?

'It's . . . it's been lovely meeting you all,' he shouted, interrupting the three shouting protagonists, 'but it's getting late and I've still got my homework to do. I really

should be leaving now . . .'

The three of them stopped mid rant, carp and criticism, and turned to him.

'Late?' said Randalf.

'Leaving?' said Norbert.

Veronica jumped up and down on the wizard's head, feathers all fluffed up. '*You're* not going anywhere!' she squawked.