

THE HUNTED

THE PHOENIX SERIES

PIP COOMES



Copyright © 2019 Philippa Coomes a.k.a. Pip Coomes

First published in 2019

Second Edition.

The moral right of the author have been asserted.

All Rights Reserved. Except as permitted under the Australian Copyright Act 1968, no part of this book may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, communicated or transmitted in any form or by any means without prior written permission of the publisher, except in the case of brief quotation embodied in critical reviews and certain other non-commercial uses permitted by copyright law.

All inquiries should be made to the publisher.

In The Clouds Publishing

www.inthecloudspublishing.com

Editor: Stephen Parolini

Cover Design: Kerry Ellis

Book Layout ©2017 BookDesignTemplates.com

The Hunted/ Pip Coomes. -- 2nd ed.

ISBN 978-0-6484583-0-2

DEDICATION

For Yuin, who inspired the first words to be written; Sachin, whose eyes widened at tales of owls when he should have been sleeping; and little Frieda, the bright and beautiful Mayflower.

PROLOGUE

In the beginning, it was Death who made sorrow and pain. It was Death who allowed life.

Bored, She swallowed the light until there was only darkness. In the absence of sunlight and warmth, unnatural beasts born of cold abandoned corpses rose as Death watched on and marvelled at Her work.

The creatures Death created in Her image were wild and beyond control so She confined them to an island and lifted The Great Darkness.

The island rained hail and snow, gales blew and ferocious storms battered the land. The island called upon all the natural elements to warn the few beings who inhabited the land of the arrival of an unnatural evil, objecting to their presence.

In time, these explosive protests became part of the natural order of an island of six seasons; vampires and creatures touched in different ways by magic. The magical powers hidden within the island grew strong and when the sun finally burst through the clouds, Death was forced to conceal Herself amongst the people.

Out of necessity, those gifted with magic started to be drawn towards one another. In all things, there must be balance.

There was one who was more gifted than the others, so powerful that the prophecy spoke of her coming long before she arrived

THE HUNTER AND THE HUNTED

~William~

Warm, golden rays of sun escaping from behind grey clouds burst through the white-paned window of William Phoenix's bedroom one late July evening. His bedroom was on the second storey of the home he shared with his mother and stepfather in leafy Tunbridge Wells, just outside of London.

William's mother, Grace, had been up to his room that afternoon, changing his sheets. The bed looked fluffy and inviting to a rain-soaked William, who had returned home exhausted following a six-mile run.

Earlier that afternoon William had noticed his mother fidgeting and cleaning nervously, as she always did when it rained. With each passing year he had felt an increasingly palpable anxiety permeating from Grace, except on blazingly hot summer days when it seemed like she allowed herself to breathe a little more deeply.

William had long ago increased the frequency of his runs, particularly during the darkening winter as the energy in the house deteriorated. It always seemed to him that the long, dark English winter

tested his mother's sanity. Getting out of the house gave him brief respite, even if his mother tried to stop him.

William was perplexed by his mother's apparent seasonal affective disorder. She had been born in Alaska and had relocated to the United Kingdom when she was a young child. To the best of William's knowledge, she had only ever lived in countries that experienced significant variations in weather and light with each passing season.

Graces' parents, Ethel and Morris Matheson, had died in a snow-storm on a return trip to Alaska when she was just eighteen. The grandparents he would never meet had been hiking when they disappeared.

William had heard the story of their disappearance many times. It had been used repeatedly as an excuse to stop him from running through the woods near their home. That afternoon, he had managed to sneak out the back door and to his favourite trail before she could stop him.

William had never seen a picture of his grandparents and had only ever seen one tattered photo of his father, Adelais, that remained buried in the depths of his mother's stocking drawer. A few years earlier, he had found his mother weeping while sitting on the edge of her bed, looking longingly at the photo. When she realised he was watching her, Grace stuffed the photo back into her drawer and hastily shut it, refusing to discuss what had upset her. Later, when she was cooking dinner, William went up to her room and saw the picture of his father for the first time.

On the few occasions William asked about his father, it was clear that Grace found his death enduringly painful. She struggled to speak of the man she had loved so dearly.

Adelais Phoenix had been a hunter. He had predominantly hunted wolves but also sought to rid farms of other pests, such as foxes, to protect local livestock. Before his death, Adelais had been in a forest, tracking wolves through thick snow. No one knew how he had met his end. All blood trails and tracks had long since disap-

peared under a layer of white powder by the time anyone realised he was missing. Adelais' body was never found.

When William pushed Grace for more details about his father, Grace admitted that she suspected the wolves had followed his scent through the snow and that the hunter had been overwhelmed by the hunted.

Adelais Phoenix was just twenty-six years old when he died.

William's earliest memory was growing up in a cramped apartment on Uxbridge Road in Shepherd's Bush. Their apartment was near the bustling local market and looked out over the main street.

From his bedroom, William could hear the underground passing through Shepherd's Bush Market station. At Christmas, he could see the glittering display lights at the local shopping mall from his bedroom window.

Even though the local bank was only a few hundred meters from their apartment, Grace had always dashed across the road and inside as quickly as she could. She never walked slowly or lingered to look in shop windows when she was out. William had thought, in hindsight, that his mother was slightly agoraphobic.

Grace seemed to have no friends and no desire to leave the house. She only relaxed slightly when in a large crowd or once the door to their home had been triple-bolted closed. Grace became agitated when William dawdled up the stairs to their apartment above the small co-operative supermarket.

Once inside the apartment, Grace would usually begin brewing a broth or meal heavy with garlic. She had also arranged one of her two living room chairs so she could keep an eye on the front door, which was only steps away.

Perhaps the most peculiar thing, William had often thought, was that her hair was always bound in a tight bun secured by an unusual pink wooden chopstick. She seemed oddly attached to the chopstick, which he had come to think of as strange because she only had one of what was undoubtedly once a pair.

William's bedroom in the cramped apartment was barely big enough for his small bed and a chest of drawers. One year, Grace had

bolted his bedroom window shut after she found him peering out at the world below.

As a young boy, William had often wondered why they didn't move to a safer area in London if his mother didn't feel secure in her own home. Whenever he asked her why they continued to live in Shepherd's Bush, she had only ever said that if he had lived through what she had survived in Alaska, he would never let his guard down, either. No matter how he probed, he was never given more information.

The years wore on, each day much the same as the one before, until one autumn day, when Grace told William over a dinner of lamb stew that, much to his horror, she was getting married again.

Grace married Aaron Hanson, a successful financier. The new family moved to Tunbridge Wells and slowly got used to each other. To William, who was then twelve years old, it took Aaron what felt like a lifetime to understand what it meant to be a stepfather.

The new family was also forced to tolerate an increase in Grace's weather-related anxiety.

When Aaron lost his job at the beginning of the year, he began using the family savings to trade privately to regain his wealth. Instead, he made one poor investment after another and the weeks turned into months. Over the course of nearly six months, Aaron had become more and more reliant on alcohol, slipping down a dark path of depression and self-loathing. William's resentment of the man grew, as Aaron began treating Grace with the same disdain that he also seemed to feel for his stepson.

On the newly-plumped pillow on William's perfectly-made bed, Grace had left a letter.

William sat on the edge of his bed, staring at the creased letter in his hands.

The writing on the front of the letter said, *'To our darling son, William'* in a hand that William did not recognise. He knew from the infused scent of garlic that Grace had likely had the letter for some time.

Grace had an unusual fixation with garlic. She put garlic in every-

thing. Aaron, complained endlessly about the lack of variety in the flavours she used in her cooking. In each corner of their square garden, she grew garlic. Few other vegetables, fruits, or flowers lined the fence. The trees that had been in the yard when they moved to Tunbridge Wells still stood but William had always thought this was to distract passers-by from noticing the ridiculous amounts of garlic.

Baskets of garlic sat at the front entrance of the house. Garlic also hung on hooks to dry beside the front door.

In the backyard, Grace had a small herb garden filled with plants, such as rosemary, thyme, and basil, but she rarely used these in her cooking. William was convinced that Grace, like any addict, was trying to conceal her issue—only this addict was trying to hide her problem behind rosemary.

The smell of garlic brought William back to the letter. He hooked his finger under the wolf-and-eagle-embossed wax seal and opened it slowly.

Dearest William,

Many years ago, we lived on the island of Lanhivellier, a country and world of its own. A place separate from the world you now know. As I write you this letter, we are preparing to leave to protect you from those who seek to find you. We may slip into the shadows and disappear from our world, but it is not out of fear for ourselves.

In my dreams, I see what you will become but fear I will not be there to watch it happen, and so I write this letter—just in case.

Before your eighteenth birthday, we will bid you farewell and send you to an academy in Lanhivellier, where they will teach you to control the magic inside you.

You will learn so much about who you are and the world you come from—a world that we intend to hide you from for as long as we can. Know that we shelter you only to protect you from the darkness that began overtaking Lanhivellier not long after you were born.

Our intention has always been to protect you for as long as possible, but when the time comes, you must return.

Wherever we end up, you will sleep with a wooden box under your

bed. Inside, you will find everything you need, and you must take it with you.

Do not be afraid. True heroes face their destiny and stare their tormentors in the eye. You cannot run from them. You can only learn to control your magic and fight for what is yours. If you do not go to them, they will come for you and you will lose everything.

Be brave, my beloved son.

Dad

A stream of thoughts flooded his mind.

This was a letter from his father, a man he had never known. The hand of the man he had longed to know about for so many years had touched this paper, and yet he had learnt nothing more about his father from it, except that he had predicted his own death and wrote with a basic, block-style scrawl.

William read the letter over and over, trying to make sense of it.

We will bid you farewell and send you to school in Lanhivellier, where they will teach you all you need to control the magic inside you.

‘Magic?’ William whispered to himself.

William could do a few magic tricks, but they were just that—tricks. If not tricks, they were just coincidences. He had once willed a chair to break under his stepfather, and it had, but that was just a strange coincidence.

William turned back to the letter.

Wherever we end up, you will sleep with a wooden box under your bed.

Suddenly, William had a flashback to the day of his mother's wedding to Aaron. She had been pulling up some of the creaky wooden floorboards in his room, looking for something.

He stood up and threw the letter on his bed.

When he crouched down by his bed, William spotted a glint of gold. He reached towards the paper that had caught his eye and

picked up a thick, gold-embossed ticket which allowed passage for one person to Lanhivellier on *The Sire* vessel on the 31st of July 2017.

Putting the ticket on his bed beside the letter, William began stepping heavily on each floorboard around his bed, searching for a loose one.

At the end of his bed, a slightly discoloured floorboard lifted a fraction of an inch away from the floor. He grabbed a pair of scissors from a nearby table and jammed them forcefully into the gap, trying to wedge the floorboard up. The scissors bent and squeaked under the effort, but slowly, the floorboard lifted. Once he had levered it up, William tossed the piece of wood across the floor, ignoring the grating noise it made as an old nail scraped the floorboards. He forced his hand into the hole, searching for anything that might help him make sense of this strange, garlic-scented letter.

William's searching hand found something square and wooden, and impatiently, he heaved another floorboard until it broke with a loud crack. Again, he tossed the floorboard out of the way before finally bringing the box up and placing it on his bed.

It was an almost eerie, silver-coloured, white gum rectangular box with a heavy, Celtic-style pattern engraved on the sides, framing his initials:

'W. A. P.'

William carefully pried the box open and placed the top beside him on the bedsheets. Inside the shallow, red velvet-lined box was a long white feather, two small phials of what looked like blood, and a square, black leather ring box with an ornate silver latch. Inside this smaller box was an antique, white-gold, emerald-and-diamond ring.

Confused, he removed it from the box to look at it more closely.

The central emerald was an oval cabochon cut with fault lines swirling through the centre of the stone. Two brilliant-cut solitaire diamonds sat on each side of the emerald. Tiny, glittering diamonds wound around each stone, creating a pattern similar to a double infinity symbol. The thin, white-gold band was so small that it barely slid more than halfway down William's index finger.

William's contemplation of the ring and the meaning of the letter

was abruptly interrupted by the sounds of his mother and stepfather fighting in the living room.

As he crept slowly down the stairs, he could hear his mother begging, 'No more, Aaron. You're drinking too much.' The thud of her being pushed against a wall was more than William could bear.

William flew down the stairs, livid at the thought of his mother being hurt by his alcoholic stepfather again. As he burst into the living room, Aaron spun around, face flushed from drinking, and glared at William.

'Look who's come to save the day,' Aaron slurred and stumbled towards William, the buttons on his shirt straining to contain his stomach.

William began to focus on the bottle of whiskey in Aaron's hands, willing it to break. As if Aaron had gripped the bottle too tightly, it shattered, slicing open his sweaty palm.

Rich, red blood flowed out of Aaron's hand, gushing out of his clenched fist. A fraction of a second before the first drop of blood hit the white carpet, it stopped, hovering in mid-air unnaturally.

Grace walked towards him.

'Stop! You have to get control of your emotions, William. You cannot use magic here,' she said. She collected the airborne drops of blood with an empty glass, moving it up through the air toward each drop, effortlessly collecting the stalled cascade.

William watched in silent, open mouthed shock as his mother moved and his stepfather stood frozen in time, his face still flushed red with rage.

'All magic leaves traces and I've been trying to leave as few traces as possible.' There was an air of urgency in her voice. 'I've been waiting for the right time to show myself to you. There is magic that runs through your blood, magic that you must learn to control and to do that you need to take control of your emotions. William, everything you dreamt of as a child...' she paused. 'It's all true. Many of your dreams have threads from your earliest childhood memories.'

As William watched, dumbfounded, Grace pulled a perfect pink wand—not a chopstick as William had always thought—from her

dark brown hair, letting it fall to her shoulders. Gently moving her wand around the shards of glass, William watched as the glass pieces obeyed his mother's command and slowly came together to reconstruct the formerly shattered whiskey bottle.

Grace then touched her wand to the lip of her husband's glass. No sooner had she finished tracing the rim than the whiskey slowly disappeared into thin air.

William stood transfixed as his mother opened Aaron's palm and traced the wound with her pink wand, sealing it, as though the injury had never existed. She turned sharply toward William and said, 'Close your mouth, William.' Within a second, she had bound her hair back up into its usual bun, securing the pink wand firmly.

William braced himself for the unknown, and with a click of Grace's fingers, the spell lifted, and Aaron was baffled to discover his whiskey bottle was empty.

'Grace, where's my whiskey? What have you done with my whiskey?' Aaron quickly became more red-faced and agitated.

'You finished it. You were just going out to get more. Here are your keys and your wallet.' Grace offered him his car keys and wallet, as if what she was saying was true. William didn't move, his body bound to its place in shock.

Aaron snatched his keys from her hands, spun around, and trudged angrily to the front door. The car door slammed loudly as Aaron got behind the wheel to go down to the shops. Grace guided William back up the stairs.

'Come, William. We don't have much time.'

'Mum, what the hell is going on? How can you let Aaron drive when he's that drunk?'

'Never mind him,' Grace waved her hand dismissively.

'What about the other people on the road?' William asked horrified.

'William!' Grace snapped sharply. 'We don't have time for this. I know this must be confusing,' Grace implored as she rushed up the stairs and into William's room where she picked up his ticket for *The*

Sire. ‘There is no way for me to properly explain this without sounding insane—you just have to trust me.

‘You need to go to Lanhivellier to train as a wizard. You see,’ her voice was higher and filled with pride, ‘you are the same as me. I know you think the things you can do are just tricks, but they’re not. You’re becoming stronger as you age.’

‘What?’ William said, feeling overwhelmed by everything he was hearing while simultaneously determining his mother was definitely losing her mind.

‘William, you were born inside the castle, but we hid in the mountains of Lanhivellier by The Gates of Hell—a place where few will venture and even fewer survive. Your father and I hid you there for some time before we planned to take you south—away from the island.’

Grace gently reached out and touched her son's cheek but he pushed her hand away, unable to fully grasp what she was telling him.

‘To try and escape our past, we knew we had to blend in, to put our magic away and live the most normal lives we could while still protecting you, but we couldn’t do that in Lanhivellier.

‘We thought London would let your father be close to his family while being far enough away that the two of us could protect you.’ Grace paused as she tried to fight the tears welling in her eyes. ‘We thought your scent would be diluted in London. We thought you would be safe.’

She quickly brushed away the tears that had begun streaming down her face.

‘Your father died before we escaped and since then, I have been the only one to protect you, but I have followed the plan we set for you. I would have hidden you in the south of Spain, where the summer sun burns so strongly that you cannot hide in the shadows for long, but...’

Grace gently stroked the side of his face again before continuing. ‘Everything you’ve ever read is true. Witches, vampires, trolls—they all exist, and you’re a part of that world. A part of *our* world.’

William rubbed his temples and lay back on the bed. ‘What if I don’t *want* to be part of that world? This all sounds ridiculous.’

Grace cupped her son’s cheek in her hand and kissed him warmly. ‘You can’t tell me you want to be here, with Aaron. I know you have not always been happy here.’

‘I hear what you’re thinking, William. That’s one of my gifts. I’ve always known, my love.’

‘Once your father died, I struggled to conceal you without it becoming obvious. With Aaron here, they are less suspicious. His smell is stronger than ours.’

‘They? Smell? What?’ William was shaking his head, struggling to align the world his mother was describing and what he had always believed to be true.

‘Listen, William. You need to go to Lanhivellier, so you can learn to protect yourself and so you can be protected.’

Before William could protest, Grace continued. ‘I am not strong enough to protect you and teach you by myself. You must go. You have no choice. If you don’t, they will eventually find us.’

‘Who is they?’ William protested.

‘You have so much to learn. I hope that you will understand when...’ her voice trailed off into a whisper.

As William stared at his mother, trying to understand everything she was saying, he heard Aaron’s car returning in the distance. The vehicle ground to an awkward halt in the gravel driveway and Grace left the room.

THE SIRE

~William~

At three o'clock the next morning, William was roused by Grace, who had silently packed his soft, khaki-coloured bag with a few of his belongings. She had wrapped his white gum box in a glittering, gold-beaded throw, thrusting it under his arm as they left the house after he had quickly dressed in blue jeans, old Nike sneakers, and a black woollen jumper.

Almost as soon as he got in the car, William fell asleep, revisiting a dream he had seen many times over the years. In his dream, he saw a baby playing in luscious green grass, and he could hear laughter in the background.

Suddenly, the laughing baby was swept off the ground and into the arms of a woman in a purple dress. William watched the scene through the eyes of the baby, becoming fascinated by the large, bejewelled pendant the woman wore. The necklace featured a large, dark purple stone laced with flickers of blue and surrounded by emeralds and diamonds, hanging on a heavy gold chain.

As the baby reached up to grab the pendant, he heard the wild

growl of a dog but did not turn around. Instead, the baby stretched its tiny, chubby arms as far as it could to touch the necklace.

The next scenes of the dream always happened quickly. William heard the pained cry of the dog before its massive, headless body slumped lifelessly to the ground. He heard the wild, primal scream of a woman and saw a blast of violent blue flames. The flames were so close he could feel his skin beginning to burn and the sting of tears welling in his eyes. Most disturbingly, he could smell flesh burning.

With a start, William woke to find himself sweating profusely, as he always did when he had this dream.

A cold gust of a salty sea breeze burst through the small opening of the car window.

‘We’re here.’ Grace spoke solemnly, pain etched on her face.

A soft glow was dancing on the sea as the sun started rising and gusts of wind rattled the car windows. William could see other figures, some laden with heavy bags or trunks, making their way across empty farmland. They were walking towards one solitary boat, a tall ship that sat bobbing on the otherwise deserted shoreline.

The boat was leaving just north of Stranraer in Scotland from the edge of a cove, where they would not be noticed, not even by the earliest rising farmers. William was amazed that somehow, under the cover of darkness, they had driven from Tunbridge Wells to Scotland. Before he could ask how this was possible, Grace opened the car door and got out.

She led the way, slowly making her way across the field. William walked behind Grace, loathing the idea of leaving her, as well as the idea of getting on a tall ship.

‘You will slip between Scotland and Ireland and head northwest. Lanhivellier is largely unknown by Parvi—more traditional humans than you or I.’ She gently cupped his face in her hand, leaning in to kiss him softly on his cheek.

William ran his hands through his hair and then rubbed his face in disbelief as he surveyed the scene before him.

After a few moments Grace nudged him to move towards the boat.

‘What will happen to you, Mum?’

‘What do you mean?’

‘Aaron,’ William spat out his stepfather’s name, such were his feelings of hatred towards him.

‘We disappeared in the middle of the night, didn’t we?’ Grace smiled cheekily. ‘He has served his purpose.’ She paused and wrapped an arm lovingly around her son before gazing out over the water as the early morning sun flickered and danced over the waves. ‘He will wake up, and it will be as though we never existed. We’ve left no trace, not even a memory.’ Grace half-smiled. ‘You never really thought I loved him, did you?’

‘At one time, I thought you did.’ William spoke the words almost sheepishly.

‘There are different types of love,’ she said despondently. ‘Your father is the only man I ever really loved and when you give your heart to someone like that, you never really get it back.’

‘What will you do?’

‘Wait.’

‘For what?’ Confusion crept into William’s voice.

‘For a time when you need me again.’

Grace picked up the gold-beaded throw that had fallen at William’s feet.

‘Don’t lose this, my love,’ she said soothingly. ‘You will need it.’

‘I’ll need a gold, sparkly—whatever this is?’ William looked at the material, unable to imagine a time where he would ever use or wear something like it.

Grace nodded and smiled.

Giving William another gentle push towards the boat, she said quietly, ‘Go. You’ll miss the boat if you don’t hurry. We will be together again soon.’

With more than one look over his shoulder, William moved slowly down the hill towards the boat, his bag slung over his shoulder, and his wooden box tucked securely under his arm. Grace stood unmoving at the top of the hill, her shoulder-length, chocolate brown

hair blowing behind her in the breeze, the first rays of the morning sun making it look almost like caramel.

Climbing onto the rocking ship, William looked again for Grace. She was unrecognisable from such a distance, but he knew the figure standing on the hill was his mother. He also knew that she would stand there until she could no longer see the boat, well after all the other parents had disappeared.

A limping old man with a cigar hanging out of his mouth and a black woollen beanie pulled down to his long, bushy eyebrows pushed William forward onto the boat and began pulling up the ramp behind him. As he heaved the ramp upwards, puffs of his cigar smoke blew into William's face, and a chunk of ash landed softly on his shoe.

'Get yerself out of the way, laddie,' the man said with a thick Scottish accent.

A tall Spaniard appeared to William's right. He was in his mid-twenties and at least six feet tall, with an athletic, muscular build and long, wavy brown hair that was pulled back into a ponytail. He walked towards William and guided him over to a group of students who were moving below decks.

'You can put your things underneath,' he said, running his hands over the stubble on his chin.

The man yelled something in Spanish to a group nearby as he pulled on a black leather jacket before joining them, clasping hands and quickly embracing a few other men, whom William presumed must be students. The other men were all wearing long, billowing black cloaks, and thick gloves as they stood together, locked in an animated conversation that William could not understand.

William went below decks and stuffed his wooden box, wrapped in the golden-beaded throw, into his bag and tossed it into an enormous pile of bags, satchels, and trunks before going back upstairs. As he walked past the group, the Spaniard turned and extended his hand.

'Jorge Morillo.' Jorge grasped William's hand firmly.

‘William Phoenix.’ William smiled, relieved to have made an acquaintance. ‘Are you a student?’

‘Master’s student.’

‘Master’s?’

‘Yes. You do one year to be a graduate, no? Then you can do some more.’ As Jorge spoke, his left eyebrow arched and wrinkled his forehead.

Jorge slapped William on the back in a friendly gesture before he moved back to his group of friends, one of whom threw him a black woollen beanie, which he promptly pulled on.

William moved towards a group of students who looked roughly his age and were standing along the railing, some looking overboard, others looking up at the sails, which had burst open with a loud, rippling noise as the ship moved away from the cove.

Tentatively, William edged beside a short girl with a black bob haircut and severe fringe. She was peering through something that looked like a periscope.

‘Don’t you have to be underneath the water for periscopes to work?’ William chuckled nervously.

The girl snorted.

‘I’m William.’

‘Hattie,’ the girl said in a strong Scottish accent without bothering to look at William. Instead, she peered intently into the periscope.

‘Nice to meet you. So...’ He paused. ‘What can you see with that thing?’

‘It’s a Guilderknot. It lets you look across huge distances to see your destination, even if you’re not looking directly at it. Traditional scopes need to be lined up with what you want to look at.’

‘What do you see?’

‘Well, clearly, I can see Lanhivellier.’ She pulled back briefly from the Guilderknot. ‘Bad weather, though.’

‘How long will it take us to get there?’ William had never liked boats and did not like the sound of impending severe weather.

‘It’s a few hours away,’ Hattie said nonchalantly.

‘How is that possible?’

‘Well, this isn’t exactly a standard boat.’ Hattie raised her eyebrows in mild irritation, as if she was talking to an idiot and was trying to refrain from rolling her eyes. She motioned towards the shore.

William turned around. He could barely see the shoreline.

‘Normally, it takes about three-and-a half-hours, but with that storm, I’d say we’ll be stuck out here a little longer.’

‘What’s the capital of Lanhivellier?’

Hattie scoffed, this time unable to stop herself from rolling her eyes.

‘Do you seriously not know anything?’

William shrugged and shook his head.

‘Well this is going to be fun for you,’ Hattie’s eyes widened in astonishment before she spun on her heels and disappeared into a nearby crowd, all of whom she obviously knew.

William did not have to strain to hear her imitating him to her laughing friends.

Somewhat deflated, William leaned on the railing and looked back towards the disappearing coastline.

The boat cut quickly through the choppy water, creating vast amounts of whitewash. Ice-cold water splashed up onto William’s face as he slumped over the railing, his stomach beginning to churn and his eyes struggling to focus.

Trying to see if he could ease his sea-sickness by watching the horizon, William staggered to the front of the boat and found the steering wheel spinning wildly, completely unattended.

The Captain, whose face was etched with deep wrinkles, was making his way around the boat, as the trusty *Sire* appeared to independently steer itself towards its destination. As the Captain hobbled around the wet deck, he offered those who were not feeling sick sandwiches and fruit to eat or save for later. The smell of food made William’s stomach heave.

He began to sway until he was forced to cling to the railing, staring into the swirling black water.

Over and over, his stomach seemed to flip, lurch, and heave, and

he felt his face slowly drain of colour as the waves bullied the speeding ship, slapping spectacularly against *The Sire's* sides

After being sick over the edge multiple times, William was guided down beneath the decks by the old Captain and pushed onto an extremely narrow bed. The beds were end-to-end and stacked on top of each other. Three beds created one swaying bunk. Most beds were now filled with students who looked as unwell as William felt. Some had their heads in buckets and they moaned and tried not to fall out of bed each time another enormous wave slammed the boat.

William curled up into the foetal position and gripped onto his own plastic bucket. He tried to get his head down low towards his knees and just focus on his breathing.

Soon, William passed out.

AT FIRST SIGHT

~William~

An old, rusty bus creaked loudly as it stopped at the top of the cliffs that surrounded the small dock. William's body swayed as he looked up at the bus where it waited for the large group of students at the edge of a forest. The forest was sparsely covered with red and orange leaves that marked the end of autumn. Discarded, browning leaves floated down from the cliff tops and blew around the docks, crunching loudly underfoot as William cautiously followed the other students, the ground feeling decidedly unstable.

The port consisted of two long jetties and a small, dilapidated wooden office with broken windows. William peered inside the office where a glass lantern crackled, its warm yellow light pulsing and flickering as the wind howled around the building. Leaves whirled around the building and tiny flakes of glittering, powdery snow began stinging William's cheeks.

A weather-beaten man spat a sticky, dark brown substance onto the ground at William's feet and staggered towards *The Sire* to catch the ropes and bind them around three tall, concrete bollards.

To William's amazement at least a dozen witches and wizards

mounted broomsticks they removed from the office building and flew off into the distance.

The new students, some of whom were still decidedly green, staggered off the boat and stared up at the towering wall of cliff edge, its top partially obscured by a dense fog. William moved amongst the gathered students and watched as those more familiar with the island began clambering up the vertical pillars of stone to reach the waiting bus. The stone columns appeared to have strained under pressure, some having snapped off to create stepping stone-like access points for those who wished to scramble to the top.

Once aboard the bus, William moved slowly down the aisle before finally collapsing into a seat. He closed his eyes and pressed a hand against his stomach as the bus sped up and the twists and turns of the track became more severe, the back of the vehicle sliding when they accelerated.

Thunderous, dense, dark grey clouds started to descend on a distant mountain, black, William presumed, from years of volcanic eruptions. The bus careened downhill on a smooth, dusty pathway before suddenly veering uphill onto a steep path that looked like an emergency exit to slow out-of-control vehicles.

William's weary head bounced against the window as the bus changed direction sharply and headed towards a wall of thick, ancient pine trees. The track became an uneven, stone-covered hill.

A cracking thump of his head against the window forced William to open his eyes, his stomach still not quite recovered from his adventures aboard *The Sire*.

He noticed that the snow had stopped falling.

Veering over a rough dirt track, the bus failed to slow as it approached the thick forest, clanging and clattering over rocks and rubble. William clutched his father's wooden box on his lap, no longer wrapped in the gold-beaded material he had stuffed in his bag on the boat, wincing and bracing himself for impact with the trees.

The student next to him turned and smiled.

'You seemed to be in and out of sleep,' she said as William

became lost momentarily in her beautiful, warm, light brown eyes. 'You must not have heard what they said about the exit.'

She pointed at the oncoming trees and they parted like stage curtains, revealing a lightly gravelled road. The bus jerked with an awful grinding sound that made William flinch.

'The castle is on the other side of this forest,' she said. The bus wound almost effortlessly up a relatively small mountain on the narrow, twisting pathway, stuttering occasionally when the driver shifted gears. 'The driver said that we are about half an hour away. I'm Penelope Elderson, by the way.'

Penelope thrust her hand into William's, clasping it firmly, and beaming a radiant smile.

Apparently sensing William's nerves, Penelope added, 'Don't worry, it will be fine.'

The bus wound down a narrow gravel path surrounded by tall pine trees. They drove through the forest, the trail disappearing as the trees closed the road, leaving no sign of their tracks.

'This is my twin brother Nathaniel.' Penelope indicated towards the floppy, chocolate brown haired boy, with dark eyes who was sitting in front of them.

Wearily William reached out to shake Nathaniel's hand.

'Hattie said this is all new to you. I mean...' Penelope appeared to be searching for the right words.

'You don't have to be diplomatic,' William mumbled. 'I know what Hattie said. I don't know anything. I don't even know where we're going.'

'We're on our way to the Orphealii Academy of Magic,' Nathaniel said. William leaned forward and pressed his head into the seat in front of him.

'Don't you guys feel sick?' he moaned.

'We've been to Lanhivellier a few times before. The first time was the worst for us too,' Penelope said sympathetically.

'You guys don't look like twins,' William sat up and looked at them. He rubbed his temples with his hands.

'We're not identical,' Nathaniel smirked. 'We have the same nose

and we both have three freckles in the shape of a triangle on the exact same place on our left biceps—but other than that...’

William did his best to ignore the pounding in his head while the twins talked about their upbringing. They had been raised by two English wizards but had never lived in one location for more than two weeks.

Their father, Oin Elderson, had continued the traveling family business of selling exotic and magical animals across Europe to known wizarding communities.

‘How did you not get spotted?’ William asked in disbelief. ‘Surely if you’re travelling with dragons someone would have seen you.’

‘Of course we were seen,’ Nathaniel sighed somewhat impatiently.

‘Dad cast Pertorqueo charms over us and the animals,’ Penelope explained unhelpfully.

‘Porto-what?’

‘Pertorqueo charms,’ Penelope said, her honey brown eyes sparkling. ‘It’s like a spell that distorts the truth. People saw us as a gypsy family on the move with horses and carts.’

William shook his head, certain he was trapped in a ridiculously realistic dream that did not make sense and that he could not wake up from.

‘So, you just cruised about Europe dragging a bunch of strange creatures behind you? You know that sounds completely absurd right?’

‘To you, maybe,’ Nathaniel retorted quickly.

‘It’s not quite as weird as it sounds,’ Penelope said. ‘Dad and Nathaniel exercise the dragons and check their scales every day—which, granted, can be a little dangerous but it’s not too bad. Mum and I work with the other animals. It is just taking care of your pets. They’re just different pets to what you’re used to.’

‘You don’t say.’ William almost laughed.

Penelope explained that the twins had a telepathic connection. While they could read each other’s thoughts, her gift was stronger. Penelope was able to search every corner of Nathaniel’s mind, but if

she caught him rummaging in *her* mind, she could block him out and protect her deepest thoughts.

‘What do you mean, *block him out*?’ William asked.

‘She can shut down my access to her mind,’ Nathaniel answered. ‘And when she does, all I see is darkness. It’s like someone just turned off the lights.’

‘Sometimes it’s harder to do than others, like if I’m tired, or stressed or physically impaired in some way.’ Penelope shrugged.

‘Can you block her out?’

‘It’s a bit more difficult for me.’ Nathaniel’s tone suggested he didn’t particularly want to explain why.

‘I have three main ways of blocking her out. The most immediate and complete way is for me to really concentrate on it. I can’t do anything else at the same time—I can’t even walk. I could also cast a blinding spell but neither of us have wands yet so that’s not an option.’

‘What’s the third way?’ William asked curious.

‘He manipulates the image.’ Penelope’s voice was quiet. ‘He distorts the image or the story so it becomes darker. They can be quite vivid and realistic—to the point where I actively want to get out of his mind because I don’t want to have that experience.’

‘At first I could tell the image wasn’t as crisp, so I knew it wasn’t real. But now...’ her voice faded away.

Nathaniel shrugged. ‘I’ve got to have some protection. Otherwise, she’s just in there all the time, having a poke around. A guy’s got to have some privacy.’

When her brother turned back around to take a huge bite of a sandwich, Penelope leaned so close to William that he thought he could feel her long, dark eyelashes on his cheek. He dared not turn towards her.

‘At first, I thought all the dark images I saw were fake. I thought he was using them to punish me, but now...’ She paused. ‘Now, I think some of them are real.’

William was surprised to find himself able to accept what the twins were saying. He couldn’t think of anything more extraordinary

and unlikely than the stories they were telling him. And yet, here he was, in this strange place among witches and wizards, talking about dragons and mind-reading. He shook his head and returned to the present.

‘How bad are the things he shows you?’ William turned slightly towards Penelope, but she did not move away and kept her voice barely audible.

‘Some of them are...’ She shuddered. ‘He’s become darker as he’s gotten older. I can’t tell what’s real and what isn’t anymore, so I just withdraw from his mind. The trouble is, he now uses that against me, and he’s learnt how to force me to see certain things that he knows upset me.’

Nathaniel spoke without turning around. ‘You might think it’s cruel, Penny, but I shouldn’t have to suffer because you like to stick your nose where it doesn’t belong. Repeatedly.’

Penelope offered a half-hearted smile and rolled her eyes as she tied her long caramel coloured hair up.

William listened as the twins told more of their story.

While the telepathic abilities the twins possessed did not extend towards other people, they had never been able to attend a typical school. Instead, they had lived a nomadic lifestyle against their mother’s wishes.

They had briefly tried to stay in the town of their birth, a place where their mother had lived undetected as a witch for almost a decade while she worked as a vet. Nathaniel said that she had hated her husband’s lifestyle and family business and desperately hoped to give her children a normal life. However, she had feared, upon the birth of twins, that this would not be possible. Sure enough, when the children proved to be more connected than average twins, Meredith had agreed to re-join Oin’s family and their animal trade.

When passing through small towns, Meredith had attempted to expose her children to aspects of the Parvi world. While toddlers, they had tried to pass their gift off as a regular twin connection, but it soon became difficult to convince even the dimmest of the Parvi. Penelope also had the gift of fire, a gift she apparently had a great

deal of difficulty controlling as a child. Their gifts forced the Eldersons to hide their children, awaiting the notification of the twins' acceptance into the Orpheelii Academy of Magic.

'How do they notify you?'

Penelope's eyes narrowed slightly. 'They notify everyone by mail. How were you notified?'

'Mail, I guess,' William offered weakly. 'My mother gave me a letter from my father, and it had a ticket for *The Sire* in it. That was the first I'd heard of any of this.'

Penelope explained that when a witch or a wizard was born, their names were automatically registered on an enrolment list. As the child aged, if their gift developed into something significant, the list would reshuffle, with the most gifted or uncontrollable witches and wizards being brought to the academy first, regardless of age, nationality, or their family's economic situation.

When the witch or wizard reached the top of the enrolment list, a letter would arrive, inviting them to enroll at the Orpheelii Academy of Magic the following semester. Once the parents or the child opened the offer, it was binding.

Each enrolled student was to undergo specific training designed to help them acquire the skills required to defend themselves and the magical community from the threat posed by the swelling vampire army. Nathaniel explained that the students would undergo significant physical combat training. They would also be trained in jinxes, hexes, and defensive spells, including anti-jinxes that may help protect them in the event of an attack. Once they completed their mandatory year of training, they had the option of studying additional subjects to meet specific occupational requirements, or they could graduate if they received a passing grade for all training subjects.

Penelope explained that no strong magical being was allowed to go without at least one year of classes, which would teach them to control their power. While the academy preferred parental consent, if the gifts of the child were strong enough, the Gate Keeper would come for them, whether an entrance letter found them or not.

According to Penelope, the Gate Keeper was both a Tracker and a Seeker, and therefore, it was pointless trying to evade him.

If the child's gift did not develop, and no enrolment offer ever arrived. Some went on to build their tricks and illusions and move to places like Las Vegas, as they searched for meaning in their ability and income to source their fascination with the world of magic. Some had even been reported to mistake their mild telepathy with crossing to the other side and communicating with the dead.

William continued to listen with intent, more surprised than ever that he was coping with all the revelations that came with this new world. Somehow it all seemed... right. Nathaniel turned around again and looked William in the eyes, 'So, what can you do?'

'I only found out about all this yesterday,' William said. 'I mean, I think I've willed a few chairs to break, but that's about it.'

'You travelled from America yesterday?' Penelope asked, seemingly shocked.

'No. My mother is American but I grew up in England. I was home-schooled before high school.'

'Is your mother gifted?' Nathaniel asked. Scepticism laced in his question.

Penelope glared at her brother. William suspected the twins were using their telepathy to argue about William's justification for entry. By the look on Nathaniel's face, he had already judged it as insufficient.

'She healed a wound on my stepfather's hand and reformed a glass I had smashed,' William offered quietly, deciding not to offer Nathaniel the full details of that moment.

'That's cool,' Nathaniel said, his disinterest thinly veiled.

'Do you not see many American witches and wizards?' William asked.

'Sometimes,' Penelope shrugged. 'They can come from all over but it's more common that they come from countries near Lanhivellier.' Penelope looked down at the box on William's lap and gently ran her fingers over the place where his initials were carved. She looked

back up at him with her inquisitive brown eyes. ‘What’s in the box, William?’

‘A bunch of random things. A feather, a ring, a letter from my dad. Apparently, my parents seemed to think I’ll need all these things, but I don’t know what I’m going to do with an emerald ring.’

‘I’d be happy to take it off your hands,’ Penelope said with a mischievous smile. ‘Don’t worry, William. There’s obviously some reason you were invited to OAM. In time, you’ll find out why.’

As the bus rounded yet another narrow corner, William could make out a castle on the edge of a cliff in the far distance. The coach continued to make smooth progress through the dense forest, the fog having lifted not long after the snow stopped falling.

With the sun slowly disappearing, a soft glow fell over the castle, creating a spectacular lighting effect. A narrow, tall, central tower glowed in the light like radiant ivory, causing the students to stir with nervous excitement.

‘What time is it?’ William stammered, without looking away from the beautiful castle.

‘It’s just after one o’clock, but it is the shortest day of the year. Twilight lasts for a few hours instead of just moments. It will get dark around four o’clock,’ Penelope replied, also staring in wonder at the castle. ‘Soon, it will be wintertime.’

William surveyed the castle in wonderment. It was defined by four main defensive towers on each corner of the tall, thick, white stone walls. Narrow slivers of space created by many carved fleur de lis were designed to allow archers to send arrows soaring into the field surrounding the castle, while staying protected from any response. At least that’s what William assumed they were for, based on his limited knowledge of castles.

The primary central structure sat inside the high walls, with towers of various heights and widths soaring towards the darkening autumn sky.

The castle was precariously placed on the edge of a cliff, overlooking a black lake, surrounded by mountains and pine forest as far as the eye could see. A narrow ivory tower stood above all the rest in

the very centre of the castle grounds, with a 360-degree view of the surrounding land from a small balcony wrapping around the top chamber.

As they approached the castle, William studied the beautiful ivory tower more closely. The roof appeared to be decorated with stone eagles captured in flight, wings spread, scattered across the surface, as if guarding the tower. The longer he stared at it, the more the tower seemed to glow, as if it had a pulse.

A long bridge led the bus across the narrowest part of the lapping black lake to a rocky path leading up the steep mountainside towards the castle. As the bus approached the imposing walls of the castle, a muscular man in his sixties emerged from a small, built-up cottage beside the drawbridge.

The grey-bearded man effortlessly floated down the unusual, winding, snake-like staircase from his front door. He moved towards the bus, nodded at the driver, and pointed his heavy wooden staff at the castle wall, then slammed its point into the ground at his feet with a thud that moved through the bus like a shockwave.

A long, dark, wooden drawbridge appeared slowly from the stone wall, then dropped with a thud to create a path across the moat, which remained unfrozen, despite the cold temperatures and the bite in the air. The moat looped around the castle in a U-shape, appearing to end at the cliff, creating two torrential waterfalls on either side of the castle.

Despite the water gushing over the edge of the cliff, the enchanted moat never seemed to empty. William noticed in surprise that the water pouring off the cliff disappeared into nothing more than a fine mist, never crashing onto the ground below.

The bus pulled up beside the drawbridge and the stiff folding doors opened to allow the students off the bus, the driver urging them to hurry. The older students—including Jorge Morillo—were off the bus and across the drawbridge quickly and without hesitation. William sensed urgency in their movement.

William grabbed his belongings and jogged across the drawbridge and into the courtyard, looking up at the magnificent archway

that had thousands of lotus flowers etched into the ancient white stone. The courtyard was flooded with young faces as the number of curious onlookers began to swell. With a deafening, creaking noise, the drawbridge suddenly snapped shut and disappeared into the white stone wall to disguise the entrance to the castle once again.

In one corner of the enclosed courtyard was a large fountain with an overhanging willow tree. Other bare weeping willows surrounded by stone garden edges were scattered throughout the courtyard.

William looked around in disbelief at the place he was now to call home.

The courtyard was divided by a black, V-shaped stone path that led directly from the enormous castle doors to the two defensive towers near the cliff edge. An almost M-shaped path started at two enormous doors at the front of the castle and wrapped around the castle walls, leading towards the other two towers. The pathway to the towers was paved in coarse, black tiles that stood out from the sandstone paving which covered the rest of the courtyard.

The beautiful weeping willows appeared almost frozen, with their long, thin branches hanging down, delicately stroking the ground in the gentle breeze. Some of the branches had captured water drops, creating a sparkling, beaded appearance.

As he surveyed the grounds, pure white snow started falling again, gently covering everything except the black pathways, which stayed clean and dry, untouched by the falling snow. The trees were eerily beautiful, but it was a soft, golden glow from the fountain that caught William's eye.

The fountain had crystal-clear water bubbling over a series of jagged grey boulders that were balanced precariously on top of each other much higher than the surrounding pool. In the middle of the rock feature, there appeared to be a glowing light, flickering as the water obscured it from clear sight. The light pulsed like a heartbeat. He was captivated by it and strangely calm as he continued to watch the light flicker. He wondered why no one else seemed to have noticed.

The castle walls had flights of stairs at each end, which led up to a

platform that ran along the wall. William took in the wall of weapons with open-mouthed awe. Sheaths of arrows were attached beside every fleur de lis. Bows balanced on hooks along the wall, ready to be lifted at a moment's notice. Beside each tower's entry or exit point were racks covered in weapons, from wooden spears and stakes to arrows, almost all of them made at least partially of wood. Each tower also had Guilderknots much like the one Hattie had used on *The Sire* that were being checked periodically by the defenders.

He followed Penelope and Nathaniel to retrieve his khaki-green soft bag. With his white gum box under his left arm, he slung his bag over his shoulder and followed the mass of students towards the giant doors at the front of the castle. As the sun began to set behind the thick, grey clouds, a soft haze of white fog descended on the emptying courtyard.

William passed through the Great Doors, marvelling at their vastness, five times his size. As he entered through the doors, a witch smiled warmly. She firmly said, 'Propinquus ianua' and whipped her wand in the direction of the doors.

A wrought iron defensive gate slid across the doorway, and an electric field sparked to life upon it. Then the heavy wooden doors swung closed, the sound echoing down the hallway and silencing the students as the witch instructed them on how to find the Hall of Mysteries.

William noticed Jorge sitting with a large group of much older witches and wizards at the back of the Hall as he entered. They eyed the returning and new students carefully.

Penelope led William and Nathaniel to the pews at the front of the enormous hall, where students were nervously shuffling into their seats. An intense beam of sunlight rained all the colours of the spectrum through an enormous stained-glass window, painting the stage and the pews below.

In the same way a magnifying glass focuses to create a burning ray of light, the sunrays shifted focusing on one point on the stage, slowly smoking more intensely, before a green flame burst from the floor.

An aged and weathered wizard in a heavy, dark blue cloak appeared in the flame. An awed silence fell over the crowd as the wizard pulled his cloak violently over the fire to extinguish it.

The wizard moved with an ivory staff in his left hand and a wand of ebony in his right. He limped slowly towards the steps that led down the centre path, dividing the pews.

The wizard's hair had wisps of colour that hinted at a long-ago strawberry-blonde that was now almost entirely white. Around his head, he wore a golden band that rested securely on the middle of his forehead. Along the intricately engraved band were emeralds, sapphires, and pink and white diamonds. In the centre was a large tanzanite stone of a rich indigo colour.

William was mesmerised, his eyes transfixed on the central purple stone which had the same intense colour as the stone pendant he had seen around the neck of the unknown woman from his recurrent nightmare.

As the booming voice of the wizard echoed through the hall, the focused, stained-glass light softened, and colour fell over the students.

‘Welcome, new students, to OAM, the Orphealii Academy of Magic. I am Principal Davydalova. You have all come here to receive training in the use of magic, potions, and physical combat. Some of you will have used magic intentionally outside the walls of this facility before coming here. Others may never have known such a place existed. You are all now on even terms, and you will learn more than you ever dreamed possible.

‘Some of you may already know your gifts. Others may feel a stirring in their souls because these are dark times we face, and you have been called here for a reason. Everything you have heard is true. The academy will very soon be in danger of being attacked, and we must be ready.

‘The castle belongs to the High Priestess, the Orphealia, and it is thanks to her magic,’ he tapped his index finger against the crown, ‘that I was able to appear before you just now. Our enemies eagerly await either her return or the arrival of her son, the

Orphear, before they attack with the aim of penetrating the castle walls.

‘I tell you this not to scare you but to merely prevent you from being blindsided. We expect that the vampires attacks will continue to get more brazen as they have done over the last twelve months. You must not leave the castle grounds without one of your professors, or you face almost certain death. Inside the fortified walls, we can protect you. Outside...’ He paused.

‘Those of you who were here last semester know what can happen if you are not vigilant. We know that the vampires spend more time away from Mount Cyanide, hoping to cross paths with us. We believe they intend to try and change us, to use our own kind and our own magic against us. We cannot let them.

‘It is for this reason you must not exit the castle grounds without the knowledge and supervision of our professors. We will not teach you to cower within the safety of the castle walls but we will not allow you to be turned against us.’

The students mumbled and shuffled uncomfortably in their seats. William looked over at Penelope in shock.

‘It has been almost seventeen years since the Orphealia fled Lanhivellier with her infant son. The vampires are looking for her heir and for many years they have concentrated their efforts outside of this island, putting the lives of the Parvi in danger.

‘They have searched schools in neighbouring lands for clues as to the whereabouts of the boy, but so far, the Orphealia has kept him hidden. While they searched, the vampires have added to their coven, turning Parvi immortal, like them. Their army has been swelling, and the threat of an attack continues to grow. Now their army has returned and they await the arrival of the Orphealia and the Orphear. We must prepare for a war.’

There was a long pause in the principal’s speech as understanding of the vampires’ activities rippled through the hall.

‘The truth is, we know little of the Orphear, a boy who will soon be a man. We do not know who his father is, what his name is, or

when he was born. The little information we have was gathered from prophecy interpretation and rumour.

‘One thing we *do* know is that if either the Orphealia or her son is killed, the Orphealii Academy of Magic will be destroyed,’ he said solemnly as the murmuring of the crowd grew louder. ‘If the academy is destroyed, none of us will survive.’

Principal Davydalova paused.

‘SILENCE!’ The principal’s voice echoed around the Hall of Mysteries.

Principal Davydalova walked slowly down the central aisle, stopping halfway.

‘Given the vampires’ recent experiments, no one who is known to have been taken by the vampires will be permitted re-entry into our society. This is a sacrifice that must be made to ensure our survival.

‘You have been warned.’

And then, as if a switch had been flipped on, his voice changed. ‘Off to class,’ he said with the hint of a smile, before disappearing in a burst of green flames he had conjured without lifting a finger.

William stared wide-eyed at the place where Principal Davydalova had stood.

A woman who introduced herself as Madame Diodra, the vice principal, yelled ‘QUIET!’ over the sound of the murmuring students.

William’s eyes flicked up to Madame Diodra. Her stern eyes surveyed the fresh faces before her. Her face was thinly lined and round, and her grey hair was bound into a beehive. ‘Masters students, you have received your timetables and may go to your classes. First year students, you will find your timetables under your noses. When you open the envelope, you will be transported to your classroom, thanks to the skilled potion-making and charm-casting of Doctor Malachite.’

Each of the new students looked down and found a stained, small envelope hovering right under their noses with their names written in curling calligraphy on the front. Each envelope was sealed by scarlet wax, embossed with an image of an eagle in flight.

At the exact moment William opened his timetable, his body

began shaking. He felt his body convulse, shudder, and vibrate, until a rapidly increasing pressure made him feel like he was shrinking, starting at his head and squeezing and squashing him down to his shoes.

One by one, he watched as the other students disappeared into thin air, leaving behind only the envelopes, which dropped to the ground where each student had stood. And then he, too, was gone.

THE CHOICES YOU MAKE

~William~

When William opened his eyes, he was in a dark and dusty room, surrounded by sixteen other students, each seated at their own rectangular wooden table.

A tall, gangly boy sat next to William, hunched over in visible discomfort. The boy grabbed his stomach and moaned, lifted his table-top, and vomited loudly into the desk storage space underneath. Trying to ignore the sound and smell, his own stomach still not entirely settled after their long boat ride, William grimaced and turned away.

‘Sorry,’ the boy said when he lifted his pale face from the table. ‘I get motion sickness.’

William nodded and introduced himself to the boy. The boy’s name was Miles Haase.

No sooner had Miles spoken his name than the teacher, who had appeared silently from the shadows, slammed Miles’ desk shut quickly, quietly saying, ‘It happens.’ As the teacher turned and walked back to the front of the room, William and Miles tentatively

peeked again under the tabletop to see, much to their surprise, that the storage space was immaculate.

Textbooks flew from the bookshelves at the back of the room, one landing on each table with a thud, releasing a plume of dust. Coughing, William looked around and saw Penelope sitting next to Nathaniel both of whom were looking between the textbook that had landed on their table and each other with broad smiles, clearly enjoying the experience of being in the classroom.

On the other side of Nathaniel sat a girl roughly the same age as William. She had golden hair that glowed, as if it had been kissed by the sun. Her iridescent hair fell gently in soft curls over her shoulders, cascading down to her waist. When she stroked her long fringe to the side, William followed the line of her gaze and saw her bright blue eyes focus on a ray of sunlight that was beaming in through the window.

A transparent, diamond-patterned glass window created a fragile wall behind the professor, who stood imposingly behind a large black laboratory table. A small fire burst into life, burning and hovering just above the table surface. Eighteen of the diamond-shaped glass pieces began to shimmer as light beamed through each of the random fragments.

As the student's eyes adjusted to the unnaturally bright light that was flooding into the dusty, cobweb-filled room, they noticed glittering golden particles flowing gently along the light rays. The shimmering golden dust slowly drifted and settled on each table, then swirled violently upwards to create a small golden tornado.

The whirling tornados spun around and around as random gusts of wind whipped through the classroom.

A few stray strands of hair blew across the girls' calm face. The air pressure in the room was almost intolerable, and William began gently pulling on his earlobes, trying to relieve the pressure.

The wind slowed and eventually stopped. The glimmering particles settled, then began glowing like embers. William watched as each pulsing particle tripled in size, burning more intensely before combusting into a small, rotating ball of red flames on each desk.

Rusty cauldrons formed on each table, hovering just above the flames.

The professor's own golden tornado moved, spinning more viciously than the others, until it eventually exploded with a loud crack that echoed around the room like a cannon shot.

Students who had shielded themselves by dropping underneath their tables when the ear-splittingly loud crack had boomed around the room slowly began re-emerging. William tugged his earlobes to try and recover from the high-pitched ringing in his ears.

When the professor's larger cauldron formed, it hovered above the crackling flames on his table, quickly coming to a boil and producing soft tendrils of curling steam.

The crackling of the many small cauldron fires continued while the silent students waited and watched. The light finally faded in the room, allowing them to see the professor's face for the first time.

A red scar on his left cheek travelled up towards his ear, puckering and pulling at his cheek. It was lumpy and scarlet, like a fresh cut that had not healed well. He had a pale face with eyes as dark as night and hair as white as snow.

As the professor spoke, he ran a hand through his hair, adjusting it to cover his scar.

'My name is Professor Llodrych. I am your Weapons and Wizardry teacher.'

Professor Llodrych had a deep but gentle voice that echoed around the room. While Professor Llodrych spoke, Miles—who had been looking around the room almost absentmindedly—bent down to re-tie his shoelaces. As Miles leant forward to tie them, he grabbed his ears in pain and nearly fell off his stool.

'You will listen to me, Miles Haase,' Professor Llodrych said firmly, raising his voice. Miles's ears swelled and grew to three times their normal size. Other students tried and failed to stifle their laughter.

With a flick of Llodrych's wand, Miles' ears shrunk back to their standard size, leaving him furiously rubbing them.

'Ow, they're burning,' Miles muttered to no one in particular.

‘Now that I have your attention,’ Professor Llodrych said, trying to hide a smile, ‘we are here to create your wands. For those of you who are new to this world...’ William felt the professor’s gaze like a weight pressing on him. ‘You will need a wand to perform most kinds of magic. Each wand should be individualised and created entirely by its owner. The first thing you need to do is find a wood of your choosing to provide the base of your wand. Information about the different types of wood available to you from the storeroom were provided with your enrolment letters. You are, of course, welcome to use any items you may have brought from home.’

‘You’ll notice that you each have a cauldron on your table. The brew will slowly come to boil as you choose each component of your wand. Those of you who already have items in your possession that are intended for your wand will notice your fires are flickering more intensely than the others.

‘You will have an hour to find what you want for your wand before we meet back here to start creating them.’ Professor Llodrych turned briefly back to his cauldron before looking up and with some frustration, said, ‘Go! Go!’

The professor started stirring the thick green brew in his cauldron with his wand, keeping it just above the boiling fluid. A pungent smell began to waft around the room, accompanied by a murky green haze that moved slowly through the air, chasing the students into the hallway.

‘That smelt like a wet dog,’ the girl with the golden hair and a soft English accent said to William. As she brushed a lock of her long hair behind her left ear, she offered her right hand to William. ‘I’m Aurora. Penelope said your name is William.’

‘That’s right,’ he replied, shaking her hand.

‘I notice your fire is already burning quite steadily. What are you going to put in your wand?’ Aurora smiled, revealing slightly crooked teeth.

‘I really don’t have a clue. I have no idea what I’m doing. All of this is new to me,’ William mumbled.

‘Well, it seems the cauldron has decided for you.’ With that,

Aurora smiled again and turned away, weaving through the group of students and disappearing down the dimly-lit hallway.

He followed Penelope, Nathaniel, and Aurora as they made their way down the sandstone hallway. Soon, they were joined by another boy with floppy brown hair that almost covered his eyes. He was introduced as Michael Humphries.

Michael gestured towards a dark, narrow hallway to their right.

‘Come this way,’ Michael said, turning down the hallway.

The walls were lined with candles, most of which had gone unused for some time and were covered in a thick, tangled layer of spiderwebs and dust. The candles were at William’s shoulder-height and spaced every meter along the hall. Penelope took the lead, stretching her hands out towards the candles, each bursting alight violently, destroying the webs as she walked past, her fingertips barely touching the wicks.

Nathaniel, apparently unfazed by his sister’s abilities, asked Michael where he was taking them.

‘My brother finished his masters last year. He said there is a store-room at the end of the hallway immediately to the right of the classroom. Apparently, it includes a wood store for students to make their selections from.’

William walked behind quietly, feeling almost as if he were an intruder among friends. He stopped walking when Aurora stopped and briefly inspected Michael’s face, tilting her head to the left before saying, ‘Heterochromia iridum’. Michael’s eyes, which were different colours—one hazel, one blue.

‘Yes. Everyone in my family has at least one blue eye.’

‘That’s one of the strangest things I’ve heard in the last twenty-four hours,’ William said, shaking his head. In truth, he thought after speaking, it was probably one of the least strange things he had heard.

‘Well, it’s true. Each Humphries’ family member has a blue eye—sometimes two, but always one. My mother has blue eyes; my father has a blue eye and a green eye. My brother has blue and dark brown, and I have blue and hazel. My uncle, Tobias, had his blue

eye ripped out by an eagle, leaving behind just his brown eye. By the end of the month, it had changed to blue, so when I say that each of my family members has at least one blue eye, I really do mean it.'

Penelope asked the question on everyone's lips. 'Is there any significance to the blue?'

'I suspect we're all just genetic freaks.'

'Yes, but it's one of the traits that marks a pureblood from the House of Humphries,' Aurora said casually.

'The House of Humphries?' William asked.

Miles looked at the ground uncomfortably.

'There are six pureblood houses that were essentially the nobility, the first families of the society we live in today. They pride themselves on being the oldest families in our history,' Nathaniel explained. 'Most of them have a European origin, which is partially because Lanhivellier is quite close to Europe. Realistically, nobody really knows who came to this island first but as far as our records go back, the six Houses appear.'

'Why do they call them Parvi?' William asked, following the others down the passageway. 'Mum said something about them being more normal, but she didn't really give me any details.'

'It comes from the Latin word *parvus*, which means little, small, weak... basically, it's a badge of inferiority,' Penelope said with some disgust.

'It is not a derogatory term. It's just a way of identifying people with no magical abilities,' Nathaniel interjected.

'Really, Nathaniel? When have you ever heard the term Parvi used without an accusation of inferiority laced through it? That's why they have the six Houses. If it wasn't considered a blight on a family's name to introduce Parvi blood into their family tree, then the pureblood Houses wouldn't be treated with such reverence.'

'My mother is a Parvi,' Miles ventured quietly. 'It didn't go down well when my father married her.'

'Didn't go down well with whom?' William asked.

'Everyone,' Miles sighed.

As they came to the end of the hallway, expecting to find a pathway into the storeroom, they saw only a stone brick wall.

‘Now what?’ Nathaniel asked.

‘I’m not sure,’ Michael said, sounding almost ashamed that he had been wrong.

William noticed the slightest flicker of light in a crack between bricks and leant towards the wall to look through. As soon as he placed his hand on the wall, the bricks sunk back into the wall, each one folding and twisting in on itself until a doorway was revealed.

With a sigh of relief, Michael opened the door.

Various wood samples of different shapes, textures, colours, and cuts were piled up on three sets of shelves on the wall to their left. Some were branches or cut logs, others were cross-sections of tree trunks. Other samples of wood for use in wands were manufactured boxes and figurines.

On the wall to their right, a series of narrow cupboard doors concealed tree branches and roots. Some of the branches had been snapped carelessly before being discarded.

Dividing the cluttered room was a narrow wall created by an antique mahogany chest with tiny drawers facing out onto each side of the room. They were filled with leaves, flowers, seeds, or berries. Some drawers had semi-precious stones, while others contained different samples of all the spices imaginable in a Moroccan spice bazaar.

The students split up and started searching for their wood. William felt disinterested in every piece of wood he ran his fingers over. Instead, he was drawn almost by an invisible rope wrapped around his waist towards the centre of the room, to the small drawers. Slowly, he opened select drawers.

Without realising what he was doing William found himself sniffing the outer surface of the drawers. He pressed his nose against the rough wood and inhaled deeply. Some of the drawers he opened at random had such an intense smell that he slammed them shut almost instantly.

As he did, William became aware of Penelope watching him.

‘Why aren’t you looking inside?’

‘Don’t like the smell,’ William said dismissively, still feeling her eyes on him.

Following William, Penelope opened each drawer he had rejected and inhaled deeply. ‘William, I can’t smell anything.’

He shrugged. It wasn’t the first time someone couldn’t smell what he could.

Penelope and William noticed Michael foraging through the back corner of a cupboard, where he found a small ebony box. The wood was dark and dense, the variations in the grain barely visible, but fine patterns were etched around the base of the box, and the wood was so smooth, it almost looked like polished stone. Michael tucked this sample into his satchel and made his way to the front of the store.

Aurora moved passed Penelope and William as if she were in a world of her own, shifting cuts of different pines slowly from shelf to shelf, thoroughly assessing them while students around them rifled carelessly through wood piles and cupboards.

After opening only ten of the small drawers, William had collected four tiny green stones and tucked them into his pocket.

The next room in the store was much like a science laboratory. On the shelves were different-sized glass bottles containing potions, poisons, and body parts, some so viciously hacked off the body it was impossible to tell what creature they previously belonged to without reading the labels.

A large bottle next to the door contained a greenish-yellow fluid and the arm of a creature that was covered in warts and boils. The pus from the boils slowly leaked into the liquid, making it increasingly murky. New boils formed on the arm, almost like the skin was boiling and releasing bubbles of putrid infection.

William laughed as Penelope tried not to gag and looked away from the preserved, pus-covered arm.

A bald, hunched Cyclops spoke in a husky voice, ‘We have to change the formaldehyde in that one twice a day. Fancy it for your wand, Miss Penelope?’

‘Awesome,’ William whispered, unable to control his awe at seeing a Cyclops.

Less amazed, Penelope screwed up her face in disgust, shook her head, and walked away.

There were small phials of metallic elements, swirling gasses, acids, and poisons, all marked with handwritten labels that were barely legible. Some larger jars contained animal parts, such as teeth, wings, and eyeballs, all preserved in formaldehyde.

Perspex boxes with small holes contained live animals, such as lizards, spiders, and even a young Dalmatian puppy, who was playfully pawing at the walls of its box whenever someone walked past. The pup tried pushing its tiny paw through the air holes, reaching out to anyone and everyone.

William walked around the store, amazed at what was on offer to the students. He wondered how someone would get a puppy into a wand, of what benefit it would be, and how they would be able to justify the sacrifice of such a sweet dog. Unable to bring himself to decisively choose anything, he walked towards the door leading out into the courtyard.

‘Excuse me, Mister William,’ the Cyclops said. ‘You’ll be needin’ these.’

The Cyclops handed William two small glass phials. As soon as William thought he was out of earshot, he mumbled to himself, ‘How does he know my name?’

A heavy hand fell on William’s right shoulder and twisted him around sharply.

‘It’s my job to guide each student’s choices, Mister William. To do that, I need you know who you are.’ The Cyclops coughed and wheezed like a man who had smoked two packs of cigarettes per day for a lifetime before he turned and walked back inside the shop.

While he stood wondering what he was going to put in his wand, William heard some gentle music whistling and calling to him from the castle courtyard, which was now covered in a fine dusting of snow. He followed the sound as quietly as he could and soon found himself in the courtyard.

A boy who was about six years old was sitting on the warm black tiles that lead to the defensive towers. The child was playing a glistening silver flute to an apparently mesmerised Indian Cobra. The snake swayed and danced inside a small, purple velvet-lined wicker basket, focused on the young boy.

William, cautious to not disrupt the focus between the boy and the snake, sat quietly behind the child, placing his silver gum box in his lap. Snow continued to fall on William, but it parted ways like an opening curtain around the boy and his snake.

‘You’re a snake charmer?’ William finally said, not expecting the boy to answer, for fear of being bitten by the deadly snake.

The boy took his mouth away from the flute, but the music continued, the eye contact between the snake and the boy never breaking. ‘This is my snake, Abner. My name is Yuin.’

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Pip Coomes is a physiotherapist who lives and works in Sydney, Australia. She has been working on The Phoenix Series for a number of years while continuing to work full-time. The story was inspired by her best friend's son Yuin.

The second book in the series will be released in 2019.

 twitter.com/pipcoomes

 [instagram.com/pipcoomes](https://www.instagram.com/pipcoomes)

