

HERE OR THEREABOUTS

Bathed in the light of the day, it took their eyes a moment to adjust. Soon enough, they found themselves savouring the brightness and warmth of the sun. *Wonderful*, they thought together.

The professor looked back at the little, wooden door. *Marvellous!* It was set deeply into the gnarly roots of an old tree. He looked up to admire the tree in its entirety. *A splendid specimen!* He gazed at its crown. *Wait, did it move?*

“You okay, Prof?”

For a split second Oddney had thought he’d seen a worn and bearded face staring down at him. He rubbed his eyes and looked again but saw nothing. *Trick of the light*, he decided.

“Prof, are you okay?”

“Yes, I am fine, probably just suffering from a lack of tea. But, first, let me see what we have here.” Oddney surveyed his new surroundings: to his right lay uncultivated grasslands, studded with rocks; to his left were lines of unusual trees that marched into the hazy bluish distance; and in the midst of it all was a cobbled road, of sorts, that wound irresistibly around hillocks and gullies. *Magnificent!*

He closed his eyes and then took a deep breath in through his nose, filling it with numerous aromas but the scents made no sense to him. *Enticing, yes, but familiar, no, not*

even to me and to think my nose knows many a smell. Eyes still shut, he listened attentively and eagerly to far-off calls and cries from what – fair or foul – he did not know.

“You still with me, Prof?”

Oddney opened his eyes. “Yes, yes, I was just thinking.” He looked around for somewhere to sit. “I think it is time to work out exactly where we are.”

He found a suitable spot and pulled out the map that he’d found tucked inside Cuthbert’s journal. It took him a moment or two – turning the map around several times and glancing at regular intervals between it and his surroundings – but he eventually got his bearings. “Yes, I can now say with full confidence that we are here. This is Otherland.”

Magnus peered over the professor’s shoulder.

“We are here,” said Oddney pointing, “right next to this ‘Riddle’ tree.”

The magpie furrowed his brows.

“Your guess is as good as mine. I have no idea why Cuthbert called it that. It is plain for anyone to see that it is an oak tree. Maybe he did lose a marble or two? Anyway, moving swiftly on.”

Magnus left Oddney to it. He had his own pressing matters to consider, namely worms. *I wonder what the worms taste like in Otherland?* His eyes widened; *I wonder if there are any worms in Otherland? I’d better find out.* He set about scouring the nearby vicinity.

“The lair of The Two-Headed Firedrake is not actually marked on here,” continued





Oddney, not noticing that Magnus had assigned himself a new task, “but from the look of it, there are some natives living nearby who we could speak to. No doubt someone will point us in the right direction. But first, let us start with some tea!” He looked around searchingly. “Magnus?”

Back at the Beezers, the lady of the house was taking up her usual stance. “Ernest, this is ridiculous.”

“Mmmmmmm,” droned Mr Beezer, not even looking up.

“6.59 am they went into that old shed again, him and his bird.”

“Mmmmmmm,” he repeated.

“Dressed like Sherlock Holmes he was, and they’ve not come out yet. Two hours and thirty-four minutes by my watch. What do you think about that?”

“Oh, no! I think the dog has just finished off another one of my slippers.”

Oddney set off with a spring in his step; he had a good cup of tea inside him and was ready for action. “You know, Maggy, today I feel that very same sense of exhilaration that I had as a young explorer, setting out on my first expedition with the world at my feet. Today, I do not feel like a retiree, not at all, anything but!”

Magnus was genuinely pleased for his friend, but he still had plenty of doubts about their excursion. *That Common or Garden Gnome was one thing but a dragon with two heads, uh-uh!* He thought for a second longer. *And, if it is real, I do NOT want to meet it!* He shuddered at the possibility. *And ... and did that tree just look at me?* From the corner of his eye, he was sure that he’d seen a pair of eyes and a ghastly smile, but when he looked



again it was gone. He yawned uncomfortably and tightened his grip on the professor's hat. He tried hard to remain alert, but all of his thinking, combined with the bouncing of Oddney's gait, made him feel very sleepy. In next to no time his eyes were closed.

DO NOT DISTURB

Oddney was not in the least bit tired; he was in his element and did not want to miss a thing. With eyes agog, he marched along the roughly cobbled road, delighting in every new flower and insect in his path.

A healthy half-hour had passed when Oddney noticed a plume of smoke.

