

# A KNIGHT RISES

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*For Ruby Tuesday, the brightest of lights.*



## PROLOGUE

**T**he prophecy had been made by one known as The African Queen—a queen of unmatched power and supreme wisdom. It spoke of a woman who would be birthed of the earth and gifted all of its natural powers. A great Tempest, she could not escape the fate the African Queen had spoken for her. She would return from the Tree adorned in jewels, forever worshipped, forever tortured, the toy of Life and Death.

They would call her Orphealia. A love that knew no end would take her soul and bind her to life and its end. In their love, they made the prize that all sides would seek.

She bore a son who would be hunted all his life.



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## MOURNING

~Penelope~

**T**he morning after Principal Davydalova died, the Orphealii Academy of Magic was overflowing with witches and wizards. Many had travelled from around the island of Lanhivellier, crowding the long castle corridors while they moved and mourned in a stunned silence. Word of Davydalova's passing and William Phoenix's emergence as the Orphear had spread quickly throughout the magical community. Many had come to the castle simply to see if the news was true.

Pushing through the mourners, Penelope moved silently through the many passageways until she was alone. She had seen Madame Diodra, who had taken over as Principal of the academy, making frequent trips deep into the foundations of the castle and Penelope had followed her, moving as silently as she could. She didn't know if Madame Diodra suspected she was being followed but curiosity drove Penelope to move in the shadows behind her principal. Every time the pulsing light at the tip of Madame Diodra's wand disappeared Penelope had held her breath, expecting to be suddenly confronted.

After a moment, her eyes would adjust and the soft glow of candlelight showed her where the corner of the wall was in the otherwise pitch-black passage. When Penelope peered around the corner she saw Madame Diodra disappear behind heavy steel doors. The doors were protected by two guards who stood unmoved, a single dimly burning lantern hovering above the doors. Not once had another witch or wizard accompanied Madame Diodra into that room—not even the newly appointed vice-principal Professor Eyre-Estaad.

That afternoon, knowing that Madame Diodra was in her office making funeral arrangements, Penelope moved down the passageway alone. For some minutes she dared not cast the light charm from her wand, but unable to see which direction to move, she eventually lifted her wand and whispered ‘lux’.

Taking a deep breath and rounding the corner cautiously, Penelope stepped into the light. She lowered her wand when the guards turned to look towards her. She could only just make out their faces, partially obscured in shadow. When she stepped towards the door, Jorge Morillo and frequent castle guard Tiberius Panetta both nodded at her. With a piercing screech of stubborn hinges, Jorge pushed one of the doors open for Penelope, candlelight flooding the passageway. Without breaking eye contact with Jorge, she stepped forward and through the doorway.

Penelope looked around and thousands of white candles flickered as the door swung closed with a thud that echoed around the large cold vault. Principal Davydalova’s body lay in state alone, atop a woven bed. Flowers and greenery were woven through the platform, concealing its true purpose. Whispers around the castle had said that his body would be burnt as part of the funeral ceremony. Penelope knew it must be so, but the idea of watching his body burn so publicly knotted her stomach. She swallowed the rising lump in her throat and looked down at his body which looked lost in peaceful slumber.

Without the magic of the Crown of Eternal Life, the Orphealia’s crown, Principal Davydalova’s face had aged significantly. Time had



finally caught up with him. Deep lines were etched around his eyes and mouth, his cheeks hollower than she remembered them in life. His long white hair was pulled back. He lay on a bed of white silk, partially covered by a sheet, red rose petals scattered around him.

Davydalova's long withered fingers were gently wrapped around his ivory staff and his ebony wand where they rested on his chest. The magic in the wand had likely faded the moment Davydalova's life ended but Penelope reached her hand towards the gleaming black wand anyway, unable to resist the temptation.

Whenever she had held or touched a wand that wasn't her own, she had felt a buzzing, as if her fingers were touching a nerve. Penelope had never been able to use any other wand to cast spells, but still, she had always sensed life inside them, life that recognised she was neither master nor creator. When she lightly touched her fingertips to Davydalova's wand there was no electricity, no life, no magic to be savoured.

His fingers were cold and stiff, all the strength and life force of this man she had so admired gone. His skin looked so thin, so fragile that she was scared it would tear when she rested her hand on his. She had expected there to still be some small residual warmth in his body. Penelope pulled her hand away from his, a single tear rolling down her cheek as the enormity of everything that had happened came to her in waves of guilt and sorrow. She recognised the body of the man she had known and yet, without his soul, without life, it bore little resemblance to the reality she had known—a reality that no longer existed.

On two other occasions in her life she had seen the bodies of the deceased and every time the experience had been the same. Without the soul, the body was just an empty shell.

In her studies of the soul in the previous months at the Orphealii Academy of Magic Penelope had come to believe that all that was light or dark, joy or pain, or love and laughter was the soul. All else was simply matter, matter that would fade into nothingness while the soul moved on. Despite this, she somehow believed that Davydalova would be different in death. That he, the most powerful wizard she

had ever met, would somehow find a way to challenge Death. Death, she realised, was the equaliser. All that would be preserved was the soul and she couldn't help but wonder if Davydalova's soul had been intact.

Penelope sat silently with his body for some time watching the candlelight flicker around them. She wished that they had been given more time. Penelope blamed herself in part for his death. It was she who had demanded the wolf pack back down when she and William had stood cornered on a cliff edge. It was she who had asked William to shift into his wolf form to show himself to the pack. It was she William was protecting when he claimed his place as Alpha and King of the Werewolves.

Before leaving the vault, Penelope placed her hand again on Davydalova's frail hand and whispered her apologies. She said nothing to Jorge and Tiberius as she left the vault and slipped back into the darkness with only the light of her wand to guide her. Slowly, she made her way through the crowded hallways and towards the common room where she would find Miles, Aurora, Trixibelle, Michael and William sitting together

A holiday travel restriction had been put in place prior to Davydalova's death to prevent the permanent resident students from returning home for their two-week break after the New Year's Eve ball. The students had been alerted that morning that Madame Diodra had extended the restriction upon the former principal's passing to require all witches and wizards who weren't direct family members of enrolled students to apply for entry into the castle as the academy struggled to accommodate the influx of mourners.

Those who occupied the many non-student chambers in the castle, such as professors and the guards who protected the castle on a rotating schedule, had returned the moment word of Principal Davydalova's death had reached them. The students who occupied the temporary accommodations and ordinarily stayed only a few nights per week in the castle had also returned almost immediately upon hearing the news. Penelope had never seen the castle so full.

She had watched from her chambers as owls and eagles left the

castle that morning en masse bearing invitations to the funeral and golden medallions that would act as security passes to allow entry. While preparations for the event began, an organised chaos took over the eerily quiet castle.

Feeling unsure of what would come next and uncomfortable in the knowledge that the worst was yet to come, Penelope pushed the door that led into the common room open. As expected, her friends were sitting on their usual two couches arguing over the island's newspaper *The Lotus Edition*.

Squeezing herself onto the couch between Aurora and Miles, Penelope noticed that Aurora smelled subtly of smoke and that she and Trixibelle had small burn holes singed into their black sweaters. She rested her head on Aurora's shoulder, listening as she read from *The Lotus Edition*, staring at the roaring fire across the room.

***A Fallen Hero, A Son Revealed.***

*By Adriano Silvertéen.*

*Deception, lies and secrecy have long surrounded the man set to one day become our king. Towards the end of last year, I published an article in The Lotus Edition about all the male students who enrolled mid 2017. I questioned if the Orphear was amongst the new students and began researching the backgrounds of each student. For some, information was hard to come by, but for others a trail of false information was laid, designed to lead us astray.*

*A few nights ago, just after midnight on the night of the three full moons, the Orphear came of age. All of you who were educated at the Orphealii Academy of Magic will have been aware that the Orphealia returned from the Tree of Life on an evening much like this one. Three full moons lit up the night sky that evening too.*

*Bank accounts and birth registers deceptively list the student's name as William Phoenix Hardy son of Ruby and Helbert Hardy. It has been revealed, with the death of Principal Davydalova, that the boy's real name is William Adelais Phoenix.*

*Born on the first of January in the year 2000, Phoenix is the son of the Orphealia and the Prince of Wolves who has been identified as Adelais*

*Phoenix. It is believed that Adelais died at the tender age of twenty-six, a mere ten months after the birth of his only child.*

*The revelations about Phoenix, who apparently did not know of his birth rite, lead me to wonder if the Orphealia might appear at this Thursday's funeral for Principal Davydalova.*

*The funeral will be a who's who of Lanhivellier as we all gather to wish a fond farewell to a great man and lay eyes on our new Prince and possibly even his mother.*

*My sources tell me that the Orphear has not accepted his new role easily, which is understandable when you consider that the acceptance of his birth rite resulted in the Principal's death. Accepting the truth broke the spell that allowed Nikolai Davydalova to live to one hundred and six years old. While I'm sure we can all agree that one hundred and six years is certainly more than most will get, it is still a pretty hideous birthday gift that comes with the added bonus of blood on your hands.*

*Unfortunately, with bright purple eyes, a handsome face and a fate wrapped up in prophecy, Phoenix can hardly pretend this is not happening. It could always be worse. Just ask Hugo Zaphora, the wizard who wrote the song Sink and Say Goodbye.*

'How can I remember *Sink and Say Goodbye* if I've never even heard it?' William complained.

Without missing a beat Penelope began singing, with Aurora joining her moments later.

*I'm drowning and there's only air.  
Poison's in my blood but I don't care.  
You're lost in all that's blue.  
I'm left here missing you.  
I promised I would find a way,  
To make a minute last always.*

*I'm lying here, floating with the tide.  
Like a pebble I'll sink and say goodbye.  
Amongst the sea and stars there's nowhere to hide.*

*I'll take one last breath and go under with a sigh.*

*Without you there's no colour, no joy,  
No oceans deep in Illinois.  
Suffocating in all that's ordinary.  
Gone is the song of the gold canary.  
The torture of normal more profound.  
Thought I was lost now I'll never be found.  
Oh, where I'm going I'll never be found*

*I'm lying here, floating with the tide.  
Like a pebble I'll sink and say goodbye.  
Amongst the sea and stars there's nowhere to hide.  
I'll take one last breath and go under with a sigh.*

*I'll go south to where you met your end,  
And there in the water we'll meet again.*

*I'm lying here, floating with the tide.  
Like a pebble I'll sink and say goodbye.  
Amongst the sea and stars there's nowhere to hide.  
I'll take one last breath and go under with a sigh.  
For there we will always be,  
You, me and the sea.*

After a minute of silence Miles spoke.

'Thanks guys. Now I'm *really* depressed.'

'Yeah,' William agreed. 'Now I feel even worse. I have blood on my hands. People are gossiping about me and enjoying my pain.' He scrunched up the paper and hurled it towards the fire. 'And now I also feel sorry for the guy who wrote that song.'

'At least you're not trapped in monotony,' Penelope whispered, looking at William while she spoke. 'There's nothing worse than feeling trapped in a life you don't recognise because you've been changed by someone... by a moment with them.' Penelope paused,

feeling slightly awkward, before quickly adding, 'that's what that song is about anyway.'

'Feeling trapped and bound to a prophecy someone else made about you and having blood on your hands is a close second,' William said offering a wry smile.

'And closely behind that,' Miles ventured, perking up slightly, 'is realising you're the new toy of Adriano Silverteen. I'm sure we all look forward to future editions of the Orphear Chronicles. Not.'

'He really is the worst,' Aurora said. 'It's like he's enjoying your pain, like it's a sport. I'm so sorry William. I thought it was going to be more of an obituary for Principal Davydalova. I wouldn't have read it if I'd known what it was really about.'

'It's okay Aurora,' William mumbled. 'I guess I'll just have to get used to it.'

'I saw him,' Penelope quietly admitted.

'Who? Davydalova?' Michael asked slightly horrified. 'I couldn't do that. Dead bodies freak me out. What did he look like?'

'You'll see him on Thursday at the funeral so you had better start getting used to the idea,' Trixibelle said with a shrug.

'He looked peaceful,' Penelope offered. 'Older, but peaceful.'

Penelope had hoped that this would help William relax, but he shifted awkwardly on the couch and turned towards the window.

A group of noisy students walked into the common room. Seeing the mood of their group and William's angry purple eyes turn on them, the group quickly left, only the crackling of the fire disturbing the silence.

Miles nosily unwrapped a purple Changeling Chew from Mister Warbler's store in the Hive and stuffed it in his mouth.

'Wills,' he ventured, apparently bolstered by the purple sweet which was designed to give him twenty seconds of courage and confidence, 'do you think your mum's going to come to the funeral?'

'I don't know,' William muttered. 'Davydalova had said she would resist any urge to come to the academy because it would end his life. She very kindly left that to me.'

'William don't you remember? Principal Davydalova said he

didn't want his death to burden you. He said that death would be a relief,' Trixibelle implored, her bright blue eyes focused on him.

'Easier said than done,' he paused. 'Just look at *The Lotus Edition*. Even they are saying I have blood on my hands.'

'You need to find a way to let it go.' Trixibelle clasped William's hand. 'Find a way to let him go.'

William sat quietly for a few seconds before responding. 'It's hard to let things go when you're this angry.'

'You have every right to be angry,' Penelope said. She felt some of his guilt even though she, like Trixibelle, clearly remembered Davy-dalova saying he would welcome death when it came.

'Absolutely,' Michael interrupted. 'I would have smashed a few things for sure.'

'You know what,' William half smiled. 'I don't think smashing anything is going to help. It doesn't matter how I try to rationalise it, how I try to understand everything that's happened in the last few days, I just don't even know how to begin processing it.'

William ran his hands over his stubble-covered chin.

'If you had asked me twelve months ago if my mum would come to my principal's funeral I would have said no, she's agoraphobic. Now I don't know. In hindsight, maybe I was in some sort of witness protection program,' he paused. 'We were in hiding and I just never knew it.'

'And now you can't hide,' Penelope said softly.

'Exactly!' William exclaimed. 'And believe me, I would very much like to go into hiding and pretend none of this is happening. But that doesn't change the fact that I have to hear the prophecy so I can know what I'm up against. Right now I just don't know where to start. Honestly, I don't care if my mother comes. I don't want to see her. I'm too angry.'

'Are you worried you'll say something you don't mean?' Miles asked, stretching his long legs out in front of him as he struggled to get comfortable on the crowded couch.

'No. I'm worried I'll say *exactly* what I mean. I'm also worried that there is more, something else she hasn't told me.'

After the sun set and most of the visitors had rushed to leave the castle ahead of a coming storm, the gale season strengthening, the group made their way to the Hall of Mysteries for dinner. Penelope's twin brother Nathaniel joined them.

The beautiful mahogany tables were decorated, as always, with four ornate golden candelabras, each holding three long white candles. In addition, dozens of thick white candles were spread across each bench, surrounded by blood-red rose petals. None of the lanterns along the walls had been lit. The traditional mourning feast began in relative silence amid the glow of candlelight.

Steam wafted from the simmering cauldron brew that smelt like roast chicken and garlic potatoes to Penelope. She dipped the ladle into the brew and poured the potion onto her plate. Crispy skinned, herb covered chicken breast, roast potatoes and carrots appeared the moment the potion touched the plate. A smaller second scoop produced two slices of garlic bread.

Penelope watched while her friends and other students poured their meals. Aurora poured grilled salmon, a slice of lemon and a basic salad, William a steak and a mix of grilled vegetables. Miles conjured spaghetti bolognaise, Michael roast lamb and potatoes and Trixibelle poured some pumpkin soup. Nathaniel, who had sat next to Miles to stay as far away from his sister as he could, poured potato bake and green beans.

Once all the students in the Hall of Mysteries had their meals, they followed the tradition of the mourning feast by raising their glasses and saying in unison, 'Rest in peace'. Bagpipes played continuously while they ate, silencing any whispered conversations.

While they ate, only gesturing to communicate, Penelope watched Trixibelle and Aurora inspect each other's burnt clothing. When they noticed she was watching, they hastily tucked their arms under the table and looked away, as if making eye contact with Penelope would confirm they were hiding something. Nathaniel too was behaving unusually. Penelope sensed him watching her but every time she looked up at him, he quickly looked down and started pushing his potatoes around his plate.



Their telepathic connection had waned significantly over the past few months. Penelope wondered if the connection had been damaged by her desire to avoid him for fear of any of the images she had seen in her prophecy coming true. Out of the corner of her eye, she watched him look up again, seemingly wanting to communicate with her but not knowing how.

Before they left the hall, William pulled a large jar out from under the table and emptied the contents of the cauldron into the jar. He tightened the lid and took the ladle and a clean plate with him when he left the table.

‘Do you really think you’ll need a snack in the tower later?’ Penelope asked, smiling for the first time that day.

‘Surely there’s some sort of buzzer you can press for room service,’ Miles teased.

‘I’m going to take it to the den to feed the pack,’ William said, tucking the jar of cauldron brew under arm. ‘Do you think I should take the cauldron too?’

Miles shrugged and ran his hand through his floppy brown hair. William reached over to grab the cauldron off the table just as the large mahogany tables shifted and started to disappear below the floorboards.

‘I keep forgetting you’re a werewolf,’ Miles smiled, slapping William on the back. ‘It’s a weird world.’

‘You make it sound like I’ve been a werewolf all my life but it’s only been a week.’

‘Well, you *have* kind of been a werewolf your whole life if you think about it.’

‘Let’s not go there Miles.’ Penelope shook her head.

‘Guys I don’t think I’ll go back to the common room tonight. I’m a little sick of everyone staring at me.’

William wished them all a goodnight and left.

Penelope watched him leave, hesitating before walking hand in hand with Michael back to the common room where she planted herself on a soft, saggy sofa in front of the roaring fire. A tidal wave of fatigue hit her and she rested her head on Michael’s shoulder. She

could not even imagine what the last six months had been like for William, let alone the last week. She couldn't help but wonder if she should have warned him after seeing a flash of purple in his eyes when she received her prophecy. In the end she had decided, just as she suspected Aurora had too, that the Orphealia must have had a reason not to warn her son. She resolved, staring at the red and orange flames, that she would find a way to understand the prophecy, and a way to change the path they were on.

## THE ORPHEALIA

~William~

**W**illiam staggered up the hundreds of stairs that lead up to his private chambers at the top of the Ivory Tower. He wanted to escape the many eyes that gazed upon him and the pointed whispers that followed him. Hundreds of charmed lanterns lined the narrow staircase, providing a soft pulsing light while William climbed higher and higher. His legs were starting to burn when he finally came to the landing at the top of the stairs.

The two stone soldiers that were usually embedded in the wall on either side of his enormous heavy double doors were standing on guard, their swords crossed in front of the door. The four soldiers who stood opposite the double door entry were bristling with life and had also stepped forward prepared to defend the tower against the yet unseen threat.

William drew his wand.

His mother stepped forward from the dark shadows, one arm stretched out towards her son.

She looked different. Gone was her straight, dark brown shoulder length hair and her deep brown eyes that had been like his. Her skin

was dark olive and her caramel coloured long wavy hair was nearly golden blonde by the time it reached her mid-back. Hazel eyes glistened in the flickering light, tears rolling down her cheeks as she took another step forward.

‘So, it looks like everything was a lie. My childhood, my life, what you told me about my father and my family. Even the way you looked was a lie,’ he spat, seething.

‘William,’ Grace started before being cut off.

‘Don’t. I don’t want to hear one more lie.’

‘I’m so sorry,’ she whispered.

‘If that were true, if you were *really* sorry, you would have told me the truth. You had seventeen years to explain it to me. You lied to me for seventeen years.’ William’s body was trembling with rage. ‘But instead you left me in the dark and set me up. So, don’t bother with ‘I’m sorry’ because I don’t believe you.’

With an angry flick of his wand the stone guards stepped aside. The chamber doors flew open, thumping loudly against the walls, and William strode into his bedroom. The doors slammed shut, the sound echoing through his room, disturbing Reyki, his beautiful yellow eyed owl, who rustled her black feathers and hooted indignantly.

William turned around to see his mother touch the crown that sat near his owl on a chest of drawers. When she touched it, the crown shifted into a glittering kokoshnik style tiara. Each of the stones grew and shifted so that the diamonds bound around the tanzanite and emeralds, separating the enormous glittering stones, encasing them in a swirling band of glittering gems.

‘You can have that back,’ William nodded at the crown.

‘William,’ Grace said, her voice firm. ‘Do you remember I told you I can hear your thoughts? To answer your questions there are no more nasty surprises coming that I know of. What comes next, I do not know. Yes, I know the prophecy, but it does not clearly lay a path forward. Sometimes prophecies only make sense with hindsight. Ask me anything my beautiful boy and I swear to tell the truth.’

‘How do you expect me to trust you?’ William shook his head. ‘You told me you were from Alaska!’

Grace pulled a small labelled bottle from the pocket of her long black cloak and handed it to William. The label was faded but he could just make out the words *Thiopental Potion brewed in 1999*.

‘It gets more potent as the potion matures. I have had that with me since I fell pregnant with you. You can see the seal is unbroken. It has not been tampered with. Three drops is all it takes and I will tell you every truth I can.’

‘Every truth you *can*?’ William asked.

‘There are some things that I am bound to protect. I know you want to know the prophecy, William, but I cannot tell you.’

‘Then what’s the point?’ he mumbled, looking down at the phial of truth serum.

‘There is more that you want to ask, more that you want to say, I know it.’ Grace’s voice wavered. She took the bottle and opened it, squeezing three drops of the clear liquid onto her tongue.

Grace’s pupils dilated rapidly and she stumbled while her eyes adjusted to the light. William guided her to the edge of his bed where she sat quietly for a minute while the potion took effect. Finally, she looked up at him, waiting for his first question.

‘Who are you? Where did you come from?’ William asked.

‘I have no memory of being born. I do not know who my parents are. I hear her calling my name and I recognise her voice. Her accent is like mine—just as yours is. She calls me ‘child’. I belong to her, but I have never seen her. I came from the forest to the clearing outside the castle. I was raised by Hamish Inglis-McGreggor, a Seeker and Tracker who works as the castle Gate Keeper. He called me Grace. They have called me Grace and the Orphealia. I am your mother.’

The words came with no resistance.

‘Why do they protect you?’

‘They protect me because I am the one with the blood of the tree in my veins, because I was gifted powers they do not fully understand. They protect me because the tree marked me as the one the

prophecy spoke of. They protect me because the African Queen saw me coming and because this castle recognises me as Regent.'

'Why do they protect me?' William asked coldly.

'Because I ordered them too,' Grace conceded. 'They need you. Their lives depend on your survival. The bone of the father of the vampires, the maker, bathed in your fresh blood and sealed in the secretions gifted by the Queen Bee is all that can end the life of Marcus if he makes the change. He has the Blood Diamond. I lost it. I sentenced you to this life,' she whispered, her head hung low.

William watched her silently, unmoved by her tears.

'To the wolves,' Grace continued, wiping away her tears. 'You are their Alpha and the pack needs an Alpha to function. Your father was the Prince of Wolves. Your grandfather is dead. You are the King of Wolves now. They are bound to protect you and your heirs. You are the leader from which all other wolves are descended. You can order any wolf to obey your command, even those who are not part of your pack. You are *the* Alpha.'

'Why do the wolves think I'm betrothed to one of their own?' William asked.

'You are bound to the daughter of Kingsley. It is an agreement your father made not long after Thalia was born.'

'So,' William's anger returned, his body tensing, 'I don't get a choice in this?'

'If you have not chosen and married another by the time you are twenty-one you must marry Thalia.' Grace moved towards the balcony, opening the door and stepping outside into the wind, rain pelting down as thunder rattled around the castle.

'What if I don't want to marry her?' William yelled. He followed his mother out on to the balcony that wrapped around the top of the Ivory Tower.

'I could not undo the deal once I found out about it. I was so angry at your father. Thankfully I managed to delay it. You were supposed to marry her by your eighteenth birthday. That is normal in the pack but because you are not only wolf, because you were not to be raised as a wolf, they agreed that twenty-one was reasonable.'

‘Kingsley agreed because he knew it likely that we would be forced to flee the island to hide you. I argued that it was unreasonable to ask that you return to the island once you came of age and immediately take a wife you did not know.’

The howling wind changed direction suddenly, blowing the rain in sideways and splattering it against William’s face. Grace raised her wand and calmed the storm.

‘The only way around the bargain is to choose another. Marry someone else before your twenty-first birthday.’ Grace became insistent, clutching William’s jumper as she spoke. ‘Otherwise, your will does not matter. You will be bound to her, unable to marry another.’

‘Tell me the prophecy,’ William demanded.

Grace released William and clutched the balcony, doubling over in pain. While she fought the Thiopental Potion her control on the storm waned and lightning flashed around them, hitting one of the guards towers, sending tiles tumbling into the courtyard as guards scurried to get to safety.

‘I can’t,’ she said through clenched teeth.

‘Why not?’ William demanded.

‘It will kill me,’ Grace offered weakly, then collapsed, gasping for air as she tried to hold herself up on her hands and knees.

‘Why are you in pain?’

‘The potion is punishing me for withholding the truth. It wants me to tell you the prophecy but I am bound by something stronger than the potion. You must free me from the question or it will only get worse.’

William watched his mother while she writhed in pain. Part of him hated watching her in pain, but another part of him, a darker part that had been unleashed by all the anger and betrayal he had felt since his eighteenth birthday, felt that some of his loyalty to her had been severed.

‘You don’t have to tell me the prophecy,’ he said coolly.

Grace slowly pulled herself to her feet and staggered forwards.

‘You are so angry,’ she said in some astonishment, scraping strands of wet hair off her face.

‘What did you expect?’ William spat. ‘My whole life has been a lie. I came here completely unprepared. Other people knew or at least suspected the truth but I didn’t have any idea because this whole world was new to me so I didn’t see the clues—I couldn’t see through the lies *you* told me.

‘I can’t ever be normal again. I have to be so careful meeting new people now. I have to assume the worst in them. My memories have been destroyed and tainted by lies. My life is not my own anymore. I have been offered up as a husband, bound to a woman I don’t know,’ William raged.

‘You do know her my love,’ Grace interrupted. ‘That woman with the dark hair that you’re thinking about, the one you met in the den. I can see her in your thoughts. That is Thalia.’

‘That’s not the point!’ William bellowed. ‘I don’t get to choose my life. I don’t get to choose what I do each day, where I live, what I want to be, who I love.’

William turned away from his mother.

‘Free will does not always change the path destiny creates,’ Grace offered, her voice quiet. ‘I did not choose to be who I am any more than you did. I avoided the wolves for fear of the prophecy coming true, but destiny had already chosen my path. It forced me to seek refuge with the wolves to save my life.

‘I did not choose to love your father. In fact,’ she continued, ‘I tried *not* to love him. I did everything I could to not choose this life for you. I knew if I was with your father, we would have what the prophecy calls a halfling. The only way to prevent this was to never have a child. I could never not choose you. I loved you long before I ever held you.’

A tear rolled down William’s cheek but was lost in the rain. When Grace raised both arms, quietening the wind and the rain once more. He turned his back on her and went inside, dripping water all over the cold stone floor.

‘When I look back now, I can see that I was trying to fight destiny—for fear of this very moment. A moment where you would resent



me. A moment where you would be in danger, hunted for the blood that courses through your veins.

‘My choice was to flee to the wolves and beg for their mercy, or to let the vampires take me. Either way the Blood Diamond would have been lost to me. If I sacrificed myself, I would have been turned. You never would have been born and the immortal Marcus would have made an unstoppable army. In creating you I cursed you, I know that. Sometimes in life you make difficult choices.

‘I will do whatever it takes to protect you for the rest of my life. Even if that means I have to hide things from you. Even if that means I have to make you hate me. Whatever it takes, I will always choose you.’

Grace moved behind William and tenderly rubbed his arms. William felt his body relax at his mother’s touch.

‘I hear your thoughts. I don’t choose you simply because I am your mother. Plenty of mothers would not stand in front of a bus for their child, but I would for you.’ She paused, ‘If only it were that simple...’

‘If you would stand in front of a bus for me,’ William said, eyes filling with tears as he turned to face his mother, ‘why didn’t you return to the academy sooner? Why did I have to be the cause of his death?’

‘I wanted to return,’ Grace wiped away the tears that rolled uncontrollably down William’s cheek. ‘But no matter what I do, if you are to survive, others will die and you must find a way to live with that.’

‘And if I can’t?’ William pushed his mother’s hand away and watched her pupils return to a normal size.

‘Then everything will burn.’



## FAREWELL

~William~

**I**n the days that passed after his mother's arrival at the Orphealii Academy of Magic, William kept mostly to himself, asking his friends to come to his chambers rather than meeting in the common room. He walked through the castle hallways once a day to attend dinner in the Hall of Mysteries. Every time he emerged from the tower, he endured his classmates and guests of the castle staring and whispering as though they thought he could not see or hear them.

Grace had insisted that William come with her to spend time with Hamish, the Gate Keeper. The visit had quite the opposite effect to the one William thought his mother had intended. Rather than feeling a renewed bond with his mother, he had left their company feeling like he had been deprived of a relationship with his only grandparent. He also had a distinct feeling that they were both hiding information from him while pretending that nothing was wrong.

William had noticed his mother manipulate aspects of her appearance and avoid interactions with most of the castle's occupants. Instead she spent most of her time with Madame Diodra and

two women he had never seen before. One was tall and curvaceous with pale porcelain skin and thick black hair. The other was short and round with high cheek bones, blonde hair and bright blue eyes.

On the day of Principal Davydalova's funeral, all the students dressed in their formal mourning clothes. The wizards wore black suits with a white shirts and black ties, their black leather shoes shined to perfection by the castle trolls. Witches wore floor length, long-sleeved black cotton gowns. A thick white cotton belt was bound around their waists and tied in a bow at the back.

As they made their way towards the cathedral, William admired a pendant on a long silver chain that hung around Penelope's neck which was almost concealed by long brown curls. It was a small glass globe that contained a black liquid and was encased inside a delicate silver web.

'It went black the morning after your mother arrived,' Penelope said, twirling the orb in her fingers before tucking it out of sight.

'It went black?' William asked.

'I filled it with my blood. It is supposed to warn me of danger by going black. It should change colour if someone who intends me harm is nearby.'

'I would have thought it would always be black with Max in the castle,' Miles scoffed, his dislike for Max Syre continuing to earn him regular detentions.

'Maybe he's just an annoying, entitled, spoilt brat, rather than an evil, dangerous one,' William offered with a wry smile.

'I'll accept that,' Miles smiled, patting William on the back.

They joined the growing crowd of sombre faces as they moved through the narrow passageways that led them to the exit they had taken on their first trip to the Hive. The group turned before reaching the wall covered in hieroglyphics and started ascending a staircase that was wide enough for only two people at a time. The passage they had taken on their way to the Hive, William now realised, passed through the foundations of the cathedral and exited through the high stone castle boundaries.

When they emerged at the top of the stairs their faces were

whipped by bursts of cold air. Hundreds of students, graduates, teachers, and their families all dressed in black, solemnly moved towards the cathedral. The building stood at the back of the castle with enormous candle-covered pillars dividing up row after row of pews. Ornate stained-glass windows and huge stone carvings decorated the high arched ceiling.

High inside the cathedral, an ancient enchanted organ played a melancholy tune as mourners began to take their seats. At the end of a long stone aisle was the high altar where Principal Davydalova's body lay. Over the body of the dead principle hung an ornate, gold fixture adorned with candles, and an enormous crucifix.

Davydalova's body rested upon a woven bed of roots threaded with red roses. The old man's face looked strangely unfamiliar when William stepped up to the altar to bid him farewell. He seemed withered and empty, as if in the moment of his death he had aged to his true age. His hair no longer showed any hint of a strawberry blonde tint. William's eyes traced Davydalova's face and he noticed the peaceful expression on the white-haired man's face.

William followed the masses moving through the cathedral and took his seat between Aurora and Miles in a pew with other first year students. Each guest filed by the body of Davydalova with the most senior members of staff entering last, some bending down to kiss the hand of their dear friend.

A stunned silence descended on the funeral attendees when five Elves gracefully moved down the cathedral aisle. Their piercing cobalt blue eyes found William and fixed on him. William recognised Joaquin, Eetu and Anais, who nodded in greeting, before moving to the front pews. Eetu's eyes darted briefly towards Trixibelle, who was watching the King of the Elves move through the cathedral. Grace followed, dressed in her mourning gown, her glittering crown upon her head. Her posture was poised and regal. She paused beside William, looking at him for a moment as if she expected him to join her.

Knowing she could hear his thoughts William refused to follow

her, choosing to stay with Miles and Aurora. Grace turned away and moved to sit beside Joaquin, King of the Elves.

Slowly the sound of whispered voices quieted and Madame Diodra moved to the front of the cathedral. She cleared her throat.

‘We are gathered here today to mourn the loss of Nikolai Davydalova, who was one of the greatest wizards the magical world has ever known.’ She paused to steady her voice. ‘And we should all feel honoured to have known him, been taught by him or to have worked beside him.’

‘Nikolai was born in 1911 in Siberia. His mother was a Russian peasant who fell in love with her wealthy aristocratic employer. He was raised by a mother who dabbled in dark magic with no true understanding of how to control her meagre gifts. She experimented with potions and bewitched Nikolai’s father. He was powerless against her for many years, much to his ruin.

‘As her son’s gifts grew, the control Nikolai’s mother had over his father waned until finally her spell was broken. Mother and son were isolated when tales of their unusual behaviour and abilities were spread by Nikolai’s father. Nikolai was forced into hiding, after watching his mother be burned alive for being a witch.’

William recalled a discussion he had with Principal Davydalova on his second day at the academy in which he had remarked that the *‘Parvi have not always treated those they suspected of witchcraft kindly’*. At the time it had seemed to be an insignificant comment on Parvi history, but now William felt sure that Davydalova’s words held different meaning.

‘Nikolai came from darkness and, for many years before he reached his full power, he struggled to find the light. He travelled the world as a very young man, far younger than most of you, and studied the magic and medicine of many different cultures. When he was seventeen, the academy’s Gate Keeper finally found him in Spain.

‘He was found pretending to be a matador in the Plaza del Toros in Madrid. He would wave a red cape at the enraged bull and then hide under it, vanishing from sight much to the amazement of the

crowd and frustration of the bull. Nikolai would then reveal himself in another part of the arena after removing his invisibility cloak. Eventually he grew tired of the game and, using his exceptional talents, tamed the bull, climbing on its back and riding it around the plaza to a standing ovation.

‘I tell you this story today only because he wanted me to. He wanted you all to know that even if there is darkness in you, you can always find your way towards the light. He wanted you to know that your upbringing does not define you. Your mistakes do not define you. If you simply hold on long enough, or try hard enough, the light will break through. He wrestled with his demons all his life. He could have become a dark wizard at any moment, but he knew right from wrong and fought his natural instincts until he finally became more comfortable existing in the light.

‘The power of seventeen-year-old Nikolai Davydalova was so great that he did not require a wand to do what many of you learned or are learning in your first year here.

‘Once he arrived at this academy, he began to mature and become the great man we mourn today.

‘Nikolai was a gifted interpreter of all kinds of dark magic,’ she paused. ‘He had a special ability to sense evil and unusual magic. He founded the Knights of Orphealia twenty years ago to battle the growing darkness.

‘Nikolai Davydalova was the Principal of this academy for fifty-two years and if you look around today you will see many faces who owe him their education, and for some, their lives.’

Madame Diodra paused and breathed deeply, her voice wavering. ‘He stayed on at OAM for the good of others, long beyond his natural lifespan. When the moment came for him to leave us his final words were *‘At last’*.’

Madame Diodra’s tear-filled gaze fixed on William.

‘He went with peace, his soul intact and his heart full. Although it is impossible not to feel pain or guilt when someone like Nikolai passes, we must remember that his life was defined and lengthened by his choices. He ensured that only the greatest of magic, the

greatest of reasons—love—would alter his natural life path. It was for love he stayed and with love that he left.’

William looked down and tried to swallow the rising lump in his throat.

‘To honour his wishes and belief that a body provides our enemy with a valuable target I ask the Knights of Orphealia to carry his body into the courtyard. There we will respect his final wish and protect his body from violation, allowing him to rest in peace at last.’

Madame Diodra turned to her long-time friend. Tenderly she placed her hand on his cheek in final farewell.

With a subtle nod to the conductor, a choir began to sing. The song pierced William’s grief-stricken heart when their voices lifted beautifully as one. Madame Diodra moved gracefully down the aisle towards the cathedral doors. As she made her way down the aisle, a few witches and wizards, including Jorge Morillo and Cooper Conroy, moved to the altar where Principal Davydalova lay. Each of them wore a dark maroon cloak, black suit and a black leather belt from which silver swords or daggers hung alongside their wands.

Among the Knights of Orphealia, who had gathered around the altar to carry Nikolai Davydalova’s body, were the short blonde witch and the tall, pale skinned, dark-haired witch William had seen his mother talking to.

Jorge walked towards the altar, pausing by William’s pew. Fixing his gaze on William, he tilted his head towards the altar. At Jorge’s request, William stood slowly and joined the other Knights of Orphealia. Helping to carry Davydalova’s body from the cathedral was the least he could do, considering he was, after all, the reason Davydalova had died.

Four witches and wizards stood on either side of the woven wooden platform. Silently they bent down and lifted the platform and rested it upon their shoulders.

The two witches stood at the back on each side of the principal’s body, their long black gowns trailing behind them.

Moving smoothly and slowly and in perfect unison as though it had been rehearsed, William followed the group, helping to carry the



body of his fallen principal on his shoulder while they moved down the aisle. Briefly William looked at his mother. She looked straight ahead, her eyes filled with tears, seemingly unable to watch her son remove Davydalova's body from the altar.

The Knights of Orphealia carried the pyre out through the grand doors and into the courtyard behind the main body of the castle where they gently lay it down. The congregation slowly filed out of the cathedral and gathered in a wide circle around Davydalova.

While William stood silently alongside the Knights he noticed Max Syre standing beside his mother and father. Max bore a surprising likeness to his mother except his rusty brown hair was much darker than her deep red, silky shoulder-length hair. Both had porcelain skin, though his father was an unremarkable brown-haired man with a plain face and a large Roman nose.

While the congregation gathered, William watched Francesca Delafonté whisper in her son's ear. Max's face twitched as though he were being told something he didn't like but his mother smiled sweetly as she spoke, her face calm and serene. She nodded in greeting to many other wizarding families as they exited the cathedral. William couldn't help but notice a flash of pain cross Max's face when his father shifted to stand shoulder to shoulder with his tall, well-built son. William watched Max subtly step, not towards his mother, but backwards and away from both of his parents, where he disappeared into the growing crowd.

The Knights, including William, backed away from Davydalova's body, leaving only Madame Diodra standing nearby. A small flame appeared at the tip of her trembling wand. Twice she reached her shaking hand towards the pyre but both times she pulled her wand away, unable to set it alight. Tears streaming down her pleading face, she looked around at the Knights, the Orphealia and at the Elves as if she was hoping someone else would fulfil Nikolai Davydalova's final wish.

Pushing gently to get through the crowd, Penelope moved towards Madame Diodra. Gently she lowered Madame Diodra's shaking wand, extinguishing the flame.

Penelope stretched out a hand towards the wooden pyre and walked slowly around it, a wall of flame following her, engulfing and concealing Principal Davydalova's body. The flames roared and bent to the will of the wind that had started blowing wildly once again. Funeral guests began to retreat inside away from the smoke and floating embers.

The Knights of Orphealia, William, Penelope and Madame Diodra stayed behind and watched as the fire continued to burn. William stood beside Cooper Conroy who stepped forward and thrust his wand towards the sky, settling the wind to a gentle breeze.

The woven wooden pyre cracked and collapsed, folding in on itself, burning until only coals remained. As soon as Cooper walked away the wind picked up with a sudden ferocity, whipping the now black coals and ashes across the courtyard until no sign of Davydalova's body remained.

Madame Diodra sighed and smiled sadly at Penelope, cupping her cheek in her hand and gently kissing her forehead. Silently she walked away. William wondered for the briefest moment where she would go and then felt an ache in his gut.

She was going to the principal's office. It was her office now.