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Opening Extract from...

Wintercraft

Written by Jenna Burtenshaw

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Prologue



At the southern edge of a moonlit city, a woman stood over an open grave. The blue edge of a tower's long shadow sliced across the ground beside her feet and the grave yawned like an open throat, its headstone cracked in two, leaving only a broken piece of stone to mark the place where the dead still lay.

The lamp in her hand was hooded against the wind, and the ruby beads sewn along her dress sleeves shone and sparkled in its light. Shovelfuls of earth arched up through the air and she leaned out further, watching her companion slice into the ground, clearing the way to the coffin she knew would be waiting deep down in the dark.

'Faster,' she commanded.

The man obeyed, muddying his black robes as he worked.

A few late carriages rattled along a road in the distance but they were too far away to see anything but the

lantern's tiny light, and when the sharp crack of metal striking wood sounded through the night, only the woman could sense the spirits of the dead that gathered close around their digging place.

'Open it,' she said.

The man knelt down to clear the last patch of earth from the coffin's face, then he snatched his hands back and stared down in horror. 'I don't think ya wanna do that,' he said. 'Take a look at this.'

He moved back, letting the lantern light spread all the way down to where a large symbol was burned deeply into the wood. It was a perfect circle, almost as wide as the coffin itself, and scorched into the very centre of it was a large snowflake, burned down to a finger's width deep.

'That is the mark of the Winters family,' said the woman. 'We are close. Now, open it!'

She glared at Kalen when he hesitated. The dead were close by – that mark meant that the coffin was protected by more than the eye could see – but she had waited too long for this moment to turn back now. 'I have no time for superstition, Kalen,' she said. 'Get out of my way.'

'My lady?'

'Out!'

The man clambered up on to the ground as the woman lowered herself into the grave, staining her dress with streaks of grass and moss. She did not care. She lifted the spade and smashed it straight into the centre of the symbol, releasing an invisible energy that spread out across the ground, making the hairs on Kalen's neck bristle and forcing the spirits that had gathered around them to retreat at once.

Kalen stood warily over the hole as the lid of the coffin

crunched and split beneath his mistress's hands. The ruby beads on her sleeves alone could buy her ten teams of carriage horses, but she dropped to her knees and reached down into the dark void she had uncovered, scraping them carelessly against the broken wood and snapping them from their threads as if they were made of glass. The grave was old, the coffin lined with yellowing bones, and in the very centre – where it had remained for more than a hundred years – was the object the woman had come to find.

She slid it out into the open air: a small black box barely ten inches wide, made from gnarled wood and sealed with a silver clasp.

'Give me your dagger,' she said.

The clasp snapped easily with a twist of the blade and beneath the lid, which creaked and split when she lifted it, was a small leather-bound book.

The woman snatched it up, desperate to possess it at last, and inspected the edges of its discoloured pages as if they were the last ones left in the world. It was small, but the pages were packed tight – as thick as a fist – and folded inside its cover was an ancient document bearing a warning that had been ignored many times. There, in the hands of its discoverer, it was about to be ignored again.

Kalen held out a hand to help her climb out of the grave, where she read its words with eager eyes.

> The ways of *Wintercraft* are not for the careless, the arrogant, nor the unwise.
>
> You hold now a book of instructions which, if followed, shall allow the fearless mind to go beyond the boundaries of this world and step without restraint into the mysteries of another.

Keep it safe. Keep it secret. And follow its words with care.
This path is more dangerous than you can know.

The woman smiled. After years of searching, she had found it. She opened the book to the first page, where a further warning was written in sharp black ink.

Those Who Wish To See The Dark,
Be Ready To Pay Your Price.

She nodded slowly, as if the book had spoken those thirteen words out loud. Whatever price was required, she would pay it gladly.

Kalen looked around warily as the woman ran her fingers along the title on the front of the book, its silver-leafed letters glinting in the moonlight.

Wintercraft

'This is only the beginning,' she said.

1
Market Day



For ten years the town of Morvane had been left alone. Its people had lived safely behind its high walls and watched as other towns around them died one by one. The country of Albion was at war, but most people had never seen an enemy come close to their gates. The only threat they knew came from within their own lands; from the High Council seated within the distant capital city of Fume and the wardens sent to harvest towns for anyone strong enough to fight.

There was never any warning before the wardens came. When soldiers were scarce, ordinary people were forced to take their place in battle and anyone who refused the call to fight was put to death. In five decades of war, Morvane had been harvested twice. Children had grown up hearing stories of missing parents they would never know, people had built hiding places and dug secret paths beneath the ground to escape the wardens, and many buildings stood

bare as people gradually left the town to live in the wilder villages instead, where harvesting rarely happened.

Kate Winters was five years old when the wardens last came. That was the day when everything changed. The day her parents were taken away and she had first learned what it meant to have an enemy.

Since that day, she had grown up with her uncle, Artemis Winters, living and working in his bookshop on the edge of Morvane's market square. Morvane was one of the last few great towns in the northern counties, almost three miles wide from wall to wall and divided into quarters by four stone arches left behind from an age long before the wardens and the war. The market square stood in the very heart of the town, but instead of trading in luxuries and curiosities alongside the usual market fare, the traders sold only what they could grow, stitch or build themselves, concentrating on the basic items Morvane's people needed to survive.

Books were not one of Morvane's main priorities any more, but since Artemis and Kate's bookshop was the only one left in the town, there was still enough trade to justify keeping it open. Every book they had for sale was at least second-hand and every spine was cracked and worn. They repaired them whenever they could, taking tattered old books and selling them for a small profit, and the shop earned just enough silver to be able to support them comfortably, as well as paying a small wage to a third member of staff who could repair two books in the time it took Kate to fix one. The bookshop had been passed down through the Winters family for generations and Kate hoped that, one day, it would be hers.

Artemis had taught Kate to be cautious and alert in case

the wardens ever decided to return to Morvane, and theirs was the only shop on the market square to keep a dagger hidden beneath the counter and bolts locked on every window, even during the day. Precautions, Artemis had said, that could one day save their lives.

The rest of the townspeople had become complacent, preferring to live with the pretence of freedom rather than living in fear. They no longer checked their escape routes as often as they should, or kept horses bridled by their doors at night. Soon only the two quiet owners of the dusty old bookshop had been left with their suspicions. Morvane had begun to relax. The townspeople's lives went on. And so, on the day the wardens finally did return, only the Winters were ready.

Kate woke at sunrise to a soft tap on her bedroom door. She grumbled at the unwanted noise and pulled her blanket over her head.

'Kate, are you awake?'

'No.'

'Breakfast's ready.'

'I'll be out in a minute.'

Artemis Winters was a great believer in early mornings. Kate definitely was not. Normally, she would have tried to grab a few extra minutes of sleep before he came to wake her again, but then she remembered what day it was and forced herself to sit up. Rattling sounds were coming from the kitchen and the smell of hot porridge crept under her bedroom door. She slid her feet into her slippers and shuffled over to the mirror.

It was market day; the last market day before the Night of Souls, and the bookshop could expect to see a lot more

customers than the handful that usually came through the door each day. The Night of Souls was Albion's biggest celebration, when everyone dressed up and threw parties in the streets to honour their ancestors and remember the dead. Crates of fireworks had been arriving in the market square for weeks, ready to mark the stroke of midnight in four days' time when the spirits of the dead were said to walk the streets and speak to the living. Not that Kate really believed in any of that.

To most people the Night of Souls was all about dressing up, planning parties and exchanging gifts. It was a time for drinking and feasting and celebrating. Raising a glass to the dead was just one old tradition hidden amongst the new. Far more important was the gift giving. Even the quietest shops were at their busiest that time of year, and the bookshop would have to open early to make the best of it.

Kate tied her black hair into a plait and glared at her reflection. Her eyes were wide and feline, her nose was small and her skin was pale thanks to the hours she spent in the shop every day. Artemis insisted she looked like her mother. Kate thought she looked more like a skinny cat. Her hand went to her throat, where a small pendant hung on a silver chain: a delicate circle of precious metal holding an oval gemstone that matched perfectly the vivid blue brightness of her eyes. Her mother had worn that necklace every day and, apart from the bookshop, it was all she had left of her.

Kate closed her tired eyes against the tears that were already starting to gather there. It had been ten years, but the Night of Souls always made the bad memories come creeping back. She let them settle in her mind for a few

moments and polished the surface of the stone with her thumb, making it shine a little brighter than before.

'Kate?' Artemis's voice carried down the corridor again.

'I'm coming.'

'Get dressed. Quick as you can.'

Kate turned away from the mirror, letting the stone fall back against her skin. Then she dragged on her clothes, fought her boots out of the mess lurking under her bed and shuffled sleepily down the corridor to the kitchen, letting her nose lead the way.

'I've heard something new,' said Artemis, pouring her a cup of hot milk from a steaming pan. His brow was tense; an open letter lay upon the table, bearing a black wax seal that Kate had seen many times before.

She dropped on to her chair and tried to wake up.

'As you know, the wardens haven't taken anyone from the northern counties for some time,' said Artemis. 'I contacted a few friends in the south and it turns out things have been just as quiet all over Albion.'

'That's good, isn't it?' asked Kate, resigning herself to yet another early morning warden conversation.

'I'm not sure. The last I heard, Continental soldiers had tried to land boats on the southern coast and Albion soldiers burned every one of them with fire arrows before they even reached the shore. The war could be going well for once. Or the wardens might just have new orders.'

'I don't suppose they'll leave people alone for very long,' said Kate, eating as she talked. 'What else did your friends say?'

'They told us to be careful,' said Artemis. 'Without a pattern to follow, no one knows where the wardens are likely to go next. Morvane is doing well. We have more

people here than any of the smaller towns nearby. In the High Council's eyes we could afford to lose a few hundred to the war effort. A harvest here could be well overdue.'

'You think they're coming back,' said Kate, her face serious.

'I think we need to be prepared.' Artemis pushed his bowl aside and stood up. 'We won't be opening the shop today,' he said. 'I've sent a note to Edgar telling him not to bother coming into work. Find a bag and pack whatever you will need for the next few days.'

'We're leaving Morvane?'

'Just for a while.'

'But if the wardens are coming, we have to warn people. We have to tell them! We can't just leave!'

'Yes, we can,' said Artemis. 'Two of us might pass unnoticed on our way out of the town gates. Any more than that will certainly be seen and stopped.'

'What about Edgar? He can come with us. One more won't—'

'No,' said Artemis. 'Not even him. We can't take that risk. You'll just have to trust me, Kate. We're leaving today.'

Kate had never seen Artemis as worried as he was that morning. She packed a small bag as quickly as she could and dragged it downstairs to wait for him on the bookshop floor. She looked out of the front window and across the market square. The sun had started to rise over Morvane's frosty streets and the market traders had already set up their stalls on the cobbles, welcoming their first customers with red cheeks, hugging themselves against the cold. Two would-be book buyers tested the bookshop's door and Kate hid behind a curtain, not wanting to explain why she couldn't let them in.

'Good idea,' said Artemis, lugging his travelling bag down the stairs. 'The last thing we need is customers trying to fight their way in. We'll make our way out of town on foot and follow one of the old roads out to the west. No one will know us there. We'll walk to the next town, find a good place to stay and after a few days . . . Well . . . We'll be back before you know it.'

'This is the best trading day of the year,' said Kate, who had never known her uncle take a day off work, never mind actually close up the shop. 'Why do we have to go today?'

Artemis pulled on his coat and gloves and slid the dagger from its hiding place beneath the desk. 'There are far more important things in this world than money,' he said.

Thud.

Kate turned.

Something had just struck the window.

'What was that?' Kate asked.

'Whatever it was, it's not important,' said Artemis. 'We have to go.'

Kate picked up her bag while he unlocked the door and when they stepped out into the icy square she almost stood on something small and black laid upon the cobbles.

'It's a bird,' she said, picking up the limp body and cupping it in her hands. 'It must have flown into the window.'

Artemis's eyes went immediately to the sky.

'I thought blackbirds didn't nest here in Albion any more,' said Kate. 'I've never seen one in town before.'

'Kate. Get inside.'

'What? Why?'

Before Artemis could answer, a second bird speared down past his head and struck the shop door with a sharp crack. And it was not alone.

Kate looked up and saw a huge flock of blackbirds swooping over the square. Hundreds of them, screeching to one another and thumping down at the buildings two or three at a time. People ran for cover, huddling together in doorways as the flock shifted and dived. Artemis grabbed Kate's arm and pulled her back into the shop.

'We're too late,' he said.

Thud-thud.

'What's happening?'

'It's a hording! Get in! Don't let them into the shop.'

'What's a— ? *Ahh!*' Kate ducked away from a blackbird that speared down at the door on a collision course, its bright eyes wild and unnatural. Artemis swung the door shut, ignoring Kate's shriek of horror as a flurry of black feathers bounced off the glass and flopped lifeless to the ground. He dragged the bolt across and pulled her away from the window.

'Go down into the cellar,' he said, throwing their bags into the darkness at the back of the shop. 'Stay there and hide. It'll be all right.'

Thud-thud.

'What are you going to do?'

'I— I don't know. Just stay down there.'

Bang-bang-bang.

A fist pounded on the front door and Artemis jumped.

'Everyone all right in there?' A young man was outside, braving the mad birds with his nose pressed to the glass.

'Edgar!' Kate yelled. 'Edgar's out there!'

Edgar waved at her through the door. 'Bloody birds!' he shouted, his voice muffled by the glass.

'We have to let him in!'

'No. Get down to the cellar. Please, Kate!'

'We can't just leave him out there!'

Edgar squealed as one of the birds flapped down on to his head, tangling its claws in his mess of dark hair. He reached up and grabbed it, tugging it loose and pinning its wings to its sides so it couldn't get away. 'Steady there!' he said, trying to calm it down.

The bird pecked at its reflection in the glass and freed one of its wings, fluttering hard. Edgar's boots slid on an icy cobblestone and he fell on to his back, keeping tight hold of the bird until its other wing flapped loose, smacking him full in the face.

Kate wasn't about to stand and watch her best friend wrestling on the ground. She dropped the dead blackbird into her coat pocket and pushed past her uncle, ignoring his shouts as she threw back the bolt and swung open the door. 'Edgar, come on!'

'Look out!' cried Artemis.

The bird flapped hard and Edgar let go, sending it fluttering up past Kate's face to join the others in the air. Kate helped Edgar up and pulled him into the shop.

'Now that's something you don't see every day,' he said, holding out his arms as if his coat sleeves might bite. A sticky green residue had stained one of the cuffs. 'I rubbed that off its beak,' he said. 'Bloodbane. Very poisonous. If I was a bird, I wouldn't want to eat any of that.' He sniffed it experimentally. 'And it's fresh.'

'The wardens are responsible for this,' said Artemis. 'Both of you, get down into the cellar.'

'Are you nuts?' said Edgar, taking off his coat and kicking it across the floor. 'If there are wardens about we have to run. Hiding won't do us any good.'

'Did you see any of them out there?' asked Kate.

'No, but they're not exactly going to walk up and spark up a conversation, are they? Hey! What are you doing?'

Artemis had grabbed hold of Edgar's arm and was marching him and Kate over to the cellar door. The three of them squeezed on to the cellar steps and Artemis locked them in. A flame flickered in the darkness as he lit a match from his pocket and fed it to an oil lamp that swelled with light, revealing an underground room packed with shelves, books and dozens of storage boxes.

'Down to the bottom,' he said.

Kate and Edgar followed him down into the middle of the cellar and stood there listening to thud after thud as the birds slammed into the windows above.

'Those birds are here as a test,' he said, in as loud a whisper as he could manage. 'We can't let them in. We can't even look at them. Do you understand?'

'A test for what?' asked Kate.

'You wanted to know what else my friends told me? They told me about this. This exact same thing has happened many times in the south over the last few years. Hordings were witnessed in six towns in just six days right before the wardens went quiet. It seems the High Council aren't happy collecting just anyone any more. They want a specific kind of person. I think they're looking for the Skilled.' Artemis was trying his best to put on a brave face but his hands were shaking and his fear was infectious.

Kate gently lifted the blackbird's body out of her pocket. She only knew a little about the Skilled, from

rumours mostly. They were people with abilities that most ordinary people did not possess. No one knew exactly what they could do, but most of them were healers, or seers who believed they could see into the future or communicate with the dead. Many of them lived in hiding and, by the time anyone realised they had met one of the Skilled, they would already be gone, never to be heard from again.

'Those birds will have been bred for this,' said Artemis. 'The wardens have used the same technique for years. Whenever they want to find the Skilled, they poison hundreds of blackbirds and set them loose. The birds die, the wardens make their move, and when a Skilled eventually comes into contact with one, the bird is healed. No one knows how. All the wardens have to do is find one of their birds alive and hunt close by for the person who healed it. Most of the Skilled are wise to the trap, but there are always some who don't yet know that they have the ability. Those are the ones in real danger.'

Kate felt a small stirring in her hands. Had she imagined it? Had the bird moved?

'If there are wardens here, there will be very little left of this town by nightfall,' said Artemis. 'The hording is only the beginning. I'm sorry, Kate. I should have taken you away from here sooner.'

Kate looked down at her hands. The bird's leg had definitely twitched. 'I think we have a bigger problem than that,' she said, staring in disbelief as the dead blackbird suddenly blinked, fluttered one wing and struggled drunkenly to its feet. Once up, it teetered a little and then flapped into the air to land expertly on one of the shelves.

'That bird . . .' said Edgar. 'It was just stunned, right?'

'No, it wasn't,' said Artemis. 'Its neck was broken.'

'It couldn't have been. How could it fly up there with a broken neck?'

Artemis's lamp was shaking now. 'Kate,' he said. 'You're the right age. And they say when it happens, it happens suddenly. Often under stress.'

'No,' said Kate, staring at her hands as if they were no longer a part of her. 'It . . . it couldn't have been me.'

'Did Kate do something to that bird?' Edgar looked around stupidly, as if everyone had gone crazy except him. 'It looks pretty perky to me.'

Artemis lowered the lamp, making his eye sockets look deep and dark in the shadows. 'This changes everything,' he said. 'I think . . . I think she just brought it back to life.'