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Opening extract from

Tunnels 3: Freefall

Written by

Roderick Gordon & Brian Williams

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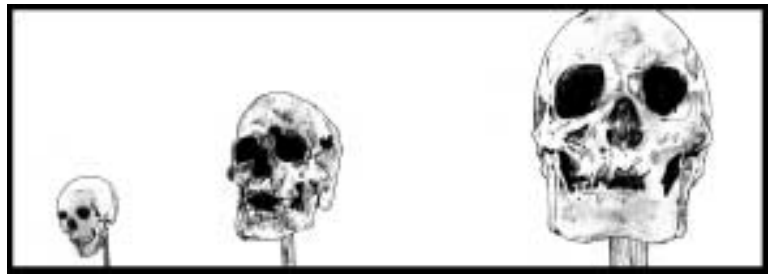
From The Chicken House

It's terrifying, falling down an apparently bottomless pit with no idea what will happen next. And that's just the start of the third adventure for our friends (and enemies) from TUNNELS. From that point the mysteries and monstrous insects pile up like Coprolites in a lift! It's brilliant!

Barry Cunningham
Publisher

FREEFALL

Roderick Gordon & Brian Williams



BOOK THREE
OF
THE TUNNELS SERIES

Chicken House

2 Palmer Street, Frome, Somerset BA11 1DS

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www.tunnelsthebook.com
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In order to arrive at what you are not
You must go through the way in which you are not.
And what you do not know is the only thing you know
And what you own is what you do not own
And where you are is where you are not.
East Coker, Four Quartets, by T.S. Eliot

Just passing through, 'till we reach the next stage.
But just to where, well it's all been arranged.
Just passing through but the break must be made.
Should we move on or stay safely away?
From Safety to Where…? by Joy Division

Part One

Closer, Further



Chapter One



'Herrrrph,' Chester Rawls groaned softly to himself. His mouth was so dry it was a few moments before he could actually speak. 'Aw, Mum, leave off, will you,' he finally managed to say, but not unpleasantly.

Something was tickling his ankle, just like his mother would do when he'd failed to react to his bleeping alarm clock and haul himself out of bed. And he knew that there would be no respite from the tickling until he threw back the duvet and began to get himself ready for school.

'Please, Mum, just another five minutes?' he pleaded, his eyes still shut tight.

He felt so snug that he just wanted to lie there for as long as he could, savouring every second. In truth, he would often pretend that he hadn't heard the alarm because he knew his mother would eventually come in to make sure he was up.

He treasured the moments when he opened his eyes and she'd be sitting there, perched on the end of his bed. He loved her breeziness and her smile, as bright as the morning sun. And she was this way every single morning, no matter how early the hour. 'I'm a morning person,' she would proclaim

cheerfully, 'but your grumpy old dad, it takes several cups of coffee before he's himself.' Then she'd pull a mean face and push her shoulders forward and make growling noises like a wounded bear, and Chester would do the same and they'd both laugh.

Chester grinned, but then his sense of smell kicked in with a vengeance, and the grin was wiped from his face.

'Eww, Mum, what's that? It's gross!' he gasped, unable to explain the stench to himself. As if someone had turned off the TV, the image of his mother was gone. He immediately became very anxious and opened his eyes.

Darkness.

'What?' he murmured. It lay all about him, impenetrable and unbroken. Then he caught something in the corner of his eye – a faint glow. *Why's it so dark in here?* he asked himself. Although he couldn't see even the smallest thing to confirm that he was in his bedroom, his mind was working overtime to convince him that he really was there. *Is that light coming from the window, and that smell . . . has something boiled over on the cooker downstairs? What's going on?*

The odour was intense. It was sulphurous, but at the same time there was something just beneath it . . . the sour tang of decay. The combination filled his nostrils and made his gore rise. He tried to lift his head to look around. He couldn't – it was held by something – and, for that matter, so were his arms and legs; his whole body felt as if it was stuck fast. His first thought was that he was paralysed. He didn't cry out, but took several quick breaths to try to quell his terror. He told himself he hadn't lost any sense of feeling, even in his extremities, so he probably wasn't paralysed. He was also further encouraged that he was able to wriggle his fingers and toes, albeit only

very slightly. It seemed as though he was lodged in something firm and unyielding.

The tickling at his ankle came again, as if his phantom mother was still there, and her tenuous image flickered back into his mind's eye again.

'Mum?' he said uncertainly.

The tickling stopped and he heard a low and mournful sound. It didn't sound quite human.

'Who's that? Who's there?' he challenged the darkness.

Then came what was quite unmistakeably a meow.

'Bartleby?' he yelled. 'Is that you, Bartleby?

As he uttered the cat's name the events at the Pore flooded back to him in a vivid rush. He gasped as he remembered how he, Will, Cal and Elliott, with a huge hole behind them called the Pore, had been trapped by Limiters. 'Oh, God,' he whimpered. They'd been facing almost certain death at the hands of the Styx soldiers. It was like a scene in a bad dream, one that refused to dim even after waking. And it all felt so fresh to him, as if it had happened only minutes ago.

Then more memories came back to him.

'Oh, Jesus!' he murmured, recalling the moment when Rebecca, the Styx girl who had been implanted in Will's family, revealed that all the time she'd had an identical twin. He remembered these twins mocking Will so mercilessly, and taking such cruel pleasure in disclosing their plans to wipe out swathes of Topsoilers using the deadly virus, Dominion. The twins telling Will to give himself up, and then Will's brother, Cal, stepping out in the open, wailing that he wanted to go home.

Then he remembered the hail of bullets that had cut the boy down.

Cal was dead.

Chester shuddered, but forced himself to recall what happened next. The image of his friend, Will, came back to him – he and Chester were reaching out their hands to each other, and Elliott was shouting, and they were all linked together by a rope. Chester knew at that instant that there was still hope . . . but why? *Why was there hope? . . . he couldn't remember.* They had been caught in a desperate situation, with no way out. Chester's mind was so muddled it took him several seconds to order his thoughts.

Yes! That was it! Elliott was going to try to take them down the inside of the Pore . . . there was still time . . . they were going to escape.

But it had all gone so very wrong. He screwed up his eyes as if his retinas still burnt with the fiery flashes and the searing whiteness of the explosions as they'd been bombarded by the Styx Division's mighty guns. He re-lived the feeling of the ground quaking beneath him, and then another memory resurfaced – the hazy image of Will being flung into the air right over his head, and over the edge of the Pore.

Chester recalled his blind panic as he and Elliott had tried to prevent themselves from being dragged over by the combined weight of Will and Cal's bodies. But it had been in vain because they were all bound together, and the next thing he knew they were hurtling, all four of them, into the dark vacuum of the Pore.

He recalled now the sensation of the rushing, unceasing wind, which snatched away his breath . . . and flashes of red light and incredibly intense heat . . . but now . . .

. . . but *now* . . .

. . . now he was supposed to be *dead*.

So what was this? Where the hell was he?

Bartleby meowed again, and Chester felt the cat's warm breath in his face.

'Bartleby, that *is* you isn't it?' Chester asked falteringly.

The animal's huge domed head was inches away from him. Of course, it had to be Bartleby. Chester was forgetting that the cat had also gone over the side at the same time as the rest of them . . . and here he was now.

Then Chester felt a damp tongue rasp against his cheek.

'Geddoff!' he bawled. 'Stop it!'

Bartleby licked him even more vigorously, clearly delighted to be getting a reaction from Chester. 'Get away from me, you stupid cat!' Chester shouted in growing alarm. It wasn't just that he was powerless to stop the animal, but Bartleby's tongue was as abrasive as a sheet of sandpaper, and being licked by him was actually quite painful. Renewing his efforts to free himself, Chester struggled furiously, all the time hollering at the top of his lungs.

The shouting appeared not to deter the animal in the slightest, and Chester was left with no recourse but to hiss and spit as savagely as he could. It eventually worked, and Bartleby backed off.

Then there was just silence and darkness again.

He tried to call out to Elliott and then to Will, although he didn't know if either of them had survived the fall. He had the most horrible feeling in the pit of his stomach that he might be the only one left alive, other than the cat, of course. That almost made it worse for him – the idea that it was just him alone with the giant slobbering animal.

A suggestion struck him like a cricket ball to the head . . . by some miracle had he landed in the very bottom of the

Pore? He remembered what Elliott had told them – that not only was the opening more than a kilometre across, it was so deep that only one man had, so the story went, managed to climb back out of it. As much as the invisible substance he was stuck in would allow him, he trembled uncontrollably. He was in his worst nightmare.

He was buried alive!

He was jammed in some kind of body-form shallow grave, stranded in the guts of the Earth. How was he ever going to get out of the Pore again and back out on to the surface? He was further down even than the Deeps – and he'd thought that had been bad enough. The prospect of returning home to his parents and to his nice predictable life was growing ever more distant.

'Please, I just want to go home,' he gabbled to himself and, beset by alternating waves of claustrophobia and dread, he broke out into a cold sweat.

Then, as he lay there, a small voice in his head told him he couldn't just give in to his fear. He stopped gabbling. He knew he had to liberate himself from whatever held him like quick-setting cement, and find the others. They might need his help.

By a process of tensing and relaxing and squirming, it took him ten minutes to partially work his head loose and to gain a measure of free movement in one shoulder. Then, as he contracted the muscles in his arms, there was a disgusting sucking sound, and one of them was suddenly released from the spongy clinging material.

'Yes!' he cried. Although the movement of his arm was limited, he took a moment to feel his face and chest with his hand. He came across the straps of his rucksack and undid

both the buckles on them, thinking it might help him in his bid for freedom. Then, as he concentrated on freeing the rest of his body, heaving and grunting, he became hotter and hotter with the exertion from these micro-movements. It was as if he was breaking free from a mould. Nevertheless, it slowly seemed to be working.

Many kilometres above Chester, at the top of the Pore, the old Styx stood peering into it while water fell in a constant drizzle around him, and somewhere in the distance packs of dogs howled.

Although his face was deeply lined, and his hair flecked with silver, age had not brought frailty to this man. His tall, thin body was stretched as tightly as a bow under the long leather coat buttoned up to his neck. And, as the light caught them, his small eyes glittered like two beads of highly polished jet, and a sense of power emanated from his whole being, which seemed to pervade the darkness around him and hold it in his thrall.

As he gestured with his hand, another man stepped up beside him, so that the pair of them stood shoulder by shoulder on the very edge of the void. This second person bore an uncanny resemblance to the old man, although his face was as yet unlined, and his hair was so black and tightly raked back that it could easily have been mistaken for a skull cap.

These men, members of a secret race called the Styx, were investigating an incident which had taken place a short time before. An incident in which the old Styx had lost his twin granddaughters, who had been swept over the edge of the void.

Although he knew there was little chance that either of the

girls was still alive, the old Styx's face revealed no trace of sorrow or anguish at their loss as he fired orders in a staccato bark.

There was a renewed flurry of activity as the Limiters around the Pore obeyed him. These soldiers, a specialised detachment that trained in the Deeps and undertook clandestine operations on the surface, wore dun-coloured fatigues – heavy jackets and bulky trousers – despite the high temperatures prevalent at that depth in the Earth. Their lean faces were impassive and intent as some of their number used the light-gathering scopes mounted on their rifles to probe the depths of the Pore, while others lowered luminescent orbs on cables to check the upper reaches. It was unlikely that the twins had managed to stop themselves from plummeting to their deaths, but the old Styx had to make certain.

'Anything?' he barked in his own tongue, a nasal and rasping language. The word echoed around the Pore and carried up the slope behind him, where other soldiers, with their usual efficiency, were already dismantling the large field guns that had caused so much destruction in the very spot where he now stood.

'They've obviously perished,' the old Styx said quietly to his young assistant, then immediately shouted orders at full volume again. 'Concentrate all your efforts on finding the phials!' He was counting on the fact that one or both of the twins had had time to unhook the small glass vessels hung around their necks before they were taken over the edge. 'We need those phials!'

His uncompromising gaze fell on the Limiters who were crawling around him as they combed every inch of the ground. They were painstakingly checking under each piece of

shattered rock and sifting through the churned-up dirt, which still smouldered from the residue of the explosive in the shells that had struck there. Every so often this residue ignited and small flames would rekindle and sprout from the ground, and just as soon vanish again.

There were shouts of warning, and several Limiters threw themselves back as a strip of land further along the Pore broke away with a low rumble. Tons of rock and soil, which had been loosened from the shelling, detached and slid into the abyss. Although it had been a close call for them, the soldiers simply picked themselves up and resumed their duties, apparently unruffled by the event.

The old Styx turned to contemplate the darkness at the top of the slope.

'No question that it was her,' his young assistant said, as he too looked up the slope. 'It was Sarah Jerome who took the twins over with her.'

'Who else could it have been?' the old Styx snapped, shaking his head. 'And what's remarkable is that she managed it even though she was mortally wounded.' He turned to his young assistant. 'We were playing with fire when we set her against her sons and, quite simply, we got our fingers burnt. Nothing is ever straightforward when it comes to that Burrows child,' changing it quickly to '*came* to that Burrows child,' because he also presumed Will was dead. He fell silent with a frown, drawing a long breath before he spoke again. 'But tell me – how did Sarah Jerome make it down here? Who was responsible for the area?' He thrust a finger at the upper slopes. 'I want them to answer to me.'

His young assistant bowed his head to acknowledge the order, then left.

Another figure immediately appeared in his place. It was so distorted and hunched it was difficult to tell at first glance whether it was actually human. From beneath a shawl stiff with filth, a pair of gnarled hands twitched their way out into the light. With birdlike movements, the hands lifted up the shawl to reveal a head horribly deformed with bulbous growths, so numerous that in places they seemed to grow one upon the other. Limp tufts of dank hair framed a face in which two perfectly white eyes were set. Devoid of irises or pupils, they swivelled about as though they were able to see.

'Condolences, 'n' that, on the loss of . . .' the figure wheezed, tailing off in a respectful silence.

'Thank you, Cox,' the old Styx responded, now speaking in English. 'Every man is the architect of his own fortune, and unfortunate things happen.'

In a sudden movement Cox swiped at the string of lacteous saliva dangling from his blackened lips with the back of his wrist, smearing it across his grey skin. He held his spindly arm in mid air, then, with a jerk, raised it further up his face and tapped the melon-sized growth on his forehead with a claw-like finger.

'At least yer girls did for Will Burrows and that sow Elliott,' he said. 'But yer still going to purge the rest of the Deeps for the last renegades, ain't yer?'

'Every last one, using the information you gave us,' the old Styx said, then shot him a knowing look. 'Anyway, Cox, why do you ask?'

'No reason,' the shapeless lump replied, quick as a flash.

'Oh, I think there is . . . you're worried because Drake has so far eluded us. And you know that sooner or later he'll come after you, to settle the score.'

''E will, and I'll be ready for 'im,' Cox proclaimed confidently, but a snaking blue vein throbbing under one of his eyes told otherwise. 'Drake could throw a spanner—'

The old Styx held up a hand to silence him as his young assistant double-timed it back with three Limiters in tow. The trio of soldiers formed a row and stood rigidly to attention, their eyes set straight before them and their long rifles at their sides. Two of them were youthful subalterns while one was an officer, a grizzled veteran of many years' service.

His fists clenched, the old Styx walked slowly down the row, stopping as he came to the last man, who happened to be the veteran. He turned fully to him, and with their faces separated by mere centimetres, the old Styx held the position for several seconds before dropping his eyes to the man's battle tunic. Three short cotton threads of different colours protruded from the material just above the veteran's breast pocket. These bright threads were decorations for acts of bravery – the Styx equivalent to Topsoiler medals. The old Styx closed his gloved fingers on them, tearing them out and then flinging them in the veteran's face. The veteran didn't blink or show the slightest reaction to this.

The old Styx stepped back, then gestured towards the Pore as casually as if he was waving away a bothersome fly. The three soldiers broke from formation. They leant their rifles against each other in a pyramid. Then they unbuckled their bulky belt kits and deposited them in a neat pile before the rifles. With no further command from the old Styx, they trooped in single file to the edge of the Pore and, one after another, stepped straight into it. None of them gave as much as a cry. And none of their comrades in the area stopped what they were doing to watch as the three soldiers hurtled

down into the abyss.

'Rough justice,' Cox said.

'We demand nothing less than excellence,' the old Styx replied. 'They failed. They were no use to us any longer.'

'You know, the girls might just 'ave survived,' Cox ventured.

The old Styx turned to give Cox his full attention. 'That's right – your people really believe a man fell down there and lived, don't they?'

'They're not *my* people,' Cox grumbled uncomfortably.

'Some myth about a glorious Garden of Eden waiting at the bottom,' the old Styx said playfully.

'Load of guff,' Cox mumbled, and began to cough.

'You've never thought of giving it a try yourself?' The old Styx didn't wait for an answer, clapping his gloved hands together as he swung around to his young assistant. 'Send a detachment to the Bunker to extract samples of the Dominion virus from the corpses there. If we can re-culture it, we can keep the plan on track.' He cocked his head and smiled evilly at Cox. 'Wouldn't want the Topsoilers to miss their day of reckoning, now, would we?'

At this Cox exploded with a cackling laugh, spraying milky spittle into the air.

Chester refused to allow himself even a second's rest. Whatever it was that had him in its grip, it felt oily next to his skin, and as he continued to struggle he became even more certain it was the source of the foul stench. While he was straining to get his second arm out, his other shoulder suddenly came free, and then, all of a sudden, the top half of his torso was clear. He roared in triumph as he sat up with a loud sucking sound.

He quickly felt around in the pitch black. He was completely hemmed in by the rubbery substance, and he found he could just reach the very top, where it seemed to level off. He tore off small strips from the sides around him – it was fibrous and greasy to the touch, and he hadn't the faintest idea what it was. But whatever it was, it seemed to have absorbed the impact of his fall down the Pore. Crazy as the idea appeared, it was probably the reason he was alive now.

'No way!' he said, dismissing the notion. It was just too far-fetched – there must be another explanation.

The lantern that had been clipped onto his jacket was nowhere to be seen, so he quickly checked through all his pockets for his spare luminescent orbs.

'Blast it!' he exclaimed as he discovered that his hip pocket was torn and the contents gone, the orbs with them.

Talking rapidly to himself to keep his spirits up, he attempted to get to his feet. 'Oh, give me a break!' he wailed as he found his legs were still firmly wedged in the spongy material and he couldn't get up. But that wasn't the only thing holding him in place.

'What's this?' he said, as he discovered the rope tied around his waist. It was Elliott's rope, which they'd used to daisy-chain themselves together at the top of the Pore. Now it was restricting his movements – to his left and right it was firmly set in the spongy material. Without the use of a knife, he had no option but to attempt to unpick the knot. This was easier said than done because his hands were drenched in the oily fluid and kept slipping off the rope.

With much fumbling and cursing, he eventually managed to undo the knot, then enlarge the loop around him. 'At last!' he bellowed, and with a sound like someone finishing a drink

through a straw, he extricated his legs. One of his boots was left behind, stuck solid in the material. He had to use both hands to tug it out, putting it back on before he scrambled up.

It was at that point that he realised how much every part of his body hurt – as if he'd just finished the toughest rugby match of his life, perhaps against a squad of particularly belligerent gorillas. 'Ow!' he complained as he rubbed his arms and legs, also finding that there were rope burns around his neck and on his hands. With a loud groan he stretched his back, peering up above to try to make out where he had fallen from. The strangest thing was that after the start of the fall, when the air had been rushing against his face so hard he could hardly breathe, he didn't really remember very much until Bartleby had brought him to by nuzzling his ankle.

'Where the hell am I?' he said repeatedly, remaining in the trench. He noticed a couple of areas of very dim illumination – although he didn't know what was causing them, the relief from the darkness made him feel slightly better. And, as his eyes adjusted further, he could vaguely make out the cat's fleeting silhouette as he circled around him like a prowling jaguar.

'Elliott!' he called. 'Are you there, Elliott?'

He noticed that as he shouted there was a definite echo coming from his left, but nothing at all from his right. He yelled several more times, each time waiting for a response. 'Elliott, can you hear me? Will! Hello, Will! Are you there?' But no one answered.

He told himself he couldn't stand there all day, simply shouting. He realised that one of the points of illumination was in fact coming from quite close by and made up his mind

to try to reach it. He clawed himself out of his pit. Because he was soaked in the slippery fluid, he didn't risk getting to his feet, but kept on all fours as he moved over the springy surface. He noticed something else as he went: he felt strangely buoyant, as if he was floating in water. Wondering if this was because the knocks to his head had made him a little dizzy, he told himself to concentrate on the job in hand.

He inched forward with small, deliberate movements, his fingers extended towards the light. Then the light seemed to catch the underside of his outstretched palm – and he realised it was coming from something embedded deep in the rubbery material. He rolled up his sleeve and stuck his arm into the hole to retrieve it.

'Yuck!' he said as he prised the light out, his arm coated in the unctuous liquid. It was a Styx lantern. He didn't know if it had been his or had belonged to one of the others, but that didn't matter right now. He held up the lantern to assess his surroundings, his confidence building to the point where he decided to get to his feet.

He found he was on a greyish surface – it wasn't smooth by any means but striated and pitted, with a texture somewhat akin to elephant hide. His light revealed that there were other things stuck in it, varying from small pebbles to substantial chunks of rock. They had evidently hit the material with some force and penetrated it, just as he had.

He lifted the lantern higher and saw that the ground stretched away on all sides in a gently undulating plateau. Treading carefully so as not to lose his footing, Chester went back to his hole to inspect it more closely. He couldn't believe what he was seeing, and chuckled in amazement. He was looking at a perfect outline of himself, sunk deep into the

surface of the material. It brought to mind the Saturday morning cartoon with the unfortunate coyote, which always seemed to end up falling from great heights and leaving a coyote-shaped impression when it hit the canyon floor. And here was a real-life Chester-shaped version! The cartoon didn't seem to be quite so funny any more.

Muttering with disbelief, he jumped back into the hole to retrieve his rucksack, which took quite some doing. Once he'd freed it, he hoisted it onto his back and scrambled from the hole. Then he bent to lift up the rope. 'Left or right?' he asked himself, looking at the opposite ends of the rope, which disappeared into the darkness. Picking a direction at random and steeling himself for what he might find, he began to follow the rope, heaving it out of the rubbery surface as he went.

He'd gone about ten metres when the rope suddenly came away in his hands, and he tumbled back into a sitting position. Grateful that the subterranean rubberised mat had absorbed his fall, he got to his feet again and examined the end of the rope. It was frayed as if it had been cut. Despite this, he was able to follow the line it had left, and soon came to a deep impression in the ground. He sidestepped around the shape, playing his light into it.

It certainly looked as if someone had been there; the outline wasn't as perfect as his, as if whoever had made it had landed on their side. 'Will! Elliott!' he called out again. There was still no reply, but Bartleby suddenly reappeared, fixing Chester with his big unwinking eyes. 'What is it? What do you want?' Chester growled impatiently at him. The cat slowly turned to face the opposite direction and, with his body low to the ground, began to creep forward. 'You want

me to come with you – is that it?' Chester asked as he realised that Bartleby was behaving precisely as if he was stalking something.

He followed the cat until they reached a vertical surface – a wall of the grey rubbery material down which water ran in rivulets. 'Where now?' he demanded, beginning to think that the cat might be taking him on a wild goose chase. Chester was reluctant to wander too far and get himself lost, but he knew sooner or later he might have to bite the bullet and explore the whole area.

His skeletal tail sticking out behind him, Bartleby was pointing his snout at what appeared to be a gap in the wall. Water was splattering down over the opening in a continuous shower. 'Inside there?' Chester asked as he tried to shine the Styx lantern through the water. In answer Bartleby stepped through the sheet of water, and Chester followed.

He found he was in some sort of cave. Bartleby wasn't the only one inside it. Someone else appeared to be sitting there, huddled over and surrounded by discarded sheets of paper.

'Will!' Chester gasped, almost unable to talk, he was so relieved that his friend had made it through.

Will raised his head, relaxing his fingers which had been tightly clenched around a luminescent orb, and allowing the light to dapple his face. He said nothing, staring dumbly at Chester.

'Will?' Chester repeated. Alarmed by his friend's silence, he squatted down beside him. 'Are you hurt?'

Will simply continued to stare at him. Then he ran a hand through his white hair, which was slick with oil, and grimaced and blinked one eye shut as if it was too much effort to speak.

'What's wrong? Talk to me, Will!'

'Yeah, I'm all right. Considering,' Will eventually answered in a monotone voice. 'Other than I've got a blinder of a headache and my legs hurt like hell. And my ears keep popping.' He swallowed several times. 'Must be the difference in pressure.'

'Mine too,' Chester said, then realised how unimportant that was at this very moment. 'But, Will, how long have you been in here?'

'Dunno,' Will shrugged.

'But, why . . . what . . . you . . .' Chester spluttered, his words tumbling into one another. 'Will, we made it!' he burst out, laughing. 'We bloody made it!'

'Looks that way,' he friend replied flatly, pressing his lips together.

'What *is* wrong with you?' Chester demanded.

'I don't know,' Will mumbled. 'I really don't know what's wrong, or what's right, not any more.'

'What do you mean?' Chester said.

'I thought I was going to see my dad again.' Will bowed his head as he answered. 'All the time those terrible things were happening to us, one hope kept me going . . . I really believed that I'd be back with my dad.' He held up a grimy-looking Mickey Mouse toothbrush. 'But that dream's gone now. He's dead, and all that he's left behind is this stupid toothbrush he nicked from me . . . and the wacko stuff he was writing in his journal.'

Will selected a damp piece of paper and read a sentence scrawled over it. '*A "second sun" . . . in the centre of the Earth?* What does that mean?' He sighed heavily. 'It doesn't even make sense.'

Then he spoke in barely a whisper.

'And Cal . . .' Will shook with an involuntary sob. 'It was my fault he died. I should have done something to save him. I should have given myself up to Rebecca . . .' He clicked his tongue against his teeth, correcting himself, '. . . to the Rebeccas.'

He raised his head, his lacklustre gaze resting on Chester. 'Every time I shut my eyes, all I see are her two faces . . . like they're pressing into my eyelids, into the darkness itself . . . two vile, nasty faces, ranting and shouting at me. I can't seem to get them out of here,' he said, slapping his forehead with some force. 'Oh, that hurt,' he groaned. 'Why did I do that?'

'But—' Chester began.

'We might just as well pack it in. What's the point?' Will interrupted him. 'Don't you remember what the Rebeccas were saying about the Dominion plot? We can't do a thing to stop them letting the virus loose on the surface, not from down here.' With great ceremony, he dropped the Mickey Mouse toothbrush into a greasy-looking puddle, as if he was drowning the crudely painted animal that composed its handle. 'What's the point?' he repeated.

Chester was quickly losing his cool. 'The point is, we're here and we're together and we showed those evil cows. It's like . . . it's like . . .' he floundered for second, as he tried to express himself, '. . . it's like in a video game when you get a respawn . . . you know, when you get another go. We've been given a second chance to try to stop the Rebecca twins and save all those lives on the surface.' He plucked the toothbrush out of the puddle and, shaking the water from it, handed it back to Will. 'The point is, we made it, we're still alive, for God's sake.'

'Biggish deal,' Will muttered.

'Of course it's a big deal!' Chester shook his friend by the shoulder. 'C'mon, Will, you're the one who always kept us all going, dragging us after you, the loopy one who—' Chester paused to draw a quick breath in his excited state, '—who always *had* to see what was round the next corner. Remember?'

'Isn't that what got us into this mess in the first place?' Will responded.

Chester made a noise halfway between a 'hmm' and a 'yes', then shook his head vigorously. 'And I want you to know . . .' Chester's voice quivered into nothing as he averted his eyes and fidgeted with a piece of rock by his boot. 'Will . . . I was such an idiot.'

'It doesn't matter now,' Will replied.

'Yes, it does. I was acting like a prize muppet . . . I got so fed up with everything . . . with you.' Then Chester's voice became steady again. 'I said a lot of stuff I didn't mean. And now I'm *asking* you to do your exploring, and I promise I'll never ever complain again. I'm sorry.'

'That's okay,' Will mumbled, a little embarrassed.

'Just do what you do best . . . find us a way out of here,' Chester urged him.

'I'll try,' Will said.

Chester fixed him with a look. 'I'm counting on it, Will. All those people on the surface are too. Don't forget, my mum and dad are up there. I don't want them to get the virus and die.'

'No, of course not,' Will replied immediately, as Chester's mention of his parents brought the situation into sharp focus for him. Will knew how much his friend loved them, and their fates and those of many hundreds of thousands – if not

millions – of people might be sealed if the Styx plot went ahead.

'Come on then, partner,' Chester urged, offering Will a hand to help him up. Together they stepped through the waterfall and out onto the rubbery surface.

'Chester,' Will said, becoming more like his old self, 'there's something you should know.'

'What's that?'

'Noticed anything weird about this place?' Will asked, giving his friend a quizzical glance.

Wondering where to start, Chester shook his head, his mane of curly, oil-drenched hair whipping about his face and a strand catching in his mouth. He plucked it out immediately with a look of disgust and spat several times. 'No, other than this stuff we landed in smells and *tastes* bloody awful.'

'My guess is that we're on a dirty great fungus,' Will went on. 'We've ended up on some sort of ledge of the stuff – it must be sticking out into the Pore. I saw something like this once on television – there was a monster fungus in America that stretched for more than a thousand miles underground.'

'Is that what you wanted to—?'

'Nope,' Will interrupted. 'This is the interesting thing. Watch carefully.' The luminescent orb was in the palm of his hand and he casually tossed it five metres into the air. Chester looked on with stunned amazement as it seemed to float back down to Will's hand again. It was as if he was witnessing the scene in slow motion.

'Hey, how'd you do that?'

'You have a go,' Will said, passing the orb over to Chester. 'But don't throw it too hard or you'll lose it.'

Chester did as Will suggested, lobbing it upwards. In the

event, he applied too much force and the orb shot some twenty metres, illuminating what appeared to be another fungal outcrop above them, before it floated eerily down again, the light playing on their upturned faces.

'How—?' Chester gasped, his eyes wide with amazement.

'Don't you feel, er, the weightlessness?' Will said, grasping for the right word. 'It's low gravity. My guess is that it's about a third of what we're used to on the surface,' Will informed him, pointing a finger heavenwards. 'That – and the soft landing we had on this fungus – might explain why we're not as flat as pancakes right now. But be careful how you move around or you'll send yourself spinning off this shelf and back into the Pore again.'

'Low gravity,' Chester repeated, trying to absorb what his friend was saying. 'What does that mean, exactly?'

'It means we must have fallen a *very* long way.'

Chester looked at him uncomprehendingly.

'Ever wondered what's at the centre of the Earth?' Will said.

Chapter Two



As Drake stole along the lava tunnel, he thought he heard a noise and froze, listening intently. 'Nothing,' he said to himself after a moment, then unhooked his canteen from his belt to take a drink. He swallowed contemplatively, his eyes peering at the gloom of the tunnel as he began to reflect on what had happened at the Pore.

He'd left before the old Styx had ordered the Limiters to jump to their deaths, but had witnessed the horrific events leading up to it. Hidden on the slope above the Pore, he'd been powerless to prevent Cal from meeting a sudden and violent end. Will's younger brother had been brutally gunned down by the Styx soldiers after he'd panicked and stepped out into the line of fire. And minutes later, Drake had been equally powerless to save Will and the rest of them when all hell had broken loose. He could only watch as the large-bore guns of the Styx Division opened up, and Elliott, Will and Chester were blasted over the side of the Pore.

Drake had been through so much with Elliott in the Deeps that he could usually second-guess how she'd act in any given situation. And as bad as things looked, Drake had still