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opening extract from

The Dark Ground

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Before

I

A ravine cut across the ground from north to south. It was too wide to jump and too long to travel round. Its overgrown banks went down sheer into the darkness.

On its western side, a bare, ridged tree rose out of the ground, growing clear of the black forest beyond. It stood tall and pale in the moonlight, topped by a crown of dead branches.

From high up in the crown, someone whistled.

Cam stepped out of the shadows on the eastern side, with the others close behind her. They all stared up at the dead tree across the ravine, hunting for Zak's silhouette among the branches. He called out to them, and the words drifted down like sounds from another world.

'Once it was like this. Remember?'

No! said a voice in Cam's head. *No, I won't, I won't—*

But it was too late. Zak had spoken the word they never used and her brain filled with forbidden images. She saw herself racing over the grass, with the world turning under her and the sky wide open above her head. Her hands moved powerfully, commanding fire and water. She soared among the clouds.

Be quiet, Zak. Be QUIET!

But he was way up in the branches, too high to reach. He was beyond her orders.

'Remember,' he called down. 'You were up in the air—above the tops of the trees. Remember the dazzle of

the sun and the space and the speed. You were *there*. Remember . . .

She couldn't stop him. None of them could stop him. He was beyond the gaping ravine, at the top of the tall, dead trunk. Only Zak could climb well enough to reach those high, cupped branches.

'Remember . . . ' he said again. The sound was relentless. Unbearable.

Cam put her fingers in her ears, turning away, but she could still hear him. They all heard. *Remember, remember . . .* The word battered at them until the darkness vibrated with anger and pain, and there was no way of stopping it. No way of silencing Zak.

Except the rope.

The rope-ends were on the ground, at Cam's feet. The great twelve-strand rope stretched across the ravine and back again, looping twice round the trunk of Zak's tree. As he called again, Cam stooped blindly, grabbing at one of the ends.

The others stooped too, jostling to find a place. A dozen hands clamped round each length of rope.

'Remember,' Zak shouted—and Cam began to pull, straining at the rope. Putting all her rage and pain into that single action.

Zak's voice grew louder. '*Remember!* You were high in the air! Above the tops of the trees, in the full dazzle of the sun! But—all in a flash—you came tumbling down, out of the music and the buzz and the energy, into deep silence. Out of the light and into the cold shadows. *Remember! Remember!*'

They were all pulling now. Their movements followed the rhythm of his voice and the trunk started to sway and creak, gathering momentum as they heaved. Up in the sky, among the top branches, Zak threw his weight forward, towards the ravine.

'Remember!'

The trunk gave way, keeling over suddenly, and Zak scrambled through the branches, screaming one word with all the air in his lungs.

'DOWN!'

He rode out the fall, straddling the trunk, but the others were caught in the whip of branches. As the tree swept down towards them, Cam was knocked clean off her feet. She clenched her fists, fighting the sound that welled up inside her.

Not she thought fiercely. *Bloody Zak, why did you have to— Oh, damn, I'm not going to—* But it was impossible to stay quiet. As the tree fell, the others began to wail with rage and pain. Cam struggled for a moment and then opened her mouth and howled, giving in to the darkness.

Zak fell past her, in the branches, so close that she saw the blue flash of his eyes. The great tree came down across the gulf, spanning it like a bridge, and crashed, head-first, on to the dark ground.

2

High in the clouds, something slammed into Robert's sleeping brain and he woke suddenly, in a rush of adrenalin. His mind was churning with images of falling, of tumbling out of the sky in a roar of broken, burning metal. He smelt the scorching and felt the rush of air against his helpless skin as he fell . . .

'Stop it!' Emma hissed fiercely, into his ear. She grabbed at his arm and shook it, digging in with her fingers. 'Be quiet!'

He hadn't known he was making a noise. He tried to move his head and found that it had slid sideways, wedged between the seat and the window blind. The engine noise vibrated in his ears and his neck was stiff and aching.

Falling . . .

He sat up and rubbed at his cheek. 'What happened?'

'Nothing happened,' Emma said crossly. 'You were just dreaming. Making a terrible moaning noise.'

'I was—'

Robert couldn't get the words out. The falling and the noise and the burning were still real and savage in his mind and he needed to talk about them. But not to Emma. She was the last person in the world he would choose to tell. She wouldn't understand and she would just say the same things, all over again. *It was only a dream. Nothing happened.*

He flexed his shoulders and looked round. She was right, of course. In a way. They were sitting side by side in the

darkened cabin, with the engines driving the plane steadily through the night. He could hear Mum and Dad talking quietly in the seats behind. He could see a stewardess moving calmly down the cabin. Nothing had happened.

And yet—he had been falling in fire and darkness. Every cell of his body was jarred and his heart was thumping. Was that nothing?

Turning away from Emma, he slid up the blind to look out of the window. The rising sun flared into his eyes so that he ducked his head, squinting to escape the dazzle. They were flying over a mass of trees that stretched in all directions. A river snaked out from the horizon, glinting golden where it caught the light, but the ground under the trees was dark and hidden.

Emma leaned across his body, pushing him out of the way so that she could see.

'Wow!' she said. 'Isn't that lovely? It's just like a photo.'

'No, it's not!' Robert pushed her away, angrily. 'Don't be stupid!'

The rush of fury took him by surprise—but it was her fault for talking rubbish. *It's just like a photo.* What did she mean? A photograph was just an image—flat colours on a piece of shiny paper. There was nothing behind the surface.

What they could see through the window was completely different. It was *real*.

If they swooped down twenty-five thousand feet, the tangled mass of treetops would separate into a pattern of interwoven branches, of twigs and leaves and intricate, ridged bark. If they dived through that, into the shadows, there would be a whole secret world of animals and plants, of streams and earth. And, deeper still, there were insects and fungi and tiny micro-organisms, getting smaller and smaller, in unimaginable complexity.

He and Emma were the ones who were unreal. They were floating high above the trees in a pressurized capsule, surrounded by strangers. The air they breathed was recycled and the temperature around them was artificially controlled. Every surface he could see was moulded into smooth, unnatural curves and beyond those curves was—nothing. Except the cold and empty sky.

The plane felt safe and ordinary, but it would only take a crack to shatter that safety and plunge them headlong through the air. *Falling and burning . . .*

He pressed his forehead against the window, struggling to look down through the trees into the hidden, real ground underneath them. But he couldn't do it.

'What's got into you?' Emma said.

It was dark and there was noise and fire . . . The words burned in Robert's head, but he couldn't speak them. The dark and the fire and the falling were *real*, like the trees and the river. But he couldn't explain that to Emma. She would give him a scornful, superior stare and go on talking about dreams and photos and what time the plane was going to land.

And she would think he was pathetic.

As usual.

Reaching forward, he snatched the sponge bag out of the pocket in front of him.

'I'm going to clean my teeth,' he said abruptly. He stood up and squeezed his way out into the aisle, pushing past Emma and the person in the next seat, without giving them a chance to move.

He thought he had his expression under control, but there must have been something odd about it. When he reached the washroom, the man who was coming out gave him a long, strange look. His eyes were blue and very clear. Robert turned away from them, hiding his face as he went through the open door.

The washroom was in the centre of the plane, a neat, cramped cubicle with no window and everything made to fit into the smallest possible space. Laying his sponge bag on the shelf, Robert took out the toothbrush and toothpaste. He unscrewed the top of the tube and squeezed a short length of toothpaste on to his brush.

But he could still feel eyes watching him.

He looked up quickly and found himself staring straight into the face in the mirror. *What's the matter with me? I can't be scared of myself.* But there was something unsettling about the reflection. Putting his toothbrush down, he leant closer, peering at it.

His own eyes peered back at him. They were grey-green, striped in a dozen places with faint lines of brown. The pattern was infinitely familiar—but today there was something different about it.

A face was looking back at him down the black tunnel of the pupils.

It was a tiny, strange face, almost too small to see. He moved his head and it kept time, moving with him, its own eyes as sharp as pinpoints. When he lifted his hand towards it a minute, pale hand came up in answer, stretching out to him.

Who is it? he thought. He could see the mirrored hand trembling in the glass. *Is that my face? My hand?*

His own hand was trembling too. Half of him wanted to look away, but he couldn't make his eyes disconnect. Taking a slow, deliberate breath, he reached out further, nearer to the glass. And nearer still . . . until his real hand met the mirror hand, fingertip to fingertip—

—and a shock went through him, jolting his whole body.

The strange face exploded forward, swooping out of the darkness. For a split second, in a flash of clear, dazzling blue, he saw his own face reflected in its eyes.

Then the darkness flared into his face, blotting out everything. It exploded around him, grating against his eyes and grinding into his head. Air and vibration beat at him, until he was shaken from the inside outwards.

Noise roared into every cell, jarring his bones and burning up his blood, and raw heat blasted against the surface of his skin.

Then a long wrenching twist wound up the spirals of his body, squeezing in and down and in and down and in and down and in and down and—

And a deeper darkness came up to meet him.

I

Alone

3

He came round suddenly, shocked and shivering. One moment he was unconscious and the next he was sitting up in a litter of wet, rotting vegetation, with the wind scouring his bare skin.

He was cold and naked and his whole aching body was covered in scratches. The damp air round him smelt of decay. The ground ran away into shadows. Looking up, he saw a tangle of branches arching far above his head, closing out the light.

He had absolutely no idea where he was.

He remembered walking down the plane towards the washroom. But after that—nothing. It was like looking into a thick fog, full of hazy shapes that slid away when he tried to focus. There was a blur of pain and a dazzle of light—

And then an exploding, overwhelming darkness.

He began to work over his body, checking the bones. Working each joint to be sure that it was still functioning.

Fingers? Eight (plus two thumbs) all whole and agile.

Toes? They wiggled reassuringly.

Arms? Legs? Nothing wrong there.

Back—? He winced as he moved and felt the long raw patch running down the left hand side. Was it a burn or a graze? He tried looking over his shoulder, but he couldn't see and he had no way of finding out.

He was shivering harder now, not from shock, but from sheer cold. Within a few moments that had driven

everything else out of his mind. He had to get warm. It was more urgent than hunger, more important than understanding. He had to cover himself up.

But how?

He was lying half-submerged in a chilly, disintegrating mass of leaf fragments, as thick and heavy as wet leather. The tangled branches over his head were dark and dripping and a break in the canopy showed a glimpse of threatening sky.

He had to find some kind of shelter.

Squelching in old leaf-sludge, he dragged himself on to his feet and looked around. He was in the middle of a strange, gloomy forest. Its floor was wet and barren, covered in leaf litter.

Out of the leaf litter, jagged, gnarled tree trunks thrust vigorously upwards. They grew in clumps, three or four together, splaying apart and rising high above his head, with branches that curved like great stone ribs. They wove in and out of each other and their coarse, tarnished leaves shut out the sun. It was impossible to see anything beyond them.

The wet ground had no clues to give him either. There was no sign of a trail. Nothing to show how he had come into the forest and no path to lead him out. Everything looked the same, whichever way he turned.

He began to struggle forward over the leaves, choosing a direction at random. It was slow and tiring. The brown mess sagged and squelched under him and twice he slipped and landed on his hands and knees. His limbs ached and his back hurt. Every step was an effort.

He was just beginning to feel that the forest was endless, that he might as well give up, when he caught a glimpse of something different, off to his left. A patch of light, broken by pale vertical lines. He slithered towards it and found himself at a break in the canopy.

Behind him, the dark forest was full of vigorous arching trees and the strong smell of decay. Ahead, the ground was quite different. Dozens of pale trees rose up into the sky, almost impossibly tall, hardly branching until the very top. Their trunks were straight and slender and they had a dry, brittle look. Their stunted, spindly branches had begun to disintegrate, splitting open to spill out long white fibres.

Every one of the trees was dead.

They rose out of a wilderness of tall, bent plants that looked like old bamboo. The rain had beaten down their jointed stems and plastered the leaf-strips one over another, moulding the plants into high, soggy mounds. He thought he might somehow use the leaves to cover himself, but when he pulled at one it was coarse and tough and it scratched his hands.

It was quite dead. Everything was dead.

He was standing on the edge of a ghost wood.

The only living thing was a long, tough creeper, thicker than his arm. Its spiralling stems had reached out greedily, looping from one tree to another and scrambling upwards.

On the far side of the pale wood, it had pulled some of the dry trees sideways, roping them round so that half a dozen leaned together. Further on, its weight had brought down a couple of other trees. It grew over them in a thick mat, with their odd, split branches sticking through.

The strands that spilled out of them had a soft, silky look, and Robert's heart jumped suddenly. He could see that they might be within his reach and he began to struggle towards them, fighting his way between the clumps of bamboo.

The ground was covered with a network of tough bamboo stems and it was hard going, but he had a purpose now. He hardly noticed how the rough bamboo leaves

scraped at his skin. He was more concerned by a sudden darkening that seemed to threaten rain. He wanted to reach that silky floss before it was drenched and useless. Rubbing impatiently at his scratched legs, he battled on over the roots and the creeping stalks.

When he reached the fallen trees, he found that their branches were higher than he had thought. But by standing on tiptoe, he could just touch the lowest one. Straining upwards, he buried his hands in the soft, thick floss and tugged. A great clump of it came loose, tangled with seeds. He pulled it down and twisted the long strands together, feeling their warmth.

He had had grand ideas of making them into thread, maybe even weaving some kind of cloth. But as soon as he had them in his hands he realized that all that was a hopeless fantasy. He would have to settle for something much more primitive.

He reached up and pulled down more of the floss. Without bothering to pick out the seeds, he rubbed the silky strands together, turning the whole mass in on itself until it hung together in a huge, matted bundle. It was bulky, but very light and soft.

Parting it with his hands, he burrowed in, pulling it on over his head, like a shirt, and pushing his arms out through the sides. Then he worked away at it, tucking and knotting to close up the gaps. The result was awkward and comic—more like a sheep's fleece than a garment—but it covered him from the neck to the knees, and he was immediately warmer.

Making the fleece had given him something to focus on. As soon as it was done, his energy drained away. He was exhausted. It seemed sensible to gather more floss, before the rain started, but he couldn't make himself reach up to pull it down.

He couldn't face the effort of struggling back under the

dark trees either, but the temperature was dropping fast and he needed some kind of shelter. Going down on all fours, he pushed his way into the nearest bamboo clump, wriggling between the tough stems and the jagged leaves that caught at his fleece and scratched his arms and face.

The stalks inside the clump were damp but not soft. They grew close together and he squatted awkwardly between them, wedging himself into place and pulling his arms inside his fleece for warmth. The moment he stopped moving, he realized that he was hungry and desperately thirsty. But he was too tired to cope with that. He closed his eyes—*just for a second*—and fell asleep instantly, in spite of his uncomfortable position.

The last thing he heard was a dull, thudding noise as heavy raindrops began to fall on the bamboo over his head.

When he woke up, it was night. In his sleep, he had fallen sideways, jamming his head against the tough stalks. Still half-dazed, he wriggled upright and crawled out of the bamboo clump, pulling his fleece close against his body. It was damp now, but it felt comforting.

The moon was high overhead, round and full. And it was the same moon as always, with the same blurry, familiar face. Looking up at it, Robert almost cried with relief.

At least I'm in the right world.

The pale trees were white where the moon lit them. Their black shadows rippled over the ground, running up the sides of the bamboo clumps. The moonlight caught the sides of the clumps, outlining their leaves with shadow, so that each one lay in its place, clear and sharp-edged.

And everywhere—on each branch and seedpod, along the edge of every blade of bamboo and every twist of

creeper—great rounded drops of water hung gleaming in the moonlight.

Robert put his cheek up to the nearest drop. It nestled against his skin like a soft, cold balloon. The shape held until he turned towards it, opening his mouth. Then it broke and the water ran over his tongue and down his dusty throat.

In a kind of trance, he moved forward under the pale, dead trees, drinking cold light. Quenching his thirst with moon-water, one drop at a time.

As he moved, the fleece scratched at his skin. Fumbling among the fibres, he pulled out a pointed seed, about the size of his thumb. It had a thick brown husk to protect it, but the husk cracked easily between his teeth. The kernel inside was sweet, and soft enough to chew. When he had eaten it, he searched through the fleece for another. And another.

It was like walking through a dream, under the distant eye of the moon. For that moment, he had everything he needed. As he ate and drank, he was aware that nothing had been solved. He was still lost and alone, without any idea of how he was going to survive. Soon he would have to confront what had happened and try to make plans.

But not yet.