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Opening extract from

Ravenwood

Written by

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To my wife Polly who helped so much with structuring, editing and creating the world and who has been my constant companion in travelling deeper; to my lovely children Roz and Asa who were my first readers; to Eugene who kept me going when I was ready to give up; to Uli for fighting the good fight; to Rachel Hawes who gave me so much helpful advice about clothes up in the trees; to Barry who had faith in me and the work and who took the risk; to the team at Chicken House who backed this to the hilt; and finally to Imogen, my brilliant editor.

'Trees are shrines. He who knows how to speak with them, who knows how to listen to them, experiences truth. They preach no catechism or recipe, they preach original law.'

Herman Hesse



THE CHASE

Stay on the wood, it's as it should.
Step off the tree: end of thee.

Dendran proverb

The forested island of Arborium
October 5th, early evening, one week before the Harvest Festival

The arrow flew over his shoulder and thudded straight into a wooden post. Too close! If he hadn't stumbled out of the way, the shaft would now be buried somewhere near his heart. He imagined the blood blooming like a flower across his shirt, his body tripping over the edge of the branch to fall lifeless to the earth, a mile below.

Ark was exhausted. Sweat coursed down his back and his calf muscles ached. He whipped his head round: they were only a hundred yards behind. This part of the

high-way was wide and straight. Not only had the original, huge branch been carved flat, like all the smaller branch-roads, but also it had been extended widthways with beams and scaffolding. Now it was twenty feet across at the passing places. At this time of the afternoon, before brush-hour, the way was deserted. Ark ran lightly, feeling each knot and dip in the wood.

Somewhere hidden up above, dark clouds squeezed out their downpour, filling the forest with echoing drips. The constant drumming urged him on and Ark ran for his life though a mass of shifting shadows. His plumbing belt was weighing him down. Spanners against crossbows? Forget it. But there was no time to get rid of it either. Another arrow whistled past and vanished harmlessly into the leafy green depths.

His pursuer paused, wiping rain from his eyes, taking careful aim for another shot. The escaping boy's drenched clothes, from the brown leather skullcap and grotty tanned jerkin to the tight britches and worn stockings, showed him up to be just a sewer worker. In fact, his prey resembled one big, turdy stain on the treescape. The guard tried to keep up, straining his eyes through the downpour. The boy streaked ahead in his rubber-soled creepers, standard wear this high up. No-one wanted to slip off the edge, especially in this weather. As for killing a fourteen-year-old? It wasn't a problem but the solution.

Straight ahead, the high-way ran towards a huge, hollow tree trunk. Ark bolted into the centre and hesitated,

catching his breath. A bird shrieked in the distance and a rustling sound echoed around the wood, causing Ark to glance up into the shadows above. The dead tree was a crossroads. Its massive trunk supported the junction with branch-lines leading off in three directions through carved archways. He looked towards each in turn. In a dark corner, ancient, moss-covered steps led down into the hollow depths. He was desperate, but going earth-wards? He shuddered even to think of it. Which way?

Ark's head replayed the day. *Just another blocked drain*, his boss had said, not wanting to dirty his clean white hands. *You can sort it out, Arktorious Malikum. It's a job. In fact, it's a 'big job'! And, let's face it, you're brown already – so sticking your hand in a great, fat pile of it won't make much difference!* The man laughed at his own joke. He always did. But this was no laughing matter.

Right in front of him, a red squirrel squatted on the wood-way, nibbling at a hazelnut. It stared at Ark briefly before diving down the stairs.

'This way . . .'

Ark looked round. The voice was so soft he wondered if he was imagining things. Talking squirrels? He was going nutty! Without thinking Ark followed the animal, darting into the archway to be swallowed by the enveloping blackness. For a moment, he could catch his breath out of sight of the guards. He had to make the most of it.

A snorting sound ahead startled him. Moving slowly towards him out of the gloom was a laundry cart, piled high with clean clothing, being pulled by a small mottled-brown pony. As the cart passed him, its wooden wheels hit a knot in the deeply carved ruts and the brass

harness jangled, sending strange harmonies into the leaves. It meant *move out of the way,* as these unaccompanied pack ponies didn't change their pace for anyone.

A gift horse! Ark smiled grimly and sprinted to the back of the cart. He scrambled up the tailgate and dived under the waterproof tarpaulin into the carefully sorted mounds. He wriggled right under, pulling clean petticoats over himself, and crossed his fingers, praying to Diana for safety.

'Where's the little sliver gone?'

'He was 'ere a second ago . . .'

The voices were muffled as they drew closer.

'I reckon we nearly got 'im!'

Ark held his breath, waiting for the pressed shifts and undergarments to be stripped away. His mother had always warned him about going out alone in the woods, else the Ravens could snatch his body and suck out his soul. This was far more dangerous.

''Ave a look from up there.' The cart shuddered as feet clambered to the top of the laundry pile. The full, adult weight of a hulking guard crushed down on Ark, squeezing out the remaining air in his lungs. They'd either hear his ribs cracking or his heart hammering like a woodpecker's beak.

A phrase from childhood came into Ark's head:

Hold the feather, grab the weather,

Woe betide me, Lady hide me!

It was a nonsense chant spouted by old crones and repeated with glee in the nursery. But he was happy to believe in anything at this moment.

'Buddy Holly!' the guard swore. 'Can't see 'im anywhere! Maybe the slippery twig fooled us into thinking 'e turned left.'

'Grasp'll kill us if we don't find the boy!' hissed the other one. 'Let's split. He can't 'ave got far . . .'

The weight on Ark's chest lifted and the voices faded away. Had the old chant worked? Ark breathed deeply, filling his lungs, and counted to two hundred, even though his legs were itching to take off. Maybe he could stay in the cart and wait until it delivered its load? He was almost lulled by the gentle rocking motion. No! He shook himself. He had heard too much. Grasp would put the word out. As of now, he was dead wood.

First, he had to put some distance between himself and the High Councillor's thugs. He carefully pulled back a pair of hose stockings and several layers of leather codpieces to make a peephole, trying not to think of where those items of clothing had nestled. He peered out. All clear. Ark slid backwards and slipped cautiously off the end of the cart, wishing he had an apple to offer the steadily plodding pony.

'Thanks, old fellow!' he whispered. 'I owe you one!' The pony's blinkered eyes flicked towards him, as if in acknowledgement, and the cart moved off, leaving Ark alone on the high-way.

He looked warily round at his world with new eyes. All that he'd taken for granted: no longer safe. A humid mist blurred the edges of the huge leaves, each one the size of a fully grown man. Above, below, behind and in front, branch-lines and high-ways were woven and cantilevered

together with rope, scaffolding and a million wooden nails. Trunks of massive girth, large enough to support the hundreds of houses, businesses and hostelries carved into the hollow depths, punctuated the sprawling treescape. Ark had always believed that, despite its turbulent history, this vast island of Arborium was the safest place on Earth, lifted up and spread out as it was throughout the canopy of trees, a mile above the dirty ground. Not any more.

'Oi!' The shout cut sharply into his thoughts. There! Only yards away, one of his pursuers was hurtling straight towards him. The branded emblem on his tabard gave him away: the cruel-beaked hawk of the councillor's household. Of course, the guards weren't that stupid. Wait long enough, and every mouse pops out of its hole.

Ark cursed himself as the man lunged and made a grab for his wrist. Ark jumped back and twisted away, but not quickly enough. The man's grip landed and tightened. Although he was almost as skinny as Ark, his muscles were strong as oak.

'Let me go!' screamed Ark.

'Don't think so, squit-features.' Vice-like fingers squeezed closer, forcing tears of pain from Ark's eyes. 'You're a month's bonus, you are!' He smiled menacingly, revealing a set of teeth like rotting fungus, with breath to match.

Ark stopped struggling as cold fury overtook him. What right did they have? His father had always told him he could think his way out of any situation. But what good was thought against brute strength? As his mind tried to focus, pure instinct kicked in – after flight comes

fight. It was like watching himself from outside his body . . . his right hand was still free. In one perfect curve of movement Ark reached down, slipped the heavy spanner from his plumbing belt and swung it up and round with all his might.

The guard was expecting a cowering youth. What he got was a well aimed weapon and a sickening crunch for a punch line. The man's eyes went wide and he slowly folded to the ground.

Ark didn't pause. He was off even before the thump of body falling on wood. His pursuer's scream would have been as good as an alarm bell and where there was one guard, more were sure to follow. At least, Ark thought, tasting the adrenalin of escape, he'd bought himself some time. But the branch-line he was following was long and straight and seemed to keep going for ever. He knew that the next turn-off was nearly a quarter of a mile away and his thin legs were beginning to cramp with the effort of the chase.

He scanned the way ahead and skidded to a sudden halt on the treacherous wood-way. His worst fear was already advancing in the distance: another guard, twice the size of the first, footsteps creaking towards Ark. The man's stiletto was drawn purposefully, its sharp blade shimmering in the rain. Ark could make out a rough scar zigzagging across the man's shaved head like a bolt of lightning.

Ark spun round. He'd have to double back. How far to the next branch crossing and even if he got there, where next? He looked over his shoulder and saw that the guard had broken into a run and was shouting and pointing. As

he turned again, he saw why. Further along, the first guard – the one he thought he'd knocked cold – was already sitting up. Could things get any worse? This time, there was no welcoming crossroads, no alternative route, nothing. Ark was trapped.

The rain soaked into the forest, thickening the mist that now hung in drifting patches. The high-way was plunged into shadow and the two guards could hardly make out the figure of the boy, already neatly camouflaged in his brown, stained clothes. No matter. Where could he go? They came at him slowly, sure of their prey, sure of the outcome. No need to hurry: it was over.

The boy appeared to kneel down as if praying. Then he stood up, looked over the edge and took a single step back. Before the men could do anything, the boy leapt from the high-way, breaking the great unwritten law of the Dendrans.

Stay on the wood, it's as it should.
Step off the tree: end of thee.

As the boy flew into space, the lead guard shuddered. To jump willingly, away from all that was known, down to the foul, poisoned earth so far below . . . it was madness!

They ran as fast as they could through the mist, but it was too late. By the time the guards finally converged on the spot, the boy had vanished. One of them crawled to the edge of the branch-way and lifted the safety ropes to peer nervously over the edge. But even though he strained

his eyes down and down, all he could spy was the lad's plumbing belt caught on an old bit of scaffolding on a dead trunk, a hundred feet below.

'Nothing would survive that fall,' he muttered, pulling his head back. He pointed out the plumbing belt to the other guard. That was that, then.

After a brief discussion, the oldest guard cleared his throat and launched a nice fat gob over the edge. Gravity did its job and it fell, just like the boy.

'Good riddance!'

'It's peeing down. Let's get out of here.' If the boy was dead, their problems were solved. Even better, their master might just be persuaded to give them a bonus *and* a barrel of beer.

'How's your head, Alnus?'

'Do you really care?' The smaller guard clenched his fists.

'Knocked out by a mere kid! That takes talent, that does.' There was a nasty glint in Salix's eye. He was thoroughly enjoying himself.

'Yeah, well, at least I caught him in the first place!' They'd be ribbing him for months now.

'And let 'im go! You must have the thickest skull in the business, plank-for-brains!'

'Oh, cheers, Salix. I appreciate your concern . . .' He could feel the bump already rising. Why couldn't he have been the one to push the boy off? The stupid squit had deprived him of revenge. Still, at least it was sorted now, and once they were dried and warmed up, a good night of drinking might just sort the throbbing between his ears.