Helping your children choose books they will love

I reading

Lovereading4kids.co.uk is a book website created for parents and children to make choosing books easy and fun

Opening extract from

The Sacrifice

Written by

Charlie Higson

Published by

Puffin

All Text is Copyright © of the Author and/or Illustrator

Please print off and read at your leisure.

Lovereading4kids.co.uk

The Green Man

Come closer. Don't make me shout. It hurts me just to talk. Don't get to talk much. Don't get many visitors. Come and sit with me. Come on. I'm not going to eat you . . .

Ha, ha, ha, ha, ha, ha . . .

Sorry about that. Just my little joke. A typical Dad joke. Why not? I *am* a father. I had two boys and a little girl. She came out wrong. My girl. Please. Don't hide over there in the darkness.

All right. Stay there then.

Let me tell you about myself.

I am a fallen angel. Wormwood. I came down to earth with a bump. A bump so big the whole earth shook. Lay there for a long while, just dreaming. Not alone. Not then. Other angels had fallen from the stars with me. Some died – millions upon millions – never got to make friends with anyone. But enough of us lived.

Our first friends, they weren't much: small fry, hardly VIPs, just germs and microbes really. We lived among them. Long time ago that was. Back when everything was all just swamp and bog and butterflies. Then the crawling things made friends with us, took us in. That was swell. It was a bug's life. We could get about more, see something of the world, riding with the insects, praying with the

mantises, battling with the beetles, eating crap with the flies. You know the sort of thing.

No?

Kids these days. They don't know anything.

God, I'm hungry.

Come closer so I can smell you better.

Where was I? Oh yes, back in the jungle – the big green. We were happy living inside the bugs, but we wanted more. We knew we were destined for greater things. It was the mosquitoes showed us how, the fleas and the ticks, the little blood-sucking vampires. They showed us how to move up in the world. How to make friends and influence people. As the blood-suckers sucked, we moved on to bigger things. I did a bit of social climbing after that. Made friends with rats and bats and monkeys. But our best friends, the ones we really loved to get inside, were the human beans. Walking around on their two legs. Couldn't get enough of them. We got on like a house on fire. Though back then there weren't any houses, of course, not yet. Just trees and leaves and dirt and the big, big green.

Oh that *green*. How I miss it. We lived in a green world, my people and me. You should have heard the monkeys sing as they scratched their fleas . . .

I've got you under my skin . . . That's what the human beans sang.

What's that you say? *I'm* a human bean . . .

I guess I look like one. I guess a *part* of me is human. I'm a whole lot *more* than that, though, so stop interrupting and let me tell you my story. Because when I finish we're going to eat.

I was telling you about the big green.

Things went well. Year upon year. I couldn't have wished

for more. I thought we were kings of the world. And the walking men did whatever we wanted. Still works. Haven't lost it. Even here the human beans bring me things. Mostly it's junk food. Rats and mice and cats and dead birds. When they get fired up, though, and the song is in them, when I sing to them so sweetly, they bring me what I really want.

You.

So sit still now while I tell you my story. There's no point running around like that, in the dark, you'll only hurt yourself. There is no way out. Don't you think I haven't looked?

Come closer so I can smell you. We need to get ready for the feast . . .

You probably can't see me too well; they keep it dark in here. They know the light hurts my eyes. But they must have told you all about me? Yes? I am Wormwood, the fallen star. Grew up in the green and the green got into me. Maybe you can see me glowing just a bit. My green skin. Wormwood, the star, the angel, the Green Man.

Now I was telling you about way back when we were kings of the jungle, me and the other fallen angels. Well, pretty soon. After only a few years, a few thousand years, maybe a few million, who's counting? But as I say, *pretty soon* – when you measure it against the stars up there, twinkling away like it was just a bit of fun – pretty soon there weren't any walking men left, only us angels. Making ready to birth our children into the green world.

What fools we were. Thinking we were kings. We weren't kings of nothing. We were just dirt-eating monkeys. No better than the bats and rats and beetles who'd been our friends over time.

I was just a flea. That's all. A fallen flea. An angel, was I? Maybe once, too long ago to mean much. We'd been living

inside the creatures too long. The walking men had been the best fit, but we were as foolish as they were. We'd spent too long with them. Their thoughts seeped into ours. We got muddled. Shouldn't never have listened to them. Anyway, we asked them, 'Is this the world?' And they answered us, 'Yes. Yes, it is. It is all of it, the green, the muddy river, the trees, the dirt, the rats, the bats and the monkeys.'

'*This is the whole world*.'

And then one day we realized we'd been living in a cupboard. Ha, ha, ha, good one! Stuck there in the dark, thinking that the cupboard was the whole house. Because, you see, if you'd lived your whole life in a cupboard that would be all you knew. You'd think there wasn't anything else.

There was a whole lot else, though, and it was big and bright and loud.

Sometimes I think we should have stayed there, dreaming that our little huts under the trees were the whole world. But one day, not so long ago, we opened the cupboard door and out we went, blinking into the sunlight. Too bright for us, got us all turned around at first, muddled and befuddled. There was a lot to take in. Found we weren't alone and we weren't kings at all. Soon saw there was a whole lot more to the world than green. There was blue and red, bright yellow, black and white, and grey.

So much grey where the walking men had made their homes, chewing up the green. I do still miss the green that was my home for so long. Here it's grey and black and dust and ashes.

Here? *Where is here?* Seems I've forgotten. I can remember the long ago better than the yesterday.

I'm hungry now. Been waiting a long time for them to

bring me someone like you. You see, sometimes it feels like I'm the boss and they work for me, and sometimes it feels like they're in charge and I'm their slave.

Are you a boy or a girl? Not that I'm fussy. Your meat all tastes the same. Oh, come along now, don't be scared. I don't like that. Why do you think I'm talking to you? I want to be your friend. All I ever wanted was to make friends, just like I did with the germs and the fleas and the bats and the rats and the monkeys and the men and . . .

You know, sometimes I wonder if I remember any of it right. If I'm even who I think I am. Am I an angel or a flea or a walking man? That is the question. No, don't talk, don't make a sound, just listen, will you?

We'd made friends with walking men, you see, so that we could learn their language, walk in their shoes, think inside their boxes. And we grew to talk like them, and walk like them, and think like them. Maybe some of us even *became* men, no longer angels. As if the sucking flea could gulp down so much blood it might turn into the beast it was feeding on.

When the fear comes on me, when my memories flicker and die, I am scared that I am becoming just a man, just another walking man.

With a man's name.

Mark Wormold from Promithios.

Not Wormwood at all. Not an angel. Won't ever return home to the heavens where I was born.

Look at me. I was once the Starchild, the exterminating angel, the great flea, king of the world, the mighty Wormwood. I was born in the heavens, I fell to earth, I grew up in the great green and then I crossed the blue and something went wrong.

I became a man.

Mark Wormold.

You see, the walking man, the human bean, *Mark Wormold*, was stronger than me. We fight over this castle, this body, every day, fight for the best seat in the house. And sometimes he wins and sometimes I win, but each fight makes me weaker, so that I fear that one day the walking man will kick me out or make me his slave.

Has that already happened?

Sometimes this place feels like a dungeon, sometimes a palace.

But I'm getting off the point. Which was . . .

God knows.

Never mind.

Never mind.

Let's get on with it. My stomach is turning somersaults.

Come over here, child. Sit a little closer. Soon neither of us will be hungry any more . . .

-

THE ACTION IN THIS BOOK BEGINS EIGHT DAYS AFTER THE END OF THE FEAR.

Unreal City,
Under the brown fog of a winter dawn,
A crowd flowed over London Bridge, so many,
I had not thought death had undone so many.
– 'The Waste Land', T. S. Eliot

1

Small Sam wasn't dead. His sister and his friends all thought that he'd been killed, that the grown-ups who'd snatched him from the car park behind Waitrose had eaten him, but right now he was walking across the grounds of the Tower of London with The Kid and a load of other children. They were heading for the White Tower, a big square lump with smaller towers at each corner that sat bang in the middle of the castle on a small hill. Sam, who was something of an expert on castles, knew all about the White Tower. It was the keep, the first part of the castle to be built here. William the Conqueror had started the building work in the eleventh century, with stone specially brought over from France, and his son, William the Second, had finished it.

Sam felt like he was living in a dream. He'd always been obsessed with knights and castles and fantasy. He'd lost count of the number of times he'd seen the *Lord of the Rings* films. And now here he was, actually living in a real-life castle. Some of the other kids even wore armour and carried medieval weapons. Though they had to leave them at the door as they filed inside.

The boy in charge, General Jordan Hordern, had called a council of war and everybody in the castle was expected to attend, even newcomers like Sam and The Kid.

Once inside they climbed to an upper floor, where there was a big room with windows on all sides. They found places to sit on the wooden benches that were arranged round the edges. Sam, who had visited the Tower several times, tried to remember what this room used to look like. He couldn't picture it. The local kids had removed the exhibits and returned it to how it must have looked in the Middle Ages. There were banners and pennants hanging on the bare stone walls, and candles lit the dark interior. A long table had been set up across one end and behind it stood four guards with halberds, double-handed weapons that looked like a cross between an axe and a spear. There was a smaller table to one side where two girls and a boy sat, writing on loose sheets of paper.

Ed came over to Sam and The Kid. It was Ed who'd found the two of them a few days ago, wandering, tired and wet, along the road that led to the Tower, and he'd taken it on himself to look after them. He still couldn't quite get his head round the fact that they'd survived for so long out there by themselves and had made it here alive. It was up to him now to make sure they stayed that way. By finding them, they had become his responsibility.

'You just sit here and listen, OK?' he said. 'Just watch.'

He glanced at The Kid. He was an odd boy, odd and unpredictable, and had his own way of talking. He was prone to speaking out and Ed didn't want him to pipe up during the council.

'What's going on?' Sam whispered.

'To tell you the truth, I'm not sure,' Ed replied. 'But I have to be over at the council table with the other captains. I'll explain anything you don't understand afterwards.'

He looked at The Kid again, holding his gaze.

'Don't be tempted to join in. All right?'

'Aye aye, Skippy. Message received and misunderstood.'

'Seriously, Kid, zip it.'

The Kid zipped it, miming the action.

'I'm as much in the dark as you are,' Ed went on. 'General Hordern called a special meeting of the council, so I guess he'll tell us what this is all about.'

'That's him there, isn't it?' said Sam, and Ed turned to see a boy with thick glasses come into the room flanked by two more guards.

'That's him. I better go. Remember. Zip it.'

Sam watched Ed go and take his place with several other kids who were settling down at the long table. Sam suddenly felt nervous. Apart from Ed, he didn't really know anyone else here. He felt like a new boy starting in big school. Other kids were always whispering about him and pointing. He felt safe with Ed. He'd been a bit scared of him at first. Ed had an ugly scar down one side of his face that pulled it out of shape, but Sam had soon learnt that he was kind and friendly and not frightening at all. Sometimes, though, Ed would go quiet and stare into the distance. Sam didn't say anything, but he knew that Ed was sad about something. He didn't need to ask what. They were all sad in their own ways. They'd all lost family and friends.

Sam and The Kid had been left alone for their first couple of days at the Tower. They'd been given food and allowed to sleep for most of the time. Now they were feeling more normal and Ed had offered to show them around properly. They'd just been getting ready when they'd been told to come to the meeting.

Jordan Hordern sat down, flanked by four boys and three girls. He waited, blank-faced and unreadable behind his

glasses that were held together by sticking plasters round the bridge of the nose and one arm.

He waited for the room to fall silent. Didn't have to say anything. It was understood.

He looked around.

General Hordern couldn't tell anyone, but the truth was that he could hardly see anything at all any more. It wasn't just that the lenses in his glasses were scratched and old. His eyesight was steadily getting worse. There were dark patches in the centre of his vision. It was still clear round the edges, so he had to look sideways at things to see them properly. He'd never liked to look people in the eye before and now it was nearly impossible.

He wouldn't let the idea enter his thoughts, but it was there, lurking in the back of his mind. He was going blind. What use would he be then? How could he keep his position in charge here at the Tower if he couldn't see anything?

It was important that nobody knew. For now he had unquestioned power over everyone at the Tower.

The kids sat in absolute silence. He was pleased. He'd known teachers at school who could never get a class to shut up. Jordan had given them hell and now here he was, just a boy, able to control more than a hundred kids.

Sam couldn't take his eyes off the general. Jordan scared him. There was a stillness and a coldness about him. He was like a statue or a big old crocodile at the zoo. Sitting there without moving. Who knew what weird thoughts were going on behind that calm exterior?

Sam could feel the tension in the room. As Ed had explained to them, nobody knew what this meeting was about, but by the look of Jordan it was something serious.

At last the general spoke.

'OK,' he said. 'Let's get started.'

Sam had been expecting something medieval, full of *verily*s and *thee*s and *thou*s and *aye* instead of yes. It was a surprise to hear Jordan talking so normally. But why not? They weren't really in the Middle Ages, were they? They were in the middle of London in the twenty-first century.

'This is a special meeting of the war council. In fact it's a military tribunal. Which means it's a trial.'

The kids on the side table started writing furiously. A hum and murmur went round the room, but it was quickly silenced when Jordan raised his hand. Everyone was looking around, though, trying to work out who wasn't there. Who might have been arrested.

'A boy has been caught trying to steal food from the storerooms. As you know, when I took control, I wrote up a list of rules and stealing is one of the worst crimes on it, especially stealing food. You all know the rules. So there's no excuse for breaking them. Having said that, I want this trial to be fair. So I will give the suspect a fair hearing. Bring him in.'

All heads twisted round now towards the doors as a boy was shoved through them, his hands tied behind his back, an armed guard on either side of him. He was tall and fair-haired and had a bruise on one cheek. His shirt was slightly torn. He looked like he'd been crying, his eyes all red and swollen. Mixed emotions – fear, anger, defiance, hatred and embarrassment – flickered across his features.

The boy was made to stand in front of the big table and his hands were untied. Everyone in the room was staring at him.

'What is your name?' Jordan asked.

'You know my name, Jordan, you arsehole,' said the boy

and a couple of the kids giggled. Jordan didn't react; his expression didn't change; he didn't even blink. He remained cold, blank, patient.

'Tell us your full name.'

'No.'

Jordan raised his head now and stared at the boy. He so rarely looked directly at anyone that the effect was quite powerful. The boy dropped his own gaze.

'Bren, *Brendan*, Eldridge.'

'And what have you been charged with, Bren?'

'Oh, for God's sake, this is stupid. This isn't a proper court. We're all just kids. I know I did wrong. So give me a slap and let's get on with our lives.'

'What have you been charged with, Bren?'

'Stealing! You know it's stealing, OK? I stole some tinned fruit. Big deal, boohoo. Naughty me.'

Jordan looked over towards the side table.

'The charge is stealing food.'

'Big deal,' said Bren.

Jordan paused for a few seconds before going on. 'Without food we die,' he said.

'Tell me something I don't know.' Brendan gave Jordan a dismissive look.

Jordan ignored him. 'Stealing from other kids is one of the worst things you can do,' he said. 'If we don't look out for each other we're all going to die. Therefore, Brendan, I reckon stealing food is as bad a crime as murder.'

'Oh, come off it, Jordan. It was just some tinned peaches.'

'Was it?'

'Yes, it was. You know it was.'

Again Jordan turned to the side table.

'Make a note of that. The suspect has admitted to stealing the peaches.'

'Hey,' said Bren. 'No, I didn't. I was talking hypothetically.'

'I'm going to call Captain Ford for evidence,' said Jordan and he nodded to the boy sitting on his right, who had long straight black hair and Japanese features. The boy stood up.

'For the record, can you state your full name and occupation, rank and regiment?' said Jordan.

'Seriously?'

'Just do it, Tomoki.'

'My name is Tomoki Ford. Captain of the Tower Watch.'

'Can you tell us how you caught the thief?'

'Alleged thief,' said Bren. 'If we're going to have a proper trial then I'm innocent until proven guilty, aren't I?'

'You've already made a confession,' said Jordan.

'I wasn't under oath.'

'We don't bother with that. You already said you stole the cans of fruit.'

'Prove it.'

'OK,' said Tomoki. 'About ten days ago Captain Reynolds of the Service Corps came to see me. He told me that he thought someone was stealing from the Tower stores. He'd noticed some small things had gone missing, and when he checked he found out that other stuff had gone as well.'

He took out a piece of paper from his pocket and showed it to General Hordern.

'I've written it all down. Do you want me to read it out?'

'No, just give it to the clerks afterwards.'

'OK, so anyway, Captain Reynolds got his team to check much more carefully every morning and evening. It was soon obvious that stuff was being nicked nearly every night.

Just small amounts – the thief probably thought that it wouldn't be noticeable. I told you about it a week ago.' This was addressed to Jordan, who nodded. 'And you told me to put a special watch on the stores. We built a hiding place and took it in turns to stake them out. We saw Bren come in just after midnight last night – he had his own key – and we saw him take three cans of peaches away in a backpack. We followed him back to his room in the Casemates and arrested him.'

'All right, all right. This is boring,' said Bren. 'Three cans of peaches. I admit it.'

'Once we'd locked Bren up we searched his room,' Tomoki went on. 'And we found all this.'

Tomoki paused as three kids brought in boxes packed with food. The murmuring started up again. Someone whistled. Bren's head drooped and he looked ashamed.

'Do you admit that you stole all this as well?' Jordan asked.

'Yes,' said Bren quietly.

'Were you working alone?'

Bren nodded and Jordan asked Tomoki if he agreed.

'We don't think there was anyone else in on it. That's why we followed him, to make sure.'

'Do you want to say anything else, Bren?' asked Jordan. 'I can't really see the point, but if you want to.'

'No. I don't want to say anything. Just . . . I'm sorry, I suppose. It was stupid.'

'Saying you're sorry won't change what you done,' said Jordan. 'You're a coward, Brendan. Stealing off of other kids. You're a traitor. You don't care about anyone except yourself.'

'Yeah, all right,' said Brendan. 'I said I'm sorry.'

‘OK,’ said Jordan. ‘So if nobody has any objections then I reckon you’re guilty.’

‘Yeah, OK. I’m guilty.’

Tomoki sat down. ‘So what’s the sentence then?’ he asked.

‘As I said.’ Jordan stared at Brendan. ‘I think stealing food from other kids is as bad as murder. So the sentence is death.’