

The Dark Is Rising Sequence: Over Sea, Under Stone; The Dark Is Rising; Greenwitch; The Grey King; Silver on the Tree

By Susan Cooper

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Epic. Bestselling. Award-winning. The complete Dark Is Rising Sequence is now available as one keepsake collection.

Will Stanton's ordinary life is shattered with the dreadful revelation that the Dark—the source of all evil—is rising in its last and greatest bid to control the world. He finds that he is no ordinary boy, but the last-born of the Old Ones, immortals dedicated to keeping mankind free from the Dark. Soon Will is swept up in the great battle, along with his ageless master, Merriman; the three Drew children, who are mortal but have their own vital part to play; and a strange boy named Bran. These six fight fear and death in a quest through time and space interwoven with the most ancient myths of the islands of Britain—until, at last, Will and Bran find the weapon that will ultimately vanquish the Dark.

One of the most celebrated fantasy sequences of all time, The Dark Is Rising is a searing, epic rendering of the eternal conflict between good and evil. This complete collection includes *Over Sea, Under Stone; The Dark Is Rising; Greenwitch; The Grey King;* and *Silver on the Tree.*

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Editorial Review

Review
"Susan Cooper is one of the few contemporary writers who has the vivid imagination, the narrative power, and the moral vision that permit her to create the kind of sweeping conflict between good and evil that lies at the heart of all great fantasy. Tolkien had it. So did C. S. Lewis. And Cooper writes in the same tradition." -- *Psychology Today*

About the Author
Susan Cooper is the recipient of the Margaret A. Edwards Award for Lifetime Achievement. Her classic five-book fantasy sequence The Dark Is Rising won the Newbery Medal and a Newbery Honor. She is also the author of *Victory*, a *Booklist* Top Ten Historical Fiction for Youth book and a *Washington Post* Top Ten for Children novel; *King of Shadows*, a *Boston Globe-Horn Book* Award Honor book; *The Boggart*; *Seaward*; *Ghost Hawk*; and many other acclaimed novels for young readers and listeners. She lives in Massachusetts, and you can visit her online at TheLostLand.com.

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The Dark is Rising

• Midwinter’s Eve •

“Too many!” James shouted, and slammed the door behind him.

“What?” said Will.

“Too many kids in this family, that’s what. Just too many.” James stood fuming on the landing like a small angry locomotive, then stumped across to the window-seat and stared out at the garden. Will put aside his book and pulled up his legs to make room. “I could hear all the yelling,” he said, chin on knees.

“Wasn’t anything,” James said. “Just stupid Barbara again. Bossing. Pick up this, don’t touch that. And Mary joining in, twitter twitter twitter. You’d think this house was big enough, but there’s always people.”

They both looked out of the window. The snow lay thin and apologetic over the world. That wide grey sweep was the lawn, with the straggling trees of the orchard still dark beyond; the white squares were the roofs of the garage, the old barn, the rabbit hutches, the chicken coops. Further back there were only the flat fields of Dawsons’ Farm, dimly white-striped. All the broad sky was grey, full of more snow that refused to fall. There was no colour anywhere.

“Four days to Christmas,” Will said. “I wish it would snow properly.”

“And your birthday tomorrow.”

“Mmm.” He had been going to say that too, but it would have been too much like a reminder. And the gift he most wished for on his birthday was something nobody could give him: it was snow, beautiful, deep, blanketing snow, and it never came. At least this year there was the grey sprinkle, better than nothing.

He said, remembering a duty: “I haven’t fed the rabbits yet. Want to come?”

Booted and muffled, they clumped out through the sprawling kitchen. A full symphony orchestra was swelling out of the radio; their eldest sister Gwen was slicing onions and singing; their mother was bent broad-beamed and red-faced over an oven. “Rabbits!” she shouted, when she caught sight of them. “And some more hay from the farm!”

“We’re going!” Will shouted back. The radio let out a sudden hideous crackle of static as he passed the table. He jumped. Mrs Stanton shrieked, “Turn that thing DOWN.”

Outdoors, it was suddenly very quiet. Will dipped out a pail of pellets from the bin in the farm-smelling barn, which was not really a barn at all, but a long, low building with a tiled roof, once a stable. They tramped through the thin snow to the row of heavy wooden hutches, leaving dark footmarks on the hard frozen ground.

Opening doors to fill the feed-boxes, Will paused, frowning. Normally the rabbits would be huddled sleepily in corners, only the greedy ones coming twitch-nosed forward to eat. Today they seemed restless and uneasy, rustling to and fro, banging against their wooden walls; one or two even leapt back in alarm when he opened their doors. He came to his favourite rabbit, named Chelsea, and reached in as usual to rub him affectionately behind the ears, but the animal scuffled back away from him and cringed into a corner, the pink-rimmed eyes staring up blank and terrified.

“Hey!” Will said, disturbed. “Hey James, look at that. What’s the matter with him? And all of them?”

“They seem all right to me.”

“Well, they don’t to me. They’re all jumpy. Even Chelsea. Hey, come on, boy—” But it was no good.

“Funny,” James said with mild interest, watching. “I dare say your hands smell wrong. You must have touched something they don’t like. Same as dogs and aniseed, but the other way round.”

“I haven’t touched anything. Matter of fact, I’d just washed my hands when I saw you.”

“There you are then,” James said promptly. “That’s the trouble. They’ve never smelt you clean before. Probably all die of shock.”

“Ha very ha.” Will attacked him, and they scuffled together, grinning, while the empty pail toppled rattling on the hard ground. But when he glanced back as they left, the animals were still moving distractedly, not eating yet, staring after him with those strange frightened wide eyes.

“There might be a fox about again, I suppose,” James said. “Remind me to tell Mum.” No fox could get at the rabbits, in their sturdy row, but the chickens were more vulnerable; a family of foxes had broken into one of the henhouses the previous winter and carried off six nicely fattened birds just before marketing time. Mrs Stanton, who relied on the chicken-money each year to help pay for eleven Christmas presents, had been so furious she had kept watch afterwards in the cold barn two nights running, but the villains had not come back. Will thought that if he were a fox he would have kept clear too; his mother might be married to a jeweller, but with generations of Buckinghamshire farmers behind her, she was no joke when the old instincts were roused.

Tugging the handcart, a home-made contraption with a bar joining its shafts, he and James made their way down the curve of the overgrown drive and out along the road to Dawsons' Farm. Quickly past the churchyard, its great dark yew trees leaning out over the crumbling wall; more slowly by Rooks' Wood, on the corner of Church Lane. The tall spinney of horse-chestnut trees, raucous with the calling of the rooks and rubbish-roofed with the clutter of their sprawling nests, was one of their familiar places.

"Hark at the rooks! Something's disturbed them." The harsh irregular chorus was deafening, and when Will looked up at the treetops he saw the sky dark with wheeling birds. They flapped and drifted to and fro; there were no flurries of sudden movement, only this clamorous interweaving throng of rooks.

"An owl?"

"They're not chasing anything. Come on, Will, it'll be getting dark soon."

"That's why it's so odd for the rooks to be in a fuss. They all ought to be roosting by now." Will turned his head reluctantly down again, but then jumped and clutched his brother's arm, his eye caught by a movement in the darkening lane that led away from the road where they stood. Church Lane: it ran between Rooks' Wood and the churchyard to the tiny local church, and then on to the River Thames.

"Hey!"

"What's up?"

"There's someone over there. Or there was. Looking at us."

James sighed. "So what? Just someone out for a walk."

"No, he wasn't." Will screwed up his eyes nervously, peering down the little side road. "It was a weird-looking man all hunched over, and when he saw me looking he ran off behind a tree. Scuttled, like a beetle."

James heaved at the handcart and set off up the road, making Will run to keep up. "It's just a tramp, then. I dunno, everyone seems to be going batty today—Barb and the rabbits and the rooks and now you all yak-twitchetty-yakking. Come on, let's get that hay. I want my tea."

The handcart bumped through the frozen ruts into Dawsons' yard, the great earthen square enclosed by buildings on three sides, and they smelt the familiar farm-smell. The cowshed must have been mucked out that day; Old George, the toothless cattleman, was piling dung across the yard. He raised a hand to them. Nothing missed Old George; he could see a hawk drop from a mile away. Mr Dawson came out of a barn.

"Ah," he said. "Hay for Stantons' Farm?" It was his joke with their mother, because of the rabbits and the hens.

James said, "Yes, please."

"It's coming," Mr Dawson said. Old George had disappeared into the barn. "Keeping well, then? Tell your mum I'll have ten birds off her tomorrow. And four rabbits. Don't look like that, young Will. If it's not their happy Christmas, it's one for the folks as'll have them." He glanced up at the sky, and Will thought a strange look came over his lined brown face. Up against the lowering grey clouds, two black rooks were flapping slowly over the farm in a wide circle.

“The rooks are making an awful din today,” James said. “Will saw a tramp up by the wood.”

Mr Dawson looked at Will sharply. “What was he like?”

“Just a little old man. He dodged away.”

“So the Walker is abroad,” the farmer said softly to himself. “Ah. He would be.”

“Nasty weather for walking,” James said cheerfully. He nodded at the northern sky over the farmhouse roof; the clouds there seemed to be growing darker, massing in ominous grey mounds with a yellowish tinge. The wind was rising too; it stirred their hair, and they could hear a distant rustling from the tops of the trees.

“More snow coming,” said Mr Dawson.

“It’s a horrible day,” said Will suddenly, surprised by his own violence; after all, he had wanted snow. But somehow uneasiness was growing in him. “It’s—creepy, somehow.”

“It will be a bad night,” said Mr Dawson.

“There’s Old George with the hay,” said James. “Come on, Will.”

“You go,” the farmer said. “I want Will to pick up something for your mother from the house.” But he did not move, as James pushed the handcart off towards the barn; he stood with his hands thrust deep into the pockets of his old tweed jacket, looking at the darkening sky.

“The Walker is abroad,” he said again. “And this night will be bad, and tomorrow will be beyond imagining.” He looked at Will, and Will looked back in growing alarm into the weathered face, the bright dark eyes creased narrow by decades of peering into sun and rain and wind. He had never noticed before how dark Farmer Dawson’s eyes were: strange, in their blue-eyed county.

“You have a birthday coming,” the farmer said.

“Mmm,” said Will.

“I have something for you.” He glanced briefly round the yard, and withdrew one hand from his pocket; in it, Will saw what looked like a kind of ornament, made of black metal, a flat circle quartered by two crossed lines. He took it, fingering it curiously. It was about the size of his palm, and quite heavy; roughly forged out of iron, he guessed, though with no sharp points or edges. The iron was cold to his hand.

“What is it?” he said.

“For the moment,” Mr Dawson said, “just call it something to keep. To keep with you always, all the time. Put it in your pocket, now. And later on, loop your belt through it and wear it like an extra buckle.”

Will slipped the iron circle into his pocket. “Thank you very much,” he said, rather shakily. Mr Dawson, usually a comforting man, was not improving the day at all.

The farmer looked at him in the same intent, unnerving way, until Will felt the hair rise on the back of his neck; then he gave a twisted half-smile, with no amusement in it but a kind of anxiety. “Keep it safe, Will.

And the less you happen to talk about it, the better. You will need it after the snow comes." He became brisk. "Come on, now, Mrs Dawson has a jar of her mincemeat for your mother."

They moved off towards the farmhouse. The farmer's wife was not there, but waiting in the doorway was Maggie Barnes, the farm's round-faced, red-cheeked dairymaid, who always reminded Will of an apple. She beamed at them both, holding out a big white crockery jar tied with a red ribbon.

"Thank you, Maggie," Farmer Dawson said.

"Missus said you'd be wanting it for young Will here," Maggie said. "She went down the village to see the vicar for something. How's your big brother, then, Will?"

She always said this, whenever she saw him; she meant Will's next-to-oldest brother Max. It was a Stanton family joke that Maggie Barnes at Dawsons' had a thing about Max.

"Fine, thank you," Will said politely. "Grown his hair long. Looks like a girl."

Maggie shrieked with delight. "Get away with you!" She giggled and waved her farewell, and just at the last moment Will noticed her gaze slip upward past his head. Out of the corner of his eye as he turned, he thought he saw a flicker of movement by the farmyard gate, as if someone were dodging quickly out of sight. But when he looked, no one was there.

With the big pot of mincemeat wedged between two bales of hay, Will and James pushed the handcart out of the yard. The farmer stood in his doorway behind them; Will could feel his eyes, watching. He glanced up uneasily at the looming, growing clouds, and half-unwillingly slipped a hand into his pocket to finger the strange iron circle. "After the snow comes." The sky looked as if it were about to fall on them. He thought: what's happening?

One of the farm dogs came bounding up, tail waving; then it stopped abruptly a few yards away, looking at them.

"Hey, Racer!" Will called.

The dog's tail went down, and it snarled, showing its teeth.

"James!" said Will.

"He won't hurt you. What's the matter?"

They went on, and turned into the road.

"It's not that. Something's wrong, that's all. Something's awful. Racer, Chelsea—the animals are all scared of me." He was beginning to be really frightened now.

The noise from the rookery was louder, even though the daylight was beginning to die. They could see the dark birds thronging over the treetops, more agitated than before, flapping and turning to and fro. And Will had been right; there was a stranger in the lane, standing beside the churchyard.

He was a shambling, tattered figure, more like a bundle of old clothes than a man, and at the sight of him the

boys slowed their pace and drew instinctively closer to the cart and to one another. He turned his shaggy head to look at them.

Then suddenly, in a dreadful blur of unreality, a hoarse, shrieking flurry was rushing dark down out of the sky, and two huge rooks swooped at the man. He staggered back, shouting, his hands thrust up to protect his face, and the birds flapped their great wings in a black vicious whirl and were gone, swooping up past the boys and into the sky.

Will and James stood frozen, staring, pressed against the bales of hay.

The stranger cowered back against the gate.

“Kaaaaaaak . . . kaaaaaak . . .” came the head-splitting racket from the frenzied flock over the wood, and then three more whirling black shapes were swooping after the first two, diving wildly at the man and then away. This time he screamed in terror and stumbled out into the road, his arms still wrapped in defence round his head, his face down; and he ran. The boys heard the frightened gasps for breath as he dashed headlong past them, and up the road past the gates of Dawsons’ Farm and on towards the village. They saw bushy, greasy grey hair below a dirty old cap; a torn brown overcoat tied with string, and some other garment flapping beneath it; old boots, one with a loose sole that made him kick his leg oddly sideways, half-hopping, as he ran. But they did not see his face.

The high whirling above their heads was dwindling into loops of slow flight, and the rooks began to settle one by one into the trees. They were still talking loudly to one another in a long cawing jumble, but the madness and the violence were not in it now. Dazed, moving his head for the first time, Will felt his cheek brush against something, and putting his hand to his shoulder, he found a long black feather there. He pushed it into his jacket pocket, moving slowly, like someone half-awake.

Together they pushed the loaded cart down the road to the house, and the cawing behind them died to an ominous murmur, like the swollen Thames in spring.

James said at last, “Rooks don’t do that sort of thing. They don’t attack people. And they don’t come down low when there’s not much space. They just don’t.”

“No,” Will said. He was still moving in a detached half-dream, not fully aware of anything except a curious vague groping in his mind. In the midst of all the din and the flurry, he had suddenly had a strange feeling stronger than any he had ever known: he had been aware that someone was trying to tell him something, something that had missed him because he could not understand the words. Not words exactly; it had been like a kind of silent shout. But he had not been able to pick up the message, because he had not known how.

“Like not having the radio on the right station,” he said aloud.

“What?” said James, but he wasn’t really listening. “What a thing,” he said. “I s’pose the tramp must have been trying to catch a rook. And they got wild. He’ll be snooping around after the hens and the rabbits, I bet you. Funny he didn’t have a gun. Better tell Mum to leave the dogs in the barn tonight.” He chattered amiably on as they reached home and unloaded the hay. Gradually Will realised in amazement that all the shock of the wild, savage attack was running out of James’s mind like water, and that in a matter of minutes even the very fact of its happening had gone.

Something had neatly wiped the whole incident from James’s memory; something that did not want it

reported. Something that knew this would stop Will from reporting it too.

“Here, take Mum’s mincemeat,” James said. “Let’s go in before we freeze. The wind’s really getting up—good job we hurried back.”

“Yes,” said Will. He felt cold, but it was not from the rising wind. His fingers closed round the iron circle in his pocket and held it tightly. This time, the iron felt warm.

* * *

The grey world had slipped into the dark by the time they went back to the kitchen. Outside the window, their father’s battered little van stood in a yellow cave of light. The kitchen was even noisier and hotter than before. Gwen was setting the table, patiently steering her way round a trio of bent figures where Mr Stanton was peering at some small, nameless piece of machinery with the twins, Robin and Paul; and with Mary’s plump form now guarding it, the radio was blasting out pop music at enormous volume. As Will approached, it erupted again into a high-pitched screech, so that everyone broke off with grimaces and howls.

“Turn that thing OFF!” Mrs Stanton yelled desperately from the sink. But though Mary, pouting, shut off the crackle and the buried music, the noise level changed very little. Somehow it never did when more than half the family was at home. Voices and laughter filled the long stone-floored kitchen as they sat round the scrubbed wooden table; the two Welsh collies, Raq and Ci, lay dozing at the far end of the room beside the fire. Will kept away from them; he could not have borne it if their own dogs had snarled at him. He sat quietly at tea—it was called tea if Mrs Stanton managed to produce it before five o’clock, supper if it was later, but it was always the same hearty kind of meal—and kept his plate and his mouth full of sausage to avoid having to talk. Not that anyone was likely to miss your talk in the cheerful babble of the Stanton family, especially when you were its youngest member.

Waving at him from the end of the table, his mother called, “What shall we have for tea tomorrow, Will?”

He said indistinctly, “Liver and bacon, please.”

James gave a loud groan.

“Shut up,” said Barbara, superior and sixteen. “It’s his birthday, he can choose.”

“But liver,” said James.

“Serves you right,” Robin said. “On your last birthday, if I remember right, we all had to eat that revolting cauliflower cheese.”

“I made it,” said Gwen, “and it wasn’t revolting.”

“No offence,” said Robin mildly. “I just can’t bear cauliflower. Anyway you take my point.”

“I do. I don’t know whether James does.”

Robin, large and deep-voiced, was the more muscular of the twins and not to be trifled with. James said hastily, “Okay, okay.”

“Double-ones tomorrow, Will,” said Mr Stanton from the head of the table. “We should have some special kind of ceremony. A tribal rite.” He smiled at his youngest son, his round, rather chubby face crinkling in affection.

Mary sniffed. “On my eleventh birthday, I was beaten and sent to bed.”

“Good heavens,” said her mother, “fancy you remembering that. And what a way to describe it. In point of fact you got one hard wallop on the bottom, and well-deserved, too, as far as I can recollect.”

“It was my birthday,” Mary said, tossing her pony-tail. “And I’ve never forgotten.”

“Give yourself time,” Robin said cheerfully. “Three years isn’t much.”

“And you were a very young eleven,” Mrs Stanton said, chewing reflectively.

“Huh!” said Mary. “And I suppose Will isn’t?”

For a moment everyone looked at Will. He blinked in alarm at the ring of contemplating faces, and scowled down into his plate so that nothing of him was visible except a thick slanting curtain of brown hair. It was most disturbing to be looked at by so many people all at once, or at any rate by more people than one could look at in return. He felt almost as if he were being attacked. And he was suddenly convinced that it could in some way be dangerous to have so many people thinking about him, all at the same time. As if someone unfriendly might hear. . . .

“Will,” Gwen said at length, “is rather an old eleven.”

“Ageless, almost,” Robin said. They both sounded solemn and detached, as if they were discussing some far-off stranger.

“Let up, now,” said Paul unexpectedly. He was the quiet twin, and the family genius, perhaps a real one: he played the flute and thought about little else. “Anyone coming to tea tomorrow, Will?”

“No. Angus Macdonald’s gone to Scotland for Christmas, and Mike’s staying with his grannie in Southall. I don’t mind.”

There was a sudden commotion at the back door, and a blast of cold air; much stamping, and noises of loud shivering. Max stuck his head into the room from the passage; his long hair was wet and white-starred. “Sorry I’m late, Mum, had to walk from the Common. Wow, you should see it out there—like a blizzard.” He looked at the blank row of faces, and grinned. “Don’t you know it’s snowing?”

Forgetting everything for a moment, Will gave a joyful yell and scrambled with James for the door. “Real snow? Heavy?”

“I’ll say,” said Max, scattering drops of water over them as he unwound his scarf. He was the eldest brother, not counting Stephen, who had been in the Navy for years and seldom came home. “Here.” He opened the door a crack, and the wind whistled through again; outside, Will saw a glittering white fog of fat snowflakes—no trees or bushes visible, nothing but the whirling snow. A chorus of protest came from the kitchen: “SHUT THAT DOOR!”

“There’s your ceremony, Will,” said his father. “Right on time.”

* * *

Much later, when he went to bed, Will opened the bedroom curtain and pressed his nose against the cold windowpane, and he saw the snow tumbling down even thicker than before. Two or three inches already lay on the sill, and he could almost watch the level rising as the wind drove more against the house. He could hear the wind, too, whining round the roof close above him, and in all the chimneys. Will slept in a slant-roof attic at the top of the old house; he had moved into it only a few months before, when Stephen, whose room it had always been, had gone back to his ship after a leave. Until then Will had always shared a room with James—everyone in the family shared with someone else. “But my attic ought to be lived in,” his eldest brother had said, knowing how Will loved it.

On a bookcase in one corner of the room now stood a portrait of Lieutenant Stephen Stanton, R.N., looking rather uncomfortable in dress uniform, and beside it a carved wooden box with a dragon on the lid, filled with the letters he sent Will sometimes from unthinkably distant parts of the world. They made a kind of private shrine.

The snow flurried against the window, with a sound like fingers brushing the pane. Again Will heard the wind moaning in the roof, louder than before; it was rising into a real storm. He thought of the tramp, and wondered where he had taken shelter. “The Walker is abroad . . . this night will be bad. . . .” He picked up his jacket and took the strange iron ornament from it, running his fingers round the circle, up and down the inner cross that quartered it. The surface of the iron was irregular, but though it showed no sign of having been polished it was completely smooth—smooth in a way that reminded him of a certain place in the rough stone floor of the kitchen, where all the roughness had been worn away by generations of feet turning to come round the corner from the door. It was an odd kind of iron: deep, absolute black, with no shine to it but no spot anywhere of discolouration or rust. And once more now it was cold to the touch; so cold this time that Will was startled to find it numbing his fingertips. Hastily he put it down. Then he pulled his belt out of his trousers, slung untidily as usual over the back of a chair, took the circle, and threaded it through like an extra buckle, as Mr Dawson had told him. The wind sang in the window-frame. Will put the belt back in his trousers and dropped them on the chair.

It was then, without warning, that the fear came.

The first wave caught him as he was crossing the room to his bed. It halted him stock-still in the middle of the room, the howl of the wind outside filling his ears. The snow lashed against the window. Will was suddenly deadly cold, yet tingling all over. He was so frightened that he could not move a finger. In a flash of memory he saw again the lowering sky over the spinney, dark with rooks, the big black birds wheeling and circling overhead. Then that was gone, and he saw only the tramp’s terrified face and heard his scream as he ran. For a moment, then, there was only a dreadful darkness in his mind, a sense of looking into a great black pit. Then the high howl of the wind died, and he was released.

He stood shaking, looking wildly round the room. Nothing was wrong. Everything was just as usual. The trouble, he told himself, came from thinking. It would be all right if only he could stop thinking and go to sleep. He pulled off his dressing gown, climbed into bed, and lay there looking up at the skylight in the slanting roof. It was covered grey with snow.

He switched off the small bedside lamp, and the night swallowed the room. There was no hint of light even when his eyes had grown accustomed to the dark. Time to sleep. Go on, go to sleep. But although he turned

on his side, pulled the blankets up to his chin, and lay there relaxed, contemplating the cheerful fact that it would be his birthday when he woke up, nothing happened. It was no good. Something was wrong.

Will tossed uneasily. He had never known a feeling like this before. It was growing worse every minute. As if some huge weight were pushing at his mind, threatening, trying to take him over, turn him into something he didn't want to be. That's it, he thought: make me into someone else. But that's stupid. Who'd want to? And make me into what? Something creaked outside the half-open door, and he jumped. Then it creaked again, and he knew what it was: a certain floorboard that often talked to itself at night, with a sound so familiar that usually he never noticed it at all. In spite of himself, he still lay listening. A different kind of creak came from further away, in the other attic, and he twitched again, jerking so that the blanket rubbed against his chin. You're just jumpy, he said to himself; you're remembering this afternoon, but really there isn't much to remember. He tried to think of the tramp as someone unremarkable, just an ordinary man with a dirty overcoat and worn-out boots; but instead all he could see once more was the vicious diving of the rooks. "The Walker is abroad. . . ." Another strange crackling noise came, this time above his head in the ceiling, and the wind whined suddenly loud, and Will sat bolt upright in bed and reached in panic for the lamp.

The room was at once a cosy cave of yellow light, and he lay back in shame, feeling stupid. Frightened of the dark, he thought: how awful. Just like a baby. Stephen would never have been frightened of the dark, up here. Look, there's the bookcase and the table, the two chairs and the window seat; look, there are the six little square-riggers of the mobile hanging from the ceiling, and their shadows sailing over there on the wall. Everything's ordinary. Go to sleep.

He switched off the light again, and instantly everything was even worse than before. The fear jumped at him for the third time like a great animal that had been waiting to spring. Will lay terrified, shaking, feeling himself shake, and yet unable to move. He felt he must be going mad. Outside, the wind moaned, paused, rose into a sudden howl, and there was a noise, a muffled scraping thump, against the skylight in the ceiling of his room. And then in a dreadful furious moment, horror seized him like a nightmare made real; there came a wrenching crash, with the howling of the wind suddenly much louder and closer, and a great blast of cold; and the Feeling came hurtling against him with such force of dread that it flung him cowering away.

Will shrieked. He only knew it afterwards; he was far too deep in fear to hear the sound of his own voice. For an appalling pitch-black moment he lay scarcely conscious, lost somewhere out of the world, out in black space. And then there were quick footsteps up the stairs outside his door, and a voice calling in concern, and blessed light warming the room and bringing him back into life again.

It was Paul's voice. "Will? What is it? Are you all right?"

Slowly Will opened his eyes. He found that he was clenched into the shape of a ball, with his knees drawn up tight against his chin. He saw Paul standing over him, blinking anxiously behind his dark-rimmed spectacles. He nodded, without finding his voice. Then Paul turned his head, and Will followed his looking and saw that the skylight in the roof was hanging open, still swaying with the force of its fall; there was a black square of empty night in the roof, and through it the wind was bringing in a bitter midwinter cold. On the carpet below the skylight lay a heap of snow.

Paul peered at the edge of the skylight frame. "Catch is broken—I suppose the snow was too heavy for it. Must have been pretty old anyway, the metal's all rusted. I'll get some wire and fix it up till tomorrow. Did it wake you? Lord, what a horrible shock. If I woke up like that, you'd find me somewhere under the bed."

Will looked at him in speechless gratitude, and managed a watery smile. Every word in Paul's soothing, deep voice brought him closer back to reality. He sat up in bed and pulled back the covers.

"Dad must have some wire with that junk in the other attic," Paul said. "But let's get this snow out before it melts. Look, there's more coming in. I bet there aren't many houses where you can watch the snow coming down on the carpet."

He was right: snowflakes were whirling in through the black space in the ceiling, scattering everywhere. Together they gathered what they could into a misshapen snowball on an old magazine, and Will scuttled downstairs to drop it in the bath. Paul wired the skylight back to its catch.

"There now," he said briskly, and though he did not look at Will, for an instant they understood one another very well. "Tell you what, Will, it's freezing up here—why don't you go down to our room and sleep in my bed? And I'll wake you when I come up later—or I might even sleep up here if you can survive Robin's snoring. All right?"

"All right," Will said huskily. "Thanks."

He picked up his descarded clothes—with the belt and its new ornament—and bundled them under his arm, then paused at the door as they went out, and looked back. There was nothing to see, now, except a dark damp patch on the carpet where the heap of snow had been. But he felt colder than the cold air had made him, and the sick, empty feeling of fear still lay in his chest. If there had been nothing wrong beyond being frightened of the dark, he would not for the world have gone down to take refuge in Paul's room. But as things were, he knew he could not stay alone in the room where he belonged. For when they were clearing up that heap of fallen snow, he had seen something that Paul had not. It was impossible, in a howling snowstorm, for anything living to have made that soft unmistakable thud against the glass that he had heard just before the skylight fell. But buried in the heap of snow, he had found the fresh black wing feather of a rook.

He heard the farmer's voice again: This night will be bad. And tomorrow will be beyond imagining.

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