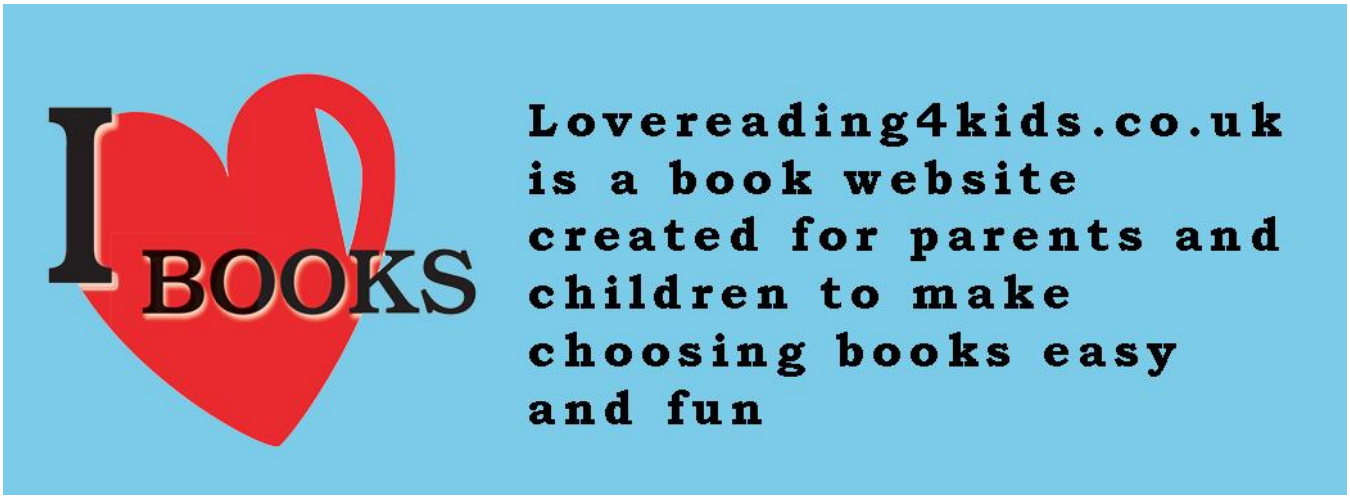


Opening extract from

The Apprentice Witch

Written by

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Published by

Chicken House Ltd

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First published in Great Britain in 2016
Chicken House
2 Palmer Street
Frome, Somerset BA11 1DS
United Kingdom
www.chickenhousebooks.com

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Cover and interior design by Steve Wells
Cover and inside illustrations © Daniela Terrazzini
Typeset by Dorchester Typesetting Group Ltd
Printed and bound in Great Britain by CPI Group (UK) Ltd, Croydon CR0 4YY

The paper used in this Chicken House book is made from wood grown in sustainable forests.

1 3 5 7 9 10 8 6 4 2

British Library Cataloguing in Publication data available.

PB ISBN 978-1-910655-15-3
eISBN 978-1-910655-62-7



Chapter 1
The CIVIL WITCHCRAFT AUTHORITY



'Witches of Hylund,' the poster declared, 'Your country needs you! Join up TODAY!' Arianwyn stared up at the elegant woman gazing proudly from the poster. The woman's hair was golden and flowing, her lips bright red. She wore the dark navy uniform and the silver star of a fully trained witch. Arianwyn glanced down at her coat and the space that her own star would soon occupy.

Far-off bells sounded the hour, cutting through the noise of busy morning traffic rushing past, horns screaming out across the bustling street. She would be late if she stood daydreaming much longer. Grabbing her bag, she skipped between the crush of passers-by through tall wrought-iron gates, following the signs for Registration. Steps led through an open

doorway and into a long, gleaming corridor.

Other witches rushed past – some now proudly displaying bright new stars and broad grins – and administrative staff carrying stacks of files or clutching clipboards. The air was full of excited chatter and the tang of damp wool coats and antiseptic. Arianwyn's wet shoes squeaked across the polished floor.

She joined one of several haphazard queues and suddenly wished she hadn't. Gimma Alverston was handing over her identity card at the desk, surrounded as ever by a small group of other young witches.

Gimma looked just like the witch on the poster outside, all flowing golden hair and bright smile. Arianwyn patted nervously at her own messy curls and tried to shrink back into the line. But she was too late – and too tall. One of the other girls – a smart-looking witch who Arianwyn recognized as Polly Walden – nudged Gimma and pointed in her direction. Gimma glanced over, offered a mean, tight smile and whispered something to the others. The corridor rang with cruel giggling and Arianwyn went red. *This is all I need*, she thought. *What did I ever do to her?*

Gimma was cruel and a snob, and you were either with her or against her. She'd been like this since they first met at school five years ago. As they had been the only witches in their year, everyone had

assumed they would get on, but Gimma had made it quite clear she didn't want to be friends with Arianwyn, and that was that.

'Oh look, it's Arianwyn "Dribble"!' Gimma called out, as she retrieved her card from the young man at the desk and tucked it away in the silly tiny beaded bag that she always carried with her. 'Ready for your evaluation?' More laughter. Gimma moved slowly down the queue until she reached Arianwyn. 'I've already been offered a position as a private witch for a family in Highbridge, you know,' she said smugly. 'I wouldn't be seen dead dealing with some old dear's brownie infestation, or making charms for a bunch of country bumpkins. What do you reckon you'll be doing, Dribble, if you pass?'

The other girls crowded around Arianwyn, smirking. Gimma flicked her mane of shiny hair. 'I *do* hope they find you something you can cope with, nothing too taxing! Not everyone has the luxury of the training my family provided for me. Who trained *you*, Arianwyn?' she asked, even though everybody already knew.

Arianwyn didn't reply, her cheeks burning.

'I heard it was her *grandmother*,' Polly whispered, nastily.

She wished more than anything that she had the nerve to do something, say something. But she looked away, as she had so many times before, finding a spot on the wall to focus on even as tears pricked at

her eyes. This was the usual way she dealt with Gimma's taunts.

Ignore her and she'll get bored.

'Er . . . name please? Miss? Hello?'

Arianwyn had reached the front of the queue and hadn't noticed. Gimma and her group had wandered off. A harassed young man, about her age, smiled politely at her as he fumbled with piles of folders, a typewriter and various notes. His dark hair flopped across his face and he tried to blow it out of his eyes.

'Sorry. I'm Arianwyn Gribble,' she smiled.

'And do you have your identity card, please, Miss . . . Gribble? Oh, here you are!' He yanked a brown card folder from the bottom of a precarious pile, which wobbled threateningly. He blushed as Arianwyn handed over her witch's identity card, clearly stamped with a large blue 'UA' for Unevaluated Apprentice. As the young man reached forward the column of paperwork shifted, quivered and slowly started to slide towards the floor. As quick as a blink, Arianwyn leant forward and with her index finger sketched a tiny symbol on to the desk.



Briå, the air glyph.

It glowed with a soft blue light that only a witch could see. The papers and folders not only righted themselves but also started to slide into the correct order on the desk.

The boy smiled again. 'Thank you!'

'*What* is going on here?'

A voice, raspy and indignant, cut through the hubbub of the room. A shrivelled, spidery woman in a severe grey suit that didn't fit entirely well stood glaring at them both over the top of some very thick spectacles.

'Oh, Miss Newam, sorry! I was just about to fetch you. This is Miss Gribble, here for the eleven o'clock evaluation ceremony.'

Miss Newam continued to stare, as if waiting for further explanation.

'Well, you see,' the boy continued hopelessly. 'There are so many files, and they were all getting in a muddle with so many witches coming and going and suddenly – whoosh! They're all falling on the floor. And Miss Gribble here was *amazing*! She just tapped something on the desk and they all zipped back into place. Look – good as new!' He gestured to the orderly pile of folders.

The woman's eyes narrowed to two tiny slits. 'Colin, I am neither interested nor concerned with what Miss Gribble did or did not do with your folders. It is your job simply to ensure the apprentice witches are put through for their evaluations as soon as possible, not to engage them in performing little . . . tricks!'

Colin glanced at Arianwyn and shrugged.

Miss Newam hadn't quite finished. 'If it's not too

inconvenient, perhaps you could go and fetch the files I need from my office. I'll deal with Miss Gribble.'

Colin gave Arianwyn a gentle smile, his cheeks flushed, and jogged off down the corridor, dodging the tide of oncoming apprentices.

'Miss Newam, it's really not his fault . . .' Arianwyn attempted to explain but fell silent as Miss Newam's full attention turned on her.

'Miss Gribble, we don't want to keep everyone waiting. I have two more evaluation ceremonies to get through today. What with war work claiming some of our most experienced witches and the recent increase in dark spirits, every village and hamlet from Goldham to Vellingstone has suddenly decided it needs a witch. We simply can't keep up with the demand.'

'Yes, I see,' Arianwyn said.

'Do you have any family with you?'

'No, I'm on my own,' she replied, feeling guilty about slipping out of the apartment so early and hiding the letter with the details of the evaluation from her grandmother. Miss Newam shot her a suspicious glance and opened the brown file on the desk, flicking through some of the papers.

'Just turned fifteen? You've been an apprentice for only two years?'

'Yes,' Arianwyn replied. 'But I wanted to—'

'And you were trained by?'

'Maria Stronelli . . . my grandmother.'

Miss Newam gazed over the top of her spectacles again. 'I see. And now you are apprenticed to?'

Arianwyn blushed, recalling Polly's taunts. 'My grandmother.'

'Well, that's rather . . . old-fashioned.' Miss Newam stared hard at her, then back at the paperwork, as if she were trying to figure something out. Then, her face lit up. 'Oh, Madam Stronelli is on the Council of Elders.' She peered closer at Arianwyn through the jam-jar-bottom spectacles and smiled. But it was bitter and tight, not really a smile at all.

A knot of anxiety twisted in Arianwyn's stomach. She could see Miss Newam was about to say more when a tinny voice crackled out from a speaker fixed high up on the wall.

'Could all apprentices for the eleven o'clock evaluation ceremony please proceed to the central courtyard. That's the central courtyard for the eleven o'clock evaluation. Thank you.'