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Opening extract from

The Fallen

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28 SECONDS LATER . . .

THE EVENTS IN *THE FALLEN* HAPPEN AT THE SAME TIME AS THE EVENTS IN *THE SACRIFICE* AND JUST AFTER THE END OF *THE ENEMY* . . .

CHAPTER 1

Laughter filled the street. Laughter and singing. Maxie was laughing too, though she wasn't really sure why. She was filled with a wild, mindless joy. Here she was, out in the cool fresh air, marching through the streets of London with the surviving Holloway kids. It reminded her of Halloween when she'd been younger. That slightly hysterical feeling of escape, the normal rules broken, the streets being owned by children.

Only tonight the monsters were real.

No matter. They would destroy all monsters.

They'd just chased off a group of sickos. Sent them running. Maxie felt invincible. She was floating on air. There was a sort of magic about it. The energy of the other kids was combining into a powerful force. They were so much more than a gang. They were an army.

They'd escaped from the palace. Got away from that creepy loser, David. After being shut away in the sick-bay for so long with Blue, the last half-hour had been mental, totally unreal, a mad film she'd watched on late-night TV while fighting to stay awake. There had been chaos in the palace. People running through the dark corridors, distant shouts, gunfire . . . At one point she'd seen one of David's captive royal family. The last surviving members from the old days. An old woman wearing a tiara and a tattered silver dress, her face covered in boils.

The kids stomped down the middle of the road and their voices bounced off the high walls of the buildings, chasing away their nightmares. Taunting the grown-ups who hid in the darkness.

She turned to smile at the girl next to her. They'd rescued her from an attack near Green Park tube. She'd been badly cut up and had a bandage round her head. Maxie saw that she was crying.

'Are you all right?' Maxie put her arm round her.

'Yeah, yeah, I'm fine.'

'Only you're crying.'

'Am I?' The girl wiped her bruised and swollen face, sniffed and laughed through her tears. 'I'm only crying cos I'm happy.'

'Then we should all be crying.'

'Maybe.' The girl held on to her. 'Thank you, Maxie.'

'So have you got a name, bandage-head?'

'I'm Brooke.'

'Cool. Pleased to meet you, Brooke.'

It was Brooke who had told them about the Natural History Museum, how there was a group of kids living there. How it was safe and well organized.

And that was where they were headed in the middle of the night.

Maxie could feel Brooke's ribs through her clothing. She hadn't seen the girl eat anything in all the time they'd shared a room. She was running on adrenalin and guts. Maxie worried that if she squeezed her too tight she'd snap in two.

Brooke was about her own age and height. Hard to know what she might look like when her face healed. Right now it was a mess of scabs and yellow and purple bruising, and Maxie hated to think what might be under that bandage.

Just so long as Brooke led them safely to the museum the poor girl could rest up and get well, then Maxie could find out all about her, what she'd been doing when she was attacked, who she'd lost, why she'd lain so long in bed without moving or speaking.

Probably not a happy story, let's face it. There weren't too many happy stories in the world any more. Except maybe this one . . .

'*Escape from the Palace of Terror, starring the Holloway Crew.*'

Maxie looked around. They hadn't all made it. They'd lost a few along the way since leaving north London, good friends, including the boy she'd loved, but there were still enough of them.

They were all around her, in a comforting knot.

Lewis, his Afro unmistakable in the darkness, was out on the left flank with his fighters; Big Mick was out on the other. Ollie was at the rear as usual, he and his skirmishers watching their backs. Clever Ollie with his red hair and his slingshot, the guy who had masterminded their escape plan.

Achilleus, the best fighter of them all, was walking stiffly just in front of Maxie and Brooke. Achilleus had been hurt pretty badly in the fight at the palace with Just John and one side of his head was taped up. He was leaning on someone for support. A stocky little kid with fuzzy hair who was new to Maxie. He was younger than Achilleus, and carried a golf-bag full of weapons. He looked like he was finding it hard work, but wasn't the complaining type. Wanted to show how hard he was. He and Brooke weren't the only newcomers; they'd also picked up a big-nosed guy called Andy, one of David's palace guards who'd defected and helped them escape.

In the centre of the group were the non-fighters – among them, big, no-nonsense Whitney, Ben and Bernie, the emo engineers, and Maeve, who acted as their doctor. They were looking after the younger kids, Blu-Tack Bill, Monkey-Boy and Ella, who were fussing over their little Alsatian puppy, Godzilla.

It felt good to be with her friends. The world had turned cold and cruel, and friendship helped keep them warm. It was more important now than ever to help each other and work together.

But the best thing was Blue, the leader of the Morrisons gang, who had a lot more going for him than Maxie had ever imagined. He was walking on Maxie's left. Quiet and watchful. She'd been scared of Blue for ages. Had thought he was a typical tough guy. Cold and hard and stupid. The alpha male who had fought his way to the top and kept his place with violence. But she'd found, in the time they'd been locked up together at the palace, that it was all a front, and behind that front he was warm and funny and smart. There wasn't a lot of good stuff in the world any more. Bad things did rather kick everything else into the gutter. Finding Blue, though, had almost made it all worthwhile.

Almost . . .

'There it is.'

Maxie looked to where Brooke was pointing. She'd been a couple of times to the museum, once with her mum and dad a few years ago, and once with her school, but she couldn't remember it being this big. Back then, though, she hadn't been thinking of living in it. It seemed to fill half the street, with tall, churchlike towers at both ends and another pair in the middle where

the main entrance was. And then she shivered. There was something about this place. Something she didn't like.

A wide strip of garden, set behind iron railings, separated the museum from the road and a small gatehouse guarded the entrance. The gatehouse appeared deserted, the door hanging open.

'Something's not right,' said Brooke and Maxie felt her heart beat faster. It was late, probably well after midnight, and she hadn't thought about being tired before, but now weariness flooded her body and her bones felt suddenly heavy. She hadn't reckoned on having to deal with any more trouble tonight.

'What is it?'

'There should be someone at the gates,' said Brooke, looking around distractedly. 'There's always someone here. Guarding them. At least two kids. This ain't right.'

Blue rattled the gates. They were firmly locked. Maxie looked over at the museum building. There was candlelight flickering in the windows.

'How do we get in?' she asked, but before Brooke could reply Blue ran back along the pavement to where the railings were lower, climbed on to a bench and vaulted over to the other side. The rest of the kids followed him and they ran up a wide, curving ramp towards the two sets of big double doors at the entrance.

'They're open!' someone shouted and Maxie watched as a group of kids pushed one of the doors back.

She forced her way to the front and found Blue. They exchanged looks. She took a deep breath.

‘What you waiting for?’ Blue asked and Maxie went in.

CHAPTER 2

The place was so big and so dimly lit it took her a moment to get her bearings and work out what was going on, but when she focused she realized that a fight was taking place. A small group of kids were backed up against a huge fossilized diplodocus skeleton, surrounded by a much larger mob of grown-ups. Dead bodies lay all around them.

By the guttering light of several candles, Maxie could see that the grown-ups were a mangy bunch, skinny and feeble, with thin, bent arms and legs. Their grey flesh was eaten away by sores and open wounds. Many of them were covered in blood, whether their own or from the children they were attacking, it was impossible to tell. They had the advantage of numbers, but weren't like the street-hard grown-ups she was used to in Holloway.

'They ain't up to much,' said Lewis. 'Take 'em down!' And he and his fighters steamed into the pack, lashing out with spears and clubs. At the same time Big Mick and his crew circled round the dinosaur and hit them from the rear. The sight of reinforcements gave the defending kids fresh hope and it took them less than a minute to hack the grown-ups to the floor.

Maxie had noticed a kid who seemed to be leading the locals. At first she'd thought she was a boy, but as she got closer she realized that she was mistaken.

'You in charge here?' Maxie asked her. The girl looked around at the other kids with her and shrugged.

'I suppose I am.'

'What's your name?'

‘Jackson.’

‘Well, Jackson, do you want to tell us what’s going on?’

‘Who are you?’ Jackson said warily.

‘It’s all right, they’re with me.’ Brooke stepped forward. Jackson looked first shocked then delighted.

‘Brooke . . . We thought you were dead.’ Jackson gave her a quick hug. ‘Are the others with you?’

Maxie remembered rescuing Brooke. The mangled bodies of her friends lying in the road.

Brooke didn’t reply. She didn’t have to. Her face said it all. Jackson swore and spat on one of the dead grown-ups.

‘I don’t get it,’ said Brooke. ‘What’s happened here?’

‘I don’t really know, to tell you the truth,’ said Jackson. ‘It’s been mad. No time to stop and think. Far as we can tell, the sickos have got in from downstairs; they somehow got past the locked doors. The museum’s full of them. They’re all over the place.’

‘Where’s everyone else?’ said Brooke.

‘It’s OK. They’re mostly safe. They’re up in the minerals gallery.’

‘Mostly?’

‘I don’t know.’ Jackson peered into the darkness. She looked tired. ‘I think we might have lost some. I can’t keep up with what’s happening.’

Maxie had a chilly feeling of unease. It wasn’t just the grown-ups. There was something else. That shiver that had run through her outside. She bent her neck back and craned up at the looming black skeleton of the diplodocus.

She remembered now what had happened when she'd come here the first time with her mum and dad – *the dinosaurs*. They'd totally freaked her out. She must only have been about four or five years old. There had been some kind of moving exhibit, with life-size animatronic dinosaurs, and she'd had nightmares for weeks. She still found dinosaurs a bit creepy. It was the teeth that did it. Maxie didn't like teeth.

She switched her attention to the dead bodies on the floor, crouching down to try and identify them. They'd been chopped up pretty badly.

'Any of this lot yours?' she asked Jackson.

'No. All sickos.'

Maxie gave her a questioning look.

'It's what we call grown-ups,' Brooke explained.

'Fair enough.' Maxie straightened and peered into the shadows. 'So how many *sickos* got in, d'you think?'

She was getting bad vibes from the place. Echoes of her childhood fears. This central hall was massive, the vaulted ceiling disappearing into darkness. It was full of giant fossils and weird stuffed things that threw eerie shadows on to the high walls.

'No idea,' said Jackson, wiping blood from her face. 'I've seen at least ten others, but I reckon there's more.'

'And you think they got in downstairs somehow?'

'A guy called Robbie usually looks after security, but he's injured.' Jackson looked at Brooke. 'I guess things have slipped a little.'

'Do you have any more fighters, or is this it?' Maxie asked, checking out Jackson's crew.

‘This is it.’

‘All right,’ said Maxie, raising her voice. ‘Listen up. I know you’re all knackered, but before we get to beddy-byes we got some work to do.’ She pointed at Brooke. ‘Take the smaller kids and put them with your people where they’ll be safe.’

‘In the minerals gallery?’ said Brooke.

‘If you say so.’

‘It was designed to keep precious stones safe,’ Brooke explained. ‘It’s built like a bank vault.’

‘Sounds good. Round everyone up, Whitney.’

‘I’m on it, girl.’

Maxie now turned to Jackson. ‘We need to split up and search the museum, look for any surviving kids and any more grown-ups. How many groups do you think we’ll need? I don’t know the layout of the place.’

‘We’ve closed off the red zone and the orange zone, so this part of the museum’s sealed off from the rest, but it’s still pretty big. There’s the whole of the blue zone and the green zone. We’ll need one group to go upstairs, two more to search this floor, taking one zone each, and another group to go down and lock the lower-level doors. That’ll be the hardest bit. Don’t know what to expect down there.’

Blue stepped forward.

‘I’ll go down,’ he said, ‘but someone’s gonna have to show us the way.’

Jackson put her hand on the shoulder of the boy next to her.

‘Boggle,’ she said, ‘you go with him. You know the lower level best.’

The boy they called Boggle nodded. Maxie did a quick check of who was left.

‘Big Mick,’ she said. ‘You and me are going to take one squad and cover the left side of this floor.’

‘That’s the blue zone,’ Jackson explained.

‘OK.’ Maxie was working now, all tiredness forgotten. ‘Lewis,’ she said, ‘you take the other side, the green zone. Jackson, we’ll need some of your guys to help us.’

‘Take as many as you want.’

‘What about me?’ said Achilleus.

‘Escort Brooke and Whitney and the rest to the safe area,’ said Maxie. ‘Then carry on up to the top, work your way down from there and join up with us when it’s all clear.’

‘Is gonna be bare quiet up there,’ Achilleus protested.

‘That’s the point. You’re hurt, Akkie.’

‘It ain’t so bad.’

‘Even so. You’ve done enough fighting for one night.’

‘I’ll come with you,’ Jackson said to Achilleus.

Achilleus looked her up and down, getting the measure of her, and then slowly nodded his head.

‘Cool,’ he said.

‘We need to get the doors shut,’ said Ollie. ‘Stop any more from getting in.’

‘Let’s chuck these bodies out first,’ said Maxie. ‘If you’re sure none of them are yours, Jackson.’

‘Get rid of them,’ said Jackson.

‘I’m on it,’ said Ollie and his team immediately went to work dragging bodies across the black and white tiled floor towards the doors.

Blue came over to Maxie.

‘So you in charge now, are you, girl?’ he said, half smiling.

‘You gotta keep up,’ said Maxie. ‘You’re just too lazy. You keep slacking like this, we’ll have to put you back to bed.’

‘We’ll see.’ Blue shot her a look and walked over to Jackson.

‘What’s the name of this kid who’s taking us down?’ he asked.

‘Boggle,’ said Jackson and when she clocked Blue’s mystified expression she explained. ‘He’s Polish, real name’s something unpronounceable with loads of consonants and no vowels. Justin nicknamed him Boggle, after the word game.’

‘Don’t know it,’ said Blue. ‘But he’s OK, yeah?’

‘Sure.’

Blue strode over and clapped Boggle on the shoulder. He was a big, chunky kid with stubbly hair so pale you couldn’t tell where his skin ended and his hairline began. He was armed with a thin sword covered in fancy inlaid decoration. The end had snapped off.

‘You do much damage with that toy of yours?’ Blue asked.

‘Is better than nothing.’

‘Maybes. You ready for this?’

Boggle shrugged.

‘Good. Let’s go then, hench. Get this party over.’

CHAPTER 3

Boggle led the way to the back of the hall, past the giant diplodocus, its immense long neck stretching out above them, and through an archway that supported one side of the main staircase. A smaller area here had served as one of the museum cafés; there were still tables and chairs laid out. Boggle went over to an ordinary-looking door that opened into an equally ordinary corridor, obviously part of the museum that had been closed to the public. He took a torch out of his pocket and switched it on. Blue did likewise.

'The lower level was for museum staff only,' Boggle explained as they walked down the corridor. 'It was used for storage and that. It's not all underground, there's windows in some walls.'

They reached another door. Boggle went to open it and stopped. His hand was shaking where it rested against the scratched paintwork. He was steeling himself to carry on.

'You see, when we first arrived here,' he said, 'the whole place was crawling with sickos. Reckon most of them were people who used to work here. We couldn't clean half of them out. The place is too vast. Is like a maze of corridors and hidden rooms down there. So we left them to it. Made all the galleries safe and locked the doors so that they couldn't get up here where we were.'

'You've been living with them underneath you?'

'Yeah.'

'How'd they get in and out?' Blue asked.

‘Through the windows mostly. We do what we can, try and block any holes from the outside during the day, but they still get in.’

‘OK, open up,’ said Blue. ‘Let’s see what you got down here.’

Boggle did as he was told and the kids nervously headed into the stairwell.

<line#>

Jackson, meanwhile, was leading her party up the main stairs past the white marble statue of Charles Darwin, sitting happily in his stone chair, oblivious to what was going on around him. Achilleus stayed next to her. He had a round shield slung across his back and carried a sharpened metal spike for a spear. The end had been broken and the shaft was scraped and dented. It looked like he’d recently been in a fight. He was as bashed about as his spear. His chin was cut and bruised, one ear bandaged, and there were spots of blood across the front of the old T-shirt he was wearing. It had a logo on it for the Sarajevo Olympics. He moved with some difficulty and was obviously in some of pain. Despite his injuries, he carried himself with a certain confident swagger. He had a razor-cut pattern in his hair and was pretty well a textbook bad boy, the sort Jackson’s mother had always warned her about.

The sort she’d always liked.

They walked along the upper balcony, where the stuffed apes were. She expected some of the younger kids to say something, to make a joke, but she figured they were probably pretty spooked by the turn the night had taken. Only one of them spoke up, the little guy who was lugging the golf-bag full of weapons and who stuck close to Achilleus like a dog.

‘I never been here before,’ he said in a broad Irish accent. ‘I like animals.’

‘You come in here they’d have to put you on show in a case, Paddy,’ said Achilleus. ‘With all the other monkeys.’

The little boy laughed.

‘That’s right. You said it.’

They soon reached the iron gates at the end of the balcony that closed off the minerals gallery. They were firmly closed and there were pale faces pressed up against the metalwork, fingers gripping the bars.

‘What’s going on?’ said a voice.

‘We come to rescue you,’ said Achilleus. ‘Open up.’

‘We’re not unlocking these gates,’ said another voice.

‘Do as he says,’ said Jackson wearily. ‘They’re friends.’

She heard a rattle of keys, a clank, and the gates swung open. The big girl, Whitney, took most of the kids inside and Jackson was left with Achilleus, Paddy and seven of her team.

‘We climbing,’ said Achilleus, and he looked up towards the roof.

<line#>

Maxie was helping Ollie’s team drag the last of the dead bodies out through the front doors. There was a dark smear across the tiles. She took the body to the wide, shallow steps at the front and hauled it down, its head bumping as they went. She was too pumped up to feel frightened. She had a job to do and that was all. She knew she’d pay for it in the morning. She’d feel exhausted and moody and short-tempered, but if they could clear the museum tonight then she could sleep all week if she wanted. Hell, she had no right to be tired.

She'd spent most of the last day lying in bed. She supposed it was the stress that took it out of you, though.

She dumped the body with the others at the bottom of the steps and went back inside where she helped one of the museum kids secure the doors.

'So we've got the blue zone, yeah?' she said to him. 'Talk me through it.'

'It's about ten rooms. Half of them are locked, though, so we shouldn't need to check them.'

'OK. And the others?'

'Two main corridors. And the mammals gallery, human body and dinosaurs.'

Oh great. Just great . . .

<line#>

Blue's party had already met two grown-ups halfway down the stairs to the lower level, wandering, confused. They didn't look too dangerous, more scared than anything, pale and thin and weak. They'd somehow got through the doors and now didn't really know what to do. Blue didn't show them any mercy, though. He wanted this night to be over. He wanted to sleep in peace. He held Boggle back.

'I'll do it,' he said and clubbed the grown-ups to the floor. Then smashed their skulls against the steps.

'We'll collect the bodies later. Try and remember where they're lying.'

At the bottom of the stairs they found three more grown-ups, but these ones were already dead. There was the body of a young girl lying with them; they'd obviously dragged her down here before they killed her.

Blue shone his torch both ways down a long straight corridor. Pipework, wiring and strip lighting ran along the ceiling; ancient filing cabinets, piles of boxes and junk lined the walls.

‘How far to the doors we need to lock?’ Blue asked.

‘There’s a sort of crossroads to the right,’ said Boggle. ‘A door there.’

‘And the other way?’

‘About the same distance that way. There’s a T-junction. Another door.’

Boggle’s voice sounded hoarse, and there was a catch in it. Blue shone his torch in his face. Boggle was crying.

‘You all right?’

‘Not really, no.’ Boggle looked at the dead girl. ‘She was called Emma. She was a friend of mine.’

‘Sorry. You cool to carry on?’

‘Yeah. Don’t want anyone else to get hurt. We need to fix this up.’

‘Good man.’ Blue held out his hand and locked wrists with Boggle. Boggle took a deep breath and swallowed hard.

‘I’m with you, mate,’ said Blue and they crept down the corridor side by side, Blue’s troops sticking close behind them. After about thirty metres they came to where another identical corridor branched off to the right.

They found two lads of about thirteen crouching there in the dark. They were staring off along the corridor towards an open door and nearly jumped as high as the ceiling when Blue’s team stumbled on them.

Once they’d got over their shock they looked hugely relieved to see Boggle.

‘What’s happening?’ Boggle asked.

‘There’s loads of them down there,’ said one of the boys, who was clutching a short ornamental sword like Boggle’s. It was splashed with blood. ‘We don’t dare go any further.’

‘We got to lock that door,’ said Boggle.

‘We ain’t going no further. No way, Boggle.’

‘Any idea what happened tonight?’ Boggle asked the boys.

‘Don’t know. We’ve checked all the doors earlier. They was fine. But maybe we made a mistake. Maybe we mucked up. Maybe it’s our fault. That’s why we came down here. And then our candle burned out and we were stuck in the dark.’

‘We checked them all at nine o’clock,’ said the other boy. ‘Just like always. Even though Robbie’s not around. They was all locked. We’re sure of it.’

‘We found Jason,’ said the first boy.

‘Who’s Jason?’ asked Blue.

‘He’s on one of the other security teams,’ said the boy. ‘He also checks the doors. We found his body, what was left of it, half eaten. God knows how, but all the doors are open . . .’

Blue looked at the frightened faces of the boys. Somebody here had either been careless or crazy, but finding out the answer to that would have to wait till later; right now they had to deal with the grown-ups.

‘Looks like you got a war on your hands,’ said Blue.

‘Don’t I know it,’ said Boggle.

‘So come on,’ said Blue. ‘Let’s win it . . .’

<line#>

Achilleus was staring at a cross section of a giant sequoia tree that was fixed to the wall at the very top of the museum. It must have been five or six metres wide. The sign next to it said it was thirteen hundred years old when it was cut down. Thirteen hundred years was a very long time. Like Paddy, Achilleus had never been to the museum before, would have sneered at the idea, but since the disease, since everything had changed, he'd found himself thinking about the world a lot more than he ever used to. Thinking about life and death and time and history. His dad had loved history. Was obsessed by the History Channel. And here was this tree that had lived through it all. The Middle Ages, the discovery of America, the Napoleonic Wars, both world wars . . .

'There's nothing up here,' said Jackson.

''Cept this tree,' said Achilleus and Jackson laughed.

'Don't think that's going to attack us,' she said.

Achilleus turned to her and smiled. 'Could fall off the wall and merkolate us.'

'Could do.'

'We ought to check the opposite side from where we came up, I guess,' said Achilleus.

'OK. And then we'll stay at the bottom. Guard the main hall.' Jackson's voice wasn't what Achilleus had been expecting when he first saw her. She was posh. Like a private school kid. Didn't look like one, though. Looked like a bloke, to be honest.

She was staring at him, her lumpy potato face barely visible in the half-light. It was like she was waiting to say something, or for him to say something. He realized the two of them were alone; the others had moved

down the stairs. All except for Paddy who stood there, slowly drooping under the weight of the golf-bag.

Let him droop.

And let her wait. He had nothing to say to her. Except . . .

‘So what are you waiting for?’

‘OK.’

Jackson led them back down to the next level.

Bloody girls . . .