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GAME ZERO
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FIND THE KEYS.
UNLOCK THE WORLD.
CHRISTOPHER EDGE
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ESCAPE
ROOM
GAME ZERO

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ESCAPE ROOM

GAME ZERO

CHRISTOPHER EDGE

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For Chrissie, Alex and Josie





1

It's only half past four, but it's already starting to get dark as I cut through the overgrown no man's land at the edge of the technology park. The sign on the gate said NO ENTRY, but if I've followed the clues correctly this is my way into The Escape.

My breath frosts the air as I follow a track that leads between the trees. In the fading light their bare branches reach up to scrape the sky, the dark shapes of birds' nests silhouetted against a wirework of twigs. I pull the printout from my pocket, squinting hard as I read the final message that Ami sent me.





ARE YOU READY TO PLAY?

The land is locked, the keys are scattered,
The Escape a refuge from a world that is shattered.
All gates must be opened, a new world restored.
Can you find these three keys before dusk falls?
The gift of a song from the heart of the forest.
A tear cried in time beneath a broken sea.
The thought that burns in the mind of the mountain.
The keys to save reality.

THE ESCAPE AWAITS YOU…

I've played plenty of escape rooms before. So far this year I've searched for treasure in an ancient Egyptian tomb, foiled a zombie apocalypse from a top-secret government laboratory, pulled off a bank heist and escaped from the *Titanic* twice. It's like all my friends suddenly decided that the best kind of birthday party involved being locked in a room solving puzzles. But The Escape is something different. The Escape is a whole new world.

Dead leaves carpet the muddy ground beneath my feet as I hurry down the track. Through the trees, I can see the dim glow of the technology park lights illuminating the long low building that lies beyond the security fence.

It looks like a hard drive laid on its side. There are no windows – only a blank expanse of brushed black steel that encases the exterior completely, giving the building a metallic sheen. As I watch, a horizontal band of red lights flicker across the front of the facade, almost as if it's being switched on. But that can't be true because this place is *always* on. It's a data centre running twenty-four hours a day. Ami told me it's where The Escape lives.

Imagine a world where every place you explore is filled with puzzles and challenges. A truly immersive world that feels so real you can lose yourself in it, but where you need to find the keys to save reality. The Escape is the *ultimate* escape room and it's an online game.

As the track taking me through the trees winds towards the data centre, I hear a low droning noise that seems to emanate from the jet-black building. This must be the sound of the powerful computers inside whirring away. There are thousands of these data centres all around the world and between them they store all the digital information that makes up the internet. Every time you click online you connect to one of these data centres and it sends the thing you were searching for in an instant: websites,

videos, songs, games and social media posts.

That's how I first heard about The Escape. Someone with the username 'AMI' posted a screenshot of its loading page on an online gaming forum. She said The Escape was so incredible it was going to change the world, but it was being kept secret by the tech company who built it. Over time Ami started to leave more snippets of information about the game: concept art and gameplay footage, more screenshots and prototype designs. She said the game was strictly invitation only but challenged those who dared to find the keys and unlock the world.

Studying all this information about The Escape, I started to realise these weren't just leaks and rumours, but a real-life escape room puzzle giving me a trail of clues I could follow. I found a series of numbers hidden in each piece of evidence that Ami posted: date stamps, digits, time codes and more. When I put these numbers together in the right order, I unlocked a final message from Ami asking me if I was ready to play. The message came with a set of map coordinates that led to this location, a ten-minute walk from the flat where I live with Mum and Dad.

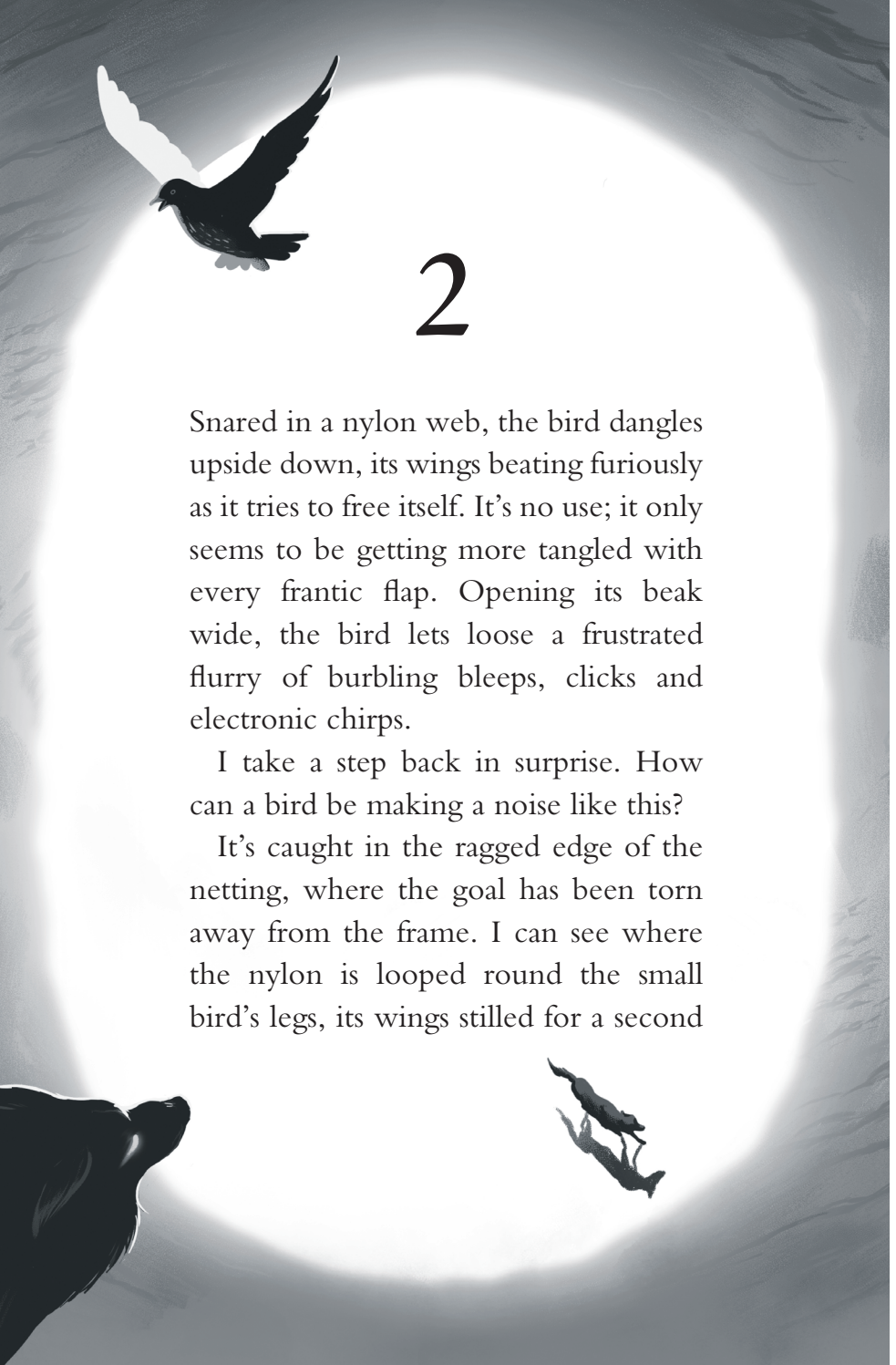
I look around. The light is fading as dusk draws in and I have to squint as I peer into the shrubbery that lies on either side of the track. This is the final challenge. Hidden somewhere in these bushes is a geocache that contains the game pass I need to enter The Escape. Ami promised me it'd be here.

I can still hear the low droning hum of the data centre, almost like a vibration at the very edge of my hearing. But then I hear another noise – a sudden crackling hiss that seems to be coming from close by. I peer into the gloom, trying to find the source of this mysterious sound. There's a pinging followed by strange flurry of warbling beeps and then a screech of static.

Maybe this is some kind of beacon showing me where the geocache is hidden.

A few metres away, I spot the raggedy frame of a pop-up football net that's been slung into the bushes, but then I spy something moving – a fluttering blur of black caught near the base of the netting.

It's a bird.



2

Snared in a nylon web, the bird dangles upside down, its wings beating furiously as it tries to free itself. It's no use; it only seems to be getting more tangled with every frantic flap. Opening its beak wide, the bird lets loose a frustrated flurry of burbling bleeps, clicks and electronic chirps.

I take a step back in surprise. How can a bird be making a noise like this?

It's caught in the ragged edge of the netting, where the goal has been torn away from the frame. I can see where the nylon is looped round the small bird's legs, its wings stilled for a second as it dangles there, exhausted. The bird must've landed on the bush where the goal was dumped and then become caught in the netting. Its glossy black plumage has a metallic sheen – its feathers are flecked with tiny white stars, making it look like it's wrapped in the universe.

Then I hear another more familiar sound – the faint tinkle of a bell – and turning my head, I see the sleek grey shape of a cat slinking through the undergrowth.

It's *my* cat, Molly. She must've followed me from home.

She's crouching low to the ground as she moves stealthily towards the entangled bird, its struggling shape almost within pouncing distance now. I watch as Molly gathers her rear legs beneath her, ready to leap, and quickly step forward with a sharp word of warning.

"No!"

Molly lets out a thwarted mew as I nudge her away, shielding the bird with my body as I try to work out how to set it free. The bird's alarm call of scrambled beeps and whistles ends in a blare of static. It sounds like the tide coming in, the squall of the bird a wave of white noise that ends in a

click. And then the bird seems to glitch in front of my eyes.

At first I think it's a trick of the shadows – the tiny stars that speckle its plumage suddenly flaring into supernova as the bird is consumed by a bright white light. But as the brightness fades, I glimpse a blur of beating wings as the bird launches itself into the sky.

I tip my head skywards to follow its flight and then gasp in surprise. It looks like a tidal wave rolling across the sky – a dark swirling flock of thousands of birds. The sound of their wings reverberates through the air in a whistling roar. I don't know how I didn't hear it before. It's like they've appeared out of nowhere at the very moment the trapped bird somehow freed itself. I glimpse this bird now as it arrows towards the oncoming swarm – a tiny black speck against the ruby-red sky as the sun starts to set behind the trees.

As Molly mews plaintively, I stand mesmerised, watching the wheeling mass of birds as they trace pulsing patterns in the sky. There's a special word for when you see birds flocking together like this – it's called a *murmuration*. And as the shape-shifting flock turns and swoops in a single fluid movement,

I let out my own murmur. "Wow…"

Mum says there's only one type of bird that flocks like this. I remember the two of us watching the same aerial dance from the balcony of our flat as the birds soared as one over our heads.

"It's a murmuration of starlings," she told me. "They fly together like this, Eden, to protect themselves from predators. These shapes they're making in the sky help to scare off any birds of prey, making them think twice about attacking something so big. It's safety in numbers."

And as I stare up now at a sky black with birds, I finally understand what she means.

Molly mews again, pressing herself against my leg as I feel her body vibrating with fear. I reach down to give her a stroke, but as I do, I glimpse something shining in the ragged edge of the net where the bird was snared.

It's a feather.

I pluck the feather from the net, marvelling at its brightness as it shimmers in my hand. Then Molly hisses, her hackles raised as she bares her teeth at the sky.

The murmuration looks like a dragon, its vast wings outstretched as it swoops low over the

treetops. Instinctively, I duck, feeling the pressure of the air shift as the starlings suddenly swoosh upwards in tight formation, the flock moving as one as it catches the last rays of the setting sun. I can feel Molly frozen by my side as the swirling flock pours itself into a brand-new shape – a teardrop that, for a fragment of a second, hangs suspended in the sky. Then it's gone, washed away in the blink of an eye, as the black brushstrokes of the starlings' wings paint fresh pictures across the sunset.

I watch a wolf's head morph into the shape of a key. Each image lasts for only a fleeting moment, but as the birds twist and whirl in tight formation, it almost feels as if they're trying to tell me something. For a second, the shape of a feather is etched against the horizon, but then this dissolves as the starlings cascade skywards, spiralling like a tornado before wheeling in one direction as the flock circles back.

I glance down at the feather I'm holding. Its purple and green speckles are shining even more brightly than before. Then the feather seems to glitch between my fingertips as Molly lets out a loud, drawn-out growl.

She stares unblinking at the sky, the points of her ears now flattened against her head. My heart

thumps in my chest. I've never seen her act like this before. In Molly's amber eyes, I glimpse a reflection of the circling birds and lift my gaze to see the murmuration tracing a brand-new shape above our heads.

It looks like the spinning wheel you get when you're waiting for a game to load – the whirl of birds a rushing blackness circling the sky. I feel light-headed, almost as if the beating of their wings is sucking the breath from my lungs. The flock looks like a living thing – the murmuration chasing its own tail, just like Molly used to when she was a kitten.

I can feel the feather pulsing in my hand, but I can't tear my eyes away from the sky. The whirl of birds keeps on turning – the quill between my fingertips vibrating in time with every swirling circuit that they make. The circle is almost complete, and I hear the droning hum of the data centre, suddenly loud over the sound of their wings.

Something's wrong. It doesn't even look like a flock of birds any more – the loading circle is now a solid black line. I feel like I'm standing at the edge of a precipice, the world around me falling away as I stare up at this hole in the sky. The darkening

horizon is now stained with stars, but through the perfect circle of the murmuration, I see nothing – just an empty void that looks like the end of the world.

Molly screeches, the sound stretching out like an endless howl.

Then the spinning circle splinters into countless shards as the starlings fall in a frenzied blur. Frozen to the spot, I throw up my hands to protect myself, but it's no use as I'm engulfed in a hurricane of beating black wings. I screw my eyes tightly shut as the darkness surrounds me in a storm of white noise. I'm ready for the pain, but instead it feels like I'm falling on to a soft feather-filled mattress – the sound of their wings like the roar of the ocean, lulling me into a forever sleep.

I feel myself slipping away. It's as if my mind is being scoured clean. All my thoughts, all my worries, even the memories of the moments that brought me to this place, are rushing out on the beating tide. It'd be so easy to surrender, but then I hear something at the very edge of my hearing.

The soft tinkling of a bell.

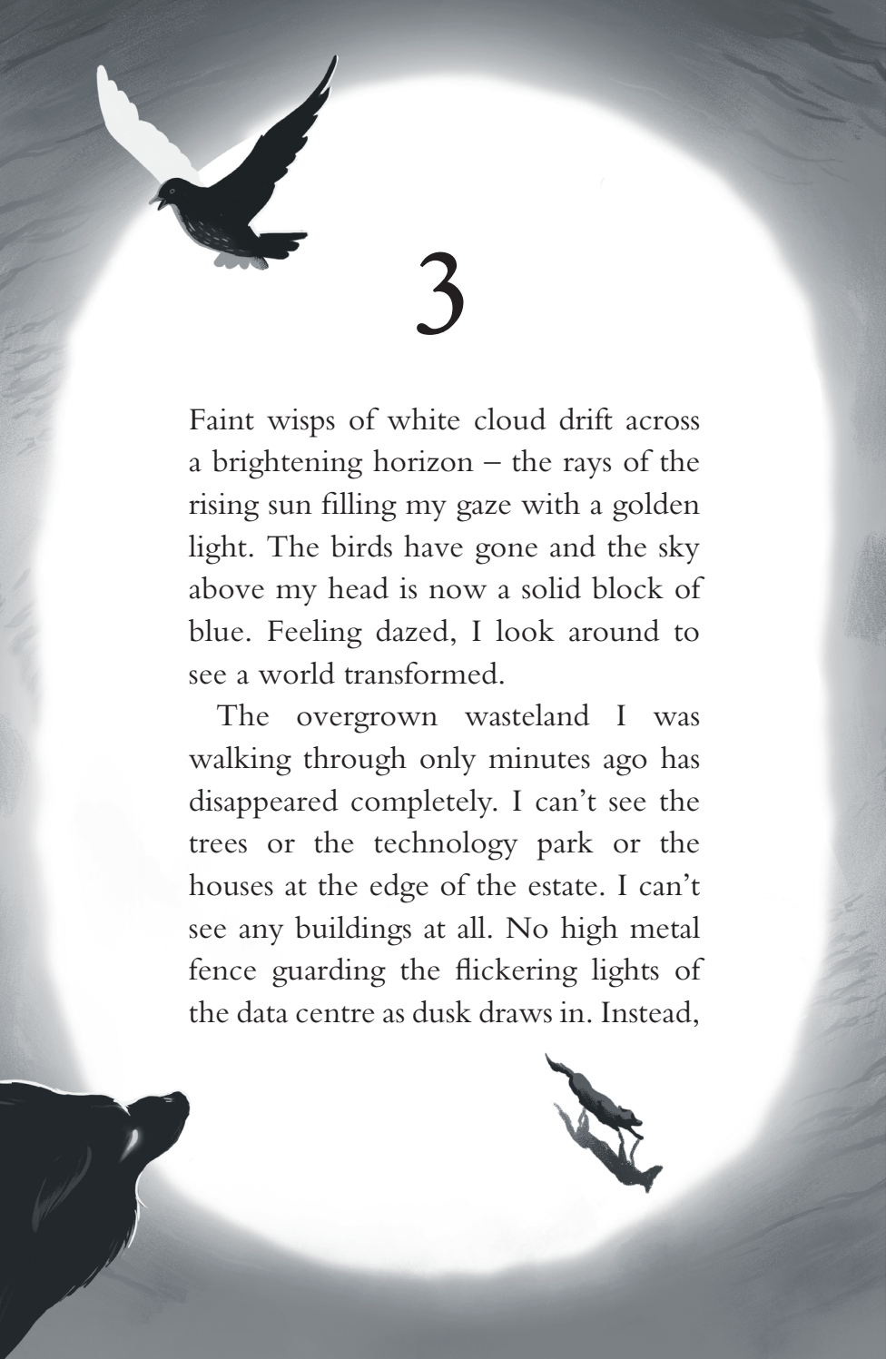
It's almost inaudible, but something about this sound seems to chime inside my mind. In the

endless dark I glimpse a flash of grey. The shape of a cat. *Molly.*

She's almost gone, the curl of her tail like the imprint of a question mark as it slowly fades to black. I feel my mind twist with emotion as the thunderous roar nears a crescendo.

I can't let her go.

Blindly, I try to follow Molly's trail, tearing myself free from the smothering embrace of the void as I take a stumbling step forward. Then the world seems to shift on its axis as the deafening sound snaps into silence and I open my eyes to see the sunrise.



3

Faint wisps of white cloud drift across a brightening horizon – the rays of the rising sun filling my gaze with a golden light. The birds have gone and the sky above my head is now a solid block of blue. Feeling dazed, I look around to see a world transformed.

The overgrown wasteland I was walking through only minutes ago has disappeared completely. I can't see the trees or the technology park or the houses at the edge of the estate. I can't see any buildings at all. No high metal fence guarding the flickering lights of the data centre as dusk draws in. Instead, a brand-new landscape stretches out in front of me, looking almost unreal in its pixel-sharp brightness.

Swathes of golden-green grass carpet the ground around my feet, swaying gently in the breeze as the land rolls away in every direction. To my left, a dense forest cloaks the nearest hillside, while in the distance I can see sparkling lakes and snow-topped peaks.

My mind scrabbles to find a landmark on the horizon. There should be shops and houses, roads and railway lines – some sign of human life – but all I can see is a lush green vista of forested hills, plains and valleys.

It looks like the first screenshot of The Escape that Ami posted – the landscape in front of me a perfect match for the world shown on the game's loading page. But that's impossible. The Escape is an online game and this is real life.

I reach for the phone in my pocket, thinking I can use it to find out where I am, but my mobile's gone. I must have dropped it when the birds went all Alfred Hitchcock on me. All I can find is the feather I was holding as the murmuration whirled in the sky. The feather is now a dull grey colour and it doesn't shimmer with the same light as before.