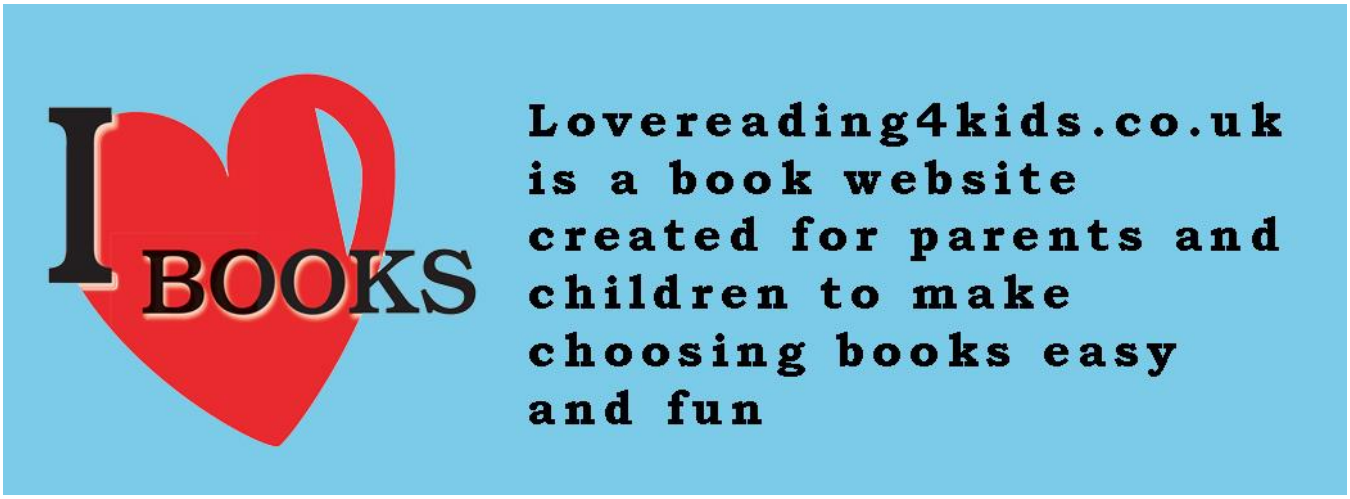


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Half Lost

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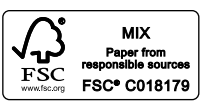
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wounded, not lost

'We should agree on some passwords.'

'Yeah? Why?'

'Because one day you're going to go off on one of your trips and get killed, and then one of the Hunters with the Gift of disguise will pretend to be you, come back here to camp and kill me.'

'More likely they'd find the camp, kill you and wait for me to come innocently whistling home.'

'That is also a possibility, though I can't imagine the whistling element.'

'So, what's the password?'

'Not just one word but a phrase. I say a certain thing and you answer in the right way.'

'Oh, right. So I say "I'm whistling because I've killed ten Hunters" and you reply "But I'd rather be climbing the Eiger".'

'I was thinking of a question I might really ask.'

'Like what?'

'*You've been away a long time. Were you lost?*'

'And what's my answer?'

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'*I was wounded, not lost.*'

'I don't think I'd ever say that.'

'Still . . . You want to practise? Make sure you get it right?'

'No.'

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part one

who to trust

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stones

In the year that my father turned twenty-eight he killed thirty-two people. Celia used to make me learn facts about Marcus. That's one of them. It was the most he killed in any one year before the war between Soul's Council and the Alliance of Free Witches. I used to think that thirty-two was a lot.

In the year Marcus turned seventeen, the year of his Giving, he killed just four people. I'm still only seventeen. Before the Battle of Bialowieza – the day my father died, the day almost half of the Alliance died, the day now referred to as 'BB' by anyone who dares refer to it at all – anyway, before that day I'd killed twenty-three people.

BB was months ago and now I've passed fifty kills.

I've killed fifty-two people to be precise.

It's important to be precise about these things. I don't include Pilot – she was dying anyway – and Sameen isn't in the count. What I did for her was a mercy. The Hunters killed Sameen. Shot her in the back as we fled from the battle. And Marcus? I definitely don't include him in the fifty-two. I didn't kill him. *She* killed him.

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Annalise.

Her name makes me want to spew. Everything about her makes me want to spew: her blonde hair, her blue eyes, her golden skin. Everything about her is disgusting, false. She said she loved me. And I said I loved her but *I* meant it. I did love her. What a stupid idiot! Falling for her, an O'Brien. She said I was her hero, her prince and, like the dumb, thick mug that I am, I wanted to believe her. I did believe her.

And now all I want is to kill her. To cut her open and rip screams out of her. But even that isn't enough; that won't come close to it. I'd have to make her know how hard it is to do what I did. I'd have to make her cut off her own hand and eat it, or cut out her own eyes and eat them, and still that'd be easier than what I did.

I've killed fifty-two people. But really all I want is to get my hands on her. I'd be happy with fifty-three. Just one more and I'll be satisfied.

'Just her.'

But I've scoured every inch of the battlefield and the old camp. I've killed all the Hunters I've come across – some who were clearing up the mess after the battle, some who I've tracked since. But I've not seen her. Not a sign! Days and weeks following every track, every trail, every hint of a footprint and nothing leads me to her.

'Nothing.'

I look up at the sound and listen. It's silent.

The noise was me, I think, talking to myself again.

'Shit!'

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Annalise! She does this to me.

'Well, fuck her.' I lift my head to look around me and shout at the treetops. 'Fuck her!'

And then quietly to the stones I say, 'I just want her dead. Obliterated. I want her soul to stop existing. I want her gone from this world. Forever. That's all. Then I'll stop.'

I pick up a little stone and tell it, 'Or maybe not. Maybe not.'

Marcus wanted me to kill them all. Maybe I can do that. I think he knew I could or he wouldn't have said it.

I push my stones into a small pile. Fifty-two of them. It sounds a lot, fifty-two, but it's nothing really. Nothing to how many my father would have me kill. Nothing to how many have died because of Annalise. Over a hundred at BB. I've really got to up my game if I'm going to compete with her level of carnage. Because of her, the Alliance is virtually destroyed. Because of her, Marcus is dead – the one person who could have held the Hunters back when they attacked, the one person who could have defeated them. But instead, because of her, because she shot him, the Alliance were almost obliterated. And there's that niggling thought as well that all along she's been a spy for Soul. Soul is her uncle after all. Gabriel has never trusted Annalise and always said she could have been the one who told the Hunters where to find Mercury's apartment in Geneva. I never believed that but maybe he's right.

There's a movement in the trees and Gabriel appears. He's been collecting firewood. He's heard me shouting, I guess. And now he comes up, pretending as if he was

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coming back anyway, and drops the wood, and stands by my stones.

I've not told Gabriel what the stones are and he doesn't ask, but I think he knows. I pick one up. It's small, the size of my fingernail. They're only little but each one is quite individual. One for each person I've killed. I used to know who each stone represented – not names or anything like that; most of the Hunters are just Hunters – but I used the stones to help me remember incidents and fights and how they died. I've forgotten the individual fights now; they've all blurred into one never-ending pageant of blood, but I've got fifty-two little stones in my pile.

Gabriel's boots turn ninety degrees and stay still for a second or so before he says, 'We need more wood. Are you coming to help?'

'In a bit.'

His boots stay there for a few seconds more, then turn another forty-five degrees and stay there for four, five, six, seven seconds and then they make their way back into the trees.

I get out the white stone from my pocket. It's oval-shaped, pure white: quartz. Smooth but not shiny. It's Annalise's stone. I found it by a stream one day when I was searching for her. I thought it was a good sign. I was sure I'd find her trail that day. I didn't but I will, one day. When I kill her I won't add it to the pile but I'll throw it away. It'll be gone. Like her.

Maybe then the dreams will stop. I doubt it but you never know. I dream of Annalise a lot. Sometimes the

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dreams even start sort of nice but that doesn't last long. Sometimes she shoots my father and it's exactly like it was at BB. If I'm lucky I wake up before then, but sometimes it carries on and it's as if I'm living it all again.

I wish I'd dream of Gabriel. Those would be good dreams. I'd dream of us climbing together like we used to and we'd be friends, like the old days. We're friends now; we'll always be friends, but it's different. We don't talk much. Sometimes he talks about his family or things he did years ago, before all this, or he talks about climbing or a book he's read or . . . I don't know . . . stuff he likes. He's good at talking but I'm crap at listening.

The other day he was telling me some story about a climb he did in France. It was high above this river and very beautiful. I'm listening and imagining the woods he walked through to get there, and he describes the ravine and the river and then I'm not thinking about that at all but of Annalise being free. And I notice that a part of me says, *Listen to Gabriel! Listen to his story!* But another part of me wants to think about Annalise and it says, *While he's talking, Annalise is somewhere out there, free.* And my father's dead and I don't know where his body is, except, of course, some of it is in me because I ate his heart and that has to be the sickest thing ever, and here I am, this person, this kid who has eaten his father, and I'm sitting next to Gabriel, who's talking about a fucking climb and how he waded across the river to get to the start of it, and I'm thinking that I've eaten my own father and held him as he died and Annalise is wandering around free, and Gabriel

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is still talking about climbing, and how can that be normal and OK? And so I say to him as calmly as I can, 'Gabriel, can you shut up about your fucking climb?' I say it really quietly because otherwise I'll scream.

And he pauses and then says, 'Of course. And do you think you can say a sentence without swearing?' He's teasing, trying to keep it light, and I know he's doing that but somehow that pisses me off even more, so I tell him to fuck off. Only I don't just say the F-word but other words too and then I can hardly stop myself, well, I can't stop myself at all, and I'm swearing at him again and again and he tries to hold me, to take my arm and I push him away and tell him he should go or I'll hurt him and he goes then.

I calm down after he's walked away. And then I feel a huge wave of relief because I'm alone and I can breathe better when I'm alone. I'm OK for a bit and then when I'm properly calm I hate myself because I want him to touch my arm and I want to hear his story. I want him to talk to me and I want to be normal. But I'm not normal. I can't be normal. And it's all because of her.

We're sitting together looking at the fire. I've told myself that I've got to try harder and talk to Gabriel. Talk, like a normal person. And listen too. But I can't think of anything to say. Gabriel hasn't said much either. I think he's annoyed about the stones. I haven't told him about the two extra stones I added yesterday. I don't want to tell him about that . . . about them. I scrape round my tin bowl even though I've scraped round it already and there's nothing

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left. We've had cheese and soup from a packet; it was watery soup but better than nothing. I'm still hungry and I know Gabriel is too. He's looking dead thin. Gaunt, that's the word. Someone said I looked gaunt once. I remember I was really hungry then too.

I say, 'We need meat.'

'Yes, that would make a nice change.'

'I'll put out some rabbit traps tomorrow.'

'Do you want me to help?'

'No.'

He says nothing but pokes at the fire.

'I'm faster on my own,' I say.

'Yes, I know.'

Gabriel pokes the fire again and I scrape out my bowl again.

It was Trev who said I was gaunt. I try to remember when but it's not coming back. I can remember him walking up the road in Liverpool, carrying a plastic bag. Then I remember the fain girl who was there too, and the Hunters who were chasing me, and it seems like a different world and a different lifetime.

I tell Gabriel, 'There was this girl I met in Liverpool. A fain. She was tough. She had a brother and he had a gun . . . and dogs. Or maybe that wasn't her brother. No, it was someone else with the dogs. Her brother had a gun. She told me that, but I never saw him. Anyway, I went to Liverpool to meet Trev. He was a strange bloke. Tall and . . . I don't know . . . quiet and walked as if he was gliding along. White Witch. Good, though. He'd taken

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samples from my tattoo, the one on my ankle. Blood, skin and bone. He was trying to work out what the tattoos did. Anyway, Hunters came and we ran off but I dropped the plastic bag that the samples were in and had to go back and this fain girl had found them. She gave them me back and I burned them after.'

Gabriel looks at me, as if he's waiting for the rest of the story. I'm not sure what the rest of the story is but then I remember.

'There were two Hunters. They nearly caught us, me and Trev. But the girl, the one with the brother, she was part of this fain gang. They caught the Hunters instead. I left. I don't know what they did to them.' I look at Gabriel and say, 'It never crossed my mind to kill the Hunters. Now it wouldn't cross my mind not to.'

Gabriel says, 'We're in a war now. It's different.'

'Yeah. It sure is different.' And then I add, 'I was the gaunt one then, and now you are.'

'Gaunt?'

And I realize I've not told him why I started the story and actually we're both gaunt and anyway I can't be bothered to explain, so I say, 'It doesn't matter.'

We sit looking at the fire. The only bit of brightness for miles. The sky's overcast. There's no moon. And I wonder where Trev is now and his mate Jim. And then I remember it wasn't Trev who called me gaunt; it was Jim.

Gabriel says, 'I went to see Greatorex.'

'Yeah, I know.' He came back with packets of soup and the cheese.

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It's about an hour each way to Greatorex. Gabriel must have gone when I was counting the stones and then he collected the wood. I must have been counting for hours.

'Nothing much to report,' he says. And I know that too.

The members of the Alliance who survived the battle are living in seven remote camps spread across Europe. We're with Greatorex's camp, a small group in Poland. Only we're not with them. I stay out of everyone's way. I have my own camp here. All the camps have numbers. Greatorex's is Camp Three. So I guess that makes mine Camp Three B or Camp Three and a Half. Anyway, Greatorex is in charge of the camp and communication with Camp One, Celia's camp, but there isn't much to communicate as far as I can tell. All Greatorex can do is train the young witches who have survived with her in the hope that someday the training can be used.

I watched the trainees last time I was at Camp Three. I like Greatorex but not the trainees. The trainees don't look at me, not when I'm looking at them. When I'm not looking I feel eyes all over me but whenever I glance at them suddenly they find the ground dead interesting.

I think it was like that for my father. No one wanted to meet his eye either. But it didn't use to be like that for me. Before BB I was part of the team, the team of fighters, when me and Nesbitt were partnered up and Gabriel was with Sameen and we used to train with Greatorex and the others. We were a good team. We laughed and messed around and fought and ate and talked together. I miss that

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feeling; it's gone and I know it'll never come back. But still Greatorex is great with her team.

'She's good at training them,' I say.

'Do you mean Greatorex?'

'That's who we're talking about, isn't it?' And I don't know why I snap at him.

'You should come into camp with me. Greatorex would like to see you.'

'Yeah. Maybe.' But we both know that means no.

It's been weeks since I've seen Greatorex, or anyone other than Gabriel. In fact, the last people I saw apart from Gabriel were those two Hunters and I killed them. Now I think about it, I generally kill the people that I meet. Greatorex should be grateful that I keep away.

'She wants to show off her trainees to you. They've improved a lot.'

And I don't know what to say to that. What should I say? 'Oh?' 'Good.' Or 'Who the fuck cares cos it won't make any difference to anything?'

I really don't know what to say.

Then I think of something and I ask, 'What day is it?'

Gabriel says, 'You asked me that yesterday.'

'And?'

'I don't know. I was going to ask Greatorex but I forgot.' He turns to me, asking, 'Does it matter?'

I shake my head. It doesn't matter at all what day it is except I'm trying to keep things clear in my head but each day seems like every other, and weeks have gone by but it could be months, and everything is merging in my memory.

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I need to concentrate and not lose track of things. I killed the two Hunters yesterday. Then I came back here, but already it feels like longer ago. I have to go back and check on the bodies. More Hunters will come looking for their pals. Maybe I'll get a chance to catch one, question them. Maybe they'll know something about Annalise. If she is a spy she'll have gone back to Soul; maybe the Hunters will have seen her.

I lie back and put my arm over my face.

I've not told Gabriel about the two Hunters because he'll tell Greatorex and she'll move the camp and I need to check on the Hunters before then. But first I need to sleep. Since Marcus died I've not slept much. I need sleep, then I can go and check on the Hunters. Or maybe leave it another day. Tomorrow I can scout to the south. Check if there's any sign of Annalise there, then come back here, then go to the Hunters' bodies. I need to get some more food as well. So, south and rabbit traps tomorrow, and dead Hunters and hopefully some live ones too the day after.

I realize I'm staring at my arm; I've still got my eyes open. I have to remember to close my eyes. I've got to sleep.

We're sitting close together, legs dangling over the outcrop. Leaves flutter down. Annalise's tanned leg is close to mine. She reaches out for a falling leaf, grabbing it and my sleeve at the same time. She turns back to me, holding the leaf in front of my face, getting my attention, and she taps my nose with the leaf. Her eyes sparkle, the silver glints twisting quickly. Her skin is smooth and velvety and I want to touch

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her. I try to lean forward but I can't move and I'm tied down on a bench and Wallend is standing over me, saying, 'This may feel a little strange,' and he puts the metal against my neck, and then I'm kneeling in the forest and my father is on the ground in front of me bleeding out from his stomach. I'm holding the Fairborn and feeling it vibrate in my hand as if it's alive and desperate to get on with the job. My right hand is holding Marcus's shoulder, feeling his jacket. And my father says, 'You can do it.' And we begin. The first cut is through his shirt and his flesh in one long stroke and then we cut across that, deeper. Then a third cut, deeper still, slicing through the ribs as if they're paper. The blood covers Marcus's skin and my hands, hot but cooling quickly. I put my fingers round his heart, and feel its beat as I lean forward. Bite. Blood spurts into my mouth. I'm gagging but I swallow. And I take another bite and look into my father's eyes and he's staring back at me as his blood fills my mouth.

I wake up coughing and puking and sweating. Gabriel shuffles over and holds me. And I hold on to him. And he doesn't say anything, just holds me, and that's good. We stay like that for a long time and eventually he says, 'Can you tell me what happens in your dream?'

But I don't want to think about it. And no way am I going to talk about it. Gabriel knows what I did, what I had to do to take my father's Gifts. Gabriel saw me afterwards, covered in blood, but at least he didn't see me do it. He thinks that if I talk about it I might feel better but

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talking about it isn't going to change a thing about what I did and all that will happen is he'll know how disgusting it was and –

'Nathan, talk to me, please.'

And then he says, 'It *was* a dream, wasn't it? You would tell me if you'd had another vision, wouldn't you?'

I push him away. I wish I hadn't told him I've started having visions.

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practice

It's morning. I'm running back to my camp. I'm not feeling too bad now. I've done a long run: a few hours in the dark straight after I woke from the dream and Gabriel started pestering me about visions. Running helps me. When I run I can concentrate on the forest, the trees, the ground, and I can think better. And I can practise my Gifts.

I go invisible. I'm best at that now, but I've had to work at it. I have to think of being transparent, of being air. Breathe in and let myself become like air. And once I'm invisible I can stay like that if I concentrate on my breathing.

I can shoot out lightning from my hands too. For that I need to clap my hands together, as if I'm striking stones together to create a spark. The first time that's all it was, but now I can make long bolts of lightning that stretch for ten metres.

Sending flames from my mouth is the one I've learnt most recently. I have to flick my tongue against the roof of my mouth and let out a breath. It's not a deadly weapon and I can't do flames while I'm thinking about air and being invisible. But it's still a good Gift to have.