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opening extract from

The Enemy

written by

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published by

Penguin Books Ltd

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1



Small Sam was playing in the car park behind Waitrose when the grown-ups took him. He'd been with some of the little kids, having a battle with an odd assortment of action figures, when it happened. They weren't supposed to play outside without a guard, but it was a lovely sunny day and the little kids got bored indoors. Sam wasn't the youngest of the group, but he was the smallest. That's why they called him Small Sam. There had originally been two other Sams, Big Sam and Curly Sam, who had curly hair. Big Sam had been killed a few months ago, but Small Sam was stuck with the name.

It was probably because of his size that the grown-ups went for him. They were like that – they picked out the youngsters, the weaklings, the little ones. In the panic of the attack the rest of Sam's gang got back safely inside, but Sam was cut off and the roving pack of grown-ups trapped him in a corner.

They had come over the side wall, led by a big mother in a tracksuit that might once have been pink but was now so filthy and greasy it looked like grey plastic. She had a fat, egg-like body on top of long skinny legs. Her back was bent and she ran stooped over, but surprisingly fast, her arms held wide like a scorpion's claws, her dirty blonde hair

hanging straight down. Her face blank and stupid. Breathing through her mouth.

Small Sam was too scared even to scream or call for help, and the grown-ups made no noise, so the whole scene was played out in horrible silence. The mother blocked off the route back towards the building while two lanky fathers ran at him from either side. Sam dodged them for a few seconds, but he knew they'd get hold of him in the end. By the time help came from inside, the grown-ups were gone back over the wall, with Sam stuffed inside a sack.

Maxie led a group of bigger kids out into the car park. Even though they were armed with spears and clubs and good throwing rocks they moved cautiously, not knowing exactly what to expect.

'We're too late,' said Callum, scanning the empty car park. 'They've got him.'

'Shame,' said a stocky, dark-haired kid called Josh. 'I liked him. He was funny.'

'That's the second attack this week,' said Maxie angrily. 'What's going on? Either the grown-ups are closing in on us or they're getting braver.'

'They ain't brave,' said Josh, spitting on the ground. 'If they was still here I'd show them brave. I'd mash their ugly faces. Nothing scares me.'

'So why were they here?' asked Maxie.

'They're just hungry,' said Josh.

'We're all hungry,' said Callum.

'We should have been here,' said Maxie. 'We should have been watching over them.'

'We can't be everywhere at once,' Callum pointed out. 'There's not enough of us, not with Arran out with the scavs. Our job's to keep a look-out from the roof. The little

kids knew they weren't supposed to be out here. Nobody should be out here. We should all stay inside.'

'We can't stay inside all day,' scoffed Josh. 'We'd go crazy.'

'It's good inside,' said Callum.

'You're just scared to come outside,' said Josh with a smirk.

'No I ain't,' said Callum. 'No more scared than you.'

'Nothing scares me,' said Josh.

'Then you're just stupid,' said Callum.

'Nah,' said Josh. 'The thing about grown-ups is, some of them are strong, some of them can run fast and some of them are clever, but the strong ones are slow, the fast ones are stupid and the smart ones are weak.'

'Tell that to Small Sam,' said Maxie angrily, 'and to Big Sam and Johnno, and Eve and Mohammed and all the other kids we've lost.'

'Grown-ups won't get me,' said Josh.

'What?' said Callum. 'So it was their fault they got taken? Is that what you're saying?'

'Yeah, I am,' said Josh.

'Shut up,' Maxie snapped at the two of them. Then she said the thing that nobody wanted to admit. 'We can't go on like this.' Her voice was heavy with bitterness. 'Soon we're all going to be dead. I can't stand it any more.'

She threw down the spear she had been carrying and sat on the ground, resting her head in her hands.

It was her fault. That was all she could think. *It was all her fault.*

When Arran was away she was supposed to be in charge. She couldn't remember when it had been decided – *Arran was the leader, she was second in command* – it must have happened early on, when most of the kids had been too

frightened and confused to do anything for themselves. Arran and Maxie had just got on with it, organizing everyone, keeping their spirits up. Arran was clever and likeable. Right from the start he'd kept his head and not panicked. He'd been captain of the football team at William Ellis School and nothing ever seemed to freak him out.

The two of them had worked together. A team. Maxie had always been good at getting other children to help out. There were better fighters than her, true, but they were happy for her to tell them what to do. They didn't want the responsibility. And when Arran wasn't there, she was the leader.

So, it was all her fault. Another kid gone. She shut down part of her mind. She didn't want to think about what the grown-ups would do to Small Sam.

She started to cry. She didn't care who saw it.

Callum looked at Josh. They both felt awkward. In the end it was Josh who squatted down next to her and put an arm round her shoulders.

'It's all right, Max,' he said quietly. 'We'll be all right. Something'll happen, someone will come. Something's gonna change. When Arran and the others get back we'll talk about it maybe, yeah? Make a plan?'

'What's the point?' said Maxie.

'When Arran gets back, yeah?'

Maxie looked up into Josh's concerned, grubby face.

'Sorry,' she said.

'Come on,' said Callum. 'Let's try and find out how they got over the wall. Then we should get back inside.'

'Yeah.' Maxie jumped up. It was OK as long as you were doing something, as long as you didn't stop and think.

She wished Arran were here, though. She always felt safer when he was around.

It was just . . . What was he going to think?

Another kid gone.

All her fault.



2

A burster was lying in the middle of the road. A father by the looks of it, though it was hard to tell. He had the familiar look of a vegetable, or a piece of fruit, left too long in the sun. The skin blackened, shrivelled and split, the overripe flesh inside squeezing out. His insides had turned to mush. This was what happened if any grown-up lived long enough to let the disease run its full course. They literally burst.

Arran prodded the body with his trainer. As he did so the skin popped, and a stream of pus oozed out followed by a bright pink blossom of soft fat.

Arran was leading the scavenger party. Tall, fair-haired and athletic. He had a knife in his belt and carried a pickaxe handle as a club.

'Gross,' sniggered the boy at his side, who had a shock of curly hair bleached almost white.

'Come on. We don't have time for this.' Arran turned his back on the corpse and carried on up the Holloway Road. When the disaster first happened the kids had been appalled and fascinated by dead bodies. Now they were used to them. They hardly even noticed them. A burster, though, was still a little special.

The scavenger party took up their positions with Arran and trudged on. They hadn't gone another hundred yards,

however, before the bleach-haired boy, Deke, slowed down.

'What's that?'

They stopped and listened.

'Dogs,' said another boy and he moved to the front. He was shorter than Arran and not as strong. He had proved time and time again, though, that fighting was not all about strength. Arran was the leader, but Achilleus was the best fighter of them all, with a wiry build, dark eyes and olive skin. He spent most of his spare time shaving elaborate patterns into his short hair. He could be moody and sarcastic and quick to lose his temper, but nobody much minded because he'd saved them all many times with his combat skills. He moved fast, used his brain and was utterly ruthless in a fight.

They waited. They could hear the dogs long before they saw them. A cacophony of howling, yelping and barking. All jumbled together it sounded like a single mad beast.

Achilleus levelled his spear, pointing it towards the noise. It was made from a metal spike he'd found on a building site. It had a heavy lump at one end and he'd sharpened the other into a vicious point. It was perfect for keeping grown-ups at bay. He could stab with the front, and use the back end to batter them. It was definitely *not* for throwing. Too precious for that.

Arran took up a defensive position behind him, next to Freak and Deke. Freak and Deke were a team, best mates. Before the disaster they'd taken to the streets armed only with spray-cans. Their tag was 'Freaky-Deaky' and it could be seen all over Tufnell Park and Camden Town, sprayed on walls and shutters, stencilled on to the pavements, scratched on the glass in bus shelters. They knew all the

back ways, all the alleys and short cuts. Freak, whose real name was David, had close-cropped hair and a thin, pinched face. He was always sniffing. Deke was the bigger of the two. He was good-looking and would have been popular with the girls if he hadn't spent all his time with Freak. The two were inseparable, always finishing each other's sentences and laughing at each other's jokes. Freak carried an axe and Deke a sledgehammer. They were mainly for knocking down doors and opening windows, although, if needed, they could be used as weapons.

The last in the group was Ollie. Small and red-haired, the cleverest of them all. He had sharp eyes and could think quickly. He kept himself to himself and most of the time he kept quiet. But, when he *did* speak, people listened. Arran would often ask Ollie for advice, and it was never seen as a weakness. Ollie always knew the best thing to do.

As the barking of the dogs grew louder Ollie stepped back and to one side, keeping a clear line of sight. His weapon was a slingshot that he had taken from a sports shop. It was a powerful hunter's model, with a pistol grip and a metal brace that fitted over his forearm. He drew the elastic back and tucked a heavy steel ball into the worn leather pouch.

Whenever the kids were out of camp they travelled in a group of at least four. One to look ahead and lead the way, two to check the sides, and one to watch their backs. But, as Freak and Deke always worked together, there were five of them today. They had learnt early on to move down the middle of the roads, rather than to stay out of sight among the buildings along the sides. Grown-ups could hide in the shadows and grab you from the darkness. They weren't such a threat in the open, because on the whole they didn't move

fast enough. The biggest danger was if you got surrounded. In a mass the grown-ups were a real threat, bigger and heavier than the kids, and diseased. Grown-ups were rarely organized enough to plan any real strategy, though, and for the most part they came lumbering out in a pack from the side. Then the best thing to do was run.

Anything to avoid a fight.

Dogs were different, however. Unpredictable. Dangerous.

'Are they coming our way?' said Freak, scratching his stubbly head.

'Think so,' said Ollie, his slingshot creaking.

'Let them,' said Achilleus. 'I'm ready.'

'It gets more dangerous every time we come out,' said Arran.

'Tell me about it,' said Deke, nervously twisting his sledgehammer in his hand.

Then the first of the dogs appeared, a skinny mongrel with one eye. It bowled out into the street, fell over, wriggled on the ground then lay on its back in surrender. A second dog was hard on its tail, a dirty Staffordshire terrier. It had evidently been chasing the mongrel, because it came at him with teeth bared and hackles raised.

There was an almost comical moment when the two dogs realized that they had an audience. They both did a double take and looked at the boys in surprise. The rest of the pack came into view at almost the same time, howling and barking. They skidded to a halt and a couple of them knocked into the Staff, who turned and snapped at them.

The little mongrel saw its moment and scurried off. The Staff stood there, sniffing the air. The other dogs were a mismatched mob, with missing fur and diseased eyes caked with pus. Some were limping, some wounded. One sat

down in the road and vigorously scratched its ear, until another dog bit it and it scampered away.

The Staff strutted forward, growling, then it started to bark at the boys and the rest of the pack joined in. Instantly the street was filled with their racket.

'Will they attack, do you think?' asked Freak.

'Depends how hungry they are,' said Arran.

'They look pretty hungry to me,' said Deke and he gripped his sledgehammer tighter.

'Try and scare them off,' said Arran and the boys now made a racket of their own, yelling and screaming and waving their arms. The dogs backed off but the bolder ones were soon inching closer.

The big Staff shook his head and nosed ahead, his claws scratching on the tarmac.

'Take him out,' said Arran. 'He's the boss. Maybe the others will get the message.'

Ollie loosed his shot. The steel ball hit the dog squarely in the forehead, his legs crumpled and he went down without a sound. The other dogs sniffed him and one or two set up howling. Then a big Alsatian ran from the back of the pack, leading three other hounds with him. Achilleus went down on one knee and as the dog pounced he stuck him through the chest with his spear, the followers veered off to the side and Ollie hit one more with a steel ball, breaking its leg. It yelped and turned tail, dragging its leg behind.

With a great war-cry the boys charged and the rest of the dogs scattered.

Ollie quickly searched the area for his ammunition. He found his second ball lying in the gutter. The first one was stuck in the Staff's head in a neat crease of broken bone.

The five of them knelt by the dead body.

'Can we risk eating it?' said Freak. 'What's that parasite Maeve's always going on about? That worm thing you can catch from eating dog? Tricky something.'

'Trichinosis,' said Arran. 'He'll be all right if he's well cooked.'

'Yeah,' said Deke. 'We'll deep-fry him in batter with some chips and a nice glass of wine. Delicious.'

Freak giggled. 'I know a Jamie Oliver recipe for fried dog.'

'We can't waste any food,' said Arran. 'Some of the kids are getting really thin. Leave the Alsatian, though. He's too big to carry and his carcass might keep the pack busy.'

Achilleus took out his knife and gutted the dead animal, leaving the purple-grey entrails in the road to further distract the other dogs.

He then tied the dog's legs together with some nylon cord and slung it over Arran's shoulder.

'Should we go back?' said Freak.

'We need to find as much food as we can,' said Arran. 'It's always a risk leaving camp, and it gets riskier every time. The dog's not enough for twenty of us.'

Every day a scavenging party left the camp to look for supplies. They searched among the empty houses and flats for any abandoned cans, packets and bottles. Each time they had to start their search further from Waitrose. All the buildings close by had long since been picked clean. Most days they found nothing, but a lucky discovery could last them a long time.

They knew it couldn't last, though. They had already been through every accessible building within a mile of Waitrose, except around Crouch End, which had been

destroyed in a fire, and up around the Arsenal football stadium, where there was a large nest of grown-ups.

Sooner or later they would have to move camp.

But where would they go?

Arran pushed his hair out of his eyes. His guts hurt. He didn't really feel hungry any more, just sick and tired. He'd grown to hate these streets. The smell of them, the filth everywhere, the grass and weeds pushing out of every crack, the constant fear chewing away at him. He had been happy at first when they made him leader, but then it slowly dawned on him that he was responsible for everyone else. If anything went wrong he had to take the blame. That was why someone like Achilleus, who could easily beat him in a fight, was happy not to be in charge. He could show off and suck up the praise, but when a tough decision had to be made he would sit back, hold up his hands and let Arran sweat it out.

It was a warm and sunny spring day. There was a real sense that summer wasn't far off. Normally Arran would have enjoyed the sunshine and warmth. In the past he had always loved seeing the first green leaves come out on the trees, as if the world was waking up. Now it just meant that the grown-ups were getting bolder. In the winter they'd been too cold and feeble to be much danger, but the change in the weather seemed to give them new courage and strength. Their attacks were becoming more frequent.

They were hungrier than ever.

The kids trudged up the Holloway Road. It was full of memories for Arran – eating at McDonald's, shopping with his mum, going to the cinema . . .

He tried to shut the memories out. They only made him feel worse.

When they came to Archway they moved more cautiously. There was a tube station here, a perfect hiding-place for grown-ups.

'Which way?' said Deke.

'Highgate Road,' said Arran. 'We'll work our way towards the Whittington.'

'Ain't going in no hospital,' said Achilleus.

'What's the problem?'

'There won't be nothing in there,' said Achilleus.

'Maybe drugs?' said Ollie. 'Paracetamol and antibiotics and that.'

'Doubt it,' said Deke. 'When everything kicked off it would have been the first place to be looted.'

'We'll take a look anyway,' said Arran. 'Just in case. But let's try the houses round here first.'

'Ain't going in no hospital,' Achilleus repeated.

'What about the swimming pool then?' said Freak.

'What about it?' said Achilleus.

'Worth a look, eh?'

'Why?' said Achilleus. 'You fancy a swim?'

'Nah,' said Freak, 'but there was always a vending machine in there.'

'Never worked,' said Achilleus. 'Always stole your money.'

'Worth a look,' said Freak. 'Think about it . . . Mars bars, crisps, chewing gum . . .'

'Won't be nothing in there,' said Achilleus. 'Not after all this time.'

'Listen,' Freak insisted. 'Far as we know, us and the Morrisons crew are the only kids around. And they never come up here. All I'm saying is we should look. OK? If we're looking in the Whittington we should look in the pool as well. We search everywhere, in't that right, Arran?'

'Suppose so,' said Arran.

'Waste of time,' said Ollie. 'When have we ever found a vending machine with anything in it?'

'You agree with me, don't you, Deke?' said Freak.

'He agrees with everything you say,' Achilleus scoffed.

'Try me,' said Deke.

'The world is flat,' said Freak.

'Yes it is,' said Deke.

'Penguins can fly,' said Freak.

'Yes they can,' said Deke.

'I am the greatest kid that ever walked the earth,' said Freak.

'Yes you are,' said Deke.

'Ha, ha, very funny,' said Achilleus.

'Akkie is a twat,' said Freak.

'Yes he is,' said Deke.

'I think you've made your point,' said Arran, trying not to smile. 'We'll take a look.'

Ollie sighed. This was a waste of time. What they needed was proper food, not sweets. But Arran had spoken, and he was their leader.

Ollie shoved a hand into his jacket and rolled the heavy steel shot between his fingers. The cold hardness comforted him.

He didn't like the idea of exploring the swimming pool. He was always scared on these hunts, and going into the unknown like this just made his heart race faster.

'Come on,' said Arran. 'Let's go.'

'Searching the swimming pool is a genius idea,' said Freak.

'Yes it is,' said Deke.