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Opening extract from

Toby Alone

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PART
ONE

1
Tracked Down

Toby was just one and a half millimetres tall, not exactly big for a boy of his age. Only his toes were sticking out of the hole in the bark where he was hiding.

Looking up through the enormous russet-coloured leaves to the starry sky above, Toby felt there had never been a night as dark and shiny as this one. When there's no moon, the stars dance more brightly. Even if there were a sky in Heaven, he told himself, it couldn't possibly be as deep or as magical as this.

Thoughts like this helped Toby relax. He was tucked inside the hole in the black bark, his head on the moss, his hair still wet with cold tears. His leg was injured, he had cuts on both shoulders and his hair was matted with blood. His hands were stinging from being ripped by thorns, but the rest of his tiny body was numb with pain and exhaustion.

His life had ended a few hours earlier, so what was he still doing here? That's what people used to say to him, when he poked his nose in everywhere. "Still here, Toby?" Today, he kept whispering it to himself, "Still here?"

But he was definitely alive, and his misery was even vaster than the sky. He was staring at the sky in the same way he used to cling to his parents' hands in a crowd. If I close my eyes, he thought, I'll die. But his eyes stayed wide open, behind two lakes of muddy tears.

Then he heard them. And in a flash the fear was back. There were four of them, three adults and a child. The child was holding a flare to light their way.

"He can't be far, I'm sure he's not far."

"He must be caught. He has to pay too. Like his parents."

The eyes of the third man shone yellow in the night. He spat and said, "We'll get him, you'll see, and we'll make him pay."

More than anything, Toby wanted to wake up from this nightmare; he wanted to run over to his parents' bed, and cry and cry... He would have given anything to go through to their bright kitchen together, still in his pyjamas, where they'd make him a hot honey drink with biscuits, and say, "It's over now, Toby sweetheart, it's all right."

Instead, Toby was trembling at the bottom of a hole, trying to tuck in his sticky-out toes. Toby was only thirteen, but he was being hunted by the whole Tree, by his

own people, and what he could hear was much worse than the cold, scary night.

What he could hear was a voice he loved, the voice of his oldest friend, Leo Blue.

Once, when he was four and a half, Leo had tried to steal Toby's lunch, and they'd ended up sharing everything ever since – good things, and things that weren't so funny. Leo lived with his aunt. Both his parents had died. All he had left of his father, the famous explorer, El Blue, was a wooden boomerang. But his misfortune had made Leo Blue very strong, deep down inside. This brought out the best in him, and the worst too. Toby preferred the best – Leo's intelligence and bravery. The boys became inseparable. There was a time when people even called them Tobyleo, as if it were just one name.

One day, when Toby and his parents were due to move house, down towards the Low Branches, Tobyleo hid in a dry bud, because they didn't want to be split up. It was two days and three nights before they were found. It was one of the rare occasions when Toby saw his father cry.

But tonight, Toby was curled up all alone in his bark hole – was this really the same Leo Blue standing just a few paces away, brandishing his flare against the dark? Toby felt his heart exploding when his best friend shouted, "We'll get you! We'll get you, Toby!"

Leo's voice rang out from branch to branch. It brought back a vivid memory.

When he was tiny, Toby had a tame greenfly called

Lima. He used to climb on Lima's back, before he could even walk. One day, out of nowhere, the greenfly stopped playing – it bit Toby hard and shook him like a scrap of rag. The creature had gone crazy and Toby's parents had to separate them. Toby could still remember that look in Lima's eyes, his pupils grown fat as a pond in the rain.

His mother had said to Toby, "Today, it was Lima, but anyone could turn crazy, one day."

"We'll get you, Toby!"

When he heard that wild cry again, Toby knew that Leo's eyes must be as terrifying as a crazy animal's. Like ponds swollen by the rain.

The small troop was getting nearer, tapping the bark with wooden spears to feel for cracks and hollows. They were looking for Toby. It was like the White Ant Hunt, when fathers and sons set out every spring to drive the pests to the Far Branches.

"I'll make him come out of his hole."

The voice was so close, Toby could almost feel the speaker's warm breath. He didn't dare move, or shut his eyes. The beating spears were coming towards him through the flame-swept darkness.

A spear crashed down, landing only a finger's width away from his face. Toby was paralysed with fear, but kept his eyes glued to the patch of sky he could see in between the hunters' shadows. This time, they'd got him. It was over.

Suddenly, night fell all around again.

"Hey! Leo! Did you let the flare go out?" an angry voice shouted.

"It fell. Sorry, the flare fell..."

"You idiot!"

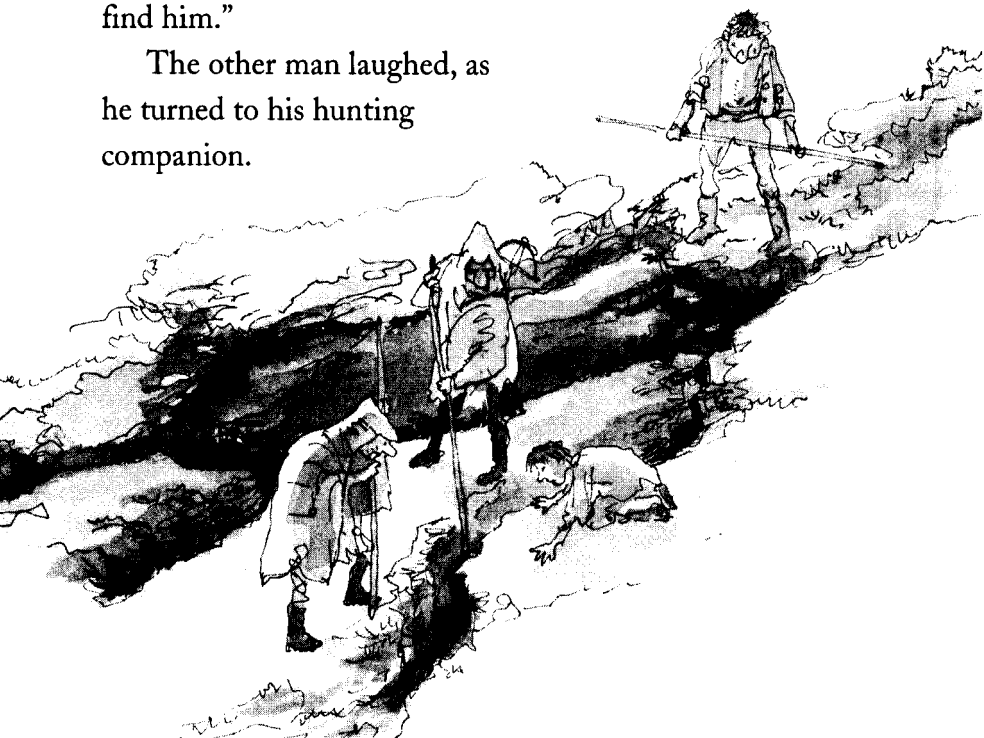
The group's only torch had gone out; the search would have to continue in the pitch black.

"We're not giving up now. We'll get him."

Another man had caught up with the first, and was rummaging around the cracks in the bark. He was so close, Toby could feel the air moving. The second man must have been drinking because he stank of alcohol, and his movements were violent and clumsy.

"I'll catch him myself. I'm going to chop him up into little pieces. And then we'll tell the others we couldn't find him."

The other man laughed, as he turned to his hunting companion.



"Doesn't change, does he? He killed forty white ants last spring!"

Toby was worse than a white ant to them – they wouldn't spare him the spear or the flames.

Both shadows were towering directly over him. Nothing could save him now. Toby almost stopped looking up at the sky, which was the only thing keeping him going. He saw the spear coming down towards him and quickly flattened himself against the sides, so all the hunter felt under his weapon was the hard wood of the Tree.

But the other man had already thrust his arm into the hole.

Toby's eyes were smarting with tears. He watched the man put his big fat hand right up against him, stop, then move it a bit higher, next to his face.

Strangely, at that moment Toby stopped feeling frightened. A sense of calm rose up inside him. There was even a faint smile on his lips when he heard that terrifying voice whisper gleefully, "I've got him. He's mine."

Silence.

The others came over. Not even Leo Blue was talking now. Perhaps he was afraid of looking his former friend in the eye.

There were four of them, surrounding an injured child. But Toby wasn't afraid of anything any more. He didn't even shudder when the man put his arm into the hole, roared with laughter as he tore something off, and showed it to the others.

Silence, longer than a snowy winter.

Toby thought he'd just felt a shred of his clothing being ripped off. After a while, words rang out in the chilly silence.

"It's bark, just a piece of bark."

Sure enough, the man was holding out a piece of bark to the other hunters.

"Got you that time, didn't I? Of course he's not here. He must be running like crazy towards the Low Branches. We'll catch him tomorrow."

The group groaned in disappointment. They hurled a few insults at the man who'd pretended to find Toby. Their shadows moved off quickly, like a sad cloud. Their echoing voices dispersed.

And silence settled around him again.

It was a long time before Toby could hear the sound of his own breathing again, before he could feel his body against the sides of the Tree.

What had happened? He pieced his thoughts together very slowly.

He relived every second of that mysterious episode over again. The man had put his hand on him, but he'd only felt wood. He'd torn off a piece of his jacket and mistaken it for bark. They'd all agreed it was bark. It was

as if Toby had become part of the wood. At least that was how it felt, as if the Tree had hidden him under its bark coat.

Suddenly Toby froze.

What if this were a trap?

Of course! The man had felt him and was waiting in the dark, a few paces away. Toby was sure now. After all, hadn't the hunter said he wanted Toby all for himself? That he'd crush him like an ant? He was lurking in the shadows waiting for Toby to come out, ready to pounce with his spear. The fear was back, curled up in a ball at the base of Toby's throat.

He didn't move. He was listening out for the slightest sound. Nothing. Then, slowly, he became aware of the sky above again. His starry friend, watching over him with so many eyes.

Beneath him, the Tree was warm. Summer was drawing to a close, and the branches had stored up a gentle heat. Toby was still in the High Branches, where the sun shines from morning till dusk, filling the air with the smell of warm bread, his mum's leaf-bread rolled in pollen grains. The reassuring smell relaxed Toby. He closed his eyes, forgetting about how frightened he was, about Leo being so crazy. He forgot that he was bait for the hunters, and that there were thousands of them against one of him. A gentle wave washed over him, lulling him to sleep. He forgot everything. His trembling and loneliness, how unfair it all was, even the big WHY that had been pounding inside him for days now.

He forgot about it all. But he kept a small space free in his dreams, the only dream he would let into his sleep. And this dream had a face. Elisha.

All day long, on the run from his enemies, he'd vowed not to think about her. That was all that mattered. He mustn't. It would be too upsetting.

He built a fortress round his heart, with watchtowers and ditches. He released soldier ants into the surrounding paths. He wouldn't let himself think about her.

But at every moment there she was, popping up in his memories, wearing her green dress. In the middle of his thoughts, she was even more real than the sky.

He'd got to know Elisha when he and his family had left the Treetop and moved to the Low Branches. How they met is an interesting story.

Here, with Toby asleep in his hole, let's re-wind the story to six years ago, and the time of the great move.

2
Farewell To The Treetop

That year, on a September morning, while the inhabitants of the Treetop were still sleeping, Toby and his parents left.

They travelled for seven days, escorted by two grumpy porters who carried their essential items. They didn't need two men to transport a couple of small cases, a few clothes, some books, and the box of files belonging to Sim Lolness, Toby's father, but the porters' real job was to make sure the family didn't turn back.

Mr Lolness was, without doubt, the greatest scientist of his time. Nobody knew the Tree's secrets like he did. Everyone admired him: he had made some of the most extraordinary discoveries of the century. But his incredible knowledge was just a tiny part of him. He also had a generous soul that shone like a star.

Sim Lolness was kind, warm-hearted and funny. He

could easily have been a comedian. But Professor Lolness never set out to make people laugh. His imagination and originality just shone through naturally.

Sometimes, during a meeting of the Grand Tree Council, in the middle of a crowd of wise elders, he would undress, get his blue pyjamas out of his suitcase, and settle down for an afternoon nap. Sleep, he said, was his secret potion. The Grand Council members lowered their voices so as not to disturb him...

Toby and his parents had been travelling down towards the Low Branches for several days. Moving around the Tree was always an adventure. You had to get from one branch to the next on foot, down barely worn paths, and risk hitting dead ends or coming up across slippery slopes. It was best to avoid crossing the leaves in autumn, as the huge brown plains might drop off at any time, whisking travellers off towards the unknown.

Not that there were many travellers. People often spent their whole lives on the branch where they'd been born. They found a job there, and made friends ... they got married to someone from the neighbouring branch, or the same region. So a marriage between a Treetop girl and a boy from the Branches was a rare event, and likely to be frowned upon by the families involved. (This is where the expression "branching out" comes from.) And this was exactly what happened to Toby's parents. Nobody encouraged their romance. Everyone thought it would be better for them to marry someone from their

own neighbourhoods.

But Sim Lolness liked the idea of a genealogical Tree, with each generation developing its own branch, a touch closer to the sky. His peers thought this a dangerous idea.

Of course, the Tree's growing population meant that some families had to emigrate to the Far Branches, but this was a collective decision, with the whole extended family moving away. When this happened, a clan would choose to take over new branches in the Lower Colonies, further towards the shady, interior branches of the Tree.

But nobody went as far as the Low Branches, a land that was even further away, right down at the bottom. At least nobody went there by choice. Not even the Lolness family, who, together with their porters, reached the wild Land of Onessa that evening, right at the bottom of the Low Branches.

They'd certainly got to know what this region looked like over the past two days. It had unfolded before their eyes as they walked.

A giant maze of damp, gnarled branches. There was nobody around, or hardly anyone. Just a few Grubbers who darted off as soon as they spotted the Lolness family coming.

The countryside was spectacular. Expanses of waterlogged bark, mysterious forks where no one had ever set foot, lakes formed at the intersection of branches, forests of green moss, thick bark criss-crossed by deep paths and

streams, as well as strange insects, and twigs that had got stuck for years because the wind had never dislodged them ... it was a hanging jungle, full of strange fruit.

Toby cried all the way, dragging with him the pain of leaving behind his friend Leo Blue. But when he reached the edge of the Low Branches, which had only ever been described to him as diabolical, his tears dried up. He was hypnotized by the landscape, and knew at once he would feel at home here. It was a magical place, a giant playground for games and dreams.

The further he went, the more cheerful he became, like he had been in the good old days, but the more he could also see his mother, Maya, giving up hope.

Maya Lolness had been born into the Alnorell family, which owned nearly a third of the Treetop, as well as some lichen plantations on the Main Trunk. They were a rich family, which organised big hunts on their estates, situated on the sunny side, and held society balls that dazzled the glamorous set until dawn. On party nights, flares lit up the paths, forming garlands round the Summit. Maya's father would settle down at the piano, and everyone would dance around him. Couples wandered off under the stars.

As the only Alnorell descendent and darling daughter of the father she adored, little Maya had grown up in this festive atmosphere. Mr Alnorell was a handsome and generous man interested in everything, he was also sensitive, like his daughter.

But he had died young, when Maya was fifteen, and

his wife took over, putting a stop to all the waltzes and moonlit banquets.

Toby's granny, Mrs Alnorell, was as sad and bad as a morning spider. She hadn't been able to make her husband or daughter happy, so instead she made her accountant Mr Perlush happy. In one stroke, she had put a stop to all the household expenditures and began to hoard a vast fortune. Every day, Mr Perlush could see the revenue from the family plantations and other Alnorell businesses coming in, without a penny ever leaving his coffers.

Mrs Alnorell loved money so much that she had forgotten what it was for. She was like a child who collects Tree-sap sweets under their bed. Except that eventually the child will wake up on top of a pile of mouldy sap,

while Mrs Alnorell's money never went mouldy. What went mouldy was Mrs Alnorell herself. She had turned almost green, and her manners weren't so fresh either.

Toby had been told that on finding out about the engagement between Maya and a man from the Branches, his grandmother had proclaimed: "You want your babies to be snails?"

These words had become a catchphrase for Toby's parents, Sim and Maya. They joked about it. The Branches where Sim had grown up were known for their gigantic but harmless snails, which produced the perfect grease for oil lamps. The Branch People adored their snails so much that Toby's father would often fondly call his son "my little snail", in memory of what his mother-in-law had said.

Maya Alnorell married Sim Lolness. They were in love. And they stayed as much in love as when they had first met, at a knitting lesson.

Knitting silk was something every daughter from a respectable family had to learn to do. Since Sim Lolness was already working very hard, dividing his days between the library, the laboratory and the botanical gardens, and seeing as he just didn't have time to "meet someone special", as his mother put it, he had enrolled for knitting lessons. Unsurprisingly, he was the only boy in the class. In just an hour a week, he was guaranteed to meet thirty girls at one go – it was an efficient way of getting an idea about this unknown species.

The first week he observed.

The second week he invented the knitting machine.

The third week the class was cancelled.

And that was the end of hand-knitted silk.

But pretty Maya had immediately understood what was hiding under the beret of this young man, who had come from the Branches to study in the Treetop. She fell in love with him.

One spring morning, she tapped on the door of his poky student room.

"Hello."

"Miss... Er... Yes?"

"You left your beret behind at the last lesson."

"Oh! I... Goodness me..."

Maya took a step inside. Sim shrank back. It was the first time he had looked at a girl properly, and he was discovering a whole new planet. He wanted to take notes, but realised it might not be the proper thing to do.

The truth was, to his great surprise, he wanted to fill two or three books on the subject, but he also just wanted to look at her.

"I'm not disturbing you, am I?" she asked after a while.

"Yes... You're... You're ... turning my whole life upside down, if you don't mind me saying so, with all due respect, miss."

"Oh! I'm sorry..."

She went to the door. Sim rushed to block her exit. He adjusted his glasses.

"No! I... You can stay..."

He offered her some cold water and a ball of gum. The way she held her cup of water made Sim want to sketch her. But he resisted. He'd divided the ball of gum with his fingers, which kept sticking to things when he tried to pick them up.

Maya giggled to herself.

Sim reached for the walls to try and pull himself together, but he left a trail of gum all around the room.

After a while, Maya made her excuses and left, stepping over one trail and under another.

"Thanks for the beret," Sim called, as he watched her

leave. At which point he realised the beret was on his head, and that he had been wearing it when she'd arrived. In short, he'd never left it behind.

He took off his thick-lens glasses, put them down on the table and fell to the ground. Out cold.

Later, he understood why he had fainted that day – for the simple reason that if she'd brought him a beret he hadn't left behind, she must have wanted to see him again.

Yes, him. Which was plenty to faint about.

A year later, they were married. It was a beautiful Summit wedding. Grandmother Alnorell agreed to spend a few crumbs of her fortune. Mr Perlush, the accountant, sobbed as he took two golden coins from a bath full to overflowing.

"Mrs Alnorell, we're as good as ruined..." he lamented, staring at the bathtub with its contents spilling out of it, not to mention the corridor leading to fourteen rooms where the coffers were piled high with mountains of coins and notes.

Mrs Alnorell behaved herself reasonably well during the wedding, but she did make fun of how awkward Sim's father was.

Being unfamiliar with the habits of high society, Sim Lolness's father was trying a bit too hard. He snacked on the flower petals meant to decorate the buffet. He lifted up the women's long dresses so they wouldn't get dust on them. After a few glasses, he was kissing everyone's

hands, including the men's, and twirling his tie like it was a sweet-paper.

For twenty years, the happy couple were childless, which infuriated Grandmother Alnorell.

And then one day...

Toby.

He suddenly came into their life, and completed their joy.

His grandmother quickly decided there was too much Lolness in him, and not enough Alnorell. So when Toby spent his summers on his grandmother's estates, she handed him over to a fleet of nannies, and did everything to avoid him. According to her, children were dirty and full of infections. She fled in the opposite direction the moment she saw him coming. In the five or six summers Toby spent there, she hardly ever saw her own grandson.

And each time she did, she had a fit of hysterics.

"Get him away from me! I'm having an attack of the vapours!" she would yelp. Toby would be whisked off as if he had the plague.

Which was why, as she made her way further down into the Low Branches, towards the place where she would be living from now on with her husband and son, Maya Lolness was choking back the tears. She had fought so hard against her own, and her mother's, snobbery, but she felt her disgust for the dark, spongy territories of the

Low Branches rising to the surface.

Her husband could see she was crying. Every so often, he asked her what was wrong.

"I'm so happy to be with both of you," she tried, smiling unconvincingly.

And she walked on again, wrapping her shawl round her.

Toby glanced at his father. He knew he was suffering. Not that he would be feeling sorry for himself, because Sim Lolness could always find something to be amazed about, even a fly's intestines. No, he was suffering because he was dragging his wife and his son down with him, a part of his punishment.

The family was in exile.

These three beings, abandoned by the porters in the middle of nowhere, in the Land of Onessa, right at the end of a branch with two enormous flame-coloured leaves hanging under it, this family, had been banished from the rest of the Tree, condemned to decay and exile.

"Here we are," whispered Toby's father.

The branch was so damp it felt as if they were walking on cold soup. Toby was sitting on his suitcase, wringing out his socks.

"Here we are," said Sim again, in a tight voice.

Maya Lolness was hiding her tears in her shawl.

After so much glory, honour and success, Sim Lolness and his family were starting again from nothing.

From less than nothing.