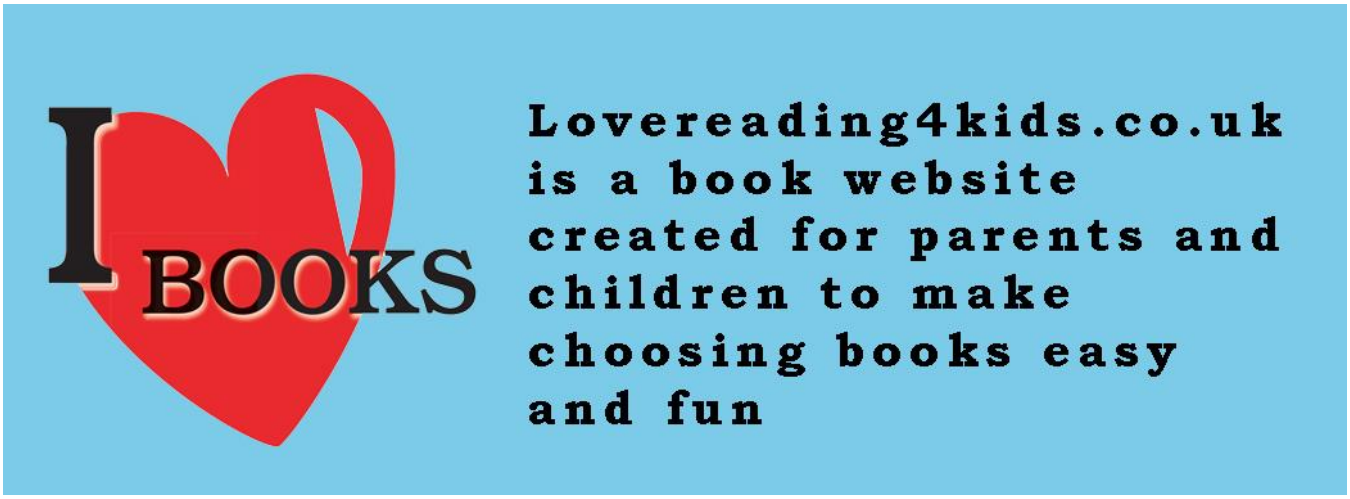

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They walked north up Exhibition Road, between the Victoria and Albert on their right and the Science Museum on their left. It was a wide road, wide enough for four lanes of traffic, with a weird grid pattern on it made of different coloured paving bricks. A line of tall poles, like flagpoles, ran down the middle.

Ryan's hunters stayed in a pack, marching in step, almost like a military unit. The hunters scared Paddy, with their huge dogs and their studs and their leather masks made out of the faces of dead grown-ups. They were filthy dirty and they smelt of blood and sweat and worse. They reminded Paddy of the wild kids he'd been living with in St James's Park before Achilleus and his friends had turned up. Ryan even had a string of human ears hanging from his belt.

At least Paddy felt safe with them, though. They were used to these streets. They owned them. He saw how easy they were, and on top of things at the same time. Listening, looking, aware of everything that was going on around them without making a big deal out of it. Five of their dogs trotted ahead, off their leashes. Sniffing everywhere, weeing everywhere, scouting around. The rest of the dogs, the biggest, meanest-looking ones, were kept on

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short, heavy chains and walked obediently at the boys' sides.

Paddy liked dogs, wished he had one of his own. Not a big monster like Ryan's. He wanted a spaniel or a terrier of some sort. He'd had two Jack Russells before, had kept them with him right through the bad times when the disease hit. And a long time after. They'd been with him in the camp in St James's Park. The leader of the camp, John, had liked to play with them, making them chase rats. And then one night he'd killed them and eaten them.

Achilleus dropped back from his position at the front and joined Paddy.

'What you reckon, padawan?' he said. 'Think we should join this lot? Get out of the museum. Run the streets?'

'I don't know,' said Paddy, who hated the idea. Paddy liked having a regular place to sleep. Strong, thick walls around him. And there were other kids at the museum who relied on Achilleus.

'What about your friends?' he said and Achilleus huffed.

'What about them?'

'It's your job to be their champion. To be their best fighter. Their best killer. You couldn't let them down.'

'Most of them don't even like me,' said Achilleus.

'Does that bother you?'

'Nope. I know that in the end they need me, so they try to hide their feelings and keep me sweet. Just as long as they show me some respect I'm cool.'

Yeah. Akkie was the coolest person in the world. Paddy liked everything about him – his ugly, scarred face, the patterns carved in his hair with a razor blade, his mangled ear, the way he could be relaxed and not bothered one

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moment and scary and tough the next. And when he fought there was no one better.

'One day they'll make the world right again,' Paddy said. 'We'll kill all the grown-ups, rebuild everything, and then they'll start making films again over in Hollywood, where that big sign is. They'll make a film about you, and you'll be the biggest hero, bigger than James Bond and Spiderman and the X-Men put together.'

'You're a dreamer, kid,' said Achilleus. 'It'll be a thousand years before it gets back to how things were. A thousand years before we can figure out how to do stuff like make films again, with CGI and green screen and all that crap you see on the DVD extras. First we got to figure out how to do something as basic as turning the juice back on. How do you make electricity? I got no idea. Don't even really know what electricity is. Might as well be magic. It powered my life before it got switched off – my TV, my phone, my console, my computer, the lights, the heating, the fridge . . . Without power, we're back in the olden days, Paddy, back in the Stone Age. That's why they call it "power", because electricity *is* power. It made us gods. Maybe Einstein and his science nerds back at the museum could figure it out. Ben and Bernie – they into all that type of thing. But, seriously, how long d'you think it's gonna be before we get a power station up and running again?'

'A long time,' said Paddy. 'A thousand years.'

'A thousand years is right. In the meantime there's just *this*. Hunting, killing, fighting to stay alive. Nothing's gonna get sorted until we've sorted the grown-ups. And that's something I *do* know about. That's what we doing now.'

Ryan and his hunters had come to the museum with a

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car that they exchanged for some cases of beer. A few days ago a little girl called Ella had left with some other kids to go and live in the countryside, and then her brother, Sam, had turned up looking for her. So a scarred-faced guy called Ed had gone to bring her back. The car had been for him.

Achilleus had got talking to Ryan who'd told him they were going up to Hyde Park to check out a sighting of some grown-ups. They hadn't needed to persuade Achilleus to go with them. He was totally bored at the museum.

They came to the end of the street. Ahead of them was the park. In between was a big main road, with a pedestrian strip down the middle of it. In the past this would have been busy with traffic; now it was still and silent.

But the hunters weren't crossing. They were looking at something in the road off to their right.

A grown-up. A father. Standing with his arms held straight out in front of him, face turned up to the sky, like he was waiting for rain.

Paddy moved closer to Achilleus. Didn't say anything. Hoped no one noticed how nervous he was.

Hoped it wasn't all about to kick off.

'Should've spotted him before,' said Achilleus. 'But standing still like that . . .'

'They're all over,' said Ryan. 'We mostly ignore them.'

'Ed called them sentinels,' said Achilleus. 'Like they're sending signals to other grown-ups somehow.'

'What do you think they're saying?' Ryan asked.

'Maybe there's a special meal deal on at McDonald's,' said Achilleus.

A couple of hunters laughed. Paddy did too, but he wasn't laughing inside. The sentinels freaked him out. He

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didn't like the idea of grown-ups communicating with each other. He didn't like the idea of grown-ups at all. Wished he could have stayed back at the museum. But he couldn't look moist in front of the others.

The father had a bloated purple face, like someone had tightened something round his throat, and his head was bulging out, ready to burst. His hands were puffy too, with fat, sausagey fingers. There was something ripe about him. Ripe and rotten.

Paddy told himself to man up.

'What do you reckon, Akkie?' he said. 'Can we take him?'

'Is up to you, caddie. You wanna whack him? Show off your skills?'

'Can I?'

'You asking if I'm giving you permission? Or you asking if I think you're up to it?'

'Both, I guess.'

'He's all yours. He ain't no threat to a warrior like you. What spear you gonna use?' Achilleus took the golf bag off Paddy.

Paddy carried Akkie's collection of spears in it. He was in charge of them. Cleaned them, sharpened them, suggested the best one to use in a fight.

'The *Gáe Bolg*,' said Paddy, hyped up and just a little bit terrified.

The *Gáe Bolg* was Achilleus's newest spear – the death spear, the belly spear – which Paddy had named after the legendary spear carried by the greatest Irish folk hero, Cúchulainn.

Although Akkie preferred to call it the Gay Bulge, which always made Paddy laugh.

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It had a wide, leaf-shaped blade and it was a beauty. It was a perfect stomach ripper. It was the disemboweller.

'Nice choice, Champion,' said Achilleus and he pulled out the spear.

Paddy took it and weighed it in his hands, getting the feel of it, checking the balance. It was a bit too big for him – too long and heavy and awkward. He hoped the others wouldn't say anything.

'Where you aiming for?' Achilleus asked.

'The belly,' said Paddy, trying to sound all serious and expert and grown-up. 'I mean, this is the belly ripper, isn't it?'

'If you say so. Go in fast, like I showed you. Keep low, keep the spear out in front, come at him from off to one side, not straight on. Keep your arms strong. Swing hard and cut deep. Takes a lot to cut through clothes and skin.'

'Yeah.' Paddy was nodding, psyching himself up. Practising on a dummy in the yard back at the museum was one thing. Actually killing a person was something else entirely.

'Arms wide apart and well spaced,' said Achilleus. 'You'll get more power in your cut then. It'd be easier to spike him, but if you want to go for a slice that's up to you.'

'I think the slice is better,' said Paddy, still all serious. 'That's what this spear was made for.'

'Then what you waiting for? Go for it. Kill the puffy sod.'

Paddy hopped from foot to foot on the spot, like an athlete getting ready for his start. Jigging about, loosening up. And then he gave a shout and was off and running – remembering Achilleus's instructions – coming at the

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father at an angle, not straight on, just as Achilleus had told him.

As he got closer, he gave a war cry, almost screaming, and he swiped the spear across the father's stomach. He could immediately see it wasn't deep enough or hard enough. It tore open the front of the father's filthy, greasy shirt, but did nothing worse.

The father barely flinched, just swayed slightly and carried on waiting for rain.

Ignoring Paddy.

The hunters cheered and laughed.

'Keep on it, soldier,' Achilleus shouted. 'Come back at him.'

So Paddy swung back the other way and this time the head of his spear dug deep. There was an audible pop, like a balloon bursting, and a spray of blood and brown liquid squirted all over Paddy who wasn't fast enough to get out of the way. After the liquid came the guts, spilling out and flopping to the ground, releasing a foul stink that made the hunters groan and cover their mouths and noses. The father rocked backwards and forwards and then toppled over on to his back and hit the road with a wet splat and a crack of skull on concrete.

Paddy knew he was going to puke.

'I'm covered in it,' he wailed. 'Bastard sprayed all over me.'

'Unclean, unclean! Keep away from me,' laughed one of the hunters and they all started moaning and making disgusted noises.

'Stupid idiot,' said Achilleus and he laughed too. 'You shoulda kept going, gone clear – you're gonna stink for days now.'

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'Yeah – ha, ha! Ain't I? I got him, though, didn't I? I stuck him good.'

'You stuck him bare good, soldier.'

And Paddy puked.

Achilleus walked up to him. 'Bend over,' he said. 'Head down. Deep breaths.'

A thin stream of vomit spattered on to the road.

'It was the smell,' said Paddy. 'That's all.'

'Yeah.'

It wasn't the smell, though.

Paddy had never killed anyone before.

He straightened up, taking big gulps of air. 'I'm OK.'

'Good man.' Achilleus slapped him on the back and they followed the hunters over the road to where they were entering the park.

Paddy really hoped there wasn't anything much worse in there.

He really didn't think he could do that again.

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