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Welcome to the Unmapped Kingdoms . . .

When you become a grown-up, several rather troubling things happen at once: your knees stop working as well as they used to; you spend large chunks of the day banging on about homework, vegetables and bedtimes; and you fall asleep the moment you sit down in a comfortable armchair. But with all the dodgy knees, nagging and nodding off comes wisdom. Or does it? Because, if grown-ups were truly wise, then they would know about the Unmapped Kingdoms. But they do not. They are far too busy to believe in magic. And yet, if they did, they would realise that the world is very much not as they know it . . .

You see, at the beginning there were no big bangs or black holes. There was just an egg. A rather large one. And out of this egg a phoenix was born. It wept seven tears when it found itself alone and, as these tears fell, they 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, had a hippogriff or a unicorn been in charge, things might have got out of hand (for though these beasts like to boss others around they are rarely on time for anything and are far too vain to govern fairly). But a phoenix is the wisest of all magical creatures and the very first phoenix knew that magic grows strange and dark if used selfishly 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 thought long and hard about which magical creatures to appoint as rulers of each Unmapped Kingdom. The cloud giants were tall and strong, but they tended to fall asleep when anything important needed to be done. The snow trolls were kind and clever, but rather too keen on firing crossbows. And so the phoenix settled on the Lofty Husks – 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 the Lofty Husks in each kingdom 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, while a phoenix may be wise, it 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.

A period of peace and prosperity followed and every five hundred years the Unmappers learnt to watch for a new phoenix rising up into the sky to renew the Unmapped magic and herald the arrival of a new era. Everyone believed things would continue this way for ever . . .

When you're dealing with magic, though, *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, 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.

Four thousand years ago, Morg breathed a curse over the nest of the last phoenix on the very night of the renewal of magic. 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 seized the nest as her own and set about seeking to claim all the magic of the Unmapped Kingdoms for herself.

But, when things go wrong and magic goes awry, it makes room for stories with unexpected heroes and unlikely heroines. I could tell you about a girl from Crackledawn who stole Morg's wings, the very things that held the harpy's power, or about a boy named Casper from the Faraway, who once journeyed to Rumblestar to destroy those same wings so that the Unmapped Kingdoms and the Faraway might be saved from ruin. I could also tell you about the dragons that roam the kingdoms now and scatter moondust from their wings to keep what is left of the Unmapped magic turning until Morg dies and a new phoenix rises.

But those are stories for another time and place – and perhaps some of you have discovered them already. Now, though, a new story is brewing . . . Because Morg is stirring in Everdark once more, with new wings built from the

deepest curses, and her sights are set on the kingdom of Jungledrop, where – she has learnt – a mythical fern that grants immortality grows. A plant that Morg believes will be most useful in her plans for the Unmapped Kingdoms . . .

And, as much as I wish I could introduce you to a boy and a girl brimming with charm for this story, I'm afraid I cannot. The Petty-Squabble twins have as much charm as a politician's underpants. But, just because someone has a sharp tongue and a thorny heart at eleven years old, it doesn't mean that they will stay that way for ever. Quite the contrary. Children are remarkably bendy creatures, especially when they are thrust head first into an adventure. Just when you think you've got the measure of them, they twist and turn and end up surprising you altogether.

Even the ones who seem truly dreadful like Fox and Fibber Petty-Squabble. In fact, sometimes it is children like that who make the most interesting heroes of all . . .



Fox Petty-Squabble flopped onto the sofa in the penthouse suite of the Neverwrinkle Hotel. It was the summer holidays – or at least it was supposed to be – but rather than heading to the seaside, or relaxing with a barbeque in their garden, the Petty-Squabble family had descended upon the sleepy village of Mizzlegurg in the Bavarian countryside for a business trip.

Although originally from England, Gertrude and Bernard Petty-Squabble had moved their family to Germany shortly after Fox and her twin brother, Fibber, had been born. Bernard had a very wealthy German ancestor, a duke called Great Uncle Rudolph, and when he passed away the Petty-Squabbles found themselves inheriting his enormous mansion in Munich because they were his only living relatives. Bickery Towers was one of the biggest and grandest houses in all of Europe, which was just as well because being bigger and grander than everyone else mattered enormously to Mr and Mrs Petty-Squabble. So much so that they filled every summer holiday (and indeed every Christmas and

Easter holiday, too) with business meetings because making heaps of cash was, to them, the only way to ensure they remained more important than everybody else.

And so, as today marked the start of the twins' summer holiday, the Petty-Squabbles had all set off from Bickery Towers that morning, complete with matching luggage, matching business suits and matching scowls, before bullying their way through the day – as was their custom. The family motto, etched in gold across the boot of their car, was:

Do Not Be Afraid

Then, in smaller letters below this:

To Stamp All Over Other People's Feelings

Gertrude Petty and Bernard Squabble had been living by this code for as long as they could remember and it had made them very rich indeed. Even before the move to Bickery Towers eleven years ago, Gertrude was running one of the world's leading anti-ageing skincare ranges, Petty Pampering, and Bernard was the founder of Squabble Sauces, a global corporation which claimed to make cooking sauces that did all sorts of improbable things like reduce tiredness and increase intelligence. In reality, neither the skincare products nor the sauces actually fulfilled any of their bold promises. The Petty-Squabble empire was built on

lies. But bullies and liars often go from strength to strength until someone is brave enough to take them down.

Needless to say, no one was brave enough to take the Petty-Squabbles down the day they left for Mizzlegurg for they were very much in a stamping sort of mood. The family's long-suffering driver, Hans Underboot, got it in the neck first. Mrs Petty took it upon herself to dock his pay every time he obeyed the speed limit or got stuck in traffic because she had an appointment at the Neverwrinkle Hotel that she really didn't want to miss. Then, upon arrival at the hotel, Mr Squabble clouted the porter round the head when he asked if the family had had an enjoyable journey because that was *clearly* none of his business. And Fox sneered at every single person who crossed her path – the receptionist who smiled too much, the waiter who asked too many questions at lunch and the pool attendant whose moustache was 'stupid' – purely because that was how she had been raised to behave. To be kind was to be weak and to be weak was to be stamped on by everyone, which, admittedly, did not sound ideal to Fox.

Only Fibber had held back on the stamping. In fact, Fox had noticed that her brother had been unusually quiet since the end of term a few weeks ago. Suspiciously quiet, she thought.

Fox and Fibber were twins, not that you would have known it to look at them. Fibber was tall with sleek dark hair, like their mother, while Fox was short with a tumble of red hair, which had come from their father. But, though

they might not have looked alike, they had one thing in common: a sharp tongue. And the only thing the twins liked more than insulting strangers was being horrid to one another, especially if it meant that they could show their sibling up in front of their mother and father.

This inter-family competitiveness had been handed down to the twins from their parents. For, while Gertrude and Bernard ultimately wanted to amass one giant Petty-Squabble fortune, they valued rivalry over romance. Working *against* family members, rather than *with* them, added a competitive edge to money-making schemes and got you richer quicker, as far as Gerturde and Bernard were concerned. And so they were constantly seeking sly ways to get one up on each other and this rivalry overshadowed every aspect of Fox and Fibber's relationship, too.

Moments after the twins' birth, Fox had given Fibber a black eye for being born three minutes sooner than her and that was to set the tone for the rivalry to come. When they were barely a year old, Fibber knocked over Fox's crib back in Bickery Towers when his parents weren't looking. Fox then retaliated by biting the head off Fibber's favourite teddy and Fibber had fought back by flicking the brake off Fox's pram the next day which very nearly sent his sister hurtling under a lorry racing down their street.

The Petty-Squabble parents delighted in these feuds and even named their children in such a way as to heighten the sense of conflict: Fibber because they hoped he'd turn out to be a brilliant liar (which he did) and Fox because

they hoped she'd turn out to be as sly as the animal itself (which she didn't, because being impulsive makes it near impossible to be sly). So this sibling rivalry, fuelled by their parents, went on – through early childhood, nursery and school – reaching a peak a few months ago when Fibber tricked Fox into flushing her homework down the loo, causing Fox to dangle her brother by his ankles from a fifth-floor window in Bickery Towers (to the cheers of their parents down below).

But Fox was uneasy. Since the dangling incident, Fibber hadn't tricked or cheated or – his favourite – lied to his parents to get his sister into trouble. For months, she had waited for her brother to fight back, but instead Fibber had remained uncharacteristically quiet and thoughtful. So now, as they sat together in the hotel suite booked by their parents, Fox watched him with narrowed eyes. He was sitting in an armchair opposite her, his briefcase parked by his feet and a pad of paper open on his lap. Fox craned her neck to see what he was up to, but he inched his pad higher to shield the page from her.

Fox plucked at her plait. 'What are you scribbling about?'

Fibber didn't look up. He didn't stop writing either. Fox was used to her brother's calm, collected manner when he was stamping all over other people's feelings, but she had always found it easy to bait Fibber into bickering with her when it was just the two of them alone together. These new-found silences were starting to unnerve her because Petty-Squabbles who were silent were usually plotting

something. Like the aforementioned Great Uncle Rudolph who apparently hadn't said a word for forty-three years, then announced he was digging a tunnel from Munich to London so that he could kidnap the Queen and hold her hostage for an unreasonable sum of money. Great Uncle Rudolph had got as far as Poland before realising he had been digging in the wrong direction; he was then silent for another forty-three years, for different reasons.

Fox tried to conjure up some mutinous money-making thoughts of her own, but she couldn't help feeling that kidnaps, robberies and large-scale revolutions might be more effective when performed with other people. And Fox was very much a solo act, both at school (where avoiding being stamped on meant insulting classmates and teachers on a daily basis) and at home (where conversations were limited to business, smiling was frowned upon and hugging was completely out of the question).

Fox pulled off her tie, wedged it down the side of the sofa, then looked across at her brother again. 'You're working on the Petty Pampering business plan, aren't you?'

There was an edge to her voice now because she knew that, if Fibber was putting in the hours attempting to rebrand the Petty Pampering products, it meant she should be doing the same for Squabble Sauces. The twins knew that both companies were based on lies, but there was too much at stake to start messing around with the truth. Customers had slowly but surely been starting to realise they'd been duped and now profits were falling and contracts were being

dropped, which was why the twins spent every holiday traipsing round luxury hotels while their parents tried to persuade the spas and restaurants to stock their products.

But Fox and Fibber weren't brought along on these trips because Gertrude and Bernard couldn't bear to be parted from their children. Oh, no. They were here to work. Their parents had cornered them at the end of Year One and informed the twins that only one of them would inherit the Petty-Squabble empire; if Fox came up with a way to save Squabble Sauces, it would be her, but if Fibber swept in and rescued Petty Pampering first it would be him. So, just like that, the rivalry between the siblings deepened.

And Gertrude and Bernard didn't stop there. To spur Fox on to recover the family fortune as quickly as possible, her parents frequently told her that Fibber's cunning lies would, eventually, be the key to his success. While at the same time (unbeknown to Fox) her parents goaded Fibber into believing that Fox really was sly enough to rebuild the Petty-Squabble empire without him even noticing and would push him out in the process. This meant that the twins were always jealous of each other and constantly convinced that their parents loved one more than the other. So they had grown up in the firm and somewhat terrifying knowledge that they were rivals, not siblings.

In truth, Gertrude and Bernard didn't care which child saved the family fortune. The only reason they had had children in the first place was in the hope that one of them might eventually make them lots of cash. Indeed, when Fox

had asked her father what would happen to the child who didn't inherit the Petty-Squabble empire, his response – *They will be packaged up, posted somewhere very far away, like Antarctica, and politely wished all the very best* – had not been altogether reassuring.

Fox reached inside her blazer pocket for her phone and began tapping away in the Notes section.

'Just opening my list of secret, and utterly brilliant, ways to save Squabble Sauces,' she muttered, loudly enough for her brother to hear.

Fibber looked up briefly, then carried on writing.

Fox tapped away with a smirk. 'Just adding in a few more beltors to clinch the deal.'

Which was entirely untrue. There was no list of breathtaking ideas that would save the dwindling Petty-Squabble empire. Fox knew all the right words to blag her way through the weekly family business meetings – *expenditure, capital, profit margin, asset* – but she had no idea what any of these terms actually meant. And she was absolutely hopeless at strategic thinking.

For a moment, Fox felt the weight of something dark and unlovely shifting inside her. Fibber was a businessman-in-the-making. He was clever and smooth-talking – he could fool even the most intelligent grown-ups with his silky lies – and although at school he was far too arrogant to feel the need to make friends he had, this term, endeared himself to a teacher, Mrs Scribble, with whom he now took extra lessons during lunchbreak because she sensed in him some '*hidden potential*'.

The darkness inside Fox flinched. No one had ever thought that she was special. That she had ‘potential’. What was she good at? Too much of a solo act to be picked for the sports teams, not bright enough to achieve top grades and not nearly popular enough to be picked for Head of School in Year Six next term. Everyone in her class seemed to be good at *something*, even the really quiet ones who (much to Fox’s annoyance) looked perfectly ordinary, but ended up being fabulous at spelling, feverishly fast on ice skates or shockingly good at the clarinet.

Fox had concluded some years ago that her obvious lack of talent was what made her unlovable to her parents. Stamping on other people’s feelings every day was all very well – after all, Fox didn’t fancy being kind because being weak, as well as talentless, would only add to her misery – but the heart is a fragile thing and sometimes people assume that the best way to keep theirs safe is to build a wall round it. And that was just what Fox had done. Hers was a very high wall that had grown up over the years without her truly realising because it made dealing with being unlovable ever so slightly easier.

She stole a look at Fibber. Was he quieter than usual because he had, finally – and perhaps predictably – come up with a way to save the family fortune? Maybe he was just moments away from announcing his triumph. Fox contemplated her options. She could pin Fibber down, snatch his business plan, then – she thought fast – *eat it*? Or was it time to do a Great Uncle Rudolph (without the

tunnel drama): grab the plan and hold it hostage until Fibber agreed to say that he and Fox had come up with all the ideas together?

Before Fox could do either, the door to the penthouse suite opened. In stormed Gertrude Petty-Squabble, wearing a white bathrobe, white slippers and a white towel twisted up over her hair. She was wearing so much white she looked uncannily like a meringue while behind her, red-haired and red-faced, was Bernard Petty-Squabble resembling a volcano rammed into a business suit.

Bernard flung the door shut. Then he and his wife eyed their children with the kind of look that is usually only reserved for traffic wardens and large spiders. Fox gulped. She knew all too well that when her parents barged into a room like this it was never good news . . .