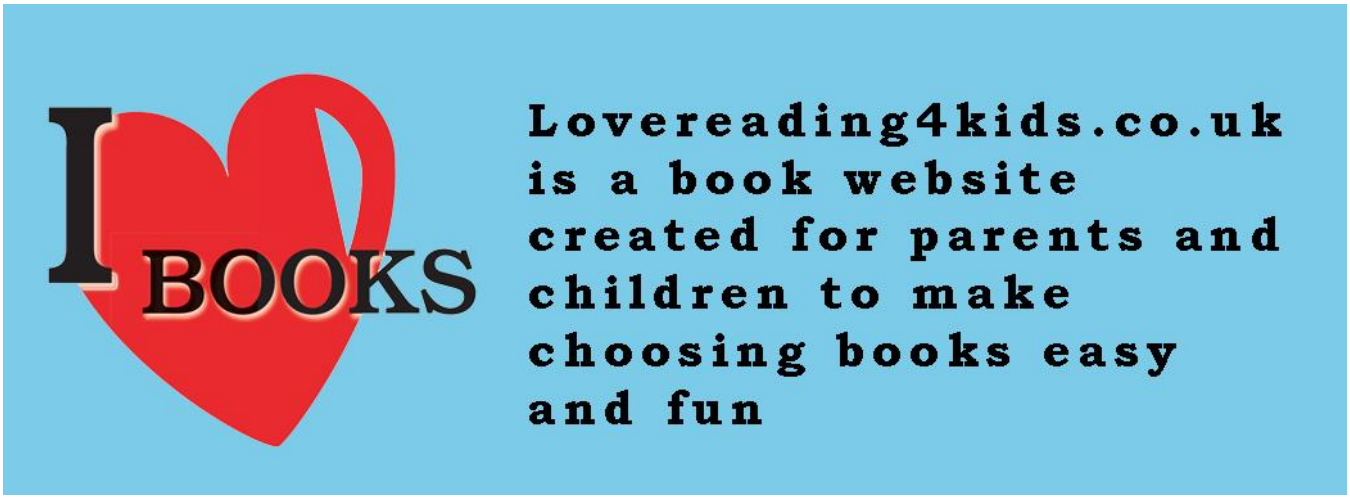


Opening extract from

Storm Weaver

Written by

Matt Griffin

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Prologue and Ch1 pages 9-23

My uncles are gone.

Ayla's thoughts surged around the inside of her skull, tossed like a ship on a stormy ocean. The pain of mourning rose in huge mountainous waves and crashed against her, their violence so intense she felt as though she might drown under their weight.

They're gone. Just … gone! Disintegrated in front of me!

In all the terror she had faced in the last few days (had it been days? She couldn't tell) there had at least always been the hope that she would see them again; that they would once again save her and look after her and give her a happy life. There had been moments in the dark, stuffy cell, where she had been a prisoner of the Red Root King and his goblins, when she had contemplated just giving up. But in those moments she clung to the love of her uncles and her three best friends – Finny, Sean and Benvy – and the fear of never seeing them again gave her strength.

And now I'm risking the lives of my friends again.

There had been another feeling in the cell. One that she had never quite shaken despite all the tortures the goblins and their master had brought upon her. It was a sense of, of all things, belonging. Like the Ayla in those hellish tunnels was the best Ayla. A sense that if she was to be really, properly, true to herself it was down here, further from home than ever before and deeper into the dark.

And so even now, sick with loss, she pressed on through the choking dust into the blackness, hauling her three friends – the only family she had now – back into danger. And with every step she felt it was right. With every step she felt more powerful. With every step back into hell she felt more herself than ever.

CHAPTER 1

The Shattering Tunnels

Sean shut his dark eyes against the invading dust but it was no use. Even with the remains of his glasses for protection, the dust bit under his lids and his tears made seeing even harder. Every few minutes a distant boom sounded, the tunnel shook and fresh billows of grit filled the air. He realised then that they were all shouting, pleading with Ayla to slow down or anxiously calling out when their grip on each other's shirts slipped and for a few sickening moments they were alone in the chaos.

Confused and frightened in the dense fog of dirt, the group scrambled and crawled deeper into the void. Only a short time ago they had emerged from this accursed place, having risked their lives to save their friend. They had all skirted death by a whisker, none more so than Ayla herself. She had been a prisoner of things that only existed in horror films: a horde of goblins, minions of an entity called the Red Root King. He had tried to take her very soul in order to revive the life of his love: Queen Maeve. And Finny, Sean and Benvy had saved Ayla from his tortuous intentions only moments before the last ember of her life had been extinguished. Then they had all watched Lann, Fergus and Taig, the three giants of Kilnabracka and Ayla's beloved uncles, dissipate into the wind and sacrifice their lives for hers.

As she led her three friends back into the chaos of the goblin tunnels, Ayla's sadness was every bit as stifling as the dust. She ploughed through both with gritted teeth. Behind her, Sean, Benvy and Finny followed without question or protest, at least not vocally. They trusted her completely, and if she asked them to go back to the place that nearly killed them, she must have had good reason.

Silently, however, each of them struggled to think of a good reason why they weren't on the long way home by now. But the way Ayla's eyes had shone with dancing fronds of electricity made it quite clear that there was a lot more to her than they had realised and, as their friend, she should be trusted even if it meant going back into the pandemonium of the goblin tunnels. Whatever they were, they were loyal to her, no matter what.

For her part, Ayla's head was whirling. She felt as if she was divided into different people in the same body. Of all the things that had happened to her: waking up in a stuffy, dark pit and finding herself the prisoner of actual goblins, escaping into the tunnels only to get nearly eaten by a giant toad, and having her soul wrenched from her on the loom – the knowledge that she was the child of such malevolent beings was what shocked her most.

It's still just like a bad dream! How can those things be my parents? What does that make me?

Independently of her will, Ayla's legs and arms urged her deeper into the hell from which they had only just escaped; she simply charged on, unwavering in her mission to rescue the goblins and return them to their true forms. They were girls once, just like me. She had realised this because on that dreaded loom, she had nearly become one of them.

The sadness of losing her beloved uncles churned in her stomach, stirring up so much bile she thought it would come out in her tears. They have just died. They have just died. They have just died. The words ricocheted in her brain. Lann, Fergus and Taig died for me. And I still don't know why? I don't know why any of this has happened. Please God, let me wake up.

But Ayla knew she was awake, and that this was real and it frightened her so much. Still she pushed on through the darkness, her tears carving wet tracks through the dirt on her cheeks.

Sean's hammer, Benvy's javelin and Finny's sword – magical weapons they had risked their lives to earn – gave off a faint blue light that was useless in the murky black tunnels, and cumbersome too. Sean, in particular, struggled to heave the great hammer through narrow gaps with only one hand while his other hand grasped for Benvy's shirt in front of him.

'Please, slow down!' he croaked, his mouth filling instantly with dust. But his pleading was lost in the chaos.

Sean's grip on Benvy's shirt slipped for the hundredth time, and his pack snagged on the low ceiling. He hollered for his friends to stop, and put every ounce of his strength into freeing his pack. He shut his eyes, clenched his teeth, pulled his pack from where it snagged and clawed at the earth to move himself along again, but their voices were fading, and then they were gone and he really was alone in the shuddering tunnel.

Panic squeezed at his stomach, wringing it out like a wet cloth. 'NO!' he shouted, but his desperate cry went unheard. Awkwardly, he wriggled himself into a position where he could reach the straps on his shoulders and remove his rucksack. Freed of that burden, he crawled along the shingly floor, hauling Fergus's huge hammer behind him. When he could raise his head again he pulled himself up into a crouch and shuffled. After a few metres he could stand almost to his full height. There was another deafening boom, and the aftershock flung him first against one wall and then the other. He rubbed his shoulders, coaxing movement back. Then he cleared his throat, picked up the hammer and pushed on through the veil of soil and sand to find his friends, sure that they were just ahead.

The dim glow of the hammer showed deep-hewn likenesses of gurning creatures on the walls. They were carved in complex mosaics of intertwining knots, like the old Celtic designs found on Irish souvenirs, except these ones featured wide-eyed monsters that chilled the blood. They were even more unsettling in the ghostly blue light. Sean tried not to look and concentrated instead on the floor and on keeping his footing on the loose gravel. He thought back to the day in Coleman's Woods, when Ayla had gone

missing and they had all gone looking for her. He wished with all his heart that Benvy would play one of her tricks and jump out of the murk to frighten him. At every turn he prayed for it to happen, but it never did. He called after the others between coughing and half-choking with the dirt, until the shouting and invading dust made his throat too raw and hoarse. He pressed on with the hammer pushed out in front, until at last the walls widened, the ceiling rose enough for him to stand and the air cleared just enough to breathe a little easier. In the meek light, Sean could just about make out where he was. It was the first fork in the tunnel – the place where Finny had gone off alone in search of Ayla and ended up getting himself captured.

He remembered that the path he and Benvy had taken led to a dead end at the cell where they had found Ayla's phone. Oh Benvy, he thought, please, please tell me you've remembered it too and you've gone the other way! He tried to call out again, but his voice was only a rasp. Then Sean heard something: a shout, lost in the gloom. He tried frantically to call back but only a rasping sound came out. Then there it was again: a voice muffled by dust clouds but definitely a human voice. It was coming from the tunnel that branched off to the left. He didn't hesitate, and ran as best he could straight towards the noise, hauling the hammer behind him. Just past the mouth of the new corridor, he stepped into nothing but empty space, and fell a long, long way, the hammer clattering beneath him into the shadows.

Moments before this, Ayla, Benvy and Finny had suffered a similar fate. None of them had noticed the ground fall away beneath their feet and they too had fallen painfully into some deep crevasse. Benvy groaned and tried to stand. Her tailbone ached, having borne the brunt of the impact and she felt a trickle of blood course down her cheek. It was a big fall, but mercifully nothing was broken.

'Sean! Finny! Guys, are you okay? Is everyone okay? Ayla?'

'Ugh!' groaned Finny from the darkness. 'What happened? Ayla? You okay?'

'Yeah, I'm alright,' she answered. 'I think I came pretty close to being skewered by your sword, but I'm in one piece.'

'I think I'm okay too,' Finny replied. 'That hole wasn't there before. Anyone know where we are now?'

'Hang on,' Benvy interrupted. 'What about Sean? Sheridan! Where are you?'

But here was no reply. She tried again, now joined by the others.

'Sean! Are you there?'

Still there was no answer. They could see next to nothing, but groped around frantically to try and find their friend. The space was wider than the one they had come through, but strewn with rubble, the remnants of the collapsed floor above. At the other end the ground sank and then fell away entirely into a deep hole – the only way out. There was no sign of Sean. They shouted again, and this time the shout was answered by the sound of falling rocks. It came from behind one of the walls. Then there was a clatter of steel on stone, followed by a definite human yelp, and, at last, a dull thud.

'Here!' shouted Finny. He had found a gap in the wall about the size of a football. 'He's in there! I can see his hammer!'

Benvy shoved Finny aside. 'Sheridan? Sean? Are you alright?' she pleaded.

'Agggh!' came the strangled reply. 'I think I've broken … Wait! Benvy, is that you?'

'It's me!' she replied. 'It's us. We're all here. Are you hurt?'

'Oh, thank God!' Sean laughed, before wincing in pain. His voice was hoarse. 'I wasn't sure I'd ever find you. I got stuck and lost you guys a while back. I thought you knew.'

'We had no idea,' confessed Benvy. 'I thought you were just behind me. But are you okay? Is anything actually broken?'

'No I … I don't think so.' Sean groped around himself to make sure everything was in the right place. 'Just a bit battered. But how do I get in there?'

Benvy turned to the other two. 'We need to get him,' she said, and all three began looking for a way past the wall. There was none.

Finny put his face to the gap. 'Sean, is there any way out of there? Tell us what you see.'

Sean raised himself stiffly, located the hammer and held it out, using its faint blue light to see.

'It's mostly rubble. But hang on. There's a gap in the wall. Not your wall. The other one. It's tight but I can get through.'

'But how do we get there?' Benvy shouted. 'You need to get in here, not the opposite way, you eejit!'

Sean threw his eyes to heaven. 'I know that, Benvy. But I'm telling you there isn't a way. This is the only way out.'

'What about where you fell from?' Finny asked.

Sean pointed the hammer up to the ceiling.

'No,' he said, 'it's just a hole. No way up to it.'

'He's going to have to go his own way,' said Ayla. She surprised even herself with her lack of compassion, but it was clear to her that this was a delay they did not need.

Benvy and Finny turned to stare at her incredulously.

'What are you talking about?' Benvy asked angrily. 'He can't go off on his own. The whole place is collapsing! We need to stick together.'

Ayla felt a stirring of frustration, whipped into exasperation. She checked herself: That's Sean! You need to get to him. What's the matter with you? This isn't you, Ayla! You're not that cold! But from somewhere deep inside she felt anger broiling: This is holding us back! We have to keep going! It was as if there was another voice in her head. One that sounded like her, but wasn't Ayla at all.

'Look, Sean can't get in here, and we can't get in there. We're losing time. We have to press on! We're all going in roughly the same direction. He'll find us. But we have to get to Maeve now!'

At the last word, her eyes shone for a moment. She made for the hole in the far corner of their section of the tunnels.

'Ayla!' Finny shouted, trying in vain to reach out to his best friend.

Benvy couldn't believe they were even considering leaving Sean alone. She interrupted Finny, shouting out after Ayla, 'Hang on just one flipping second! That's our friend in there! And we're all back down here in this disintegrating, evil, airless hell hole because of you! The least you can do is help keep us all together!'

Sean's voice made its way meekly though the gap in the tunnel wall. 'I don't want to be alone,' he murmured.

‘There! You see?’ Benvy was still shouting at Ayla’s retreating back.

But Sean’s voice went on, ‘Ayla’s right, though. The only thing you can do is keep going your way. I’ll go through this gap, and hopefully we’ll meet down the line.’

‘What?’ Benvy couldn’t believe what she was hearing. ‘Ah, Sean, would you stop trying to be a hero, for flip sake!’

‘It’s alright, Benvy. I’ll meet you in a bit.’ Sean reached a hand through the hole, and Benvy took hold of the tips of his fingers reluctantly.

‘It’s alright,’ Sean said again, squeezing Benvy’s hand as best he could. ‘The tunnels probably join back up soon. I’ll probably see you in five minutes.’

He took his hand away and Benvy could see him, in the faint light from his hammer, attempting a reassuring smile. Defeated and with a sinking heart, she said roughly, ‘You’d bloody better, Sheridan. Then she turned to follow Finny and Ayla down through the hole.

They had just lowered themselves though the gap when there was a deafening bang behind them and the whole chamber they had just left shook violently, crumbling in a wreck of grinding stone and hissing dirt.

‘Sean!’ Benvy screamed, but there was no answer.