

WORD HUNTERS

WAR OF THE WORD HUNTERS



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UQP

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While stories build from words, it's true,
The words themselves have stories too.
Who dares to read? Who dares to look?
Who dares to hunt within this book?

LIKE THIS,' GRANDAD Al said as he lunged forward with his sword. The tip stopped a millimetre in front of a button on Will's shirt and stayed perfectly still. 'That's the thrust. If you put your legs and your body into it, you'll add at least 50 centimetres to your reach. Any time we land in Europe between 300 and 1500, it's one of the most useful moves you'll make with a sword. Anyone know why?'

Will took a step back, put his hand up to the wooden blade and turned the sword away from his body. Alan Hunter had a point to make and it would be all too easy for him to forget he was holding a sword to someone's chest.

The rest of them had no idea why the thrust was so useful, so Grandad Al went on. 'The Romans liked swords and they knew how to use them. They used the thrust and you should be ready for it before the year 300. The Saxons and the Vikings preferred axes, which meant they tended to hack with their swords.' He lifted his sword and chopped the air with it, first from the right and then the left. 'Same as their axe action, and that's what they're expecting in return. That's what their shields are ready to block. If we're up against them, the thrust will be a surprise most of the time. It comes back by the 16th century, though, so remember that.'

Lexi felt sweat in her hair. She waved her hand in front of her face to get rid of a fly. ‘Camping with Grandad Al’ – that’s what this medieval warrior boot camp had been called when it was put to their parents. The scars on her arm from the Battle of Hastings were fading, but still pink, and her memory of the fight hadn’t faded at all. She tried to make herself take in the tactics her grandfather was talking about. She wanted to reduce the idea of battle to tactics for as long as she could, and not to think about it as a clash of unwashed bodies, axes splintering shields, the black specks of arrows in the sky, falling, hundreds of them. She tried to picture thrusting and blocking – calculated moves – rather than being caught in the middle of chaos.

Grandad Al flipped the sword over, caught the blade and gave the handle to Will. He knelt down, slid his left arm into the straps of the round shield that was lying on the ground and picked it up, along with another sword in his right hand.

‘Okay, this is what you have to look for,’ he said. ‘I’m a Saxon or a Viking and I’m assuming you are, too.’ He nodded at Will. ‘So I’m ready to hack with my sword or axe and to block you doing the same. You might want the other shield.’ He lifted the edge of it with the toe of his boot and tipped it over towards Will.

Will picked it up. ‘Are we—’

‘No. This is a demonstration. Slow motion. So, my blade will come down like this—’ He moved into the action. ‘From here I can only do a kind of forehand – I don’t know

what they called it. So Will can block that.’ Will moved his shield to cover. ‘Then I’m ready for the same from Will, so my shield goes here.’ He moved it to check Will’s likely blow. ‘But if Will drops the point of his sword and thrusts—’ Will did as instructed. ‘See the space? See how I’m not covered for that at all? He can go straight to the abdomen from there. If I’m wearing chain mail – and I probably won’t be – he can go for my thigh, for the femoral artery.’ He lowered his own sword to show where the artery ran. ‘The thrust to the abdomen should put them out of the fight right away. The femoral artery might too, but if it doesn’t, blood loss will do it within a minute or so.’

The two of them worked through the moves again in slow motion, as Lexi, Al and Mursili watched, knowing that their turn would come soon.

‘Spears are another thing to look out for,’ Mursili said as Will lunged again. ‘If we’re fighting an army with spears – the kind for holding and jabbing, not for throwing – they might be more ready for the thrust with the sword. So, 3,000 years ago, the thrust will not surprise. And the swords will be



short. Bronze bends if it's too long. So did Hittite iron, even though it was supreme in its time.'

Mursili had been googling to see what had gone wrong in Hattusa all those years ago, but too much time had passed and the damage had been too great for there to be good records or a clear answer. The Kaskians had wrecked the place and done nothing with it. The waste of it all was more than he wanted to think about.

Al was starting to wonder how he'd remember everything he needed to, particularly if an ancient warrior was coming for him in a battle. He could picture Hastings, too, and the Norman with the mace who had wounded Lexi. He could see it differently now. There had been a chance, as his shield blocked the mace, to thrust. The Norman was exposed.

But the thrust would stick a sword in a man's stomach. In battle it wouldn't be a theory, or a blunt wooden blade in a national park two hours from home. It would wound someone, and maybe do more than that.

Back over the hill they'd pitched two tents in the campground, which was no more than a cleared area beside a track. Mount Barney was a wilderness park, so there were no amenities. Tomorrow they would climb the mountain and it would take all day, but this afternoon's schedule was all about fighting techniques.

Grandad Al had brought padded clothes, and Viking and Roman style shields as well as the swords. It had taken two trips to the car park, 20 minutes down a fire trail and through a paddock, to bring all the gear in to the camping ground.

Alan Hunter had known this time was coming and he'd had years to plan for it, without anyone noticing what he was doing. He had looked into fencing classes and the protective gear fencers wear, but the techniques weren't right for medieval battle, the weapons weren't enough like an arming sword and the outfits didn't give the right kind of protection.

But his grandchildren, and now this team of word hunters, needed to be as ready for battle as anyone could make them. So, while the dictionary had been dormant in the late 20th century, he had thought through the battles of the past and worked out as precisely as he could what they would need when a word next sent them into history.

It was summer and Lexi and Al would soon be 13. They were survivors already, but not warriors yet. Will was the closest to that and, at 20, he was a good age for it, too, even if he was technically 110. Which was nothing on Mursili, who had been born more than 3,000 years before and managed not to look a day over 35.

At least Mursili could handle a sword, even if it was in an ancient kind of way, and shoot a bow, and ride. He had been a Hittite boy before he'd become court librarian, and all those experiences were part of a standard Hittite boyhood in the 1190s BC.

And now it was time to put the padding on and start fighting. Grandad Al lifted the gear out of the bag.

'I know it's hot,' he said. He had a motorbike helmet in each hand. 'We'll only do five minutes at a time. Who wants to go first?'

There was a pause and then Will said, 'Me. I'll give it a try.'

'And me.' Mursili swaggered across to Will and drew himself up to his full height, which put his head at the level of Will's chest. 'You probably don't need the helmet, but your femoral arteries are in grave danger, let me tell you.'

Lexi picked up a spare sword and imagined a shield on her other arm.

'What if one of them's coming at you from here?' Al said to her. He was over to her right, and he made a move in her direction. She lifted her sword to block his imaginary axe swing as she turned.

'Good.' Grandad Al clapped his hands together. 'You two work on the theory, while these two get the gear on. And, Lexi, if Al's swinging something big at you, like an axe, just try to deflect it, rather than take the full force of it with your sword. Your choice is right, though. Use the sword if you can't get the shield there in time. And focus on the defence. You won't get to attack if you don't defend. And remember, we're not there to win these battles. It's about staying alive.'

Al swung again and this time Lexi's shield arm was ready.

'So you're a Viking or a Saxon?' She couldn't really picture Al as either, but that wasn't the problem. She turned to her grandfather. 'What if he was a grey-robe with a sword? How do they fight? Are they like everyone else from whatever time it is, or—'



She wanted the answer to be yes. She wanted Grandad Al to know, and something to be certain about the people who seemed to want to kill them.

Her grandfather looked at Will, who shook his head.

'I don't think we know,' Grandad Al said. 'We don't know if they're gathering in some of the times we go to, or if they're being sent through time to find us. We might not be the

only time travellers.’ He couldn’t help looking past her through the trees, checking. ‘None of us has seen them after 1648. And they didn’t take my pegs then.’ It sounded like two bits of good news, but it didn’t amount to much. ‘We have to assume the worst. That they know who we are, they know what we do, they know most of what we know and if they’ve got swords, we should expect them not to be surprised by the thrust.’

Lexi nodded and tried to pretend that she hadn’t wanted a different answer. Her friends from school were on their way to Madison Bond’s house for a sleepover. They would play music till late, eat junk food, and take a thousand photos of the whole thing. Not a second of the evening would be spent discussing sword-fighting techniques. Sometimes it seemed to Lexi as if she had to be ready to ride into battle against the entire past, just to keep the present as it was – to make sure iTunes existed, and phones. As well as the English language and perhaps most of the people she knew.

She poked at the ground with the wooden sword. ‘So can I have the next fight?’



‘So much better with stirrups,’ Mursili said. He was built like a jockey, and now he was riding like one.

He turned the horse and started it cantering again. The axe in his hand was beginning to feel heavy. Al kept the target moving. It was two hay bales in a wheelbarrow, with a hat on top.

Through the trees beyond Mursili, he could see the house he was trying to get used to thinking of as Grandad Al and Grandma Noela’s. He and Lexi had two sets of memories now – that was how Grandad Al had put it, though it wasn’t as simple as that.

They had true memories of their own lives that were now wrong, because they’d saved their grandfather in 1648 and sent him back to his own time. Now he had always been in their lives, but only pictures proved it to them. And he and Grandma Noela had lived at Brookfield for two years. Lexi and Al had visited dozens of times and yet never visited at all. In the lives they remembered, Grandma Noela was alone and still in her old house.

‘You’ll have both sets of memories in there, I think,’ Grandad Al had told them. ‘But your brain can’t accept that, so it won’t bring one up. That’s my best guess.’ He shrugged. ‘We weren’t built for this – for time travel or for what it can mean if something changes – but it’s what we’ve got.’

Grandad Al and Grandma Noela lived next door to the Franklins, who had horses. There was nothing coincidental about that. Al and Lexi could hardly believe how well their grandfather had planned it. One way or another, he had the

makings of a medieval military training camp in place, without it being visible to anyone. Hiking and climbing had always been in the family, so the trips to Mount Barney were no surprise. He'd had two things in mind when looking in real estate agents' windows after Noela and he retired – neighbours with horses and a place with a workshop almost as big as the house.

After they moved in, he befriended the Franklins and became the most obvious person to care for their horses whenever they went away. And, over time, he turned the workshop into exactly the place he needed it to be. Grandma Noela talked about 'men and their sheds' and imagined him down there painting toy trains. Instead he made shields and swords, padded jackets and targets and he tried to imagine every past conflict he might face with his grandchildren, when they became word hunters.

When he took them to the shed for the first time, it reminded them of only one thing.

'Best looking workshop I've seen since the 5th century,' Al told him.

'If only,' Grandad Al said. 'I could do with some of those scrolls.'

There were three pairs of light stirrups on one bench and he was working on two more, for Will and Mursili. Like every word hunter, Grandad Al had his own packing list, but his had more than 50 missions behind it and then 30 years of planning.

Stirrups would give them an edge in Europe for 800 years. Stirrups arrived in the 7th century, but the solid saddle



they required if they were to work came long before, with the Romans. If the word hunters could ride well enough, they had a chance of outriding someone far more experienced, who didn't have stirrups.

With the Franklins out of the country, they had their opportunity to practise.

Mursili urged the horse into a gallop. He wanted to ride one day without a battle plan in mind and for the sake of riding, but for now he had the hay to focus on. Al moved the barrow back and forward and the bales rocked from side to side. Mursili made small corrections to his line, talking to his horse the whole time.

With only metres to go, Al pulled back hard on the wheelbarrow, but Mursili was ready and leant out from the saddle, swung the axe and felt the heavy head thump into the upper bale, jerking the handle from his grip.

'Nice one,' Lexi said, and clapped.

Mursili gave a small bow and drew back on the reins to turn the horse, before they reached the end of the yard. He followed the arc of hoof prints around and rode back towards Al.

Al picked up the axe from the ground.

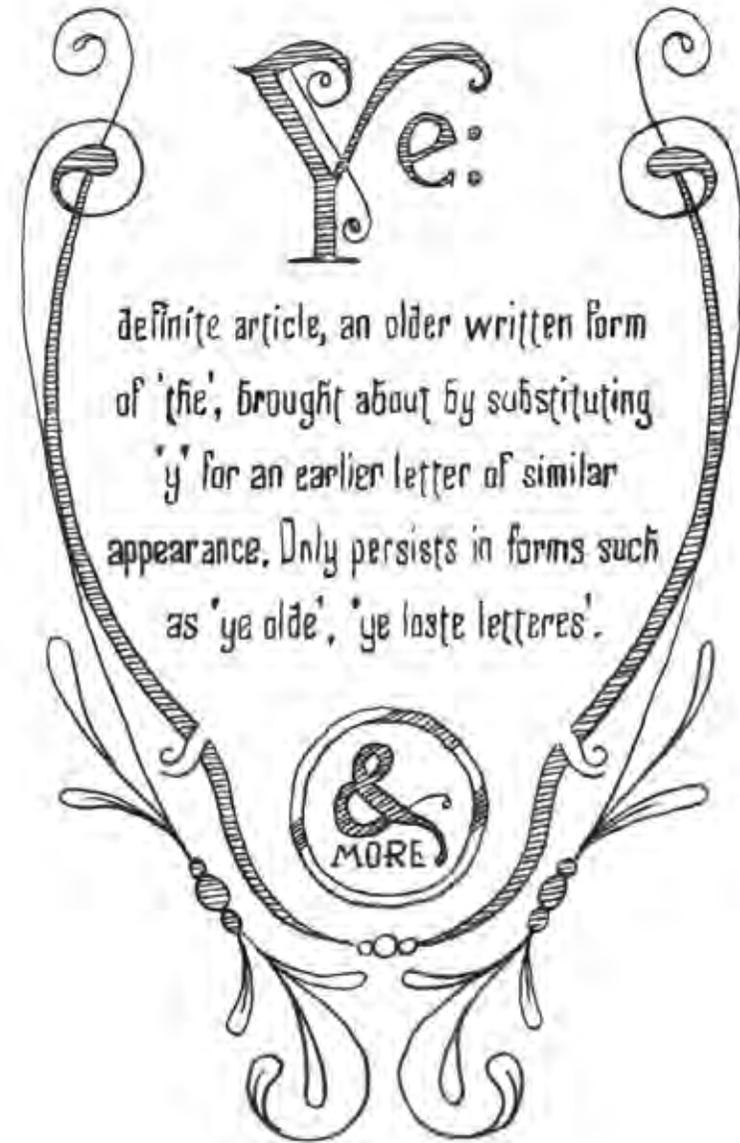
'Yeah, nice one,' he said, as he handed it back to Mursili. 'I still don't get how you didn't have a saddle – how no one worked that out before the Assyrians.' He couldn't help himself – he'd double-checked Grandad Al's research and found that the first saddle was a fringed cloth used by Assyrian cavalry a few centuries after Mursili's time.

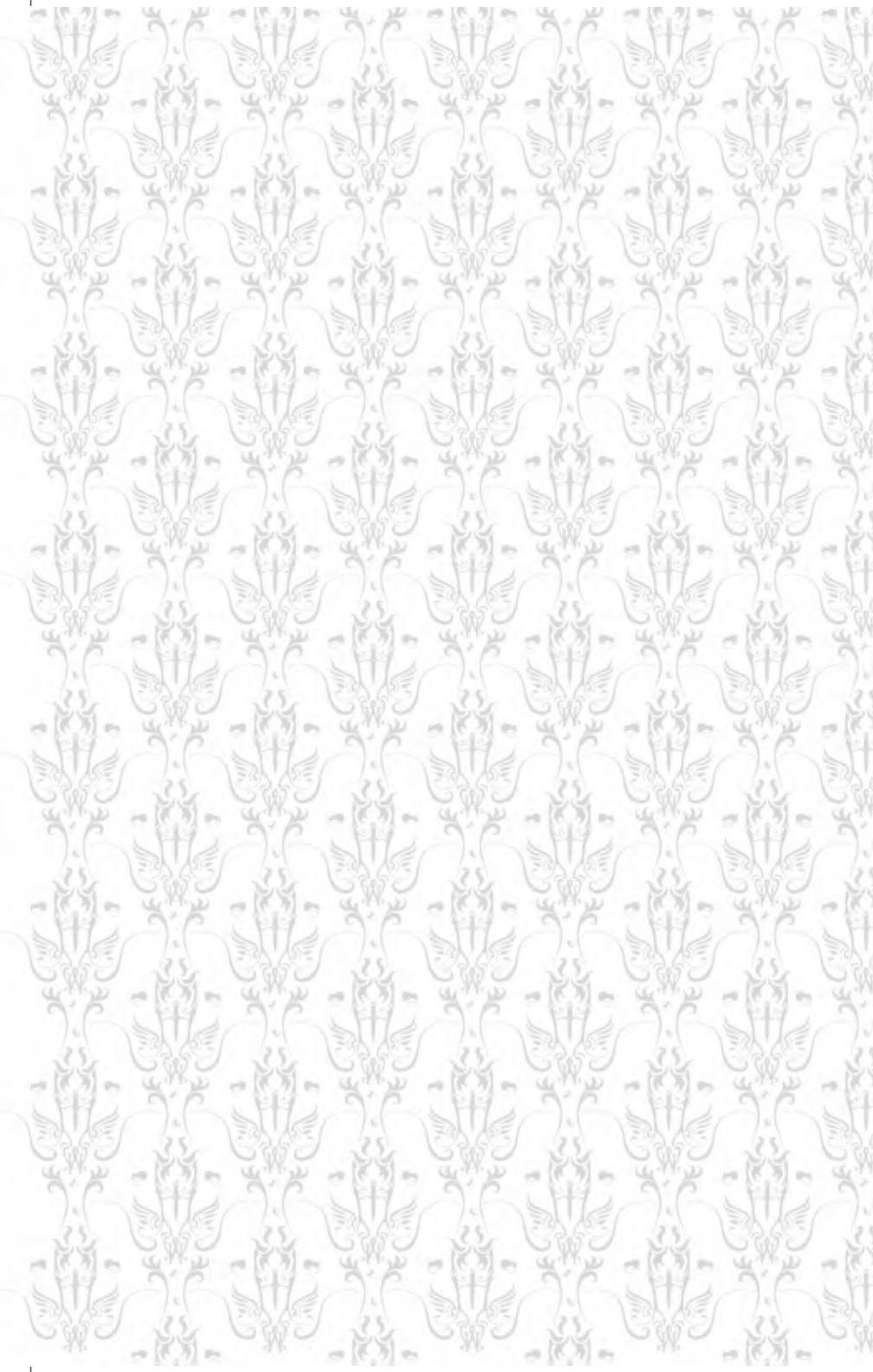


'Oh, please. Until two weeks ago you could hardly tell a horse's face from its bottom!' Lexi laughed, so Mursili kept going. 'I hate to think what would have happened if we'd sent you in here with a bucket of carrots. That Assyrian remark is where a small amount of googling can get you into trouble. You should talk to the man.' Mursili tilted the axe head to point to himself. 'Have you seen a Hittite horse? Tiny. Well – small, anyway. We could ride them as kids, but their backs couldn't take the weight of an adult. Great for pulling war chariots, though, and we wrote the book on that. Literally. I had it in my library. By Kikkuli of Mittani, master trainer to

King Suppi I. Google that one, my friend. People talk about it all over the net. And it's there because of you. You helped save it from the Kaskians, remember. So thank you for letting the world know that the Hittites were in fact the first great horse trainers. If we'd had bigger horses—'

'And you know I love the history, too,' Grandad Al said before Mursili started going on about the Kaskians. He took the reins. 'But we don't want the Franklins to turn up while you're still in the saddle. They're only skiing in Japan for another week—'





LEXI TOOK THE first shower after horseriding. Al was always made to shower last, since he never came out quickly and often used up all the hot water. He'd heard every dull joke from his father about him dissolving, or Christmas coming, or Al having shares in the gas company. It was easier just to go after everyone else.

He stood in the kitchen eating handfuls of nuts. His mother was making herself a cup of tea.

'You know, I think it's really nice that you and Lexi give your grandfather so much help when he's looking after those horses,' she said. She jiggled the tea bag up and down.

'Yeah, well, we do get to ride them.' Al wondered what she thought went on at the Franklins', or in Grandad Al's workshop. She had no idea. Sometimes he wanted to say something like, 'He's training us for war, you know,' just for the shock value.

'Still, it's a lot of work. I'm not sure why he told his neighbours he'd do it.' She lifted the tea bag out and dropped it in the bin. 'It's good that he's got you there, too, for all the heavy lifting and bending and things.'

'Yeah.'

Grandad Al was such a faker. He walked around with a stoop and managed to look as if he wasn't up to much. And

yet, if a horde of Vikings with battleaxes attacked the house, Grandad Al would see them off, one at a time at the top of the stairs, while their father would lock the family in the bathroom, dial triple 0 and talk to the operator in a hopeless squeaky voice that'd sound like a practical joke.

Al tipped up the nut jar. There were a few left in the bottom, but there was mostly salt.

His mother stopped her teacup halfway to her mouth. 'Go easy on those. You'll spoil your appetite.'

'As if.' He emptied the last nuts into his hand, set the jar down and left the kitchen.

The shower was still running in the bathroom as he walked past and opened the door to his room. He noticed the glow right away. It had been weeks since the last time, but there was no doubt now that it was there. Another word in the dictionary had been triggered, and that called for another trip into the past to save it.

He shut the door behind him and went to his desk. He cleared away the mess on top and opened the dictionary carefully. 'Ye'. It wasn't even really a word anymore. He wondered if they could let this one go, tell no one, but it was impossible to guess the consequences. So they would have to go anyway, and save a word that for a hundred years or more had only been used to mean that something was hokey and pretending to be old.

There was a scuffling sound from Doug's cage. Al turned to see a beady stare directed his way.

'Don't worry,' he said to him. 'You were my next step.'

He unzipped the top of his backpack and set it near the cage. 'Well, maybe not next step, but you're part of the plan. I'll put you in there just before we go.'

When he heard Lexi come out of the bathroom Al opened his door.

She was about to tell him the bathroom was free, but he got in first. 'It's gone off.'

The way he said it told her exactly what 'it' was.

'Okay.' She glanced down the corridor and then followed him into his room.

'Do I at least get to have a shower?' He shut the door behind her.

'Why? No one before the mid-19th century's going to care. You'll fit into most of history better if you stink. Which means you'd fit in really well right now. What's the—' She took a step towards the desk.

'I'm going to have a shower. You get the team together. It's a weird word.' He shrugged. 'I haven't looked for where it might take us yet.'

After Lexi called him on her mobile, Grandad Al called the landline and told their mother that she and Al had forgotten something, but that he was on his way out now and would drop it over.

'Your grandmother's been baking again,' her mother said. 'And you know she thinks it's a waste not to eat it when it's fresh. Grandad's in a bit of a hurry to go somewhere, so

he wants one of you to meet him out the front. He'll have the pie in his car.'

When they heard Grandad Al pull up, Lexi went down the front steps while Al snuck out the back way with their packs and the dictionary. He met her at the gate. Grandad Al, Mursili and Will were all standing next to the car with their packs at their feet. Grandad Al was stuffing his old orange towelling hat into his before zipping it shut.

Lexi laughed. 'I can't believe you're bringing that.'

'It's my lucky hat.' He made out that he was offended.

'Lucky?' Will picked up his own pack and checked he'd closed it properly. 'You were a prisoner of the grey-robcs for 30 years with that hat.'

Grandad Al unzipped his pack and put the hat on defiantly. 'You found me when I had this hat. That's the bit I prefer to remember.'



Al opened the dictionary on the bonnet and Mursili said, 'I've looked up "ye". I'm still the team librarian, even though I'm also a warrior now. There might be a 19th-century step first, since it came back then as a bit of a joke. Then I think it'll go to printers in the 15th or 16th, but I don't know who or where. Earlier than that it's all guesswork.'

Will laughed. 'It was already sounding like guesswork.'

'Hey, I didn't invent your crazy mixed-up language. Some trails go cold.' Mursili shrugged. 'Of course, if you'd been decent enough to hunt this word before, you might have something to offer on the subject. At least it doesn't seem to involve any wars. I know some people don't like words that drop us into battles.'

He didn't want to admit it, but he was one of those people. It had never been his plan to join them in the past, but Alan had talked about strength in numbers. Mursili had tried to run his line about being the cool tech guy who stays back at base looking things up on screens, but it hadn't worked. So he had trained as hard as he could and then, just in case, he had said a few quiet words to Tarhunt, the god of thunder and of war. And he had tried to put out of his mind the loss of the city of Nerik to the Kaskians. All the spare thick bread in the empire and dozens of oxen hadn't persuaded Tarhunt to change that.

Lexi took a closer look at the dictionary entry. There was very little light now, but the glow from the page was enough to read by.

‘What do you think?’ she said to no one in particular. ‘I’ve seen “ye olde” before, on antique shops and things, but never “ye loste letteres”. What’s that about?’

She was sure someone would have an answer.

No one did.

‘It’s not one I’ve done before. It looks like an old spelling of “the lost letters”,’ Grandad Al said, ‘but beyond that—’

‘Maybe that’s it.’ Al leant forward to take a closer look. ‘Maybe it’s a clue and the earlier letter that looked like “y” was one of the lost letters.’

A bat flew by and the leathery flap of its wings caught him by surprise. His hand reached for a sword that wasn’t there. He was about to leave Fig Tree Pocket for a past that might have anything in it – congresses, voyages, conflict – small moments that led to words despite themselves. He could feel the fight and the fear in himself already. But he’d never been more prepared.

‘Time to go,’ Grandad Al said. ‘Your mother’s expecting a pie. Who wants to— Mursili, what about you? You’ve never started one of these trips off before, have you?’

He turned the dictionary around so that it faced Mursili, who tried hard to keep his finger steady as he reached forward.

‘Here goes not much—’ Just as he thought it’d be a good idea to talk it all through again, his fingertip touched the portal and it opened wide with a flare of golden light and he felt himself sucked forward.

