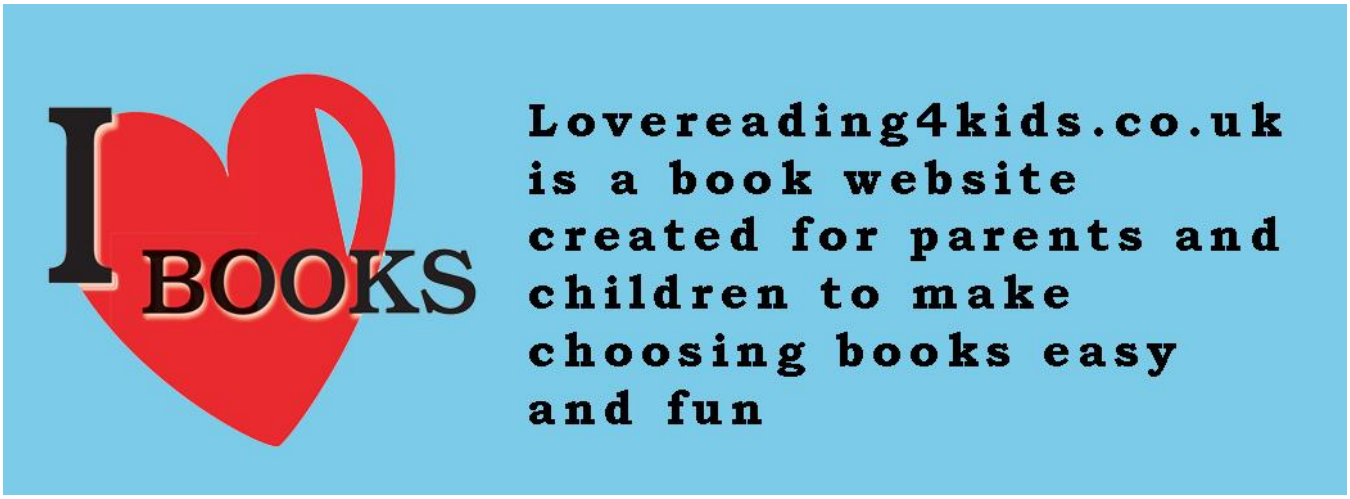


Opening extract from

Darkthaw

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DARKTHAW

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1

The river is swollen and violent.

The dead lie beneath.

I fix my eyes where the banks close to a narrow gap and the river rushes through in a torrent. Where the trees bud out with soft green tips, bending in the springtime breeze. Where they sent my pa to his peace.

They did it quick, that very day he died to save me, before *La Prise* howled in and blinded us, before the world went dark. Wrapped in cloth tied at each end, his body was thrown to the deadly chunks of whirling ice. I had the memory of those waters deep in my bones, the hollow scream of the river loud in my ears, and I went with him, swirling down that giant hole of black.

Then Kane put his hand to the nape of my neck and pulled me, gentle, to his chest, his woodsmoke warmth. I heard the winter winds whistling through the trees, Kane's heart beating loud in my ear. Matisa put her unfamiliar, familiar hand in mine.

We took shelter. The dark rushed in. The river froze.

And our dreams began. Matisa's of death: river on fire,

shattering bone, deafening sound. A war destroying the people she and I love. Mine of life: tall peaks of rock, snowcapped trees, shining waters. A valley where warm winds drift across an impossible lake: blue like a robin's egg yet green like the newest poplar buds. And all of it, calling out to me.

Matisa says we're the dreamers of her legend – two dreamers from 'different times' who were meant to find each other. Last fall, I dreamt about Matisa every night. I dreamt she was out in the woods beyond our fortification, and the pull, the desire to find her, was so strong, I risked my own life to do it. She was dreaming of me, too. She left her home and searched these woods, a forbidden place among her people, to find me. All winterkill long, my dreams have been about life – my new life, out there. A small part of me wants to cling to that idea, wants to believe that this alone is the reason she came.

But I know different. The disaster Matisa dreams: she believes we will prevent it if we stay together. And even if I don't rightly know how, I plan to try. I'll leave this place and journey to her home, that strange and beautiful place in my dreams. Find out how our dreams connect, how they can prevent death.

I fiddle the balsamroot in my hand. It grows much closer to the fortification, but I can't help but come out here to pick it. I bend low to pull some more from the bank, shifting my weight to my good foot before I remember it won't hurt to lean on my other, thanks to Matisa's tincture. She says I'll forget the habit soon enough.

The voices that used to whisper at me from the trees are silent. My Lost People, the ghosts of the First Peoples who once lived on this land, are here now. They have been found; *we* have been found.

But I hear new voices murmuring beneath the rush of river. Way down in those cold depths. Clamouring under the surface.

And they don't speak of life.

I close my ears to the murmuring and breathe the soft wind that sighs through the willows. The sun shines on the spot where they cast my pa. My pa's body, so still. I push the memory away and let my eyes fill up with the silver light gleaming off the waters. That once solid ribbon of frozen river is now a glimmering rush, feeding the thirsty willows and cattails, helping the trees burst into all shades of green.

With the Thaw comes promise.

I put that idea in my secret heart and hold it there. I cling to the truth that this river's melt brings new life, new beginnings.

I try to push away a different truth that creeps cold fingers across my chest: once ice thaws, what is hidden in its depths can resurface.

My world is changing. I have to believe it's changing to the good.

'Em!' A child's voice comes from far off, behind me.

I turn. Kane and his little brother Daniel are making their way from the fortification. The morning sun bathes them in a warm glow, but the walls loom dark behind them.

Kane's head is bare, and his shirt is open at the neck, like always. He walks casual; hands in his pockets, like he has all the time in the world to get to me. I know better; I know neither of us can get near the other fast enough.

Stolen moments from this past winterkill wash over me in a heat: desperate kisses and fumbling hands in the dark woodshed. Kane's breath on my skin, his woodsmoke scent all over me.

Nothing about those secret meetings was slow. And they were always far too short … heartbeats in time, only.

Tom's ma, my self-appointed guardian, would look on me hard when I stamped back into the common area, shaking snow from my winter cloak, hoping my cheeks looked flushed from the biting cold.

I watch Kane approach now, cabbage moths fluttering around in my belly.

Daniel breaks away from Kane and races towards me, his five-year-old legs pumping furious. 'I got to feed them today!' he calls.

I pull my gaze from Kane and notice Daniel's bright eyes. 'Feed them?'

He skids to a stop before me, dark hair all mussed. 'The horses!'

Of course. Daniel plain loves those beasts. None of us had ever seen horses before Matisa and her cousin, Isi, and brother, Nishwa, showed up on them in the fall; such animals were taken by the sickness when our ancestors arrived.

Matisa's horses are like something from a fairy-tale picture book: all long lines and sleek muscles.

I reach out my hand to smooth Daniel's hair. 'You been wrestling with Nico?' Kane's other brother, Nicolas, is eight, but Daniel is the sort to bite off more than he can chew.

Daniel shakes his head but looks at the ground, a mischievous smile on his face.

'Why are you so messy?' I prompt.

Kane strolls up. 'He lets Dottie snuffle his hair,' he answers for him.

'Dottie?'

Daniel looks up, pleased. 'Matisa's horse!' he says. 'I named her.'

'Did you now.' I'm distracted, with Kane so close. His sleeves are rolled up, and the tilt of his head, his dark eyes on me …

'Yep. Dottie. Because of her spots. And she thinks my hair is grass!' Daniel giggles and grabs at my hand. 'Come on, I'll show you!'

'Hang on, Daniel.' Kane puts a hand on his shoulder. 'Remember I told you Em and me had some things to speak on?'

Daniel drops my hand, his face crumpling in disappointment. 'But—'

'That was the deal, right? You could come out to the river so long as you let me and Em talk?'

Daniel nods, reluctant.

'I'll come soon as we're done,' I reassure him, smoothing his hair again.

'You pull some feed for her,' Kane suggests, pointing to the pockets of new grass growing on the banks. 'She'll love that.'

Daniel's off and pulling grass in a heartbeat. I feel a pang. He's going to be so disappointed when we take those beasts away. Never mind his older brother.

Kane's dark eyes are studying me. I turn towards him, passing the balsamroot one hand to the other, keeping my fingers busy so they don't wander where they'd rather be – up near the open collar of his shirt.

'You've been out here a while,' he says. They're nothing words – idle talk. But his voice is softer, huskier. The cabbage moths in my belly are furious.

'Just getting some things for my medicines,' I say. I shrug like I'm at ease. 'Mayhap I lingered a bit.'

That funny half smile pulls at the corner of his mouth. 'You and these trees,' he says. 'You've always loved them best.'

'Not best. Just prefer them to being inside.' I glance at him from under my eyelashes. 'I love other things best.'

His eyebrows arch. 'That so?'

'Sure.' I put the herb into my satchel and make my eyes go wide. 'Spring strawberries, for instance.'

He frowns to hide a smile. 'Strawberries.'

'Delicious,' I say. 'Better than trees.'

'Ah,' he says. 'Well, I hear the ones out there' – he tips his head at the woods – 'are the very best.'

I smile, a fluttering starting in my chest. *Out there.* It's all so near. 'Matisa says we'll leave this week,' I say.

'She can tell?' Kane asks.

I nod, but guilt stabs me. 'She says Soeur Manon will go soon.' Soeur Manon, the healer woman who was teaching me her craft, the only one besides my pa who ever cared for me, is lying in her bed in the Healing House. Dying. I promised myself I'd stay to see her out. 'She's barely opened her eyes in days,' I say. 'Don't think she even knows I'm there.'

Kane's eyes search my face. 'She'd be happy to know we're leaving,' he says, gentle. 'She'd want you to.' His brow creases. He rubs a hand across the back of his neck. 'Wish everyone were so inclined.'

'You talked to your ma again,' I guess.

He nods.

'And?' I cross my arms, like it'll shield me from the answer I don't want.

He shakes his head: it didn't go well.

'She's not worried about the *malmaci*, is she?' Before Matisa and the boys discovered our settlement, before this past winterkill, most people believed we were alone – mayhap even the last people left alive anywhere – living under the threat of the *malmaci*, an evil spirit, in the outlying forest. It attacked those who explored too far, turning them into rivers of blood, ravaging them from the inside out. It snatched people who wandered out beyond our borders. We know now it was lore, superstition only.

We know now it was a sickness, one that Matisa's people had suffered with and fled from long ago. And that the Takings – the disappearances – were started by Brother Stockham's pa to protect his position as leader of the settlement. People shouldn't fear it anymore, but there's a sliver of doubt left in some.

'No. It's the fact of me going at all.'

I sigh, though I don't rightly know what I was expecting. Did I really think she'd send him off with her blessing? His pa died years ago, and he has two little brothers; she counts on him for all manner of help. But …

She can only expect that so long.

I look over his shoulder at the tall wooden walls of the fortification, my gaze tracing up to the empty watchtower. Used to be a Watcher in there at all times, day and night, surveying the woods outside the fortification, ready to report any sign of danger, any sign of Waywardness. Things are different now. We can make our own decisions.

'You're …' I have to force myself to meet his eyes. 'You're sure you still want to come?'

'Em.' He reaches out and grasps my forearm. The way he says my name – my breath gets fast. His touch is fire.

'I'll go anywhere with you.'

His hand slides down my arm, and I lace my fingers in his, drowning in his gaze – the gaze that sees straight into me, sees all of me. Our fingers tighten, and it pulls us closer. I throw a quick look at Daniel, but he's busy, his head bent to the grasses. Kane reaches for me with the other hand,

and I let him draw me towards the heat of his body. I place my hand on his chest, my fingers grasping at the open laces of his collar. His mouth is so close. I could kiss him here, in the fresh air of the Thaw. It would be right …

Over his shoulder I see a figure emerge from the fortification gates. It's Tom, and his blond head is lifted like he wants to speak as he hurries towards us. Kane follows my gaze and turns, pulling away.

I miss the feel of Kane straightaway, but I'm distracted by the way Tom is moving, crossing the distance in long, loping strides.

For days he's been busy tending to his pa, who took ill at the end of *La Prise*. We'd been talking about the Thaw for months, talking about my dreams, about Matisa's people, but with his pa unwell, there's a chance he won't be seeing any of it. More likely, we'll be leaving without him.

My heart clenches tight at the thought. He should be coming; there's nothing for him here. It's not just that he's curious about what's beyond, it's what lies out there for him. Here, he'll be expected to find a life mate and produce children. But Tom is *ginup*, and his heart would only ever belong to another boy. Matisa has told me that such a thing isn't strange to her people and surely not persecuted. He should come with me, find a new life out there, one that doesn't have to be a secret.

But he would never leave with his pa sickly the way he is. And that thought washes me in a muddled wave of sadness, anger, and pride.

As Tom pulls up, I see his cheeks are flushed and his blue eyes are serious.

My stomach knots. Is the tea I've been giving his pa not working well? I start riffling my brain for my medicines knowledge, wondering what Matisa and I might be able to come up with in its place—

'It's Soeur Manon,' he tells me. 'Matisa says you need to come.'

*

The Healing House is silence and shadow.

Isi and Nishwa stand on either side of the door. Nishwa offers me a soft smile as we approach, Isi inclines his head, his eyes unblinking. It's always the same these days: Nishwa with the easy look, Isi with the look that makes me feel tested – tested and found wanting. He's been pricklier than ever since the Thaw began. Ever since I insisted we wait on Soeur Manon.

I ignore his weighty gaze. Heavy clouds are gathering above us, blocking out the morning sun. Surely that's what sets the tingle on my skin. I cross between the boys and push the door open.

Matisa sits beside the bed, her hand resting near Soeur Manon's snowy hair. The rest of the healing woman is covered by a mound of wool blankets – our futile attempt to chase away her chill. Futile, because it's not a chill that comes with cold.

Matisa beckons me close, her calm presence spilling out

like much-needed light in the dingy hut. I feel Tom and Kane linger in the doorway.

'It's all right,' I say over my shoulder. 'I'll come get you … after.'

Tom touches my elbow – a gesture of brother-like love – and leaves. Kane's parting look washes me in a different sort of love: fierce and protective.

The door shuts, sealing out the crisp air, the beam of sunlight. In the candlelit space, the room feels smaller. I cross to the bed, pulling a chair from the corner of the room with me, and sit.

Soeur Manon's wrinkled face is dwarfed by the bed and blankets; her eyes are shut, her breathing shallow, irregular. She's been this way for days. I search for some sign that she is near her end but find nothing different.

I look to Matisa. 'How do you know?' I ask under my breath. Doesn't seem proper to be speaking on a person's death in their earshot.

'I have seen many people go,' Matisa replies. 'I know when it is time.'

I study Matisa in the flickering light. Her dark brown braid shines against the blue of her shirt. Her face is open, reassuring. Course she's seen people come into this world and leave it; she's a healer, like Soeur Manon. Like I was training to be. She and Soeur Manon spent months sharing what they knew with each other, taught me what they could. I turn my eyes back on Soeur Manon, reach out, and place my hand on the blankets that cover her shoulder.

Matisa places her hand on my arm, rubbing her thumb back and forth in a soothing rhythm I'm glad for. It helps steady my racing heart.

Soeur Manon was always kind to me; she understood me in a way I didn't realise until it was near too late.

'Did anyone else stop by?' I ask. I wonder if everyone understands who – and what – we're losing. All of her knowledge, her methods, her cures.

Course, they probably assume I'll be here to take her place.

'Frère Andre,' Matisa says. 'He brought another blanket. It was covered in embroidered flowers. It was Soeur Bette's, I think. I didn't tell him that she is beyond all of that.'

I think of the old Watcher with his wiry beard and failing eyes, offering the blanket that once warmed Soeur Bette – the life mate he lost not two months back. He's another who was kind to me, helped me see that I was worth being kind to. He was the one who opened the sealed fortification gates for me even though *La Prise* – the deadly winter storm – was howling down upon the settlement. Even though I was supposed to be dead. He told his Watchers not to be afraid, and he locked the weapons away so they couldn't do something foolish when Matisa arrived. If not for him, my Lost People wouldn't be here; Matisa wouldn't be here.

As if recalling that memory, the wind picks up outside. A soft patter of rain starts on the thatched roof above us.

'Rain is good,' I say. 'Greens everything up.'

Matisa nods, her hand still tracing a soothing pattern on my arm.

'It'll be real pretty out there,' I say. 'Don't you think?' Don't know why I'm babbling like this. Feel a need to fill the silence. Fill these last moments. I pat the old woman's shoulder and clear my throat, forcing down a lump. 'She'll be glad we're on our way. Last week she opened her eyes long enough to look straight at me. You know what she said? *Emmeline: allez-vous-en!* Go already!' I force a laugh, but it's cut short by the sob building in my chest.

'She always knew what was truly in your heart.' Matisa's voice is gentle. Her hand is warm.

I blink back tears and nod. 'She knows my new life lies beyond.'

Matisa's hand stills.

I look at the old woman's snowy head. I keep the rest of what Soeur Manon told me to myself. About freedom bringing choices – *les choix que vous ne voulez pas*: choices I don't want.

Can't see how that can be. After years of being eyeballed, years of having no choices at all, the freedom waiting out in those trees has to be good.

'Em,' Matisa's voice breaks my thoughts. 'I want you to know something.'

The winds pick up, gusting against the little shack.

I look at her.

'Our dreams led us to each other,' she says.

I nod.

'You know that I believe we should stay together,' she says. 'But' – she clasps her hands together – 'I will not ask it of you.'

I study her face, trying to figure where this is coming from. Matisa knows I want to see what lies beyond. She knows I've always planned to leave this place with her. She saved my life last fall, risked her own to pull me from the river, but this is about more than repaying a debt to her: it's about starting a new life. It's about choosing a new life.

But she wants me to recognise it *is* a choice.

I look at Soeur Manon, my thoughts whirling around her last words to me.

She's still as ice.

I watch for the rise of her chest, listen for a rattling breath.

Nothing.

Matisa puts her hand on my arm once more. 'She's gone,' she says, soft.

And, like they're answering my heart, the heavens open and the rain thunders down on the roof above, washing the Healing House in sorrow.

*

The soil shifts beneath my dream fingers as I dig. The river sings with the voices of the dead. I'm beneath the dogwood, a place I know so well, a place I've been dozens of times to dig roots for Soeur Manon.

But why?

We sent Soeur Manon to her peace. I glance up, across the Watch flats to the fortification. It's silent. Everyone has gone.

Suddenly Matisa is on the ground before me. Her eyes are closed tight, her skin is mottled an angry red and swollen with purple bruising. A trickle of blood streams from her nose.

I am digging, fast and furious, grabbing huge handfuls of soil.

And then, a rush of hoofbeats is tearing down upon me. Gunfire. Horses. Screaming.

The dead in the river sing out, telling me to hurry, hurry, hurry.

*

I wake in a sweat, the dream bleeding out into the chill morning air. Sitting up, I scrub my hands over my face and shiver. The screaming echoes in my mind. Shrill. Constant.

No. Not screaming. The Watchtower bell is ringing.

The Watchtower bell?

I leap from my bed, pushing off the wool blanket, my bare feet slapping against the cold wood floor. The sound of the bell doesn't send the same spike of fear through me it once did. We haven't abandoned Watch fully – there are still a few Watchers up on the walls each night, but they're not watching for an attack from some spirit monster from the forest. The alarm bell is kept as a way to get the

settlement's attention in the case of something else urgent: a fire, a coming storm, a wild animal.

I dress quick, my pulse racing. As I pass my pa's old room, I notice Matisa is already up and gone, like always. I grab my cloak from a hook beside the door and push outside. There are people rushing towards me, headed for the east gate. At the wall, a crowd is gathering. I push through the people who are assembling in a silent semicircle. I notice a few weapons clenched tight in weathered hands, but no one seems to notice me jostling them aside. Everyone's craning their necks at something but hanging back, like they're reluctant to get too close.

When I get to the front of the crowd, I pull up short.

A man stands outside the east gates.