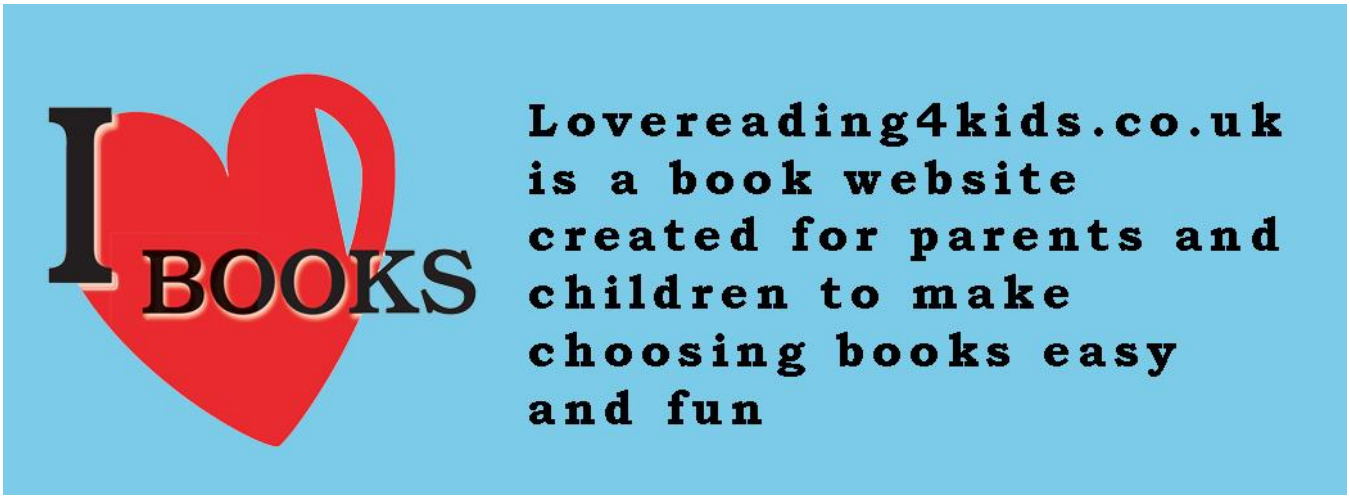


Opening extract from

Wildwitch: Oblivion

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Wildwitch

Oblivion



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Translated by Charlotte Barslund

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CHAPTER ONE

The Kestrel

"Do you like it?" my dad asked, watching me closely.

"Oh, I do," I lied. "It's perfect."

The room was bigger than my room at home with my mum on Mercury Street; the walls were glaringly white and still smelt of fresh paint. The end wall was entirely glass, with a glass door leading to a balcony and, if I looked hard, I could make out a tiny stretch of actual water on the other side of all the warehouses, containers and dockside cranes. My stuff from his old house had been packed into a couple of orange removal crates, now sitting on the new bed he had bought for me.

My dad had got a new job. Instead of living at the other end of the country in an old terraced house with whitewashed walls, a tiled roof and a garden full of apple trees and badly kept lawn, he had moved here – into a brand-new, undoubtedly

wildly expensive flat in the new harbour development, only fifteen minutes from Mercury Street on the number 18 bus. And he said he couldn't wait to spend more time with me than before.

"Before", the last seven years of my life, that is, we'd had a fixed routine: a fortnight in the summer holidays, one week over Christmas, half my Easter holidays and two weekends in the autumn. Last autumn, we had managed just the one weekend because of the events with Chimera and the cat and Aunt Isa, who had had to teach me what she referred to as *Self-defence for wildwitches, lesson one*. Events about which, incidentally, my dad knew absolutely nothing. He believed, as did most people, that I'd been ill for a few weeks with Cat Scratch Disease.

Apart from that little hiccough, we'd stuck to our routine – lovely holidays in his old house where I would play with Mick and Sarah from next door, and Dad would take time off so we could go to the local swimming pool, bake clumsy bread rolls, play Yahtzee, make popcorn and watch a lot of old movies together. He was really, really good at being Holiday Dad.

Now he was Holiday Dad no more. He had sold the terraced house on Chestnut Street, which meant no more hanging out with Mick and Sarah, no

more building dens among the redcurrant bushes, no more hot chocolate in front of the fire during thunderstorms when the rain pelted the roof tiles and splashed down onto the patio in the spot where the gutter always overflowed.

He was thrilled that we would be so much closer, and I was too. I could see the upside of being able to pop over during the week, rather than having months pass between my visits. Except that it felt a bit as if someone had sold my holiday home without checking with me first.

"You get the evening sun on the balcony," he said, and opened the glass door. "We can sit outside and barbecue in the summer."

It was February and freezing cold. I managed to curb my enthusiasm for a barbecue.

An icy wind rattled the new blinds violently and a smell of diesel, tar and brine blew into the room. Then, without warning, a feathery missile swooped down the front of the building, continued right across the balcony and shot directly through the open door.

"What...?" my dad exclaimed.

It was a bird of prey, not a very big one actually, but between the white walls of my room it seemed enormous. Fanning its tail feathers, pale apart from their black tips, it braked sharply, froze in mid-flap

for a split second, then made directly for me. I instinctively held out my arm and it landed a little clumsily on my wrist. Its yellow talons contracted and went through the sleeve of my jumper and into my skin, but even so the bird had to keep flapping its dappled wings to stay upright.

The reason it was wobbling was that it was holding something in one talon. A piece of folded paper, which it extended towards me in a decidedly bossy manner. It emitted a couple of imperious chirp-chirp sounds, and I took the note from it because that was quite clearly what it wanted me to do. The instant I'd obeyed its command, it took wing once more and streaked through the balcony door and into the sky beyond.

"But..." my dad stood with his mouth hanging open, staring after it. "But that was a kestrel!"

I quickly stuffed the note into the pocket of my jeans while his attention was on the bird.

"You see more and more of them in the city these days," I said casually, trying to make it sound as if kestrels flew into people's living rooms on a daily basis.

"Eh... right, but... it must have been a tame one, surely? Was it wearing jesses?"

"It might have been," I said. "I didn't really have time to see." I was fairly sure it was a wild bird that

had never been tamed, trained or restrained with jesses, but I decided not to mention that.

"How remarkable," my dad said. "There would appear to be more wildlife in the city than I had expected." Then he noticed my hand.

"Oh, no, Clara," he said. "It scratched you."

I looked down. He was right. A tiny trickle of blood ran down my palm, from a single deep scratch on my wrist. It wasn't much and yet a strange, cold feeling stirred in my tummy. I couldn't help thinking that this was how it had all begun last autumn – with a wild animal, four scratches and a few drops of warm, red blood on a rainy morning when I was supposed to be on my way to school. I could remember only too vividly the weight of the cat body and the sensation of its moist, rough tongue licking up the blood.

That was how Cat and I met. Now he lived with us on Mercury Street, but anyone mistaking him for a pet would be sorely misguided. Although he had fitted himself comfortably into my routines, he never neglected an opportunity to tell me who owned whom – you can guess for yourself what his view was – and he still went his own ways. Unless he was lying next to me, purring, I rarely knew where he was.

We had told the neighbours that he was a special Norwegian Forest cat to explain away his unusually generous size.

"You'd better clean that up," my dad said. "Did you have a tetanus injection back when that cat scratched you?"

"Yes," I said, and marched dutifully to the guest bathroom and stuck my wrist under the cold tap. I caught a glimpse of myself in the mirror and leaned closer to the sink. The four small, vertical scars that Cat's claws had left were normally just thin, white lines I hardly noticed. Now I suddenly thought they looked more prominent.

"Are you allowed to keep cats here?" I asked.

Dad hesitated. "Not really," he then said. "But if you want – what did you say his name was? Is it just Cat?"

"Yes," I said, well aware that it wasn't very imaginative, but it was the only word that suited his wilful nature and large, black, furry, feline body.

"If you want to bring him when you visit, you'll need a carry cage and a litter tray for him, and as long as you keep him in the flat, then I guess it should be OK."

Cat in a cage? Not in a month of Sundays, I thought. I wasn't dumb enough to even suggest it.

The scratch soon stopped bleeding. The kestrel had tried its best not to hurt me or I would have had deep holes from all four talons, but it must

have been hard to avoid damage completely when landing on one leg.

"Does it hurt?"

"No," I said. "It's nothing."

"I'll make some hot chocolate," Dad said. "Meanwhile you can unpack your things. Make yourself more at home..."

I knew he could tell that I didn't like my new room quite as much as I claimed. He was no fool. At least, not often. He put his hand on my head and ruffled my hair.

"Everything will be all right," he said.

I waited until I could hear him potter about in the shiny new white kitchen. Then I took the note out of my pocket and unfolded it.

FAIRYDELL PARK it said in capital letters. *Tomorrow. One hour before sunset, the north path, third bench from the gate.* And at the bottom, a tiny animal head supposed to be a ferret's.

It wasn't, as I'd presumed, from Aunt Isa. It had to be from a wildwitch – who else would use a wild kestrel like some kind of carrier pigeon? – and I knew only one person whose wildfriend was a ferret.

Why did Shanaia want to meet up with me? She wasn't someone who enjoyed girly chats and hugs. It had to be important.

CHAPTER 2

Shanaia

"She's supposed to be here. Or hereabouts," I said, double-checking the by now rather crumpled note. I could still see the marks where the kestrel had clutched it in its talons. O*ne hour before sunset, the north path, third bench from the gate*.

"Perhaps we're too early," said Oscar, who had stopped so that Woofer could pee against a barberry bush. "Or too late. Why couldn't she just write a quarter past five like normal people? If that's what she meant...?"

"Because she's a wildwitch," I said. "As far as she's concerned, it's all about natural time, not minutes on some watch." But even I had to admit that it had been a pain to find out what time the sun set in early February.

Fairydell Park couldn't be less magical if it tried. It was squashed between the railway, an old meat

packing plant and a strip of rather neglected-looking allotment gardens. In the summer, it might boast a few leafy trees and the odd intrepid sunbather. In winter it was merely muddy, gloomy and desolate. The paths and the soggy grass were littered with burger wrappers and pizza boxes and empty beer cans, and though it seemed a street cleaner had made a half-hearted attempt to pick up some of the litter and bag it in black bin liners, it made little difference since the bags had simply been dumped behind the benches.

"There's nobody here," Oscar said. "Please can we go home?"

"You're the one who insisted on coming with me," I said. "You were the one dead set on meeting a *real* wildwitch."

"Yes, because I thought it would be super cool. But there aren't any wildwitches, are there? Apart from you, I mean."

"And I don't count, of course..."

"Oh, stop it. You know what I mean."

I counted the benches again to make sure I had the right one – third from the gate. I did, but it remained stubbornly vacant. I don't know if I'd expected Shanaia to materialize out of the grey February air just because I had turned my back for a moment, but she certainly hadn't.

"Let's do one more round," I said. "Just to be on the safe side."

"Clara, there are people with vegetable patches bigger than this park. She's not here!"

One of the bin liners stirred. My heart jumped into my throat and I let out a startled squeak.

"What's wrong?" Oscar said.

I pointed. "There," I said. "It *moved*..."

The plastic fluttered in the wind, but that wasn't it. And now Oscar could see it too. A pointy, white head stuck out of the rubbish, a head with round, dark ears, blood-red eyes and whiskers longer than the width of its head.

"It's one of those... thingamajigs," he said. "Like weasels."

"A ferret," I said, and felt the February chill spread inside me. "It's Shanaia's..."



I squatted down on my haunches next to the bench and carefully extended my hand towards the ferret. It widened its jaw and hissed at me so I could see all its needle-sharp teeth. It wasn't until then that I realized that the pile of rubbish wasn't *all* rubbish. Under the cover of the black bags, I could see a shoulder sticking out of a torn leather jacket. That bit of denim among the milk cartons, pizza boxes and popcorn bags wasn't just a pair of old jeans someone had thrown away. It had a leg inside it. And now I saw a hand, a hand with pale fingertips and long, silver-painted nails protruding from a pair of cut-off black leather gloves with studs across the knuckles.

It was Shanaia.

"Is... is she dead?" Oscar asked. Woofer whined anxiously, then barked at the ferret and possibly also at Shanaia. Earlier he had wandered past the bench – twice – without taking any notice of the bin bags at all.

"Go away," I ordered the ferret sternly. "We're only trying to help her."

Perhaps I had become enough of a wildwitch for it to understand. At any rate, it graciously refrained from sinking its teeth into my hand as I started tossing rubbish and plastic aside so I could get a better look at Shanaia.

She was breathing.

Her eyes were closed and her face was as cold as ice, but she was breathing.

"She's not dead," I exclaimed with relief.

But what had happened to her?