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When the group reached the two figures on the path, the stronghold safely behind them, both Stanley and William were sitting upright. A little dazed but definitely alive.

'How did we get here?' said Stanley, dusting off his shoes and giving them a sniff.

'I don't know,' replied Alex, *we saw something on the screen, but we couldn't make it out. 'I think you were completely out of it, so I'm not surprised you can't remember.'*

'But how did I get from the forest floor where we fell to the road? It's not like William carried me!'

'Like I said, we don't know, but thank goodness you're alive,' added Zoe, *'you took quite a tumble there. Thanks for protecting William.'*

'That's OK. Is he alright? He's been muttering something since we got back to the road.'

'Oh yeah, he'll be fine. Looks right as rain to me. Come on, let's get going.'

'Stig' said William.

A shadowy creature ran from left to right across the path a hundred yards or so in front of them. Alex was busy with his device. Stanley was showing Zero his watch. Zoe was staring at Zero.

'There, there, it's OK, don't worry, darling, you'll be OK.'

She was worried about him but the fall did not seem to have broken anything or done any lasting damage.

He buried his head against her shoulder.

'Stig,' he said, louder this time.

A shadowy figure ran from right to left across the path a hundred and fifty yards or so in front of them. Alex was using his device as a mirror and adjusting his hair. Zero was begging for a lift from Stanley. Zoe was just staring at Zero.

'You've had a nasty surprise, just relax.' She said absent-mindedly, her thoughts elsewhere.

'Stig!' he cried again.

A shadowy figure ran away down the path in front of them towards the village in the distance. Alex turned around with his device just too late to see it properly. Stanley and Zero were munching on an extra-large onion. Zoe spoke.

'Oh Shut up, William!' she said. *'Imaginary friends at the age of two. Whatever next?'*

William looked miserable, started crying, and then wet himself.

'Oh for goodness sake,' said Zoe, attending to the mewling infant.

'It should be due West from here,' said Alex, still looking at his electronics, 'there's something a bit odd, though, although it is showing a path all the way past what was Bath and Bristol, it is only showing a distance of about five miles from here. I must get Smithers to take a look at it when I get back.'

'Doesn't that thing ever run out of battery?' said Zoe.

'Beep,' said the device.

'It just did,' said Alex, hastily putting the satnav back into his bag, *'What do we do now?'*

'Go back to my compass, that's what,' said Stanley, finally feeling a little bit useful. His carrying duties were beginning to get annoying, so he was glad to assume the role of navigator.

They plotted a course for the next few days, that took them along the valley of what had formerly been the Thames, and then across a potentially dangerous estuary before heading up into the mountains and to Woodlands itself. None of them knew what lay there, just the promise of a better and healthier life, and perhaps...just perhaps.

'A total of one hundred and five miles,' said Alex, *'at current rates of progress and with no more Gutvines, that is going to take us at least five days. We'll have to take turns in backpacking the kid – he can't make it by himself.'*

'You are beginning to annoy me now. I'm only two but I'm doing OK,' said William irritably. *'What makes you so special anyway, Mr Alex-poo-poo-Rider?'*

Alex laughed, then looking pretty offended, gave William a slap.

William span round on his left leg, leapt high, and kicked Alex in the face with his right. As the helpless doctor reeled slightly, William flew in with his left foot and kicked him right where it hurts.

'There Mr so-called Doctor - a bit of your own medicine! Take that!'

The boy really has grown up, thought Zoe, smiling happily to herself. Quite good to have that doctor taken down a peg or two.

Alex thought wistfully to himself, *'maybe I shouldn't have taught him those moves just yet.'*

Zero took control.

'Come on, there's a long way to go to get to Woodlands. Stop arguing and let's go. I can navigate, but

can you carry me for a bit. I'm tired.'

'No chance,' replied Stanley irritably. 'You were small when I did that and you weren't wearing gold chains or stuff like that. And anyway, we cured the curse.'

'I'll give you some Sploosh...'

'OK then, I'll carry you.'

William was wandering about at the front of the line. Zoe was next, followed by Alex, with Stanley and the mounted Zero bringing up the rear. Stanley was slurping from his Sploosh bottle, which seemed to give him an extra spring in his step, despite the burden.

As it turned out, the next sensible stopping point, with the right combination of security (in the form of a good view all round) and protection, was a small clump of trees by some abandoned sports pitches.

It was dusk by the time they got there.

Yes dusk. I know it's always dusk. You try writing this stuff! It's hard enough to think of what to write, let alone put it in decent English and then you sit there complaining that everything is set at night. Well if it is set in the daytime everything would be obvious wouldn't it? Some bloke comes down on a parachute – well obviously it's Alex Rider, but perhaps if it is a bit gloomy you wouldn't notice. Two teenagers, one with dark skin, the other with curly hair and trainers. Drinking onion juice. I mean really. Obvious. A crazy caveman running across a path carrying two people? Can't have that in the daytime. No-one would believe it! Shall we start again? OK here goes.

It was dusk by the time they got there.

'Woood!' exclaimed William suddenly, stopping by the side of a narrow lane.

'Yes well done William, it's a wood,' said Zoe impatiently.

'No... Woood!' he said again, followed by 'L-A-N-D'.

'Oh do shut up you little creep!' cried Zoe, a little unfairly.

'ROW-ADD', he continued, jumping up and down.

'Oh wow!' said Alex, seemingly more impressed than she was, 'this boy is incredible! He's right! It wasn't Woodlands we were looking for. That is at least a hundred miles to the west. We've come west, but we've come far enough. This is Woodlands Road. That explains why the satnav said we were close, despite the target being so far away.'

He stood up seeming to lose the weight of the rucksack, and raised himself to his full height.

'We are here. Let's just rest awhile. See that smoke over there in the distance? That is where we need to be. But let's take our time. There are a few hours left.'

'Where Stig?' asked William.

'We will see him soon, William. Do not worry,' replied Alex calmly.

'Oh just shut it, William.' Said Zoe.

They settled down in an ancient layby opposite what had once been a Co-operative supermarket. The doors were wide open and the shelves inside had been picked bare, as if a swarm of locusts had ransacked them.

'The locals were hungry,' remarked Zoe, thinking back to Norfolk and the speed with which the shops had emptied as the virus took hold. *'I hope they're friendly.'* In reality she held out little hope that the locals would welcome them with open arms.

In fact, although the village had suffered in the initial flooding, its position on a slightly elevated relief meant that it had had several weeks to recover as the floodwaters had receded.

When they reached the village, it was clear it had seen better days, but was largely intact and virus-free. The people they spotted looked healthy and happy, if a little nervous. They skitted about darting in and out of houses, perhaps worried by the new arrivals, or mindful of what they had suffered.

There was a pall of smoke hanging over the village.

The battle for the village had actually been hard-fought and bitter, and was waged on ethical and environmental grounds. Although the surrounding area was fertile and recovered quickly, the local factions had soon found things to quarrel over, especially access to food and housing.

The people with the big houses in Kidmore End had faced a constant onslaught from the neighbouring villages, and a couple of the fanciest houses had succumbed. But most had held out – having barricaded themselves in and lived on their wits.

In Peppard – frontier country – they had formed a ragtag army that had based itself in the Rotherfield area – an armed and hooded gang of former footballers and cricket players. This latter group had made an audacious attack on the Co-op, once their own Peppard Stores could no longer survive.

But they had been repelled. The proud citizens of this once noble village had held out and had set up an encampment on the site of the former village library, establishing bridgeheads on Wood Lane and Grove Road, before pushing out to Kennylands, Reades Lane and Crowsley.

Proud, brave people.

Their only danger now lay to the south, where the savages of Caversham still posed a threat. Wild of hair, and woolly of brain, these uneducated fools thought that they could lay waste to the villages at any time of their choosing. In fact, whenever they had tried, the local population sprang into action and sent them back. They had never thought to organise, so the odd hairy nonentity posed no real threat and was quickly disposed of.

The only other rebels were the sad little inhabitants of Shiplake Bottom, but they never even ventured out of their houses, worried that everyone would just laugh at the name.

'There's just one more problem,' said Alex

'What's that?'

'All the intelligence reports mention that the village headman can be a bit difficult. We might need to negotiate.' And there's often security in place.'

In fact their worst fears about arriving in a new town were unfounded. It was almost like the villagers had been waiting for returning heroes. There was a little welcoming party.

'Oh hi! You must be Alex, we've been expecting you.'

'Dr Alex Rider, pleased to meet you.'

'I'm Barney, and this is my sister Lou.' Lou smiled curiously at Alex and shifted her position on her pony.

'Hi, I'm Lou. And this is Flash.'

Alex ignored her.

Lou dismounted, and left Flash to nibble on a nearby hedge.

'And you are...Stanley, and Hec...Zero...and this must be baby William!'

William scowled at Barney.

Zoe strode through the middle of the group, looking around her expectantly.

'Ah yes, Zoe, we've been waiting for you most of all! Well done on making it so far. We are all jolly proud of you, aren't we Lou?'

Lou ignored him as usual.

'Well, there's no time for pleasantries, actually. You are just in time. We will take you to meet the village headman, and after that it will be just about time for the grand ceremony to start. Follow me.'

Grand ceremony? Village headman? Smoke from across the rooftops?

A shadowy figure raced across the road and darted down an alleyway, heading towards the source of the smoke. No-one saw him.

What on earth was going on?
