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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.’

2

The Collector



Outside, the market square was in chaos and high above it, a tall, dark figure stood alone upon a rooftop, his wide shoulders silhouetted against the sky.

Silas Dane was the last man any town wanted to see. He stood there in silence, watching events unfolding exactly as he had planned. His clothes were deliberately dark and plain, but that was where any ordinariness ended with him. Silas had the presence of ten men. Power and threat exuded from him as clearly as fear leaked from the people down below, and his eyes shone with faint light, their irises bleached grey: the washed-out empty grey of death.

Even in their madness the birds stayed clear of him, sensing the unnatural essence that made him what he was: neither fully dead nor completely alive, but unimaginably dangerous. Only one bird stayed close, one that had been with Silas since before his second life had begun: his own black crow, perched upon his shoulder, ignoring the mass

of feathers and death swooping down around them.

Silas rested a scarred hand against a chimneystack and cast his eyes around the market square. The wardens were not far away. From his viewing point he could see three of their black robes lurking nearby, daggers already drawn, blades shining in the rising sunlight. Those three were only the beginning. He had over a hundred more men stationed around the town, all waiting to make their move.

The last of the dying birds plunged into one of the market stalls and Silas watched the traders step out of their hiding places, each one nervously checking the sky for more birds. He sighed, wishing for once to face some kind of challenge . . . some form of resistance. Then the streets fell quiet, as if the entire town was holding its breath, and an unexpected sound carried to him on the wind. A flapping sound, like two strips of leather being clapped together. He looked up, his eyes darting straight to the roof of the little bookshop he had been told to watch more closely than the rest, and then he saw it.

His muscles tensed. There, rising from the bookshop's chimney, was a black fluttering shape, trailing soot behind it as it awkwardly took flight.

Bird or bat? He had to be sure.

Bird or bat?

The flying creature turned in the air, rode upon an updraught and soared across the market square, over the heads of the traders and right past Silas, so close that he could have snatched it out of the air if he had tried.

'Bird,' he said with a cruel smile.

The wardens were looking to him, waiting for instructions. Silas raised a hand and signalled the order they were all waiting for. The order to move in.

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'The chimney!' cried Artemis. 'Grab the bird. Quick!'

Edgar lunged forward but Artemis was already ahead of him, climbing up the shelves like a ladder. The blackbird watched them warily. Artemis made a wild grab for it, but he was too slow. The bird took flight, headed straight for the old cellar fire and fluttered up the chimney, searching for the sky. Edgar ducked in after it, waving his arms around blindly in the dark. When he re-emerged his face and hair were thick with soot, but his hands were empty.

Artemis stared at him. 'If a warden sees that bird they'll find us in a second,' he said.

Edgar sneezed and wiped his nose along a filthy sleeve. 'Best start running then,' he said. 'Better that than be trapped down here. Right, Kate?'

Kate didn't know what to think.

'I'm not giving either of you a choice,' said Artemis, swinging the lamp as he headed towards the back of the cellar. 'We have to hide. The wardens can't take what they can't see.'

Artemis heaved aside two boxes of old books that were stacked in the corner furthest from the door and he held the light up to the wall, revealing a tiny door sunk into the stone just wide enough for a person to crawl into. He scraped his fingers around the dusty edges and searched his pockets for the key. Kate knew that place. She had hidden behind that little door before and she never wanted to go near it again.

'I - I can't,' she said.

Something clicked and creaked above them.

Slow footsteps crossed the shop floor.

'Come on, Kate.' Edgar held out his hand and Artemis

blew out the lamp, unsticking the old door as quickly as he could.

Kate knew she had no choice. She crept forward through a cloud of dust knocked down from the floorboards above, and crawled into the secret hiding place. An old blanket was bunched on the floor, giving a soft place for her knees to rest, but the little hollow behind the wall was a lot smaller than she remembered. She shuffled forward a few knee-steps and scabbled around, making room for Edgar to squeeze in behind her.

‘Move up,’ he whispered.

‘There’s no more room.’

‘What about Artemis?’

But Artemis had already tucked the dead lamp inside the door. ‘Whatever happens, you two stay in here until they are gone,’ he said. ‘After that, I want you both to leave Morvane and don’t look back. Do you understand?’

‘But!’

‘It’ll be all right, Kate. Do you remember how to get out?’

Kate nodded nervously.

‘Good. When it is safe, go. Don’t worry about me. Nothing is going to happen to you. I promise.’

Kate could not see Artemis’s face when he closed the door, but she heard the scratchy sound of a key turning in the lock and suddenly she was afraid. The tiny room felt a lot smaller, its walls pressing closer around her body as she knelt in the dark. She was touching the wall in front of her, reassuring herself that there was still plenty of air to breathe, when a quiet whimpering sound started beside her.

‘Edgar? What’s wrong?’

‘We’re locked in,’ said Edgar, sounding even more terrified than Kate felt. ‘I don’t like this. We have to get out. We have to. Artemis!’

Edgar thumped his fist against the door and Kate grabbed his hands, forcing her own fear aside as she tried to calm him down. ‘It’s OK,’ she whispered. ‘Listen to me. You have to be quiet. If they hear us—’

‘I can’t breathe. Kate . . . I can’t . . .’

‘Shh. Yes, you can.’ She held his hand and pressed it against her chest. ‘You feel that? I’m breathing. You’re breathing. We’re going to be all right.’

Edgar fell quiet and small scraping noises bumped against the door as Artemis quickly stacked boxes against it. Then Kate heard the sound of metal rattling against stone and a cold key fell into her hands. The eyeholes! Her fingers reached up to feel out the thin spaces in the wall. How could she have forgotten the eyeholes?

‘Stay quiet and don’t come out,’ said Artemis. ‘I love you, Kate. Remember that.’

Kate walked her fingers along the stones and found a flap of leather pinned a little way below the ceiling. It was dry and curled with age, but when she pushed it aside, she could see through a carefully cut slit between the mortar of the wall and one of the old stones. She moved Edgar’s hand up to a second leather strip and together they looked out.

At first they couldn’t see anything, just deep darkness. Then there were voices, quick footsteps and a loud slam as someone forced open the cellar door. Two black-robed men burst on to the staircase, flooding the room with light from a lantern that cracked hard against the wall.

One of the men had a crossbow trained carefully down the cellar steps and the other held the lantern up high,

straining to keep hold of a long leather lead with a vicious dog panting at the end of it. Kate's mind threw up visions of the great beast sniffing them out, snuffling its jaws into their hiding place and dragging them out with its sharp yellow teeth, but those terrors were soon buried under something far more important.

Where was Artemis?

'Search it,' said the bowman, and the warden with the dog scuttled down the steps, letting its nose investigate, hunting out its prey.

The dogman dragged full boxes aside as if they were empty, scouring every cranny for signs of life. He pulled handfuls of paper out of the storage chests, rapped his knuckles on the walls, and dug his long fingers into every crack, leaving nothing unchecked. Closer and closer he came to the little door, until a sudden scrabbling noise in the wall made the dog lower its head and snarl.

'Here,' the bowman said. 'What's that in there?'

Kate froze, but the wardens were not looking in her direction. They were looking towards the fireplace, where a trickle of soot was falling into the room. Artemis was hiding in the chimney. The wardens had found him.

'Come out of there!' demanded the dogman, mashing his fist against the chimneybreast. 'Now!'

The dog's ears pressed back against its skull as Artemis's feet thumped down into the hearth. 'Wait!' he said, holding his hands out. He stepped into the room, dropping his useless dagger on the floor. 'Please.'

The bowman raised his weapon to Artemis's chest. Kate wanted to shout out, to distract them, stop them, but fear was gripping her throat so tightly it was a struggle even to breathe.

'Name.'

'Winters. Artemis Winters. I – I own the shop upstairs.'

'Who else is in here?'

'No one.'

The glinting point of the arrow moved up to Artemis's throat. 'Who *else*?'

'I already told you . . . *ooof!*'

Artemis's lip dripped with blood. The dogman had struck him with a meaty fist, knocking him to the floor.

'There's no one here!' said Artemis, trying to stand up again. 'I told you . . . *ahh!*'

The dogman's boot kicked hard into Artemis's ankle and he dragged him up by the shoulders.

Tears stung in Kate's eyes. She couldn't bear to watch.

Edgar squeezed her hand gently as a shadow spread from the cellar door. The dog crouched low, head down, turning its eyes away from a man who was standing at the top of the stairs. All Kate saw was his shadow and she heard the flutter of feathers as a large bird shuffled upon his shoulder.

'What do you have down there?'

The dog whimpered at the sound of the man's voice and pressed its body against its master's legs.

'A bookseller,' grinned the dogman. 'Only one here. It must have been him.'

'Are you certain of that?' The man stepped down the stairs into the lantern's glow and Kate saw him clearly for the first time. He didn't dress like a warden, he didn't even speak like a warden. Instead of robes he wore a long coat that hissed across the floor as he walked and his voice was dark and well-spoken, demanding the attention of anyone who could hear it. His black hair was long enough to touch

his shoulders. He was younger than Artemis and walked with the strides of a man used to being in control, but the strangest thing about him was his eyes. Dead eyes, Kate thought. Eyes without a soul. She watched him closely, waiting for those eyes to look in her direction, and when they did, pausing for only the smallest moment before moving on, her body felt cold with fear.

‘His name?’

‘Winters,’ said the bowman.

The man towered over Artemis, at least a head and shoulders taller than him. ‘He is not the one we have come for,’ he said, taking one last look around. ‘There is someone else here.’

‘No,’ insisted Artemis, his voice unusually strong. ‘There’s no one. Only me.’

‘The girl. Where is she?’

‘W-what girl?’

Kate shrank back in the darkness. He knew about the blackbird. He knew that it was her.

‘Lies will not keep me from her for long.’ The man turned to his wardens. ‘You, take him outside and put him with the others. And you, check the upper floor. If the girl is not found here, I will burn this place down.’

‘Yes, sir.’

‘No!’ cried Artemis, looking back at the hiding place, his face pale with desperation. ‘My shop! M-my work!’

‘None of that matters to you now,’ said the man. ‘If you are one of the Skilled, as these men think you are, then your life as you know it is over. If not . . . the same applies, only in a much more final way. Take him.’

Artemis struggled all the way up the cellar steps, limping whenever his bruised ankle was put to use. He

barely made it halfway before his leg gave way altogether and the dogman had to leave his lantern on the floor and drag him up into the shop, with his dog and the bowman close behind.

Soon only the grey-eyed man was left in the cellar and he stood there, motionless, staring at the wall as if he could see Kate and Edgar cowering behind it. The bird on his shoulder cocked its head to one side and Kate pressed her nose right up to the stone beneath the eyehole, watching. She wanted to move back, but any movement might give her away. Edgar's chest was wheezing with each nervous breath and she squeezed his hand, desperate for him to be quiet.

'We're ready, sir,' came the bowman's voice from the floor above. 'There is a girl's room on the top floor, but the rest of the house is clear.'

'Very well,' said the man. 'Return to the square.'

With the wardens gone, the grey-eyed man opened the lantern and slid a small book from a storage shelf beside him. He cracked the book open with one hand, touching its pages to the lantern's exposed flame. They caught at once. The book smouldered and burned with growing fire, and he carried it up the cellar steps to begin his work.

'He's going to burn the shop,' whispered Kate, as heavy footsteps crossed overhead.

'Maybe he's just trying to scare Artemis,' said Edgar. 'To make him tell him where you are.'

The hot smell of burning paper crept in around them and Kate pressed the key into Edgar's hand.

'He's doing it!' she whispered. 'Open the door. We have to get out.'

Edgar fumbled with the key, dropping it in his panic.
'Kate, that man . . .'

'I know,' said Kate. 'Just get us out.'

'No, you don't understand . . .'

Something thumped nearby. A door, slamming open.

'What was that?' Kate twisted back to the eyehole. The man had returned, his face glowing in the light of a flaming torch that blazed in front of him as he walked down the cellar steps. He stopped for a moment at the bottom, looked along the shelves one last time and then rammed the head of the lit torch into the box nearest to him, letting the flames catch, crackle and spread.

'Oh no,' said Edgar, desperately searching for the fallen key.

The man moved to the next shelf, then another and another, until one side of the cellar was spreading quickly into a rising wall of flame. Edgar found the key and felt around for the keyhole, but Kate held him back, pulling on his arm with all her strength. The man did not hear the scuffle above the crackling noise of the flames. He threw the torch into the centre of the room, watched it splutter against the stone and then climbed back up to the doomed shop floor, leaving his deadly fire to spread and grow.

Edgar struggled and scratched the little key into place, fighting to make it turn.

'Stop! It's too late,' said Kate. 'Listen to me!'

Firelight seeped in through the open eyeholes, reflecting in Edgar's frightened eyes as he turned to her. 'The shop is on fire!' he said. 'We have to get out!'

'No, we don't. Give me the key.'

'What? No! You said . . .'

'Edgar, please.'

‘We’re going to die in here, Kate!’

‘No, we’re not.’ Kate tugged up a corner of the floor blanket and rapped her knuckles on what sounded like hollow wood where stone should have been. Edgar looked at her, confused.

‘I think Artemis knew what he was doing, putting us in here,’ she said. ‘There’s another way out. Please, Edgar. Trust me.’