



MONICA FAIRVIEW



TRACES *of* MAGIC

MR. DARCY'S MAGIC BOOK 3

Traces of Magic

A Pride and Prejudice Variation

MONICA FAIRVIEW

White Soup Press

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Also By Monica Fairview

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CHAPTER 1



*S*eptember 1812

It was amazing what a difference the presence of eleven fresh young gentlemen from the Kent Magical Academy made. Netherfield Park had been transformed into another place entirely. After the monotony of seeing the same faces day after day, hurrying from class to class and practicing spells, today was a wonder. Fitzwilliam Darcy delighted in the sight.

The air was filled with high-pitched young voices chattering and laughing in excitement. Some of the older visiting apprentices were flirting with the young ladies, leaning against the wall of Netherfield House, swinging their bats at their side in a deliberately nonchalant manner. Others – the younger ones – were letting off steam by chasing each other across the gardens and through the trees.

Darcy was the one who had created this occasion. He had come up with the idea of a cricket match and brought the players to Netherfield. Though, to be fair, he did not do it

alone. And to be even fairer, it was not only cricket that had the young apprentices excited. His gaze went to Elizabeth, who was overseeing the preparation of the archery stands and the pall mall wickets. As if sensing his thoughts, she turned and waved at him.

His heart swelled with pride. It was really Elizabeth who had made all this possible. She had encouraged him to pursue it, convincing him to keep trying even when the Council of Mages had refused to entertain the idea. She had argued that, with Napoleon occupied with his Russian campaign, now was the best possible time to organize a Games Day. The apprentices had suffered after the attack on Founders' Hall, and they had been under threat for many months now. They deserved a chance to amuse themselves, even if it was only for a short time.

Dearest, loveliest Elizabeth! Without her, none of this could have happened. He smiled and waved at her enthusiastically – wishing he could go and take her in his arms – but it was time to start the event, and he was needed elsewhere.

Darcy nodded at Lord Matlock, who was waiting by the wooden platform, and gave his uncle the signal to begin. The Head Mage took the three steps up to the dais and looked out onto the open green and the eager faces.

“Good morning, and welcome everyone,” he said, using a spell to project his voice. He waited as the noise faded and the apprentices fell silent. “The sun is smiling down on us, and there is no sign of rain. I am sure you are eager to begin our

Games Day, but before we start, I would like us to express our thanks to Mr. Darcy, He came up with the idea of the first Inter-Academy Cricket Match and has worked hard to bring you here. Can we have a show of thanks from you all at the same time?"

A chorus of voices rose up in unison. "Thank you, Mr. Darcy."

"You are witnessing the beginning of a new tradition for apprentices from different Academies to meet once a year and compete. We will do everything we can to make it happen. Meanwhile, I am sure each and every player will make their Academy proud today." Lord Matlock paused. "But I have the feeling you don't want to listen to a speech, so I will give the floor to Mr. Darcy."

There were a few huzzahs as Lord Matlock came down and was replaced by Darcy.

"I do not wish to put a damper on things, but it is my duty to mention an unhappy event. I would like us to bow our heads in memory of the Prime Minister, Lord Pearce, who was assassinated a week ago."

The Prime Minister had been an unpopular figure, but his assassination had been met with horror and disbelief throughout the Kingdom. Luckily, the perpetrator had been caught red-handed and brought to trial at once.

Darcy kept the moment short. Even in those brief seconds, the apprentices had already started squirming. He needed to put them out of their misery.

“Onto other things.” As their faces brightened, he saw he had judged the situation correctly. “First, I would like to make a correction. I am the one who came up with the idea of the cricket match, that is certainly the case. But today is not only about a cricket match, is it? It’s a day of games and entertainment for everyone. This has been a joint effort by many people, not least of whom was my wife and Janus Twin, Mrs. Darcy.”

He indicated Elizabeth. As heads turned towards her, she gave a little smile and inclined her head.

“And now, to what you have all been waiting for. The cricket match will begin shortly. You all know the rules of the game. At least I hope so.”

“I forgot the rules,” said a visiting player. He was a tall, athletic young gentleman of around seventeen. “Could you remind us, sir?”

There was a smattering of laughter mixed in with groans.

“Step aside then, Tolhurst. I will explain the rules to you while the others get on with the game. I will also teach you how to use a bat.”

Since Tolworth was one of the best cricket players present, several boys snickered good-naturedly.

Tolhurst chuckled. “I would not like to take up your time, sir. I will just give it a try, then see what happens.”

More laughter followed.

Darcy waited until the laughter died down. “Apart from the usual rules, there is one very strict rule that everyone here must follow. This rule cannot be bent or broken. No magic may be used to influence the game in any shape or form. Any player who breaks that rule will be disqualified at once and sent home from the Academy. The same applies to the spectators. There will be no exceptions. Have I made myself clear?”

“Yes, Mr. Darcy.” The expressions of the apprentices had turned serious. He had made his point.

“Are you ready to start?”

“Yes, Mr. Darcy.”

“Good. The players may head for the pitch and prepare themselves. Spectators, find yourselves somewhere to sit. For those who want to play other games, Miss Bingley is standing next to the refreshment tent. She will sort you out, but you must first put your names down.” He took out his timepiece and looked at it. “We will begin when the clock strikes the hour.”

During the ensuing chaos, as people moved to their chosen amusements, Darcy searched for Elizabeth. He could no longer see her, but there was no mistaking her location. Elizabeth’s magic was like a lighthouse to a weary sailor. It had been luring him for the last hour at least.

He surrendered to the impulse. Handing over the responsibility of organizing the boys to Bingley and headed

towards the refreshment tent. He did not have much time, but it was better than nothing.

She was standing just outside the tent, her back against a tree, waiting for him. How did she know he was coming to find her? It still amazed him that their connection was so strong, despite the turbulence of their early relationship.

He strode over to her. "I cannot believe the day has finally arrived. Do you think things are going well?"

She reached over and laced her fingers between his, their arms forming a bridge between them.

"I think you have started something remarkable here with the cricket. If it becomes a yearly tradition, they will have to call it the Darcy Tournament. Your name will be remembered for posterity."

"*Our* name, Elizabeth. Have you forgotten that you are a Darcy now?"

She smiled. "Sometimes I do. Especially when members of Council call me the Bennet girl," she teased.

"I have not heard anyone say that for a while," said Darcy. "And I would rather not think about the Council today, of all days."

He tugged at her hands and drew her to him until their noses almost touched. They could not kiss, not here in the open with so many apprentices around them. People of their social position did not display their affection in public. He did not want the parents to accuse him of corrupting their children.

He felt a powerful yearning to have Elizabeth to himself for a while, to pretend that life was simple. Today was supposed to be a day when they could forget about the world, about the war, assassinations, unrest in the North, and a thousand other things that plagued their life every day. He wanted the world to consist of only two people: Elizabeth and himself. Surely, he was entitled to spend some time with his wife, just for once.

He cast a glance at the bat-wielding boys to make certain Bingley was keeping everything under control, then threw caution to the wind. “Come with me. There is a delightfully thick copse of trees over there.”

He clasped her by the hand and began to run. She ran with him, picking her skirts up with her other hand, and giving him a tempting glimpse of long, strong legs, sending little jostles of desire through him each time their bodies bumped.

Her scent settled over him, caressing him like the warm sunshine shining down from a glorious sky. He needed to kiss her, without delay.

In the shade of the trees, away from prying eyes, he touched her lips with his. He kept the kiss short and fleeting, because that was all he could do right now. Yet even that light kiss left him shaken, hungry for more. It was torture to stop himself from going further.

He deliberately put his hands on her shoulders, putting a distance between them. Drawing back, he studied her face, wanting to know if she felt the same. Her eyes were soft and tender, and he saw an echo of her pain inside them. He

wondered whether it would have been better not to kiss her at all.

He took out his timepiece. “It is time,” he said, with regret. “Always remember that I love you. And if I behave badly, you must tell me so.”

She smiled. “Of course. Do you think I would let you get away with it?”

He took her hand and guided her back into the world.

As soon as they emerged from behind the trees, Devitt, one of the youngest apprentices, ran up to them.

“Mr. Darcy, sir,” said the boy. “How long until the game starts?”

Darcy took out his fob watch from his waistcoat pocket and showed it to him. It was the third time Devitt had asked him this question.

“We will begin in five minutes.

“Do you think the Netherfield Eleven will win?”

“We stand a very good chance,” said Darcy. He had seen the other team practicing yesterday. The teams were about equal – which was to say, none of them had trained much. “Now run off and find a seat before the best ones are taken. I will be right behind you.”

The two of them watched him race away. It was a joy to see the children happy.

“Are you nervous?” Elizabeth asked, once the boy was out of earshot.

His first inclination was to deny it, but he had promised her to be open about his feelings. It was absurd to care so much about a game, but it meant a great deal to him.

“I *am* apprehensive,” he acknowledged, tasting the words on his tongue. It felt odd to say it aloud. “I have no idea what to expect. It is important for the Netherfield mages to win, after all they have been through. It would only be fair. The other team did not have to suffer through French attacks and all the upheaval we encountered.”

“I think the fact that they have this opportunity to play and to meet other young mages is just as important as winning.”

“I hope so. Anyway, we will find out soon enough.” He took up her hand and kissed the inside of her wrist, feeling the beating of her pulse against his lips. “And now, my dear wife, I must leave you.”

“Go then,” she said, with a little laugh. “Hurry. You do not want to be late.”

He grinned at her. “If I am, it would have been for good reason.”



It was a joy to see Darcy so light-hearted and cheerful. Setting up these games had brought out his younger self. After all he had been through, he needed to shed some of his ghosts and

take pleasure in the moment. He rarely had the opportunity to set aside his responsibilities and enjoy himself. She was fiercely glad for him.

Last week, with the assassination on everyone's minds, she had worried that it would be postponed, even cancelled. Her heart had grown heavy as she witnessed Darcy's disappointment. It had been so complicated to arrange transportation for the Kent Eleven while maintaining absolute secrecy. It would have been much too difficult to rearrange all the small details again.

Thankfully, it was decided that cancelling Games Day would create problems with morale, and the Council decided to continue as planned. Darcy's plans came to fruition and here they were.

Initially, Elizabeth had planned to include a select number of young ladies from the Kent Academy as well to compete in archery or pall mall. However, she discovered that it was not that simple. The Netherfield Royal Mages did not yet have a Mistress of Maidens. Miss Caroline Bingley had been put temporarily in charge, but many people outside Netherfield did not consider her suitable. Apart from being a single young lady herself, there were strong objections to her background in trade. Money and magical Talent were not enough, it seemed, nor was Academy training. Miss Bingley lacked the correct Bloodlines.

In the end, Elizabeth had to acknowledge that, despite her good intentions, it was simply not practical to bring the young

ladies for a visit.

Elizabeth walked over to where Miss Bingley was taking down names. She was looking flustered. It was clear that her patience was wearing thin.

“Problems?” she said, sympathetically.

“Nothing I cannot handle,” said Miss Bingley, with a sniff. “Though I admit it has been a challenge keeping track of the young ladies. Still, all the gentlemen are soon going to be occupied with the cricket. Once the archery and pall mall start, the young ladies will settle down. I have enlisted the help of Miss Bennet to keep an eye on them. She should be arriving soon.”

Elizabeth could not imagine her sister Jane imposing discipline on anyone. She tried not to smile. Jane Bennet was the most forgiving and easily duped person she knew. If Miss Bingley was relying on Jane to supervise the young ladies, it was a lost cause.

Elizabeth started to offer her assistance, but Miss Bingley’s attention was elsewhere. “You must excuse me,” she said, in alarm. “I must drag Miss Walsh away from Lord Tolhurst. She is clinging to his arm most improperly. Would you mind taking down names until I return?”

Miss Bingley hurried away. Elizabeth did not envy her the task of keeping the young ladies in order. Judging by Lydia and Kitty’s behavior, nothing could stop them when they were in pursuit of a handsome gentleman. Or any young gentleman at all.

Elizabeth stood at the table in Miss Bingley's place, chatting to some of the apprentices as they wrote down their names. When Miss Bingley came back, Elizabeth made her way into the refreshment tent.

The mood inside the tent was a stark contrast to the mood outside it. Many of the Mage tutors were gathered there, and they were speculating about the Prime Minister's death. His harsh policies had aroused anger for some time, and his blatant indifference to the increasing poverty brought on by the war had led to opposition in Parliament and resentment amongst the populace. Although the assassin was rumored to be insane, word was circulating that the assassination was connected to the unrest in the Kingdom, and that the assassin was part of a dissident group.

Three of the Council members were standing around Colonel Fitzwilliam. He had arrived this morning from London, and everyone was trying to discover the latest news from the capital. The poor Colonel had not had a second to himself.

"Are you enjoying your day?" Ramon de Riquer appeared suddenly at her side. He was their newly acquired mage from Barcelona who had switched sides from fighting with the French.

Elizabeth sighed. "I would have enjoyed it much more if the assassination had not happened."

De Riquer gave her a look of mock horror. "Come, Mrs. Darcy. Do you mean to tell me you are indifferent to the poor man's fate?"

“Not at all. Like most people, I am appalled.” She tried to find the right words. “It is very unfortunate. Just when we thought Napoleon’s attacks were easing off, this had to happen to ensure we could not rest easy.”

“Anyone listening would think you are completely heartless, Mrs. Darcy. Luckily, I am not in the least deceived.” His eyes twinkled. “In any case, I am glad you are not interested in the Prime Minister. I need your help.”

He lowered his voice. “I have placed a wager on the Netherfield team,” he said. “Naturally, I wish to support our boys. But I know nothing about this English game. The other mages have talked about wickets and innings and badgers, but I do not have the slightest idea what they mean. It would be too humiliating to admit my ignorance. You must explain everything to me quickly so I can pretend that I have all the knowledge.”

Elizabeth chuckled. “I am afraid I cannot help you in this, Riquer. I am woefully ignorant as well. You had better ask Mr. Bingley. He will give you a far better idea than I will.”

“Mr. Bingley is preoccupied with the players.”

“You can ask Colonel Fitzwilliam.”

De Riquer looked doubtful. “If I ever have a chance to speak to him. I suppose I must resign myself to being ignorant.”

“It is not as if you are going to be watching cricket every day,” she remarked. “You can always ask Darcy before the next competition. He would be happy to tell you all about it.”

She returned to their former conversation. “What do *you* think of the assassination, Riquer? I know they have caught the culprit, but do you detect Napoleon’s hand in it?”

“Do you know something interesting? You are the first person to ask me this question. You and I are still outsiders.” He smiled wryly.

“It is only to be expected. They have all known each other for years. You and I are newcomers in their world.”

“True. But you would expect them to extract as much useful information from me as they can, given my background. As to your question, I have thought about it. I do not detect Napoleon’s hand in the assassination. I do not see how it would serve him.”

“To strike uncertainty and terror? To make us more likely to surrender to him? To start a revolution?”

De Riquer considered the possibility. “I suppose. I will have to give it more thought. We know so little about the situation. We cannot make a judgement without knowing all the facts.”

A loud Enhanced whistle indicated that the cricket game had started. Cheers erupted as the players walked onto the pitch. Elizabeth decided that she would rather be out in the open air than inside the tent, and she excused herself to go and watch the game until the archery began.

Just as she was about to step outside, Elizabeth felt a single strong blast of Elemental Magic. Startled, she looked around her to see if it was one of the apprentices playing a practical

joke, or if someone was showing off a new magic spell and it had gone wrong. From the startled expressions on everyone's faces, it was clear everyone else had felt it as well.

She expected embarrassed laughter and an apology. Instead, there were looks of confusion everywhere. Someone called a halt to the game while they waited to discover the source of the spell. Was it someone trying to influence the game in some way?

She sent out magical threads to find the culprit, but it quickly became evident that it had not originated within the grounds of Netherfield.

Her heartbeat quickened. That meant the source must be outside the boundary of Netherfield Park.

Was Netherfield under attack? Surely not. Not today, of all days. But then, what better time to do it, when they were distracted by the games? Her mind grappled with the possibility. She tried to set aside her fears and think about it rationally. If this was an attack, why had it not been aimed at them? It made no sense to warn them ahead of time rather than take them completely by surprise.

Carefully, she reached out to identify the source, her stomach churning with worry. She searched just beyond the Wards guarding the estate. Nothing.

She explored further, extending the reach of the seeking tendrils. Still nothing. She stretched the tendrils out, further and further beyond the estate. She was reaching her limits. She had never expanded her magic over such a distance.

Then at last she found it. There it was— a single, sudden flare of magic. Whoever it was had to be a powerful mage, because it was at least three miles away, though it was impossible to know for certain.

It took a few more moments for her to realize the implications. *Three miles away.*

That was how far it was from Netherfield to Longbourn.

CHAPTER 2



The cricket game had been forgotten. Everything was at a standstill. Someone gave the order to ring the alarm bells and the order was Enhanced so it could be heard all the way inside the house.

Three miles away. The moment the idea popped into Elizabeth's head, it seized her, and she could not get rid of it. Horrible thoughts ran through her head – Longbourn was under attack, under fire. Papa would never be able to defend it alone. Lydia and Kitty's magic would be useless.

The feeling of urgency was overwhelming. She had to go to Longbourn at once. She began to push her way through the crowds to reach Darcy.

"Excuse me," she said. She repeated the word again and again, feeling like a parrot. She tried to Enhance the words, to clear the space in front of her, but the ugly clanging of the bells drowned her voice. Her fear was the only thing that drove her through the press of people.

Darcy took one look at her face and seized both her hands in his. “What is it, Elizabeth? You are trembling. Are you sensing an imminent attack?”

She had been the one to warn them last time, at Founder’s Hall. Around them, people fell silent as they tried to hear what she was saying. Most of the people here remembered that fateful day when they had been forced to flee to Netherfield.

“No. I do not sense anything converging on Netherfield. I do not believe we are under threat here. But I think we need to get to Longbourn. Something is happening there.”

He stared at her intently. “Are you certain?”

“I am not certain the magic came from Longbourn. I can’t pin down the exact location. Not at this distance. The magic came from that general direction. I can’t say how or why, but my instincts tell me it has something to do with Longbourn, but I can’t say why.”

A year ago, Darcy would not have taken her seriously, but by now, he knew her instincts were generally accurate.

Darcy did not hesitate. “Then we had better go and talk to my uncle. We need to stop him before he orders everyone to go to their battle positions.”

Lord Matlock was climbing the steps to the dais. Darcy waved both arms above him to get his attention, but the Head Mage was not looking in his direction. Darcy would be faster pushing his way through the crowd without her.

“You go. You are taller. He is more likely to see you. I will follow as quickly as possible.”

Darcy nodded grimly and began to shoulder his way through. Elizabeth wished one of them had Conjuring magic. It would have enabled them to use an Illusion to make him turn. She considered sending up a small flare to draw Lord Matlock’s attention, but she did not want to cause general panic. The apprentices might assume it was part of the attack.

The air was thick with magic. Everyone was trying to find the unknown origin of the magic spell. Darcy was lost in the crowd, and she found it difficult to locate Darcy’s signature. She had to look for him physically, craning her neck to find his distinctive dark curls. Then she spotted him. He had almost reached his uncle, who was now standing on the dais, ready to make his announcement.

She groaned in relief. Darcy had managed to draw his attention, and they were talking together. There was a brief consultation, and Lord Matlock nodded.

The Head Mage raised his arms. He tried to use projection magic to Enhance his voice, but like Elizabeth, the bells smothered the attempt.

He turned to Illusion magic. It would weaken him, because it was not his main Talent, but it was worth it.

SILENCE

The words were written in red above him.

All conversation stopped. Tense faces turned in his direction. They all knew what they needed to do. They had practiced it so many times, they could do it in their sleep. They were simply waiting for the command to take up their positions. The only ones who were at a loss were the visiting players. Elizabeth spared a moment of sympathy for them. It must be terrifying to be somewhere unfamiliar during a suspected attack.

“First let me reassure you. This is not a battle alarm. We do not believe we are in immediate danger of attack. Though, of course, that could change. I suggest we remain vigilant and be prepared in case anything further happens. Can someone stop the bells, please?” He looked towards the other Mages.

De Riquer hurried into the house to silence the ringing.

Lord Matlock paused, looking around at the apprentices. “You may also have guessed that this has implications for you. I am sorry to interrupt the games, but hopefully we can resume them when we have clarified the situation.”

“You may stay outside for now if you wish to but be alert for any new announcements. If the bells ring again, this time it will mean we are in danger. Do not wait for an announcement. Just take up your positions. As for our visiting team, gather outside the refreshment tent and wait for instructions. Apprentices, you may disperse now. Council members, I am calling a meeting. Mrs. Darcy, could you join us, please?”

By the time Elizabeth had reached the house, the bells had stopped clanging. She hurried towards the Council Chamber.

They were wasting time. She could not wait to explain to the Council. She looked around for a footman to send a message to Darcy, telling him she was leaving. She was going to Longbourn *now*.

As she stepped through the front door and headed in the direction of the stables, a footman came running towards her.

“A message has just arrived for you, Mrs. Darcy,” he said. “The footman says it is urgent.”

She took the note from the silver salver and tore it open, her hands trembling.

Lizzy,

Lydia has lost control of her magic. She has set Sir William Lucas's barn on fire. Please send an Elemental mage to extinguish the flames. It is blazing out of control and requires magical intervention.

Please ensure that someone from the Academy takes Lydia away. She has become a danger to herself and others. I will hold the Academy responsible if she turns Rogue.

Thomas Bennet

Elizabeth closed her eyes in frustration. Her instincts *were* right, even if not in the way she thought. The flare of magic had something to do with Longbourn. She was too far away, but Elizabeth had felt Lydia's magic in it somehow.

The Council was not going to be happy to hear that it was one of the Bennet sisters who had sent them all into a panic.

There *was* a good part, of course. There was no danger of an attack. It was going to be humiliating to admit her sister had caused this problem, but there was nothing to be done but grin and bear it.

She turned back to the house and went quickly into the Council room. Her sense of urgency had lessened, but there was still a fire to be dealt with, and time was still of the essence. As she entered, the Council members turned towards her as one.

She looked towards Darcy. He gave her an encouraging smile. She wished she did not have to do this, but it was up to her to let them know what had happened.

She held up her father's letter. "The good news is, Netherfield is not in danger. So the games can continue as planned. I have just received a letter from Mr. Bennet, who explained the source of the problem."

Elizabeth took a deep breath, trying not to wince as she imagined their reaction.

"The magic flare everyone felt belongs to my sister Lydia. It seems she lost control of an Elemental spell and set a barn on fire. My father has requested our help extinguishing the fire, since the flames are magical and cannot be put out the usual way."

Someone— most likely Lord Devereux, who had never liked her— muttered the words 'the Bennet girls' along with something she preferred not to hear. Elizabeth kept her

expression under control. She could have predicted they would react that way. Unfortunately.

But she had not finished. The next part was even more awkward, if possible.

“My father also insists that Lydia needs Academy training immediately. He is concerned that, without training, she will turn Rogue.”

“Does he indeed? May I see the letter?” said Lord Matlock.

She had told them everything in the letter already, but she handed it over. “It is very brief.”

He looked it through and nodded. “Mrs. Darcy has stated the situation rather more politely than Bennet does. If Bennet believes she is in urgent need of training, then we are obliged to take this very seriously indeed.”

Lord Matlock turned to Elizabeth. “For now, we will send an Elemental mage to put out the fire, though it must be done at a distance and very discreetly. I suppose you will deal with your sister?”

Elizabeth nodded.

“I will go with her,” said Darcy.

“Before you leave,” said Lord Grayson, “I would like to clarify something. I believe bringing her here might not be the wisest course of action. The Council will have to discuss what to do with Miss Lydia Bennet first.”

Elizabeth felt the sting of betrayal. Lord Grayson had always been one of her few allies among the Royal Mages. Why was he suddenly raising objections to bringing Lydia here?

From the expression on Darcy's face, he felt the same, and he had no intention of letting it go.

"Now, look here, Grayson—"

"Allow me to explain myself," interrupted Grayson. "I have valid concerns. Everyone at Netherfield felt Miss Lydia's magic, which is remarkable, given how far away the fire is. I do not know the exact distance of the barn from here, but I gather it is around three or four miles."

Elizabeth nodded. "Around three."

"If we felt it from that distance, we are surely not the only ones." He paused to let that idea sink in. "Which means that there is a chance – admittedly remote – that someone may have noticed her and will come looking for her."

The idea had not occurred to Elizabeth, though now that he had stated it, it seemed obvious. She was dismayed.

"It behooves us to consider all the implications before we bring her here."

"I do not see how it would be any better leaving her running loose around Meryton, setting people's barns on fire. Or worse." Lady Ashcombe's tone was ominous. "She is clearly a powerful mage. We need to train her."

Darcy spoke up. "Before the Council enters into a protracted discussion, Mrs. Darcy and I will excuse ourselves. There is a

fire that needs extinguishing, and it cannot wait.” He looked at Matlock. “Shall I take Rease with us? He is an Elemental mage, and is better than most at extinguishing fires.”

“Yes,” said Lord Matlock. “Take the carriage. It is vital that no one sees you. You could leave him at some distance from the barn so no one notices him.”

Elizabeth just wanted to go and fetch Lydia so everything would be safe, but it seemed everything must be complicated.

A footman was dispatched to bring Rease immediately, and another to order the carriage.



Elizabeth and Darcy left the Council members in deep discussion and hurried towards the stables.

“What do we do if Lydia refuses to come with us?” she said to Darcy, as they headed for the stables.

“I do not think she will refuse the chance to join an Academy. If she does, we will have to cast a spell on her and force her to come.”

Elizabeth looked at him incredulously. “Surely you do not mean that.”

Darcy shrugged. “I have no patience with your sister, Elizabeth. Not only has she set fire to someone’s barn, but everyone here felt her magic. She has created a very tricky situation.”

“She is young,” said Elizabeth, though she knew that was not much of an excuse. “And she is untrained.”

“How many barns did you set fire to when you were fifteen?”

The answer was *none*. Elizabeth knew he was right, but she could not help defending her sister. “I was not an Elemental Mage.”

“If you must insist on defending Lydia, Elizabeth, let us then lay the blame squarely where it belongs. Your father ought to have trained her.”

At that moment, Mr. Rease joined them, and their conversation ended. It was a relief. She was embarrassed by Lydia’s behavior. Having to admit what had happened to the Council was bad enough. When Lydia turned up, everyone would know that she was the one who had disrupted Games Day.

If Elizabeth’s entrance to the Academy had been difficult, she did not want to think what would happen in Lydia’s case.



Darcy stopped the carriage some distance away from the burning barn to let off Rease, then ordered the coachman to find a concealed location where they could still see the barn clearly. Elizabeth was staring out of the window at the fire. He could sense her distress. A fire brigade had been organized, and buckets of water were being passed down the line. The

Lucases and their tenants had been trying everything they could to douse the flames.

Darcy experienced a smothering sensation, like a blanket pressing downwards.

“Rease is at work already. He should have it under control shortly.” She would have felt Rease’s magic, but he wanted to reassure her.

A black plume of smoke was snaking up towards the sky. The acrid odor of smoke was everywhere. From where they were, it looked like the barn had been damaged beyond repair.

Elizabeth’s father must have been looking out for their arrival, because he soon approached on horseback and gestured for Elizabeth to lower the window.

“Where is Lydia, Papa?” said Elizabeth anxiously. “Is she inside the barn?”

“Unfortunately, yes.”

Elizabeth gasped loudly.

Mr. Bennet was not showing the least sign of distress. Darcy was incensed. How could any father be so indifferent to his daughter’s fate?

“What? We were not aware that she was trapped inside.”

“Oh, you need not get worked up about it,” said Mr. Bennet. “She is safe. She is surrounded by some kind of bubble she created to protect herself. Regrettably, this has rendered her immobile, and she is unable to come out.”

“What if she breathes in the smoke—?” Elizabeth was beside herself with worry. Darcy took her hand and squeezed it tightly.

“The bubble is keeping the smoke from her. I assure you, she will not come to any harm. Which cannot be said about Sir William Lucas’s barn.”

“You do realize, Papa, that she will not be able to hold the bubble for very long before she tires. Besides, it is *hot* in there. Oh, why is she not coming out? We must help her.”

Darcy could see her rising frustration. Elizabeth was stuck in the carriage, trying not to betray their presence, when her first instinct would be to use magic to help her sister.

“You have to find a way to bring her out yourself, Bennet,” said Darcy.

“It is clear you have never dealt with Lydia, Darcy,” said Mr. Bennet, shaking his head and laughing. “Do you honestly think she will let me control her with magic?”

Was everything a joke to him? Darcy felt his temper slipping. “If she had learned some discipline when she was younger, we would not be in such a situation.”

“If the Academy had taken her and trained her, we would not be in such a situation,” said Mr. Bennet, mildly, though his lips tightened with displeasure. Well, he could be as displeased as he liked, thought Darcy. Someone had to tell him the truth.

“It was your responsibility to make sure she was trained. You chose to leave the Academy for reasons of your own

when you were younger. We know you have something against it. But that is no excuse to allow Lydia to run free with her magic with no attempt at disciplining her.”

A flash of anger lightened Mr. Bennet’s eyes, and his magic crackled, creating a curling light that streaked around Darcy, who reacted by instinct, gathering magic to counter it. He checked himself at once. He had no intention of fighting a fellow mage. They were on the same side. Though he was curious to discover the formidable power hidden behind Mr. Bennet’s mask of indifference.

“If I did not care to join the Royal Mages. I had my reasons.” He gave Darcy a level look. “You know nothing about the matter. As for how I deal with Lydia, that is my concern.”

Darcy felt sorry he had brought up such a sensitive issue. “I do not claim to know your reasons for leaving the Royal Mages. They are your own. What I do know is that your daughter’s actions may have serious consequences for all of us. Miss Lydia might as well have stood at the top of Oakham Mount and announced her powers to the world.”

Mr. Bennet paled. Darcy did not doubt Mr. Bennet’s intelligence, but he was always shut in his library, burying his head in his books. He had lost touch with real the world outside his home. Sadly, the consequences of Lydia’s mistake were very real.

“Either Lydia cannot control her magic, or she was determined to get the attention of the Royal Mages. Either way, the consequences are the same. Such a large flare of

power will not go unnoticed. Any French spies will see it from miles away.”

Even as he spoke, Darcy realized that Mr. Bennet was not entirely to blame. Darcy had known Lydia was growing out of control, and he had not done anything either. Elizabeth had warned him. He should have followed up and taken care of things himself.

“Enough!” said Elizabeth, suddenly. “You can have this discussion another day. Right now, a barn is on fire, and my sister is inside. Someone needs to *do* something.”

Darcy felt contrite. Elizabeth was right. Why was he arguing with Mr. Bennet at a time like this?

By now, Rease had put out the fire completely, but the smoking wreck of the barn could not hold up any longer. A cry tore out of Elizabeth as the roof crumpled in a loud crash. She fumbled with the door of the carriage and started to get out. Mr. Bennet took off at a gallop, finally galvanized into action.

Darcy held onto Elizabeth’s arm. She struggled, trying to shrug him off.

“You must not reveal your presence, Elizabeth,” said Darcy, putting his arm around her.

“You cannot expect me to sit here, when my sister is trapped inside!”

Darcy held her tenderly. “There. Look! She is making her way out.”

Lydia emerged from the remains of the barn, looking dazed. Darcy was relieved that she seemed unharmed, from this distance at least. Clearly her protection bubble had been effective.

“Thank heavens she isn’t injured.” Elizabeth sagged and leaned against Darcy. “Stupid girl! What was she thinking?”

Lydia may have been safe, but by now she was the object of everyone’s wrath. Everyone turned to glare at her as she passed by.

“Papa!” cried Lydia and ran the last few steps to him, sobbing.

“There, there.” Mr. Bennet dismounted and put his arms around his youngest daughter briefly. He patted her on the shoulder. Then, making a stirrup with his hands, he boosted her onto his horse. Lydia sat awkwardly balanced sideways on a man’s saddle, trying to arrange her skirts into some semblance of dignity. He held the reins and guided her towards their carriage. Darcy and Elizabeth drew back into the shadows so no one could see them. Stopping a small distance away, he left Lydia behind and approached them.

“I will leave Lydia in your charge. I must go and ascertain what the damage is. I hope none of the livestock has been injured.” He suddenly looked old and careworn. “I will need to offer Sir William Lucas compensation and arrange to have the area cleared and rebuilt.”

Darcy wished it had not come at such a large expense, but at least no one could doubt that Lydia required proper instruction

in the use of magic.

“I hope to see you both soon. Under better circumstances,” said Mr. Bennet, dryly.

He went to Lydia and swung her to the ground, giving her a little push towards the carriage.

“There is a carriage waiting for you. I must go and speak to Sir William.”

Lydia frowned in their direction. “But whose carriage is it, Papa? I do not recognize it.”

“I asked you to go,” said Mr. Bennet, his voice harsh. “Can you cease arguing for once, child, and do as you are told? Have you not done enough damage? As it is, I will have to use your dowry to pay for a new barn.”

“My dowry?” Lydia looked shocked. “But how am I to marry without a dowry?”

“You will have no choice but to find a rich husband who will not care whether you have a dowry or not.” Even under the circumstances, Mr. Bennet could not help being facetious.

“But who is in the carriage, Papa? Am I to go to prison?” Lydia’s voice went up one register. “I did not mean to do it.”

“Go into the carriage at once or I will cast a paralysis spell on you.”

Such threats were so unlike Mr. Bennet that Lydia’s mouth fell open. Her shoulders hunched in defeat and she nodded.

She walked towards them slowly, staring at the window, hoping to determine who was inside.

“We had better conceal our presence,” remarked Darcy, suddenly realizing the danger of a careless word. “You cannot have her shouting your name out to everyone once she discovers you are here.”

“You do it, Darcy. You are better at Illusion magic.”

Elizabeth looked so careworn, he wanted to rally her spirits. “Are you admitting that I am better than you at *something*?”

Elizabeth responded with a weak smile. “I will only admit that one small thing.”

Darcy chuckled. He quickly spoke the spell for fog and in a moment a milky essence arose inside the carriage. Suddenly, he could not even see Elizabeth, who was right next to him.

As Lydia put out her hand to open the door, Elizabeth pushed him away. “You had better sit somewhere else before she embarrasses you by sitting in your lap.”

The possibility had him scrambling to get out of the way. He jumped up and sat at the opposite end of the carriage.

The carriage door opened. Darcy could just make out the faint outline of Lydia’s head.

“La! What is going on here? Is this some kind of joke?”

CHAPTER 3



The fog had hidden their identity effectively, but Lydia had left the door open, and they were beginning to attract unwanted attention. Darcy realized he had not thought this through properly. It was imperative that Lydia did not recognize their voices until after she had closed the door. If she discovered who they were, she would undoubtedly shout out Elizabeth's name, and they would have to come up with an elaborate explanation for their presence as well as the reason why—as mages—they had not intervened to quell the fire.

Darcy had to think quickly. Lydia did not know him very well, so hopefully the disguise would work.

Holding the bottom of his cravat in front of his mouth, he spoke in his deepest voice. "Shut the door, Miss Bennet."

He thought he heard Elizabeth snickering, but he could not be sure.

His impromptu ruse must have worked, because Lydia came inside and closed the door. Judging by the creaking of the seat,

it was clear she sat in the exact spot he had recently vacated.

Darcy gave the signal for the carriage to start moving.

“Who are you? Are you taking me to jail? Am I going to be accused of arson?”

Even a young lady as ignorant as Lydia knew that the laws against arson were severe. Setting fire to domestic premises that contained stacks of corn, grain, straw, hay or wood with malicious intent could be punishable by death. Not that it would come to that, of course. Sir William Lucas would not press charges, especially since Mr. Bennet was going to foot the bill.

“Lydia, it’s me,” said Elizabeth.

Darcy dispelled the fog just as Lydia screamed Elizabeth’s name and launched herself at her sister. Elizabeth barely had time to react as Lydia landed on top of her.

“Oh, Lizzy!” She gave a loud cry. “I was so frightened!”

She sobbed for a while into Elizabeth’s shoulder while Elizabeth made soothing sounds.

“Did you see how everyone stared at me? They all hate me.”

“It is only to be expected,” said Darcy, not wanting to belittle the seriousness of what she had done. “Especially if any of the livestock were killed.”

She recoiled in dismay. “No. No, I did not see any animals. It was just piles of hay.”

“If the piles of hay were burnt, it means the animals will have little to feed on this winter.”

At this, Lydia rallied. “La! Sir William has another barn, and he is rich.”

“Papa will have to pay for everything that was lost,” added Elizabeth.

But Lydia was already dismissing their concerns. “It is not as if I started the fire deliberately. If Edward Lucas did not come in when he did, it would never have happened.”

“What did Edward Lucas have to do with it, Lydia?”

“Nothing.”

“Was he injured?”

“No. He ran away as soon as the fire started. I was the one trapped inside.”

Darcy preferred not to probe. He suspected it had been a clandestine meeting in the barn. She would never admit it, of course. She was a silly young girl, but she would be foolish indeed to admit to such a thing. Though why she would have used fire magic in a barn full of hay was beyond him. Darcy could only imagine she wanted to show off one of her skills.

Elizabeth looked as if she wanted to pursue the topic further, but, meeting her gaze, he shook his head slightly to indicate that she should drop the conversation.

“But why are you here,” said Lydia, “and where are you taking me?”

It was a good question, and Darcy did not have a good answer.

“I will answer your question once we have picked up a friend of ours.”

They drove a short distance, then stopped to pick up Mr. Rease, the Elemental mage, at the spot they had agreed. Darcy had to jump down quickly to warn the mage not to mention Netherfield in front of Lydia. They would drop him off at some distance and leave him to continue there on foot.

As Darcy was about to follow Mr. Rease into the carriage, he hesitated. His thoughts were churning. He needed to give the coachman a destination. They could not take Lydia to Netherfield Park. For one thing, they did not know the outcome of the Council’s discussion, and they needed permission to bring her there. For another, it was not safe for Lydia to know the Royal Mages were so close to Meryton. She was just the kind of thoughtless young lady who would want to boast about it.

“Elizabeth, could you come down for a moment?”

Putting a Ward around them to prevent Lydia from listening, Darcy quickly outlined the problem to Elizabeth.

As usual, she grasped the issues very quickly. “I agree. We cannot go straight to Netherfield. And we cannot take her to Longbourn, either, in case we are being followed.” She laid her hand on his arm. “I think our only choice now is to go to an inn. It should be somewhere we have never been. If you

give Rease our destination, he can tell your uncle. He will advise us what to do next.”

It was a sensible solution, but Darcy could not help feeling ill-used and despondent. It had taken him so long to organize that cricket game, and now he would have to miss it.



After a consultation with Darcy, the coachman took them to The Swan, a quiet inn that was out of the way, but was clean and served decent food. They asked for two adjoining rooms. Elizabeth and Lydia went into one of them, and Darcy into the other.

Elizabeth ordered a hot bath for each of them. Even though Elizabeth was far from the fire, she desperately needed to wash. They reeked of smoke – clothes, hair, everything, but they had no change of clothes, so they carried the smoke around with them. Luckily, the bubble Lydia had set up had prevented her from being burnt, as well as protecting her.

Elizabeth shuddered, seeing the burning barn in her mind’s eye, and the angry looks afterwards. Lydia would not be forgiven easily, not when the Lucases had been her victims. Meryton society could be ruthless at times.

They helped each other dress again. Lydia immediately threw herself onto the bed. “I am so tired, Lizzy. I think I spent too much energy on that Protection bubble.”

“Of course you did. It saved your life. Why don’t you take a nap?”

“I don’t like taking naps. And I am famished.”

No sooner had she said the words than she fell into a deep sleep. It was hardly surprising. It took a lot of effort to maintain a spell. Elizabeth drew the covers over Lydia. Sleep had given her a serenity that made her look very different. Lydia was always overflowing with an abundance of energy. It was strange to see her so quiet.

Still, there was an innocence about her that moved Elizabeth. She felt a warm affection towards her hapless sister. She had been worried sick when the barn collapsed. Lydia was foolish, true, but there was still a chance that she would learn.

Once Elizabeth was sure her sister would not wake up, she scratched on the door that separated her room from Darcy’s. Darcy answered immediately. They spoke in whispers.

“Any news from your uncle yet?”

“It is much too soon,” said Darcy.

“Do you think we will be staying the night?”

“I cannot be sure of anything at this point. We will have to wait and see.”

He did not seem very happy. Elizabeth remembered that it was Games Day at Netherfield, and that Darcy was unable to be there.

“I am sorry you are stuck here and missing the cricket, Darcy.”

“No need for you to apologise. It is hardly your fault. Would you like something to eat? I for one would welcome something.”



Elizabeth soon realized it had been a mistake to order food, because as soon as there was a knock on the door, Lydia’s eyes flew open and she sprang up in bed. It would have been better to give her a chance to rest.

But food was necessary as well, and as soon as Lydia spotted the cold cuts, she fell upon them and ate as if she had not eaten for days.

“Do you know which Academy I will be attending, Elizabeth? I do hope they will allow me to come home for the Meryton Assembly. I promised my friends I would be there, and Mama ordered a new gown for me.”

Elizabeth sat on the side of the bed and took Lydia’s hands. “I think you should plan on missing the Assembly this time, dearest,” said Elizabeth. “Considering the circumstances.”

Lydia came to her feet sulkily and strolled to the window, drawing back the curtains.

She must have seen someone in the yard because she stood up on tiptoes, craning her neck to get a better view.

“Look! There is a young gentleman in the courtyard. He has a very fine seat. He is just dismounting.”

Lydia opened the window and leaned out. “His back is turned. I cannot tell if he is handsome or not. I wonder if I can make him notice me?”

Elizabeth stared at her sister in dismay.

“Have you no concept of propriety? He is a stranger! Come away from the window at once, Lydia.”

“Not until I draw his attention.”

Elizabeth gritted her teeth. Was Lydia so incapable of grasping the situation?

“You may have been followed, Lydia. A French mage, perhaps.”

Instead of looking alarmed, Lydia clapped her hands. “Do you really think so? I am having an adventure! How thrilling!”

Elizabeth bit back an angry retort.

“It would hardly be thrilling if he sent a firebolt to kill you.”

Lydia snorted. “That is very unlikely.”

She leaned even further forward and waved her handkerchief. “There. I have done it. He is turning to look at me. Oh!”

Lydia suddenly fell silent.

“What is it, Lydia? Is it someone you know?”

“No. It is nobody.” She stepped away from the window and threw herself on the bed. “He is not as handsome as I thought after all.”

Elizabeth walked to where Lydia had been standing and looked out. She caught sight of a young gentleman with undistinguished features looking in her direction.

When he spotted her, he turned and walked away casually, whistling a tune.

The hairs at the back of her neck stood up as Elizabeth picked up a magic signature coming from his direction. It was very faint. The tune eluded her, but there was no mistaking its intent.

The whistling was a spell.

Elizabeth’s pulse started to race. She needed to tell Darcy at once.

“Stay here, Lydia. And whatever you do, do not use magic. You cannot draw his attention.”

“If he followed me because of my magic, he already knows about it.” Lydia looked pleased with herself for working this out.

It was certainly a logical conclusion. Elizabeth was surprised Lydia had even thought of it. “True. But just in case I am mistaken, try not to draw his attention. I need to talk to Darcy. Stay here, and I *beg* you, don’t do anything. Don’t move.”

“Are you serious? You do not want me to move?” Lydia sighed dramatically. “Just when I thought I was starting to

enjoy myself.”

With a doubtful look at her sister, Elizabeth knocked at Darcy’s door for the second time. When he answered, she slipped past him into his bedchamber. He looked startled.

She was about to set up Wards so they would not be heard, when she remembered what she told Lydia. It was better not to use magic just yet, in case it alerted the unknown mage.

“I believe we might have been followed.” She quickly told him about the man Lydia had spotted.

“Confound it!” Darcy went to the window and peered cautiously into the courtyard, trying not to move the curtain. “There is nobody there. And I do not feel any magic.”

“Well, I do. Do you think I should set up Wards around us?”

“If there is someone who intends us harm,” said Darcy, his brow furrowing, “setting up Wards will confirm that we are mages. Whoever this person is, he can easily send for others. I think we need to leave as quickly as possible.”

“And go where? We cannot lead him back to Netherfield.” Elizabeth’s heart sank as she considered the implications.

“We will have to continue to London and hope we can escape him,” said Darcy. “I know a bolt hole where we can hide in case of emergency. With just the three of us, it should be easy enough to lose him in Town.”

Elizabeth was not convinced. “Are you sure that is our best solution? Why not strike while the iron is hot and ensure he cannot follow us?”

“And risk another magic signal that draws even more people to us?” Darcy was understandably cautious.

Elizabeth thought of the man’s whistling. What kind of magic was he using? He was not trained by the Academy. They needed to find out more about him before he slipped through their fingers. “As Lydia wisely pointed out, if we have already been noticed, it will not make any difference.”

“You think we should tackle him?”

She hoped she was not advocating something foolish. “If he is alone, yes, I believe so. We cannot let him escape and spread the news.”

Darcy took a deep breath. “Very well. I will rely on you to find him. You are better at tracing magic than I am.”

Another admission that she was better than him at something. She chuckled. He smiled in response. Her gaze went to his lips as she remembered how they had felt against hers earlier that day. She flushed and turned away quickly to hide her reaction. This was no time to be having such thoughts.

She focused instead on sending out threads of magic, searching for the whistling gentleman. He could not have gone far.

It took several minutes, but she finally found something. “He is near the stables. We had better hurry. He may be planning to leave.”

“What if there are others with him?”

“There is no one else,” she replied, “though I could be mistaken. We will just have to deal with it if that is the case.”

Darcy quickly outlined a sequence of spells which would both achieve their goal and ensure that their magic was hidden. Elizabeth nodded in agreement. She found the Academy spells long-winded and clumsy, but the results were predictable and easy to control.

They headed down the stairs with an air of grim determination. As they reached the door that led out to the courtyard, Darcy put out a hand to stop her from advancing.

“Is he still there?”

Elizabeth reached out carefully to locate him, trying to dampen the effects of tendrils of magic that were seeking him. To her surprise, there was no trace of his magic anywhere to be found. She extended her reach further, looking throughout the inn. All the magic she was able to pick up was a faint blur, like writing on a chalkboard, half-erased.

Whoever it was, he had disappeared without a trace.

CHAPTER 4



Word arrived from Lord Matlock just after noon, instructing them to bring Lydia to Netherfield for the time being, until the Council could determine what they would do next.

The journey back to Netherfield should have taken no more than an hour, but it took twice that. Caution and impatience battled inside Darcy. He wanted nothing more than to return as quickly as possible to Netherfield. Cricket matches were long, and the game might still be in progress. With luck, he would catch the end of it.

However, he could not allow his eagerness to return to prevail over vigilance. The presence of the elusive mage had been a lesson against being careless. Darcy had no idea if the man had followed them from Meryton, or if he had picked up traces of their magic and followed them. The crucial thing was that they could not afford to lead him to Netherfield. Elizabeth checked continuously for the presence of his elusive magic,

with Darcy working to conceal her magic, and they stopped frequently to ensure there was no sign of pursuit.

It was a long and circuitous way to Netherfield. They had an additional reason to take their time, which was to throw Lydia off the scent so she did not know where they were going. He and Elizabeth had discussed the possibility of using a Compulsion to stop her from mentioning Netherfield or the Royal Mages, but Darcy considered that kind of spell repugnant.

“I have been raised to do what was right, and placing another human being under a Compulsion is morally questionable, to say the least.”

Elizabeth shrugged. “We do many morally questionable things to defend the Kingdom. In this case, we are protecting a household of Royal Mages, many of them children. I am not as particular as you are. I would sleep better at night if I know she will not give the secret away.”

She did not persist, however, for which Darcy had to be grateful.

Not that there was any easy solution. In the end, they had to deceive Lydia into thinking they were going somewhere else. In the last segment of the journey, they blindfolded Lydia with a sash, explaining that it was important to keep the location of the Academy a secret. This appealed to Lydia’s sense of adventure, and she was happy to submit.

As they arrived, the sound of cheers reached them. Darcy excused himself and bounded out of the carriage to join the

cricket at the back of the house, leaving Elizabeth to take care of her sister.



It was now up to Elizabeth to introduce her to the Royal Mages. She was uneasy about it. Lydia would not fit in very well with the highest mages in the Kingdom. If it were up to her, she would recommend that Lydia be sent to a small Academy where there were less illustrious apprentices. It was unlikely the Council would ask her, and it was too early for Elizabeth to determine whether Lydia might benefit from being here.

“Are we finally there?” They had stopped several times, and every time, Lydia had asked the same question.

This time, Elizabeth smiled, even though Lydia could not see her. “Yes, we are, but you may not remove the blindfold until we are inside.”

Fortunately, Lydia had not been to Netherfield since she was a child, and with all the old pictures taken down, and the transformation of the house into a Mage Academy, it was unlikely she would recognize it. She took her straight to the Great Hall and untied the blindfold and waited tensely to see her sister’s reaction.

Lydia turned around in a circle, taking in the scene with an air of delight. Miss Bingley and her apprentices had set up the Hall in an imaginative rendition of Games Day. There were

several Cupids with bows and arrows to represent archery, statues of Thor with his hammer to reflect pall mall, and sculptures of boys holding bats and standing in front of wickets.

Lydia gaped. “Are they all Illusions?”

“They are. It is Games Day today, so this is a special occasion. I believe they will be bringing in a giant cake with icing made in the shape of a wicket after dinner, but you had better not mention it. It is meant to be a surprise.”

“It is wonderful! I think I am going to be happy here.”

Elizabeth froze as she caught sight of Oakham Mount out of the French windows. Would Lydia see it and realize where they were?

But Lydia was more interested in what was happening outside. “What is that noise? Why are people cheering?”

Elizabeth explained about the cricket match.

“You mean there are visiting players as well as the usual apprentices?” Lydia looked as if all her dreams had come true at once. “Then what are we doing, standing here?”

“I think, before you join the spectators, you ought to freshen up. Your clothes are intact, but they smell pungently of smoke.”

Lydia giggled. “I forgot about that. You will have to lend me one of your dresses. Though it may be too short, because I am taller than you. *Your* dresses are too short, and Jane’s are too tight. Jane is not as nicely rounded as I am. Maybe I could

wear a mage's robe. Do you think they will be impressed to see me in a mage's robe?"

"Mage's robes are only for formal occasions. No one will be impressed to see you in one today, especially since so many of the young apprentices will be dressed in their shirt sleeves to play cricket."

Lydia's eyes widened as she took in that bit of information.

"Someone – possibly the Mistress of Maidens' Hall – will take you to have a robe fitted. Since it is to be a banquet tonight, I am sure she will help you find something appropriate. There are plenty of young ladies here. I am sure someone is the same size as you. If you dress quickly in something of mine, I will take you to Miss Bingley. She will sort you out and assign you a room in Maidens' Hall. I will warn you. You will need to share a bedchamber."

Elizabeth smiled as she remembered how she had been forced to share with Miss Bingley when she first arrived. They had never become close, but Miss Bingley had grown on her over time. It was strange that she would be taking care of Lydia now.

"We will have to send for some of your clothes from Longbourn, since you left so unexpectedly." Then, remembering that they had not told Lydia they were still in Meryton, she added. "They will take a while to arrive, of course, so, meanwhile, you will still have to borrow some clothes."



By the time Elizabeth and Lydia were ready to join the activities outside, Elizabeth was at her wit's end. It was obvious Lydia considered the Academy a sort of extension of the Meryton Assembly. All her talk was about events and clothes and meeting young gentlemen.

When they emerged finally into the sunshine, Elizabeth was determined to find Jane, who had always been better at dealing with Lydia. Jane would show Lydia around and introduce her to the necessary people.

“Could you look out for Jane, Lydia?”

Lydia looked astonished. “Jane is here? I thought she was at Netherfield, helping with the injured.”

How unfortunate that Lydia had remembered that.

“Well, she is here now. Though it will be impossible to find her in the crowd. She will be so surprised to see you.”

Elizabeth would have to warn Jane. She did not want her older sister accidentally revealing the truth by welcoming Lydia to Netherfield. She realized now that it would be almost impossible to hide the knowledge from her.”

Lydia, however, had other concerns on her mind. “Do not look now, Lizzy, but one of the gentlemen mages has been staring at me since I arrived. I think he likes me. Can you tell me his name?”

“I cannot tell you his name, since you do not want me to look,” said Elizabeth, with a laugh. “In any case, you have only just arrived, Lydia. You will meet all the resident mages soon enough. For now, I would suggest acting with restraint.”

“I *am* planning to act with restraint. All I am asking is for you to tell me his name.”

Elizabeth sighed. Lydia would give her no peace until she identified the young mage. She looked in the direction Lydia indicated and winced as she saw Redmond. He was looking at Lydia, but his expression held disapproval rather than admiration.

“I would not set my sights on this particular apprentice, Lydia. That is Lord Redmond. He is very arrogant, and he already has more than his share of admirers. Besides, he will not be positively inclined towards you. His aunt, Lady Alice, has caused me endless problems.”

Redmond had stayed away from the Royal Mages for several months, though no one knew the exact reasons for his absence. In the end, he came back. He was a Janus mage, after all, and a Janus mage could not escape his duty forever. He had been pleasant enough with Elizabeth when they trained together with Darcy, but he kept his distance otherwise.

Lydia was not to be deterred. “But he is so very handsome. And he is a *lord*. And just because his aunt does not like *you*, it does not follow that he will not like *me*.”

“Well, if you do not heed my warning, you will have to suffer the consequences. A viscount will not be interested in a

young lady without pedigree, especially this one.”

“He will be interested in me. I am prepared to wager on it.”

“Proper young ladies do not lay wagers.”

“I wager that, if I gain his attention, you will buy me a new hat.”

“And what will I be getting out of it if you lose? You do not have any pin money at all.”

“I will not need it. I intend to win the wager.”

Elizabeth turned away, vexed at her sister’s refusal to even consider her advice. She immediately regretted it, since Lydia began to walk in Redmond’s direction.

“Lydia!” Elizabeth flew across the distance between them and took hold of Lydia’s arm. Redmond watched the interaction with a smirk. Elizabeth drew a deep breath, trying to stay patient.

“Lydia, you cannot behave here as you do at Meryton, where everyone knows you. You are in a new place, and it is important that you prove yourself worthy of being here. I thought you *wanted* to come to the Academy. Do you want them to send you away the very first day? They will, you know. They take the reputation of their young ladies very seriously.”

“Since when did you become so insipid, Lizzy? It must be the influence of that husband of yours. He never smiles.”

Elizabeth gritted her teeth. Was Lydia so incapable of grasping her situation?

“Leave Darcy out of this. If you misbehave, you will regret it. We live in close quarters here. Since you are new, you will be under constant scrutiny.”

“We shall see about that,” said Lydia. “Anyway, where is this Miss Bingley you mentioned? I thought I was going to meet her so she could find me some nice gowns. And when are you going to introduce me to the other apprentices?”

“You will meet some of the apprentices at dinner. Miss Bingley will perform the introductions.”

Lydia beamed. “I cannot wait! Oh, look, there is Jane. And she is standing next to a handsome mage.”

“That is Mr. Bingley. You had better stay away from him as well.”

Elizabeth did not want to mention that Jane might be interested in Mr. Bingley. That was Jane’s story to tell. But she did want to ensure Lydia did not make a nuisance of herself over him.



Once she had handed Lydia over to Miss Bingley, Elizabeth looked for Jane to tell her about Lydia’s arrival, but Jane was seated close to Mr. Bingley, who was actively involved in the game. It would be impossible to have any kind of conversation without being overheard.

It would have to wait until later.

Instead, Elizabeth went to sit next to Colonel Fitzwilliam. The colonel was a keen spectator and was more than happy to explain some of the finer points of the game as the match progressed. Mostly, Elizabeth watched Darcy, enjoying the way his face lit up as he and the apprentices commented on the skills of the players.

As the match concluded and twilight descended, Elizabeth wondered how Lydia was settling in. She was tempted to visit her sister at Maidens' Hall, but she refrained. Miss Bingley would take care of Lydia. There would be time to talk about her first impression when they met over dinner.

When the gong sounded for dinner, Elizabeth – like everyone else – went to the Great Hall. She saved Lydia a seat. Jane arrived soon after, and Elizabeth told her everything that had happened since the alarm had been raised. Was it only this morning? So much had happened, it was hard to believe the day was not yet over.

“I am glad she was able to come here. It will be nice to have another sister with us. I am sure it will be good for her.”

Elizabeth was not quite as hopeful. Lydia had shown no real sign of remorse for burning the barn. There was a thoughtlessness about her that worried Elizabeth. Still, she had to believe that Lydia could change. The alternative was not very palatable.

“But you ought not to have tricked her about Netherfield, Lizzy. What if she finds out? Anyone could mention Meryton,

and she will discover where we are. She will never believe anything you say again.”

Jane was right. Elizabeth had to tell Lydia as soon as possible, but she also had to warn Darcy. The question was, how? He was surrounded by cricket players. If only she had thought of this earlier!

Then Lydia came in with some of the other female apprentices. Elizabeth stood up and waved at her to join them. Lydia waved back merrily, but she looked around the room, and her gaze settled on Lord Redmond. She headed straight in that direction.

For a moment, Elizabeth saw him through her younger sister’s eyes. With his floppy golden hair and laughing brown eyes, he was one of the most handsome apprentices in the room. His boyish looks did not suit Elizabeth’s taste at all, but he would appeal to Lydia. She wished it was not the case.

“Why didn’t Lydia sit with us?” Jane sounded hurt. “Doesn’t she want to talk to me? She has not even greeted me yet.”

“It is her first day. Naturally, she is going to seek out the handsome young gentlemen. I just hope Redmond is nicer to Lydia than he was to me.”

“I know you do not like him, Lizzy, but he may be more welcoming with Lydia. After all, she is closer to his age. And she is—”

Jane broke off, looking embarrassed. Elizabeth could not help teasing her. “Are you trying to tell me she is prettier than

I am?”

“That is not what I said, Lizzy,” Jane blushed to the very roots of her hair.

“You thought it, though. Did I tell you that one of the new Talents I have been working on was reading people’s thoughts?”

Jane’s eyes widened. “Really?”

Elizabeth chuckled. It was so easy to tease Jane. “Of course not. There is no such Talent.”

“Well, that is a relief. I wish you would not do that, Lizzy.”

“I am like Papa. I must amuse myself, somehow, especially when Darcy is not here.”

“Well, I am glad Lydia has joined us here. I am sure she will talk to me later. I hope they do not decide to send her back home.”

“I hope so too. At least, for the sake of all the barns in Meryton.”



As the dining room began to thin out, and the apprentices started to return to their rooms, Darcy and Bingley joined Elizabeth and Jane at their table.

“We can only join you for a few minutes,” said Darcy. “We will be going to the tavern with some of the older visiting apprentices and their tutors.”

Elizabeth took advantage of Jane's distraction with Bingley to talk about Lydia.

"I know you are enjoying yourself, and this is not the right time, but we need to deal with the situation. I am feeling very uneasy about lying to Lydia. I know we did not have much choice, so I am not questioning our decision. It am just worried it would take just one small slip for Lydia to discover the truth. If she discovers it, she will be incensed. And incensed means she might do something reckless."

"If that is really worrying you, then the answer is simple," said Darcy firmly. "I will tell her the truth right now and explain why we concealed it from her. I will take full responsibility, Elizabeth. It was my idea in the first place."

She was touched that he was willing to do so. "We can both talk to her together. It would certainly remove a burden from my mind. I have been on edge, dreading that someone would say something."

"I do appreciate that you want to do it with me, but Lydia is sitting with Redmond and his friends. It would be more discreet for me to go over and take her aside for a minute."

He rose to his feet and walked over to where Lydia was sitting. Elizabeth watched him as he spoke to her sister. She could not see Lydia's reaction because her back was turned, but she could not help admiring his calm and genial manner. She could only suppose it went well, because he soon bowed to Lydia and went away to join the cricket players.

Later that evening, Lydia caught Elizabeth's arm as she was leaving the hall.

“Mr. Darcy told me about the secret, Lizzy. That we are close to Meryton, but you had to pretend we were not because the secret would come out. I would never have guessed it! What a lark! You should have seen Mr. Darcy's face! He looked so sorry to have deceived me.”

“You are not vexed with us, then?”

“I was, at the beginning. But now I am very happy. I will be able to go to the Meryton Assembly after all.”

CHAPTER 5



Darcy could not stop thinking about the man at the inn. He felt it was something that should be dealt with at once. They ought to track the man down and try to determine why he had been at the inn at the time as Darcy and Elizabeth. Initially, that was what he expected would happen. When Darcy had first explained the situation to the Council, everyone had been prodded into action.

But any hope for action had quickly fizzled out. As it was discussed, it had begun to sound implausible. Yes, Elizabeth had seen him from the window. No, Elizabeth could not describe him. No, Darcy had not sensed his magic. It all began to sound very nebulous, and the more they talked about it, the more convinced they were that there was nothing to worry about. The man happened to be passing by. It was possible he knew how to evoke a spell through whistling. It was not unusual, after all, amongst common people. Blacksmiths, for example, whistled certain tunes while they worked because they contained spells to harden or soften the iron. It did not

mean they had Talent. It just meant they had bought a spell from someone with a rudimentary knowledge of spell-making.

So here he was, sitting through yet another interminable Council meeting, wishing he was anywhere else. With Elizabeth, for one thing. While they were organizing Games Day, they had spent more time together, and he had enjoyed every minute of it. But now that he was back to tutoring and endless meetings, they barely had a chance to see each other. Even having dinner together was a luxury. He was sorely tempted to give up his seat on the Council.

He knew he could not do it. He had originally joined to protect Elizabeth. Now it had become a matter of having a say and knowing what was going on. He may not agree with the discussions, but he liked to think that, if it came to something important, he could convince them to see his point of view.

And to be fair, they *had* listened to his concerns, in their own twisted way. It had taken them several days to reach this point, but they had come around to the possibility that Lydia's magic flare may have attracted unwanted attention. What they were going to do about it was an entirely different matter.

Lord Matlock was sounding exasperated.

"If both the Guildhall and Founder's Hall have been repaired and are already being occupied, there is no reason for us to continue to sequester ourselves here in the countryside. We came here because we had no other option."

"Moving is a huge disruption," said Lady Ashcombe. "I do not think we should subject the apprentices to such upheaval."

“There are still members of this Council who do not understand the gravity of this situation.” Lord Matlock sounded tired. “We are sitting ducks here. There are too few of us, and we are too far for anyone to come to our aid if we are attacked. It is time for us to regroup, rebuild our forces and go on the attack.”

“I understand the gravity of the situation only too well,” drawled Lord Devereux. “We are losing sight of the most important thing in a war: morale. Every time we are forced to move, we suffer yet another defeat.”

“We suffered a serious defeat when we were obliged to abandon Founders’ Hall. But we always knew the move here was temporary. Now that the roof has been repaired, and many of the other mages have returned, we can re-join them. This time we will set up the Wards differently so there is no possibility of anyone approaching the building at all.”

Lady Ashcombe threw up her hands. “Except we have the Thames River passing right next to Founder’s Hall, which we cannot control, since magic is ineffective over water.”

“We *can* set up conventional defenses, however.” Matlock sounded as if he had made the same point many times.

“I tell you, staying put is the best military tactic. It builds morale.” Devereux was getting more and more insistent.

Darcy propped his left elbow against the uncomfortable arm of his seat, trying to conceal his contempt for Devereux’s statement. He looked around at the Council members, trying to gauge their support for Lord Devereux.

“Morale is not the issue,” said Lord Matlock.

Lord Grayson threw up his hands. “I understand both arguments. But look around you. We decided we would have nine members on the Council, but we are only six. People simply cannot spare the time. We barely have enough mages to tutor the apprentices. We have been forced to leave several of our mages behind to protect Parliament and the Prince Regent. My wife and children in London are living with barely functioning Wards because there is no one to reinforce them. It is simply not sustainable to remain here.”

“We are going around in circles,” said Darcy, suddenly unable to bear it anymore. “I suggest we come back tomorrow.” He rose to his feet. “And I would really like to hear from those who have not spoken yet.” He bowed. “But for now, it is a pleasant afternoon, and I would like to enjoy the good weather while it lasts.”



For several days after Lydia’s arrival, Elizabeth did not see much of her sister. She assumed that was a good sign. She hoped it meant Lydia was making friends and settling into a familiar routine.

Then, ten days after her arrival, Lydia burst into Elizabeth’s room before dinner and threw herself onto the bed, sobbing.

“Could you please knock before you enter, Lydia?” said Elizabeth, crossly. “This is the second time you have entered

unannounced.”

“I see,” said Lydia. “I beg your pardon. Was I supposed to send my sister a note to humbly request the opportunity to meet with her?”

“You need not make a mockery of my words,” said Elizabeth. “I am simply asking you to knock before you enter. We are no longer at Longbourn. Suppose I was undressed? You have left the door open for everyone to see me.”

“What a fuss over nothing, Lizzy. You are fully dressed.”

“But what if I was not? You did not know that before you opened the door.”

“No one is peering into your room to see if you’re fully clothed or not,” said Lydia, snorting. “Anyway, I did not come here to talk about knocking on doors. I came to talk to you because I accidentally dripped some gravy onto my gloves yesterday and they are completely ruined. I had them washed overnight, and the stains did not come off. I need a new pair. But Miss Bingley says I may not go out to buy anything. You must explain to her that I have no other gloves because my clothes have not come from Longbourn. I do not have my pin money yet, but I told her you would pay for them.”

“The pin money is not the issue, Lydia. You simply cannot go to the village to buy new gloves. You are not allowed to leave the grounds of the Academy for any reason at all.”

Lydia stared at Elizabeth. “What do you mean I cannot leave the grounds? You did not tell me this before bringing me

here.” She began to walk around the bed chamber in a state of agitation. “You have not been honest with me about anything. I thought I would be going to London like you did, and that I would be allowed to attend the theater, and balls, and to join Society.”

They *had* misrepresented the situation to her to some extent, but she had obviously built up her own vision of what an Academy was and allowed her imagination to run away with it.

“You are only fifteen. You are not even *out*, Lydia. You would not be allowed to attend any of those events until you are old enough. You have gone to events in Meryton because everyone knows us here. In London, even as an apprentice Mage, you would not be allowed to do any of the things you mentioned. And we are at war. The French have sent their mages to spy on us and destroy us. You cannot simply go wherever you would like.”

“But I was going wherever I liked before I came here. No one told me anything about being in danger.”

“That was because no one knew how strong your magic was. When you set the barn on fire, you exposed yourself to being noticed.”

“What is the use of being noticed? If I cannot go to London, and I cannot do anything there, I do not see what I have to gain from joining the Royal Mages.”

Elizabeth would have thought it would be more than enough for Lydia to meet so many new mages and to flirt to her heart’s

content. It was true that Redmond and his friends had not been very welcoming, but Lydia's skin was thicker than that. She did not particularly care about other people's approval.

"I thought you were impatient to meet handsome young mages."

"They are not as interesting as I thought they would be," said Lydia. "All they care about is following the rules."

That was unexpected. It was not like Lydia to be put off so easily. What had Redmond and his friends said to her that had discouraged her so completely?

"I did warn you to stay away from Lord Redmond," said Elizabeth, mildly. "I hope he has not said something dreadful."

Lydia shrugged. "I care nothing for his opinion. He and his friends have teased me because I lost control of my magic, but I know that is not true. Or at least, not as true as they are saying."

"Are you telling me you set the barn on fire *deliberately*?"

"Yes. No, of course not. I would not burn down a barn for my own amusement. Anyway, that is not the point. The point is, I do not like it here. I want to go home."

"It is natural to feel homesick at the beginning. You will get used to it in time, Lydia." She gave her sister a tight squeeze, as she used to do when Lydia was younger. "You will soon make friends, I promise you. You just need to find the right people. You might even come to like it."

“I will never like it here. I hate it, Lizzy. It’s not at all what I expected. The mages are *odious*. I want to go home. I miss everyone. Even Papa, who always makes fun of me.”

“Does he?”

“Oh, come Lizzy. You know you are his favorite. He thinks me too stupid to know I’m being made fun of, but I am not.”

Elizabeth sighed. It was true. She could not deny it.

“And I hate it in Maidens’ Hall. They don’t let you do anything. Now that the cricket games are over, we only see the male mages in the Great Hall, and whenever they talk to me, if they ever bother to, they are perfectly horrid.”

The distress in Lydia’s voice touched Elizabeth’s heartstrings. She had experienced the same type of misery when she first arrived.

“I want to go back to Longbourn.”

“I’m afraid that isn’t possible, Lydia. You’ve been conscripted, just as I was. You know what that means.”

“It’s your fault. You and Mr. Darcy. You are the ones who came up with the idea of sending me to an Academy. Papa would have never sent me. And you brought me here.”

“We may have come up with the idea, but it was you that made it happen, Lydia. Have you forgotten that you set a barn on fire?”

Lydia rolled her eyes. “Is everyone who sets a barn on fire forced to join the Royal Mages? I hardly think so.”

“I thought you wanted to join the Academy.”

“I did, before I knew what it was like. I do not have a single second to myself. I have to go to classes all day, where they do nothing but train or memorize spells. I am so *bored*.”

It certainly did not sound as if Lydia had the slightest interest in what the Academy could teach her. Not for the first time, Elizabeth wondered if it was already too late for Lydia to adapt to such an environment.

Not that there was any alternative at this point. Lydia’s misuse of magic to play pranks on others had already resulted in serious consequences. Her growing powers made it imperative for her to learn discipline. If only Papa had insisted on giving her lessons when she was younger. Sadly, Papa was very much like Lydia. He lacked tenacity, and he was incapable of being firm.

Well, the past could not be undone. Lydia was here, and there was no point in mollycoddling her. It was crucial for her to understand that she had to follow the rules.

“You cannot escape from Maidens’ Hall whenever you please,” said Elizabeth in a no-nonsense tone. “And you need to learn the spells from the *Compendium*, Lydia. You must learn to control your magic.”

“My magic is better than theirs. Why do I need to learn all that gobbledygook when I can do spells without it?”

Elizabeth had asked herself the same question so many times in the past. Had she really been as spoilt as Lydia?

She suddenly knew what to say.

“Think about it. If you learn the *Compendium*, you will know the whole of their magic. And you will still have your own on top of that. Think how powerful you will be with two different types of magic at your fingertips.”

A look of calculation came into Lydia’s eyes. For a moment, Elizabeth thought she’d won. Then the sullen look returned.

“But memorizing spells is so slow and tedious. I have no patience for it.”

There was only one argument left that would convince her.

“It is boring, I agree. But if you want gentlemen mages like Lord Redmond to pay you any attention, you must show you are as good as them or better. You do not wish them to think you are a country bumpkin, do you?”

The sullen look persisted. Elizabeth had no more arguments to make.

Lydia sulked as she watched Elizabeth pull out clothes from her wardrobe. Then she suddenly brightened up.

“I will show that snooty Lord Redmond! He thinks the only reason I got into the Academy was because Mr. Darcy is on the Council. I will prove him wrong. Him and those horrid friends of his who are always whispering in the corners.”

So Redmond was bothering her, as Elizabeth had suspected he would. Elizabeth considered asking Darcy to talk to his Twin. But what if that only made matters worse? Besides, this

might just be the motivation Lydia needed to keep up with her studies.

“Lord Redmond is one of the best young mages in the country. And he knows the *Compendium* inside out.”

Elizabeth was prepared to use any method that would help keep Lydia out of trouble. It was all perfectly true, but it went against the grain for Elizabeth to sing his praises. She did not particularly like him, either.

The cunning look came back into Lydia’s face. “Memorizing spells is stupid,” she said. “It does not make him a great mage. If that is all he is good at, I will show him who is the better.”

“It is not going to be easy,” said Elizabeth. “It will take hard work and dedication. But you can do it.”

She had to create a balance between encouraging Lydia and keeping her expectations realistic.

“Do you want to wager that I will find a way to impress him?” said Lydia.

Clearly her sister had been spending far too much time with the officers. Respectable young ladies did not talk about wagers. Elizabeth wanted to reprimand her sister, but it would defeat the purpose. If placing a wager would help Lydia, so be it.

“What shall we wager on?”

“If I win, you will talk to Lord Matlock and arrange for me to go to Longbourn.”

Maybe Longbourn was the carrot Lydia needed to learn *The Compendium*. If it worked, Elizabeth would be more than happy to arrange it.

“Well, then, Lydia, I accept your wager. Shall we shake hands on it?”

“Sister’s honor?”

“Sister’s honor.”

They shook hands gravely, then Lydia began to giggle.

“La, Lizzy! You looked so solemn, I hardly recognized you!” She bounced up from the bed onto her feet, looking pleased. “Mama will be so happy to see me.”

“You had better hurry and join the others,” warned Elizabeth. “I do not know what the punishment is for escaping Maidens’ Hall, but I am sure the consequences are serious.”

“We are made to stay in our room and eat nothing but gruel for a whole day. It is worth it, though, now that you have promised to send me home.”

“I did not promise—”

But Lydia had already skipped away, convinced that she was going to win. How on earth Lydia thought she could achieve it, Elizabeth did not have the slightest idea.

CHAPTER 6



There was something unsettling about Elizabeth's conversation with her sister. It made Elizabeth realize that she had not heard anything from the Council yet. Were they going to keep Lydia here, or did they have other plans for her? She had a feeling that having Lydia at Netherfield was not helpful. Her mind was still fixed on her old life, and until she moved on, it would be nearly impossible to impose any kind of discipline on her.

She decided to approach the matter with Darcy. He was on the Council, and he would be able to argue her case. She felt guilty suggesting that they should send her away, but Elizabeth was certain it would be in Lydia's best interest.

They were both busy with classes, and it was not until lunch that she was able to seek out Darcy. She caught him as he was walking to the Great Hall.

“Has the Council decided anything about Lydia's situation yet?”

“They have tested her, and they are impressed at the amount of Talent she has displayed, but they have not yet determined what to do with her.”

“It is not that complicated. Either she remains, or she is sent to another Academy. They cannot keep her in limbo. At the moment, she is under the impression that she has been accepted into the Royal Mages. It would not be kind to send her away after she has begun to settle in and make friends. They should make up their minds soon.”

Darcy sighed. “When it comes to the Council, everything is complicated. The wheels of the Council turn slowly if they don’t perceive something as urgent.”

“In that case, may I weigh in on the decision?”

He gave her a surprised look. “You want to address the Council?”

Her previous experiences addressing the Council had generally been unpleasant, to say the least.

She smiled and tucked her arm under his elbow. “No. I will explain my reasoning to you, and you will use your persuasive ability to convince them of my point of view.”

“My ability to persuade them depends on your point of view. You will have to convince me first.”

“I would be happy to do so.”

The smile she gave him did strange things to his pulse. “If you keep smiling at me like that, I am not sure I will hear a word you say.”

“Then I will not waste my time. I will have to go to the Council directly.”

He drew her closer and planted a kiss on the top of her head. “You are too easily discouraged. You have not even tried to persuade me. I always love to hear what you have to say.”

“Always?” she teased. “It has not *always* been the case.”

“*Always*, since the moment I discovered how fortunate I was to marry such a remarkable young lady.”

Elizabeth was embarrassed to find herself blushing. This playful side of Darcy was new to her. They had been through some rough patches adjusting to each other, but she was starting to believe they were more compatible than she could ever have imagined.

He put his arms around her, looking into her eyes. “I am very fortunate you came into my life.” His gaze was warm and full of tenderness.

A group of apprentices came down the hallway, saw them, and stared openly. One of the boys snickered. Darcy stiffened, and Elizabeth giggled into his shoulder. The Academy did not encourage open displays of affection, even among married couples.

“I must go,” said Darcy, abruptly.

Elizabeth quirked her eyebrow. “Are you embarrassed to be seen with me?”

“Of course not,” he said, though his ears had turned bright red.

Darcy was becoming much less rigid than when she had first met him, but he still held back.

“I will let you off the hook – if you promise to raise an issue with the Council.”

His mouth twisted. “I cannot promise, since you have not told me yet what the issue is.”

“I have been thinking about Lydia. She has never been inclined to apply herself to any task. Remember how prejudiced you were against me because I was not Academy trained? At least I was willing to work hard to make up for it. Lydia is not like that. She will try to find other ways to achieve her purpose.”

“What are you suggesting? Do you think she should go back home?”

“No. Of course not. She must be properly trained. However, I do not believe the Royal Mages are suitable for her. At Netherfield, Lydia must deal with apprentices who have been specially selected from all the Magical Academies around the Kingdom. Are we not expecting too much at this point? Lydia would do much better in a more modest place where the demands are not quite so intense.”

“You are telling me this now, when I have been doing everything to convince them to keep her here,” said Darcy, with a wry smile. “I have all but convinced them she is a paragon and that they are lucky to have her at the Royal Academy.”

“I’m not saying that she will never be able to join us. Just that they should send her elsewhere first. There are so few tutors here in any case. She will not receive individual instruction. She will benefit more if she is with apprentices who are less advanced.”

Darcy considered the matter. “I see your point. You have convinced me, and I am prepared to argue your point with the Council, but we have a problem. What reason would I give for suddenly changing my mind about keeping her here?”

“I have a suggestion.” She threw him a mischievous glance. “All you have to do is tell them that having two Bennet sisters here with her might have a detrimental effect on her training.”



That evening, as Elizabeth prepared to go to bed, she reflected on her conversation with Darcy. She still felt guilty for sending Lydia away, but the more she thought about it, the more strongly she believed it was the right thing.

As she slipped into bed, she considered whether she should speak to the Council directly, as Darcy had proposed. It might goad them into doing something. If Lydia was going to leave, it would be better for that to happen sooner rather than later.

It seemed like a betrayal to do it, but it was not as if Elizabeth meant to do her sister any harm. She pushed the thought away. She would make her decision in the morning.

But her mind would not settle, and she tossed and turned as sleep eluded her. Tired of this pointless agonizing over something that had to be done, she decided to distract herself by checking the Wards around Netherfield before she went to sleep. It was not essential for her to do it. There were others who checked the extensive area of the Wards every day and repaired weaknesses whenever the Wards started to wear off. Nevertheless, she doggedly did it, day after day, aware that the safety of many young lives depended on keeping the Wards intact.

She lay in her bed, half-drowsy, and reached out to sense the smooth invisible walls surrounding Netherfield Park. It was easy to do. She did not have to go over every inch. The magic was familiar as the back of her hand. She recognized the ways the different mages blended their magic together. If anything felt unusual, she would know at once.

A moment later, she sat up abruptly, her heart hammering. She was fully awake instantly, her feet on the cold floor, her magic seeking the source of the disruption.

There. She identified something odd – a small area that was just a little weaker than the rest. The Ward was intact, but it was slightly irregular. It was nothing very obvious. More like an uneven hand that had made the threads too tight.

As she worked on repairing the Wards, Elizabeth pushed aside any questions she had. Her priority was to repair the Ward. She could not think of anything else yet.

Once the irregular strands had been undone and returned to normal, Elizabeth reached out to see if she could find traces of an intruder. She searched carefully for a magic signature that would indicate someone had entered from outside the Wards, but there was nothing at all.

She remembered Lady Alice and the way she had managed to sneak in and out of Netherfield at will. Was it possible she had returned? Carefully and methodically, Elizabeth combed the corridors, her magic searching for anything that did not belong in Netherfield. She had done this many times, to ensure she was familiar with every signature in the building. Most recently, when the cricket players arrived, she had forced herself to learn each of their signatures. And she had done a sweep after they were gone, to ensure no one was left behind. It was painstaking, methodical work, but not particularly demanding. If there was an intruder, they would leave a clear trace, and she would find it.

An hour later, satisfied that neither Lady Alice nor anyone else had paid them a visit, and that nothing unusual had occurred, she lay back in her bed. Still, she struggled to sleep, puzzling over the uneven area in the Wards and considering the possible reasons.

In the end, she decided it must have been the work of one of the younger apprentices. No doubt they had been practicing their Warding skills and one of them had been careless working on that area of the Wards. Very likely, it was at the end of a lesson and they had been in a hurry. Or they had been distracted.

There was no cause for immediate alarm. The path of irregular magic had not left them open to attack. She would deal with it in the morning. Careless weaving of the Wards that protected Netherfield was not something they could tolerate. They would have to find the culprit and ensure it never happened again.



The following morning, Elizabeth woke up with a strong determination to find the person responsible. She resolved to talk to all the Tutors during the course of the day and find the source of the problem.

But during her very first lesson, as she was showing a group of apprentices how to use threads to search for magic signatures, a footman signaled her from the doorway. He had brought her a message that she was required urgently in the Council chamber. Elizabeth hurried after him down the passageway, trying to guess the reason for the summons.

When she arrived, she found Darcy there, a tall shadow against the window. She had not expected it. It made her happy to see him, even if she was anxious to know what was happening.

“Do you have any idea what this is about?”

He turned swiftly, his dark eyes softening when he saw her. “I have not been told anything. Do you think it has something to do with your sister?”

“I doubt they would interrupt both our lessons because of Lydia. Besides, the footman said it was urgent.”

“Then we will just have to wait to find out.”

He smiled and came towards her, reaching her in two easy strides. “Still, I am not going to complain. At least we have a moment together.”

He was standing very close – too close. His voice was deep and vibrant. He tucked one of her curls behind her ear. As his gaze wandered over her face, it felt like a caress. Suddenly, she found it hard to breathe.

The sound of footsteps warned them that Lord Matlock had arrived. Elizabeth turned as Darcy’s uncle entered and shut the door behind him.

“I am sorry to have summoned you here so suddenly, but I have received an important request.”

Darcy and Elizabeth exchanged glances. Elizabeth did not have the slightest idea what the request could be, but a flash of apprehension made her hope it had nothing to do with Longbourn and her father.

“An express has arrived from the Prince Regent. I have been commanded not to share the letter with you, so you will have to take my word about the contents. The writing is a little – uneven, shall we say, but the gist is that the Prince is very worried about the theft of a moonstone belonging to him. It seems he fears he may be in danger.”

Elizabeth wished she could see the letter. Lord Matlock's summary raised more questions than it answered. She could not tell if the Head Mage was holding anything back.

“Why would the theft of a moonstone put him in danger?”

“The letter does not address this specifically. apart from it having something to do with the thief being a mage.

“A moonstone?” Darcy stared. “No matter how valuable it may be, surely the theft of a moonstone does not merit bringing two powerful Janus Mages to Town when there are many capable Warders in London? Is this not a trivial use of the Royal Mages?”

“By the same token, Darcy, some might argue that having a Janus mage waste his time organizing a cricket match might be considered trivial, considering we are at war. It is a matter of judgment. What may appear trivial to one person, may be crucial to another. If the Prince Regent believes he is in danger, then we cannot discard the possibility. I am sure when you arrive at Carlton House, you will find out more. What is important now is that the Prince has requested the presence of two Janus mages to Ward him against an attack.”

Lord Matlock may have found the letter unclear, but it was obvious where their duty lay.

“If there is the slightest chance the Prince Regent may be in danger, then, of course, he will need the best protection,” said Elizabeth. “The Prime Minister has been assassinated, and though it may simply be the act of a madman, we cannot discount that it is related to the unrest in the Kingdom. I

understand perfectly why the Prince Regent would want us there protecting him.”

She did not add that the Prince Regent, like the Prime Minister, was unpopular, and there was a great deal of resentment at his extravagance at a time when Napoleon’s war had caused hardship and hunger.

“Of course,” said Darcy. “So when are we expected in London? Are we expected to leave immediately?”

“A carriage will be sent for you. Be prepared to leave whenever it arrives. I will send Richard as well. He is accustomed to dealing with the Palace and can take care of some of the details at Carlton House.”

“In other words, my cousin is to make himself useful at Court while he guards us from any surprises.”

“Something like that.”

Elizabeth’s mind whirled. She had no idea what was expected of her, but it was daunting for her to be staying at Court.

“Should we take my maid Emily? And Evans to dress Darcy?”

“Under the circumstances, it might be better to have someone assigned to you at Court.”

“I had better go and arrange for someone to take over our lessons, then,” said Darcy, managing to sound both resigned and practical at the same time.

“I envy you,” said Matlock. “You will be experiencing some of His Highness’s famous hospitality. Though I imagine you will have to work hard for your supper.”

As she turned to leave, Elizabeth suddenly remembered her concern about the Wards. If she was leaving for London, someone else should pursue it. She quickly outlined her findings to Lord Matlock.

“The Wards have not been affected in any way?”

“No. They are safe. The change was very subtle.”

“In other words, no one else would have noticed it but you?”

Elizabeth thought about that. “Probably not,” she acknowledged.

“Then it is nothing to worry about. Leave the matter in our hands. Of course, it is better to err on the side of caution, so we will find the person responsible. Meanwhile, you have other more important matters to concern you.” He rose and bowed to Elizabeth. “I hope you have a safe journey. And I would advise you to enjoy London while you can. We will survive while you are away.”



That evening, Darcy, Elizabeth, and Colonel Fitzwilliam sat in the Great Hall, eating dinner together. The carriage that was supposed to take them to London had not arrived. Elizabeth felt foolish. She had already said her goodbyes, and everyone had expressed their jealousy of such a prestigious invitation.

Now everyone was looking at them pityingly. It seemed they had been forgotten by the Prince Regent after all. The worst of it was, they did not know for certain if their invitation had been withdrawn.

Darcy was pushing his food around his plate with barely concealed frustration.

“Perhaps they have found the moonstone already, and we are not needed,” he said, not for the first time.

Colonel Fitzwilliam chuckled. “Or – much more likely – the Prince Regent wrote the letter when he was drinking, and forgot all about it once it was dispatched. Relax, Darcy. You are experiencing what it is like to be a soldier, constantly at the mercy of some command that may or may not arrive.”

Elizabeth had to admit she was disappointed at the possibility that the summons may not have been important after all. She was torn between wanting to go to stay at Carlton House, and worrying that the Prince’s lifestyle would prove too wild for her taste. But it was an opportunity not to be missed, and in the end, she decided if she had any choice in the matter, she would choose to go.

But if this was a soldier’s life, she did not like it at all.

CHAPTER 7



Lydia was sitting at the dinner table with some of the young ladies. She had stopped listening to their chatter a long time ago. She had other things to occupy her. She was still trying to make up her mind whether she should or shouldn't go to the Meryton Assembly. She had promised Mr. Smith that she would be there, and she did not want to let him down.

She already knew his name was not really Mr. Smith, but that was what he told her to call him. His real name was a secret, and she was not supposed to know it yet. She liked to think he was an earl or a duke in disguise, and that he would soon reveal his identity to her because she was special.

If she could sneak away and dance a few dances with him, she could be back in an hour or two, and no one would be any the wiser. She had already planned for a carriage to take her to the Assembly, so that part was easy.

She looked over to where Lizzy was having dinner with Jane. Lizzy would be vexed if Lydia left Netherfield without

permission. And the two of them had made that wager. Why was Lydia feeling that she would be betraying her sister if she went to the Assembly?

She glanced at the clock on the mantelpiece. It was seven o'clock. The Assembly, as usual, started at half past eight. She would have to leave soon if she wanted to go. She had already decided to wear her mage's robe, so she did not have to worry about her clothes, and her hair had been done up beautifully by the maid at Maiden's Hall. It looked much more glamorous than anyone at Longbourn could do it.

Now that the time had come to follow through with her plan, she was not sure it was such a good idea. Was it worth the risk of being thrown out of the Academy? Did she really want to go back to living at Longbourn the way she used to? Who would do up her hair in such a pretty manner?

But she had promised Mr. Smith she would be there. He didn't know where she was, and if she did not go, she would not be able to set up a time to meet him again. He had helped her with her magic more than once. He was young, handsome, and charming. Though he did not cut as fine a figure as Lord Redmond, who was coming in her direction at this very moment. She turned away. She was not going to satisfy his arrogance by showing she had noticed him.

As he brushed past, he deliberately jostled her elbow, knocking her fork out of her hand. It clattered to the floor.

Lydia's face burned as she wondered how many people had witnessed her humiliation.

“I beg your pardon. Allow me to assist you. It appears you lost control of your fork.”

He gave the fork a strong kick with his foot, sending it scuttling some distance under the table.

“Did I hear you praising the virtues of the Meryton Assembly a while ago?” he said, with a snigger. “Isn’t the Assembly happening today?”

“I do not recall talking to you, your lordship.” She put up her nose.

He gave her a smug smile. “I thought you were able to walk through the Wards any time you wanted. Why don’t you attend the Assembly, then?”

Lydia looked around her. Everyone was laughing, even John Denny and William Pratt. She thought they were her friends. And now the young ladies were laughing, too.

Well, she was going to turn the tables on him. On all of them. She was the one who would be laughing soon.

“La, perhaps I will! It is not as if I am going alone. My family will be there to chaperone me.”

“Aren’t you afraid you will lose control of your magic again?” said Mr. Denny. He would have been fine looking, if he did not smirk so much.

“You really think you can go through the Wards?” said Mr. Pratt.

“The Wards are meant to keep people out, not to keep us in,” said Lydia, haughtily. “We are not prisoners. We are Royal Mages.”

She twirled one of her curls around her finger. “Besides, I can easily break through them. I have tried already, and it worked.”

“I will believe it when I see it,” said Mr. Pratt.

“I dare you to do it,” said Lord Redmond.

“Very well then. Do you want to place a wager?”

Just then Miss Bingley came towards them.

“Meet us at the stables,” said Redmond, in a whisper. “I will wager a horse that you cannot.”

She swallowed. She could not wager a horse. They did not have horses to spare at Longbourn. But she could not back out now.

“Just give me time to bring my cloak. We will meet just inside the gate.”

She would show them. She had told Lizzy she would prove herself to Lord Redmond and she would.

She went to her bedchamber, keeping to the shadows. She did not want to be caught sneaking out of Maiden’s Hall. She would never hear the end of it. Luckily the young lady who shared her bedchamber, Miss Lock, had not come back yet.

Lydia admired herself in the mirror. Her hair was exquisitely done, and everything was in place. She grabbed her cloak and

sidled out. Once she had reached the front door, she hurried to the stables and asked for the carriage to be brought out in five minutes.

They were waiting for her when she arrived. No one else placed a bet, but she knew Lord Redmond meant what he said.

She felt proud of herself. Finally, this was something she was better at than everyone else. The others were trapped in Netherfield, but she was not. She extended her arm fully – more for show than because she needed to. It was her moment of triumph, and she wanted to make the best of it. They did not believe she could do it. She would prove them wrong.

A twist of her fingers was enough to connect her with the threads inside the Wards. She could see where they began and where they ended. Once you took hold of the end, it was the work of a few minutes to undo it. It was like unraveling a knitted purse. A few well-placed tugs, and the whole structure fell apart. It was very satisfying.

It was a trick she had learned when Papa had set up Wards and forbidden her from leaving the house for one week. That was after she had almost set Tom, the stableboy, on fire. It was an accident, of course. She had only intended to have the fire hover above him and follow him around. Then Papa had shouted and startled her, and some of the sparks had fallen on Tom's head. She did not think it fair that Papa had taken it so seriously. It was intended to be a bit of a laugh.

In any case, it took a few days but, Papa found a way to stop Lydia by setting up Wards that were specifically against her.

La! These Royal Mages thought they were so clever, but they had no idea how to take apart Wards. It was not in their stupid spell book. She had already checked, and there was nothing in there that could stop her, either.

The gentlemen stared as she stepped through, their eyes wide as saucers. She wanted to laugh, but it was no fun laughing alone. She wished Kitty was here to laugh with her. A wave of nostalgia for her younger sister and her home hit her. She would be seeing them soon, and she would show them her mage cloak, with its golden trim and pearls embroidered into the bodice. It was much more beautiful than anything the young ladies at the Assembly would be wearing. They were all going to be green with envy!

She had already worked out what she would say. She would pretend they had allowed her to go home especially to attend the Meryton Assembly. If only she could bring Mr. Pratt and Mr. Denny with her to show off that she associated with mages, or even better, Lord Redmond. Everyone would be so impressed!

“I am going to a ball, gentlemen,” she said, triumphantly. “Would you care to come with me?”

The young mages shook their heads vigorously.

“I do not want to get into trouble for the sake of a country dance,” said Mr. Denny.

“Then you are nothing but cowards,” said Lydia, contemptuously. “You probably need permission to scratch your head.”

“We are not cowards,” said Mr. Pratt. “I have no desire to attend a ball.”

She laughed out loud. “Only yesterday you were wishing we could have one.”

He shrugged. “A proper ball, not a country dance.”

“Then suit yourselves,” she said. “*I* am going.”

“But you have taken the Wards down. Surely you don’t intend to leave us unprotected? You need to set up the wards again.”

“Pish! I will not leave you without Wards. I am not so stupid. I will set up my own.”

The young men exchanged alarmed glances.

“How are you going to get to the ball? Do you plan to walk there?” Lord Redmond’s voice was full of contempt.

“I have it all organized already.” She took out a dog whistle and blew on it. “Meanwhile, you had better not tell anyone, or I will lay a curse on you.”

She would do it, too. Last week she had put a curse on one of Redmond’s friends, Trafford. It had taken him and his friends two hours to find the right spell in the *Compendium* to break it. And they thought themselves such experts!”

She took out the whistle and blew it again. Like magic, Ned, the stable boy, appeared with the carriage, ready to take her to Meryton.

“This is your last chance, gentlemen. Are you sure you do not want to come with me? I am going to repair the Wards as soon as I reach the border of the estate.”

They all stepped back into the shadows. Lord Redmond was watching her seriously now. There was no smirk on his face. Ha! She had proved herself.

Her hands were shaking. She was not sure if it was because she felt triumphant, or if she was afraid of what she had done.

When they passed through the outer gate of the estate, Lydia made Ned stop.

She turned her attention to setting up the Wards. She was not as good at Warding as she was at picking apart the Wards, and it took her a few minutes to connect some of the loosened threads. They were not as strong as they were before, to be sure, but they would do at a pinch, and she had no desire to lose any more time.

Briefly, as she looked back and saw Netherfield through the tree branches, she wondered if she should go back. If she was caught, she would be sent away, and she would never become a proper mage.

Lord Redmond would call her a coward if she went back. She did not want to lose face. Besides, Mr. Smith would be expecting her. Her hands still trembling, she told Ned to get the carriage moving. A sense of excitement filled her.

She was going to the Meryton Assembly, and if that meant never seeing those horrible apprentices again, so be it.



Darcy's day had been long and tiring, but at least he did not have a Council meeting. He was trying to decide whether to go and knock on Elizabeth's door when he heard a knock on his own.

Darcy strode to the door and pulled it open, hoping it was Elizabeth. Instead, he found Redmond standing there, looking anxious and uncharacteristically uncertain.

"Good evening," he said, with a bow. "I am sorry to disturb you."

"Good evening, Redmond. Is there something worrying you?"

"Yes, sir. I would like to talk to you and Mrs. Darcy, if I may."

That meant that Darcy would be seeing Elizabeth, which Darcy had wanted to do in any case. He only wished it could have been under different circumstances.

"I suppose it cannot wait until tomorrow?"

"It cannot wait a moment longer. I have already delayed it enough." He hesitated. "I have taken the liberty to send Evans to fetch her. I hope you do not mind."

It all sounded very serious.

"If it is that urgent, I am glad you did not waste any time."

A few minutes later, Evans opened the door, and Elizabeth walked in. As always, his heart gave a little bounce when he saw her.

“Has anything happened?” she said, her gaze moving from him to Redmond.

Redmond looked down at his hands.

“I wanted to tell you that Miss Lydia has left Netherfield. She went to the Meryton Assembly.”

Elizabeth looked shocked. She sat down and buried her face in her palms.

“I am sorry, Mrs. Darcy.”

It was not in Redmond’s character to apologize. Something regrettable must have happened.

“How long ago was that?”

“Half an hour.”

Elizabeth sprung to her feet. “She has been gone half an hour! That means the Wards have left us vulnerable all that time.”

She closed her eyes and reached out with her magic.

“You need not worry about that, at least,” said Redmond. “Miss Lydia patched it up before she left. I checked the Wards. We are safe.”

Elizabeth’s eyes opened, her magic fading. “So it was Lydia who disrupted the Wards two days ago, then. I should have

known. She must have tried to determine whether she could leave if she wanted.”

There was something else puzzling Darcy. “Why did you come to us instead of going to Lord Matlock?”

Redmond looked away. “My friends and I egged her on. We dared Miss Lydia to do it. She said she could walk through any Wards. That it was a family Talent. We told her to prove it.”

Darcy looked up at the ceiling in exasperation. “Heaven help us! And you did not consider that she might be serious?”

“How could we?” said Redmond. “You, me, and Mrs. Darcy set up those Wards ourselves. We are the best Warders in the country. I thought she was just showing off. She is like that. Miss Lydia likes to boast.” He threw Elizabeth an embarrassed look.

“It is true, unfortunately,” admitted Elizabeth.

Even in all this mess, Darcy was pleased that Redmond had included Elizabeth. Things were improving between them after all. Not that it made the current situation any better.

“You do realize the trouble all this will cause?”

“Yes, I do, and I am sorry for it, Mrs. Darcy. Which is why I came to you. Especially— after all the problems with my aunt.” He looked down at his feet. “I—think it would be a pity for the Royal Academy to lose a Talented mage like Miss Lydia because of something we did. And I do not want to be the one who snitched on her.”

“That is very thoughtful of you, Redmond,” said Elizabeth.

“You have done the right thing by coming directly to us, Redmond,” said Darcy. “We will handle it from here. Your job now is to make sure no word escapes about this. Do you trust your friends to stay silent?”

“Yes, sir. They know they are to blame. They will not speak of it if I ask them not to.”

“Redmond,” said Elizabeth suddenly. “We will be going to bring my sister back. I need you to double-check that the Wards have not been weakened in any way. If there is a problem and you need reinforcements, you may confide in Mr. Bingley. I trust him completely. Will you do that?”

“Of course.”

“Good. If there is nothing else you need to tell us, we will be on our way.”

Redmond bowed stiffly.

“And Redmond,” said Darcy just as he reached the door. “I appreciate your discretion.”

Redmond nodded and left the room.

As soon as the door closed, Darcy took Elizabeth in her arms. “I am sorry this has happened. You warned me that there might be trouble, but I did not expect it so soon.”

“I am very thankful that Redmond came to us instead of going straight to the Council, Darcy. I am impressed by his thoughtfulness.”

“I agree. It gives us a chance to act quickly. We had better go to the Assembly Rooms at once and bring her back.”

“No, wait. Give me a moment,” she said. “We can’t just rush over to Meryton without thinking it through. This is far worse a disaster than anything I could have dreamt of when I told you I was worried.”

“We can put a stop to it if we act quickly and have her here before anyone raises the alarm. No one will be any wiser.”

“As much as I hate to say it, this is not just about Lydia. It affects us all. We need to tell your uncle.”

“Are you certain we cannot deal with it ourselves?”

“It is bigger than us, Darcy. We might be able to bring her back, but how will we silence the people she has spoken to? She will tell everyone the Royal Mages are at Netherfield.”

CHAPTER 8



There was no time to lose. Every moment Lydia spent away from Netherfield meant more of a chance that she would say something about the Academy's whereabouts. After a quick and urgent discussion with Lord Matlock, they decided they would take Darcy's cousin, Colonel Richard Fitzwilliam, with them. No one knew him in the neighborhood, so he could go into the ballroom and look for Lydia without compromising the Royal Mages' location. It should be an easy enough task. Richard would find her, and once they knew where she was, they would place a Compulsion on her, forcing her to return.

"I should have set a Compulsion on her to start with," said Darcy. "I should not have hesitated. If I had been decisive enough, we might have avoided this whole problem. Lydia has forfeited the right to any consideration on my part."

"I have been saying the same thing myself since the moment I heard," said Elizabeth. "We should have found a way to stop her from revealing where we are."

“Don’t be too hard on yourselves,” said Lord Matlock. “The use of Compulsions is usually forbidden in the Academy, which is exactly as it should be. It is one of the worst types of magic. But this isn’t the right time to wish things were otherwise. Go quickly. Bring her back before she reveals anything, and no one will be any the wiser. I will send for Richard to join you.”

They hurried to bring their cloaks to guard against the cold, but mostly to conceal themselves in case they had to wait a long time outside. By the time they arrived at the stables, the Colonel was already there and issuing orders with a soldier’s efficiency.

“We had better go by carriage. Arriving on horseback will draw attention. I have asked around, and one of the carriages and a stable boy are missing. They left about half an hour ago.”

A half hour had passed! So much damage could be done in a half hour! Darcy clung to the hope that parochial assemblies such as this, unlike balls, did not start until half past eight.

When they arrived in front of the Assembly rooms in Meryton, it was half past eight, and people were still arriving. At least a dozen carriages were slowly making their way down the main street, disgorging their occupants one at a time.

“The first thing we have to find out is whether Lydia is already inside, or whether she is still in the queue.”

She reached out to trace her sister amongst the carriages. Darcy looked at her expectantly, but she pursed her lips, her

shoulders slumping.

“Nothing. She may have disguised herself.”

“I will go and look for her carriage, then,” said Richard. “It shouldn’t be difficult.”

“We will wait here, ready to leave when you bring her back.”

As his cousin sprinted forward, Darcy turned to Elizabeth. She had her head back against the squabs, looking thoroughly miserable.

“I am so very sorry this has happened, Elizabeth,” he said, drawing her to him.

“I ought to have listened to my instincts,” she said. “I should have talked to members of the Council and convinced them to send her away.”

It was all too easy to blame themselves. He was doing the same.

“In the end,” he said, heavily. “It is Lydia who is to blame. Never mind why she did it. She knew she was breaking the rules. She knew it could cost her the possibility of staying with the Royal Mages.”

“I suppose so.”

She did not sound convinced. He wanted to console her, but there was not much he could say that would not be a falsehood.

“She may be more prudent than we think.”

His statement was intended just as much to calm himself as to reassure Elizabeth, he realized. He was hoping for a miracle, and he refused to allow himself to consider the possibility of failure.

But for the moment, there was nothing to do but huddle in the carriage next to Elizabeth, holding her tight, and waiting for news.



Richard returned quicker than Darcy might have expected. He poked his head inside.

Darcy read his cousin's expression at once. "You did not find her." It was a flat statement of fact.

"I did not find any carriage in the queue that answered the description the stable master gave us."

"The next step is to ask around at the stables." He disappeared into the night, not waiting for a response.

Elizabeth cast out the threads of her magic again to the back of the building.

"I have found traces of her. I do not know if she is still there, but it is our best chance to intercept her."

They raced towards the rear entrance, but Lydia had already disappeared inside.

"Shall we go in?"

“We cannot. People will recognize us and question our presence. And if Lydia has not revealed anything yet, she may say something unfortunate when she sees us.”

“We could change our appearances.”

“Neither one of us can maintain Illusion spells for long. We had better tell Fitzwilliam to look inside, and you can search from outside. He was headed for the stables. I will fetch him.”

He drew his hat low over his face and strode in the direction of the stables. His cousin was just arriving from another direction.

“Anything useful?”

“Not yet. Everyone is occupied with the carriages in the front.”

Darcy quickly summarized what they had discovered, and Richard set off at a lope towards the ballroom.

They waited in silence for Richard’s return to alert them to Lydia’s location. Time passed, and they did not hear from him.

The night was turning colder, which was hardly surprising. Darcy shuffled his feet to stay warm. Beside him, Elizabeth stood completely still. Her stiffness was a sign of how concentrated she was. She was not even aware of the cold.

“Can you sense her magic?” asked Darcy. “I wonder why I cannot. There are many different magical signatures. Most of them are not very strong, but if she is in there, I should be able to spot her.”

Elizabeth did not answer. He could do nothing but wait impatiently.

Eventually, Elizabeth came to herself. “She is not here. There are traces of her magic, but she is not in the room, nor is she anywhere close by.”

“So she is hiding her magic, after all.” Darcy was surprised.

“I did not know she was so skilled at it,” said Elizabeth. “She must have learnt a spell from the Compendium. But where is the colonel? Should we go in?”

“No. I am sure Richard will be here any moment.”

When he finally emerged, Richard did not look happy.

“Lydia is not here. None of the Bennets are here, in fact. The dancing started, and I tried to look inconspicuous by dancing while I waited. I did not want anyone to notice me.”

Elizabeth started to giggle. Darcy threw her a sharp look. He could see nothing amusing about the situation at all.

“It is impossible for a gentleman who is both agreeable and well-bred to escape notice in Meryton, especially if he is willing to invite young ladies to dance. They will be speculating about it for days!”

Richard gave a lop-sided grin. “It is a good thing, then, that I did not tell them I was an Earl’s son.”

Darcy scowled. So much for being discreet in his enquiries. He did not understand how Richard could be joking, when things continued to go from bad to worse.

“We should go and see if her carriage is still here. That should tell us what is going on.”

Now that the dance was in full swing, Richard was able to ask a few questions, and he was pointed to the missing carriage and the stable boy. The ostlers had noticed the carriage both because it was unfamiliar, and because the boy was too young to be driving a carriage. He was not wearing livery, either.

In other words, he stuck out like a sore thumb. Another way Lydia had managed to draw attention to herself.

When Darcy asked the boy to explain himself, he did not seem to be conscious of doing anything wrong. He said Miss Lydia had shown him a note written and sealed by Mrs. Darcy, asking him to prepare the carriage the next day.

“What did the note say?” said Darcy.

The boy hung his head. “I don’t know, sir. I can’t read.”

The colonel shook his head. “Next time someone shows you a note that you can’t read, you will ask to see Lord Matlock himself, do you hear?”

“If there is a next time,” said Darcy, in a hard voice.

“Yes, sir.” He looked terrified. “Am I about to be dismissed then, Mr. Darcy?”

Darcy did not see any reason to let him off the hook. “We will deal with that problem when we’ve found the young lady. But it is very likely you will be struck off.”

He felt sorry for the lad, but there was too much at stake to let him off Scott free. Loyalty to the Royal Mages was essential if someone wanted to work for them.

There was one more question that needed to be asked.

“Where is Miss Lydia now? Is she inside?”

Darcy held his breath.

“No, sir. She has gone home. She said I was to wait until the dance was finished, and then return to Netherfield.”

Elizabeth gave a little cry. “I know what has happened. She must have been seen leaving the carriage. Papa realized at once that she must have run away. He has taken her back to Longbourn and sent a message to Netherfield to retrieve her.”

It was a perfect explanation. Darcy felt his spirits lighten.

“If that was the situation, then maybe this night will end well after all.”

Elizabeth chuckled. “Except that there will be an uproar because she will not be happy to be dragged back home when she had prepared to come to a ball.”



They went directly to Longbourn, their minds set on bringing Lydia back to Netherfield and be done with the whole miserable episode.

Richard waited outside the house, not wanting to intrude on the family uninvited.

“Prepare yourself for loud voices and slamming doors,” Elizabeth warned Darcy as she rang the doorbell. “We will have to ask the servant for complete discretion in not revealing our unexpected presence to anyone. I will ask Mrs. Hill to make sure of it.”

The door opened, and Mrs. Hill appeared.

“Mrs. Darcy! Mr. Darcy!” She gave them both a hasty curtsy. “What an unexpected surprise! I’m sure the mistress will be very pleased to see you. She is down in the dumps for not being able to go to the Meryton Assembly, but your visit will cheer her up.”

“Thank you, Mrs. Hill, but we are here to collect Miss Lydia. Unfortunately, we are in a hurry and cannot delay.”

Mrs. Hill blinked at Darcy in confusion.

“Miss Lydia? Yes, of course. She went upstairs with Miss Kitty. She came to collect her things.”

Elizabeth smiled pleasantly. “Was there a big fuss about having to come here from the Meryton Assembly?”

“Well, Miss Lydia was very upset that she was not allowed to attend. I think those Lucases are making too much of a small thing, if you ask me.”

“The Lucases?”

“Oh, haven’t you heard? Well, you know Sir William is Master of Ceremonies. So, as soon as Miss Lydia walked into the Assembly Rooms, he went up to her and told her she was not allowed to attend. Imagine that!”

That was certainly unexpected. Darcy was feeling more and more buoyant about the situation.

“As you can imagine, Miss Lydia is none too happy about it. She cried on her Mama’s shoulder, but now she is in good spirits and she is upstairs in her old bedchamber gossiping with Miss Kitty as if she never left.”

At the word *gossip*, Darcy came to full alert. They had to prevent her from gossiping at all costs.

“We will go upstairs and fetch Lydia, then, Mrs. Hill,” he said.

“Shall I announce you to Mrs. Bennet, sir? I am sure she would love to see you.”

“Not tonight, Mrs. Hill. And I would ask for your discretion to make sure none of the servants mentions that we came here.” He slipped her a coin.

“Of course, sir,” she said, bobbing a curtsy as she looked at the coin. “You can be sure of it.”

Darcy hurtled up the stairs, with Elizabeth right after him.

“It is very likely too late. She may have already told Kitty everything, but we can still try to prevent it from spreading.”

Elizabeth rapped on the door of Kitty’s bedchamber.

“May I come in?” she said, trying to keep her voice as quiet as possible but still be heard.

Kitty came to the door and peered at her.

“Since when do you knock at the door, Lizzy?”

She did not look happy to see her sister. Darcy wondered what Lydia had said to her.

“May we come in?”

Kitty’s eyes widened when she noticed Darcy, but she opened the door wider. There was no sign of Lydia in the bedchamber.

“Where is Lydia?” said Elizabeth.

“She left a few minutes ago.”

“Kitty,” said Elizabeth with exasperation. “She would have passed us if that was the case. Where is she hiding?”

“She is not hiding anywhere,” said Kitty. “She left. Maybe it was more than a few minutes ago. She went away in a hurry.”

Darcy did not know how long he could cling to his patience. They needed to return to Netherfield *now*.

Kitty shrieked in shock as Darcy went to the wardrobe and threw it open, then proceeded to look for Lydia under the bed.

“You can’t do that. It is improper for a gentleman to—”

“No more of your nonsense, Kitty,” interrupted Lizzy. “Tell us where Lydia is and we won’t turn your chamber upside down.”

“She is not here. I swear it. You can turn the whole house upside down, but you won’t find her. She came to fetch her things, and now she is gone.”

“Did a carriage come for her?”

Kitty nodded vigorously. “Yes, and she took her baggage with her.”

Well, that was certainly a relief. Lord Matlock must have sent someone to take her back.

There remained one item of business to be dealt with, and then they could be on their way. Darcy had to make absolutely certain Kitty did not mention anything about Netherfield to anyone.

First, he needed to know how much Lydia had revealed. “Did she tell you which Academy she was staying at?”

“Of course. I was so surprised when she told me she was so close! Netherfield Park! Why, we are neighbors! And with Lizzy and Jane there as well! You could have knocked me down with a feather.

“What else did she tell you about Netherfield?”

“Well, what else? She told me what it’s like living there. But not as much as I wanted. She was in a hurry to leave.”

“Did she talk to anyone else about Netherfield?”

“Yes. She told Mama. And Mary. I don’t know who else. The servants might have been listening. They always listen to our conversations. And Mrs. Hill. Everyone, I suppose. Except Papa, since he was in the library.”

Darcy turned towards the window and looked out into the night, his fingers running through his hair in agitation. His worst fear had come true. The secret of their location was out.

Darcy turned to Elizabeth. “We must get back to Netherfield at once. Our location has been compromised. Your sister may as well have announced our location to the French.”

“Perhaps she has told no one other than the members of this household.”

“‘Perhaps’ is not good enough. We cannot risk having all our apprentices being killed because of a ‘perhaps.’”

Kitty was looking wildly from one to the other.

“Did she talk to anyone else before she came here?”

Her eyes widened. “I cannot say,” she wailed. “I did not go to the Assembly. Papa decided it would be best to stay at home and not go to the dance. We have quarreled with our neighbors. Everything has been dreadful since Lydia burned down the Lucases’ barn. When Lydia came here tonight, she was very upset, and said there was only one person who understood what she was going through.” She began to sob. “I had no idea. I just thought...”

“Never mind what you thought, Kitty. Lydia has placed people’s lives in danger. We have to get to the bottom of it.” Elizabeth turned to Darcy. “I am going downstairs. We must prevent word from spreading.”

“I will come with you.” He gave Kitty a severe look. “Do not leave this room. Do not talk to anyone. Do you understand?”

CHAPTER 9



Elizabeth hurried downstairs with Darcy, their feet thudding on the steps. They arrived in the hallway just in time to see Mrs. Bennet putting on her bonnet and pelisse.

“Mama!”

Mrs. Bennet stopped and turned. “Oh, I did not know you were here, Lizzy. What a surprise, to be sure!”

“Where are you going at this time of night?”

“I was going to see your aunt Philips. She did not go to the Meryton Assembly. She is ill, and at home alone, and she will not have heard the news. I want to be the first to tell her.”

“What news, Mrs. Bennet?”

Darcy’s voice was cold as a shard of ice.

“Why, that the Royal Mages are now quartered at Netherfield.”

Elizabeth groaned inwardly. Did Mama have no common sense at all? How could she be so blinded by her desire to

spread the news that she did not care about the damage it would cause?

“Mrs. Bennet. I am afraid I have to put you under arrest for treason.”

“What?” Mrs. Bennet put a hand to her heart. “Treason?”

“You will be taken to prison in London and tried.”

She stared. “That cannot be! Lizzy, speak to your husband. Tell him I would never commit treason. Mr. Bennet!! Where are you when you are needed? Mr. Darcy has come to arrest me.”

Darcy was not the least bit interested in Mrs. Bennet’s reaction. His mind was already on what they needed to do.

Elizabeth nodded. She knew what was next.

“We must set up Wards at once. No one must leave Longbourn.”

She reached out to Bond with him. This was something familiar at least. She knew the Wards inside out. She guided him as he set up Wards around the parameter of the estate. It was more complex for him because the Bennet Wards were not based on the Compendium.

Just then, Mr. Bennet emerged from his library, looking alarmed. “What is going on, Lizzy?”

Her concentration broke, and she was forced to break off the Bond.

“The Wards have been behaving strangely tonight. I thought I felt something earlier, but I was in the middle of a book I wanted to finish. Why are you and Darcy redrawing the Wards around Longbourn? And what is the meaning of all this caterwauling, Mrs. Bennet?”

Mrs. Bennet ran to him. “I am under arrest. They are taking me to London. I am to be hanged.”

“If that is the case, I am sure you deserve it,” said her husband, with perfect composure.

“I will explain to you when we are finished, Papa.”

Mr. Bennet stood quietly by, waiting for Elizabeth and Darcy to complete their task. When Elizabeth was satisfied that no one could leave the Longbourn estate, she withdrew from the Bond and turned her attention to Mr. Bennet.

“Would you care to explain what is happening, Lizzy?” he said mildly.

It was Darcy who answered. “I am afraid I am going to have to ask you not to leave the house, Mr. Bennet. You, too, are under arrest. You were aware of Lydia’s escape, but you did not immediately warn us. You allowed your daughter to compromise our position.”

Mr. Bennet turned so pale, Elizabeth thought he was about to collapse.

“I assure you. I knew nothing of it. When was Lydia here, Mrs. Bennet?”

“She was here a little while ago. She came back from the Assembly, and said she needed to return to Netherfield. The Lucases—”

Mr. Bennet interrupted. “She was here, and nobody thought of telling me?” Mr. Bennet’s face was bleak. He turned to Darcy. “I give you my word as a gentleman. I knew nothing of this. I was out most of the day overseeing some repairs to a roof that had collapsed in one of the laborer’s cottages. When I came home, I retired to the library for some peace and quiet and had my dinner there.”

Elizabeth gave Darcy a nod. Papa did that often enough. When he was absorbed in his reading, he generally preferred to ignore whatever else was happening.

Just then, Mary came down the stairs.

“Mr. Darcy. Lizzy. Kitty said you have forbidden her from leaving her room, so she sent me down with a message. She said she needs to inform you of something important.”



Mr. Bennet had grasped the problem with Lydia’s escape immediately, and within moments, had sprung into action, asking for the servants to gather in the living room. It was the first step in the process of accounting for everyone and ensuring no one had already left. It was a task best left to the master of the house.

Having assured themselves that no one could leave the grounds of Longbourn due to the Wards, Elizabeth and Darcy went back upstairs to see what Kitty had to say.

Darcy was looking as grim as he had been during their battle at Founder's Hall, when they had almost been defeated. His mouth was a thin line, his brows drawn together. As she reached the top of the stairs, Elizabeth stopped. He was one step below her, and he bumped straight into her.

He sent her a questioning look. She reached out her fingers to smooth out the frown, then kissed him on the brow.

"I am glad you came with me. I would not have wanted to do this alone."

He nodded, a small smile touching his lips. "I promised I would support you, did I not? I always keep my promises."

Mary was waiting for them at the top of the stairs. "Kitty is crying her eyes out. What is the matter, Lizzy?"

"You might as well join us," said Elizabeth. "I suppose you know about Netherfield?"

"That you are stationed there. Yes, Lydia told me. Has there been an attack?"

"Not yet," said Darcy ominously. Mercifully, he did not say anything more.

Kitty looked up when they entered the room. Her eyes were red and swollen.

“I promise you, Lizzy. I didn’t tell anyone about Netherfield.”

“Hush, now, Kitty. I do not blame you.” Elizabeth gave her a tight hug. Of course she did not know. How could she? No one had told her anything. “But I would blame you if you are holding back anything now. What is it you wanted to say?”

Kitty pulled out a folded piece of paper from under her pillow.

“Lydia made me swear I would not show it to anyone until tomorrow. She put a spell on it that would set my hair on fire if I gave it to somebody.”

“You do not have to give it to us, then, Miss Kitty. Did she make you promise not to read it out?”

“No.” She sat up straight and dried her eyes.

“Then please do so. If your hair catches fire, I will use magic to douse it.” He gave Elizabeth a sideways glance. “I have become accustomed to putting out fires.”

He was referring to the numerous times when she set him on fire when they were trying to Bond.

Kitty unfolded the letter slowly, half expecting it to burst into flames. When it did not, her body relaxed. She began to read.

La! What a lark. I will not have to put up with the odious mages at the Academy a second longer. Papa, I know you will agree with me that the Academy is the most unpleasant place in the world. No wonder you left.

I have a surprise for you. I have found someone who is willing to train my Talent. He has promised to become my Janus Twin like Lizzy and Darcy. We are to marry in Gretna Green, and I am to have a new set of clothes. Next time you see me, I will be a married woman. How droll to think of it that way!

Kitty's hair did not catch fire, but Darcy looked ready to explode, and Elizabeth could barely contain her consternation. Foolish, foolish Lydia! How could she be so completely ignorant of the danger of trusting other mages? Did she not know they were at war, and that there were French Mages everywhere?

“Kitty, you must have known what she intended to do. She must have confided in you. Why did you not tell anyone? You are two years older. Surely you did not encourage her to run away with someone she barely knew.”

Kitty burst into tears again, but Lizzy regarded her with a jaundiced eye. “Stop that snivelling at once. You need to tell us exactly what you know, so we can put a stop to this before Lydia is ruined forever.”

“If Lydia is ruined, none of us will ever find a husband,” intoned Mary. “I never thought she would be this foolish.”

Kitty looked around the room at their grave faces.

“I will tell you what I know, but I do not think it will help you much. I was there when she met him, but he was always careful not to let me see his face. I cannot describe him. All I

know about him is that he is a mage and that he has a handsome figure.”

“Do you know his purpose in visiting Meryton?”

“Lydia said that he has family here. Though I cannot imagine who those could be. Mama would have known if a young gentleman worthy of our attention was staying with his relatives.”

“Of course she would,” murmured Darcy.

Elizabeth struggled to wrap her mind around this information. This was looking even worse than they thought. There was no reason at all for a strong mage to be in Meryton unless he was spying.

She tried to get more information.

“Are you sure you did not see him?”

“I am sure. It was a gloomy day. No, wait. I think it may have been dark. He was about twenty, with golden hair. And blue eyes, I think, but I cannot be sure. Lydia likes gentlemen with golden hair.”

“I saw him,” said Mary, suddenly. “It was the day you came back from your shopping expedition in Meryton.” She looked puzzled. “It was not dark at all, Kitty. And I could see his face. I would say he was closer to thirty. And he had brown hair and brown eyes.”

“We have two completely different descriptions. Which one is accurate?”

“Mine,” said Mary, with certainty. “*I* saw his face, *you* did not.”

“How can you be so sure, Mary, when Kitty walked all the way with him, while you only glimpsed him from the window?”

“More importantly, why did Kitty think it was dark when it was not?” Darcy gritted his teeth. “He must be a Conjuror.”

“He must have cast a spell,” said Elizabeth, at the same moment. Elizabeth’s mind raced to understand the implications.

Mary looked suddenly animated. “*That* is why I saw him. I am immune to many types of magic. I do not see the same things that you do.”

“Mary has no magic Talent. Or at least, that is what we have always believed,” she said by way of explanation to Darcy. “Is it possible she might have been able to see through an Illusion intended to fool a mage?”

They had always assumed that Mary was tone-deaf to magic. What if that was an ability of its own?

Darcy looked at Mary with interest. “Is that the case, Miss Mary?”

Mary was startled by the sudden attention as they all looked at her. “Sometimes I notice things others do not. I am not like my sisters. Or like Papa. I do not know what it means. I always thought it was because I have no Talent.”

“As your sister says, you may well have an ability that is unique. If that is the case, you must be trained immediately.” He paused. “Unfortunately, I do not know of any mage who could train you. Perhaps if you have access to our magic library, you could research if such a Talent actually exists. Would you be willing to do that? I am afraid no one can spare the time to do so. We are sadly overstretched.”

Mary stared at him in disbelief. She took a deep breath, her eyes shining.

“You are asking me to do research? In a magic library? Because you think I may have a unique Talent?” Tears glimmered in her eyes. “It would be a dream come true. I have wished since I was a child that I could be in possession of magic. If I need to read *books* to prove it, then of course I am prepared to do so.”

Elizabeth went over to Mary and embraced her. “I am very happy for you, Mary. I hope you will find what you are looking for.”

Then she stepped back and glanced at Darcy. “Unfortunately, we have no time to dwell on this wonderful possibility. Lydia has run away with an unknown mage, who might be a French spy for all we know. We need to inform Papa, and we need to chase after her.”



Minutes later, they were sitting glumly in the parlor with Mr. Bennet. Mama had gone upstairs and shut herself in her bedchamber after Darcy threatened her, and had not come down since. Elizabeth was relieved. It made it easier for them to give Mr. Bennet a summary of what they had learned about Lydia's escape without being interrupted.

"I assume Kitty knew about it, but was sworn to secrecy?" said Mr. Bennet, wearily. A glance at Elizabeth's face confirmed his suspicion. His lips tightened. "How long ago did she leave? I must go after her at once."

He looked towards Mr. Darcy. "I know it is a lot to ask of you, but will you assist me in searching for her?"

Elizabeth had never seen Mr. Bennet look so vulnerable, but she already knew what Darcy's answer must be. He had to put the Royal Mages first.

"Under any other circumstances, I would have done everything I could to find Lydia. But unfortunately, we have a dangerous situation at hand, and I must deal with that first. Even if you do prevent members of your household from spreading the rumors, we have to assume Lydia had told this mage where we are. We have a mere few hours to remove ourselves to London."

Elizabeth put her hand on her father's shoulder. "I will come with you, Papa."

Mr. Bennet's mouth twisted. "As much as I appreciate the offer, you will be more of a hindrance than a help. I need to chase Lydia on horseback."

She dropped her hand, defeated. Her skill at riding would not be equal to the task of galloping fast. Then she had a sudden idea.

“You should take Mary with you, Papa. She has seen the man who has abducted Lydia. She is the only one likely to see through his disguise. She may not be able to ride as fast as you do, but she will be an invaluable help in your search.”

“Very well. I will take your advice. It is unlikely we can track them down tonight, unless we happen to stop at the same inn. If we do find her, I will send you word. If not, you can join us in the search tomorrow, when speed is not quite as crucial.”

Elizabeth suddenly recalled the summons she had received. In all the chaos, it had slipped her mind.

“Please send word to me tonight if you find her, no matter how late the hour. I will be waiting to hear from you. But I do not know if I will be able to help you tomorrow. Mr. Darcy and I have been summoned urgently to Carlton House, and we may need to leave in the morning.”

She could not bear to think that she might have to go away without knowing what had happened to Lydia.

She preferred to think it would not come to that. Mr. Bennet would find Lydia tonight.

The possibility of failure seemed too awful to contemplate.

CHAPTER 10



Late that night, Darcy came to Elizabeth's room. She had lit a fire, and she was sitting in the armchair next to it, her legs folded under her, wrapped in a blanket. It was not that cold, but her limbs felt numb and heavy, and she was hoping the fire would help warm them up.

She looked at him questioningly, knowing what his answer would be. "How did the Council take the news?"

He grimaced. "Badly, as you can imagine. They ranted and railed for about an hour. Everyone almost came to blows as each of us blamed the other. Things have settled now. They are discussing whether to move back to Founders' Hall. It's a foregone conclusion at this point. I think it would be hard to argue otherwise. I left with the excuse that I will be leaving for Carlton House in the morning."

"If it happens."

"I take it you have not had word from Longbourn."

She shook her head. "Nothing."

“Well, it is only to be expected. Even if Mr. Bennet found your sister, he may be too tired to ride back home with Lydia tonight.”

She hated that she did not know. “If only I were able to do something.”

“I understand your frustration, Elizabeth.” Darcy sat on the bed and patted the place beside him for her to sit down. She rose and joined him, bringing the blanket with her. She wrapped it around both their shoulders.

“Your hands are like ice.” Darcy took her hands in his and rubbed them to warm them up. “You need to remember, it is your father’s responsibility, not yours. He will devote his time to finding her. If anyone can do it, it is Mr. Bennet.”

Elizabeth hid her face in Darcy’s shoulder. That was the problem, right there. She did not know what Papa was capable of. He was so whimsical at times, she had no idea what he would do next. He had been a good father to Elizabeth and Jane, but had never shown much affection for Lydia. It is as if he had expended all his effort on his two eldest offspring.

She hesitated, not wanting to say anything. She felt she would be betraying her father by revealing her uncertainty, but she and Darcy had agreed to be open with each other. She could not pick and choose what she wanted to hide.

“I am worried my father has become too cynical about the world. I am not sure how much effort he will put into finding my sister.” There. She had said the words out aloud.

Darcy sighed and leaned his cheek against her hair.

“I appreciate that you were willing to confide in me, Elizabeth. It cannot have been easy to say as much. But I think you misjudge your father. I have taken his measure. I may be mistaken, but I do not think he is as uncaring as he appears to be. He is a very principled gentleman, but he presents the image of disinterest to the world to hide the fact that he cares more than he ought.”

Darcy hesitated. “Since you confided in me, I will tell you something as well. It might help you understand him better.” He took a deep breath and looked away. “I do not like to talk about our past together, because in many ways it is uncomfortable for me. I am not proud of who I was, Elizabeth. But that is a conversation for another day.”

He let go of her hands and covered them with the corner of the blanket. “When the Council decided that you and I should marry, Mr. Bennet fought it tooth and nail. He wrote angry letters refusing to give his permission. He made a few enemies, I should add, by resisting in such strong terms.”

Elizabeth stared at Darcy, stunned. She had always assumed Papa had sent her away without a second thought. He had seemed so defeated when the Royal Mages came to take her to Founders’ Hall and to the stranger who became her husband. She had thought Papa both spineless and unconcerned with her fate.

“How do you know this?”

“Because I received several express letters from him. As did my uncle. As did other members of the Council.”

Her father must have spent hours writing so many letters. She had no idea. She felt ashamed that she had accused him of indifference when he had been trying so hard on her behalf.

“I didn’t know.” Her voice was a hoarse whisper, her throat choked with unexpected emotion.

“Now you do,” said Darcy with a faint smile. “You can trust that he will do his absolute best to find your sister and bring her back.”

It made all the difference, knowing that. She nodded. “Thank you for telling me.”

They sat for a moment in silence, looking into the fire. Elizabeth could feel the warmth seeping into her body, both from the fire and from Darcy’s closeness. She was beginning to become drowsy.

She shifted to wake herself up, and Darcy stirred in response. “It is your mother I am worried about. Do you think she will spread word of Lydia’s disappearance?”

The question brought Elizabeth to full wakefulness. “Left to her own devices, she would probably want the world to know how much she is suffering. However, she does not have the ability to escape Papa’s Wards. We can only hope Kitty does not help her.”

“Does Kitty walk through Wards as well?”

“I have no idea,” said Elizabeth, “but since it is a family Talent, we have to assume she does.”

“Well, there is not much we can do about it. I will write her a letter asking her not to do it. Do you think it will have any effect?”

“I cannot say. She is not as reckless as Lydia, but I am not sure of anything.”

“You knew there would be trouble with Lydia. You wanted to send her away.”

Elizabeth nodded slowly.

“Yes. In that case, my instinct proved right. But Kitty is a follower. I am not sure how she will behave when Lydia is not there. She may fall under Mama’s influence.”

“Heaven forbid!”

“I should go to Longbourn in the morning.”

Darcy shook his head. “You cannot. You have to be here when the Prince Regent’s carriage arrives. You have been given an order, and you must follow orders for once.”

There would have been a time when she might have resented his words, but now she recognized that there were always sacrifices to be made. Her role was too important for her to go charging off and doing as she pleased. Looking back, Elizabeth thought perhaps she was more like Lydia than she had imagined. She, too, was reluctant to bow to authority. The consequences had justified the means so far, but what if they had not?

“I know,” she said, “but my journey to London could not have come at a worse time. I would rather be here, waiting for word about Lydia.”

“If your father does not find her tonight, it might be better if you had something to occupy you rather than waiting for news.”

“I suppose so. I just hope we will catch those jewel thieves quickly.” She leaned against his shoulder, listening to the regular beat of his heart.

“And I hope Mr. Bennet finds Lydia even faster.”

He rose to his feet. “You should try to sleep. It is doubtful any message will arrive until the morning. We need to rest. Tomorrow we will need to be prepared to speak to the Prince Regent himself.”



The next morning, Elizabeth slept later than usual. The emotional turmoil from yesterday had taken its toll. She woke up to find the whole house in upheaval. “What’s going on?” she asked when Emily arrived to help her dress.

“We’re moving back to Founder’s Hall.”

So they had made their decision late last night after all.

“What do you think of it, Emily? Is it a good thing?”

“It’s going to be a lot of work for all of us, isn’t it?” she said. “I’m not looking forward to that. And I can’t help

remembering what happened when we were there.” She grimaced.

It was not going to be easy to go back to the scene of a battle for many of them. She could see now why this had been a hard decision for the Council.

“I don’t blame you. It will bring back some bad memories.”

“Still,” said Emily. “I’ll be happy to be back. I have friends there, and it will be nice to be together again.”

They were interrupted by a knock on the door. Elizabeth’s heart began to pound. Had her father returned to Longbourn and sent a message?

It was Evans.

“There is a carriage waiting to take you to London downstairs. Mr. Darcy said to be ready to leave as soon as possible.”

Emily dropped the comb she was using in consternation. “You’re leaving already? But you haven’t had your breakfast, and there was that dress that was laundered last night that still needs to be packed. I’d better see to it at once.”

Emily rushed out, pushing Evans in front of her. “You had better get Mrs. Darcy something to eat before she sets out on her journey.”

Elizabeth stood up and rubbed her hands against her clothes. She was bitterly disappointed that there was no news. And now they were leaving, and she would not hear anything more.

Well, she had told Papa she was going to Carlton House, so he knew where to send a message.



In the past, when Elizabeth had promenaded past the white Corinthian columns of Carlton House on Pall Mall with her aunt, she had never thought she would be invited inside. As she stepped through the doorway, with Darcy and Colonel Fitzwilliam, she felt a strange sense of unreality. How different her life was now from anything she could have imagined!

Darcy had described the interior as well as he could. Over the years, he had worked on setting up and reinforcing Wards at the Prince Regent's palace many times, and he had dined there on several occasions. But since the Prince was constantly re-designing the interior, there was no way of knowing what it might look like, now that Darcy had been away for more than a year.

Elizabeth had heard so much talk of the Prince Regent's reckless spending on the house, along with his strange and exotic taste, she was prepared to dislike it. But as they entered the foyer, she was surprised to see it was tastefully done in the Classical style. It was bright and unassuming, with no evidence of any of the excesses people talked about.

“This is not what I expected,” she said, in a quiet voice. “It is a pleasant surprise.”

“Wait another month, and you will see an entirely different hallway,” remarked Colonel Fitzwilliam in a half-whisper. “His Royal Highness changes his mind with the seasons. Rooms and furnishings are constantly being shifted or discarded, and spaces are re-imagined completely.”

“Would it not be simpler for him to use Illusion magic rather than going to all the trouble of changing things manually?”

“From what I gather, he likes to oversee these things himself. Reshaping the house is a form of art. I believe he enjoyed watching the physical transformation.”

They soon saw evidence of Colonel Fitzwilliam’s remark. As a liveried footman led them up the lavish curved staircase, the sound of hammering reached them. They soon encountered the chaos of covers and dust, with furniture being carried away and the smell of paint filling the air.

“Normally you would have been accommodated in this wing,” said the footman apologetically, “but since His Highness is having work done, I have been asked to place you away from the noise. Our apologies for the inconvenience. The Prince Regent originally intended to have everything done while he traveled to Brighton. Unfortunately, his journey was postponed at the last minute.”

The chambers assigned to them were a set of gothic-style apartments with a view over St. James’s Park. Elizabeth thought the elaborate gold and red very ugly, and quickly revised her notion of what passed for tasteful. Still, she hoped

they would have the opportunity to experience some of the Chinese rooms during their stay.

As her gaze wandered around the space assigned to them, it settled on the large, gilded poster bed. The appearance of their rooms had distracted Elizabeth from the realization that, though there was a sitting room and a dressing room, there was only one bed. Darcy must have reached the same conclusion at the same instant because his neck suddenly turned crimson.

The silence spoke volumes. Elizabeth felt heat stain her cheeks at the implied intimacy. The agreement between them – to abstain from marital duties – had lasted all this time. They did not want to risk conception in the middle of a war. There were several historical precedents where the baby was deformed when certain forms of magic were used, and others where the enemy controlled the mother through her link to the baby. She was aware that there were ways to be intimate that did not involve conception, but Darcy was adamant he did not want to take any risks.

The attraction between them made it a form of torment to be in a room together yet keep their distance. Elizabeth dreamt of the day when she would become his wife in earnest.

Today was not the day. Darcy carefully avoided her gaze.

“I can sleep in the sitting room,” he said. “Or we can have a trundle bed made up. I could even request another bedchamber.”

“You could. But I think it would be simpler for us to be together. I would rather not have to look for you in some other wing in unfamiliar and confusing surroundings. I will sleep on the trundle bed. I am smaller and lighter.”

“I am sure we can arrange for a bed to be brought in,” said Darcy, brusquely. “As Royal Mages who might be forced to work overnight on His Highness’s protection, we should be provided with our own beds.”

He was standing rod upright, as if holding himself together by sheer effort of his will. That was how he had been when she first met him. A statue. She had thought him arrogant then. Now she knew he did it when he felt vulnerable.

She wished she could go to him, take him in her arms and convince him to throw caution to the wind. He would do it, but he would hate himself afterwards. She knew him well enough by now. Discipline was a crucial part of who he was, and she could never ask him to give up that side of himself without good reason.

She sighed. “I agree. In any case, we need to find out soon exactly what our roles entail.”

Darcy visibly relaxed. Had he expected her to test him? She would never make him do something he was reluctant to do. Now that she understood him better, she did not want to force the issue, simply for her own satisfaction.

It was tremendously difficult, when every instinct cried out to be satisfied. The only thing that made it bearable was knowing they had the future ahead of them. It demanded

patience and restraint. Elizabeth thought it must be like being engaged and having to wait for the wedding night. They were not the first couple to do it, nor the last.

It was simply a matter of time.



Darcy left the bedchamber with mixed feelings of disappointment and relief. Briefly, he had thought Elizabeth would entice him into sharing a bed. If she had, he might well have given in. He longed for it with his whole being. She had bewitched him, body and soul, and he wanted to be with her more than anything in the world.

Fortunately, he was still clear-headed enough to see it was not the right time. They had no idea what they were up against, and besides the danger of conceiving a child, they could not afford to be distracted at this point.

Someday, they would be free to enjoy each other's company to the fullest. He could only wish it would be soon, because his ability to hold steady was quickly falling by the wayside.

CHAPTER 11



No sooner had Darcy stepped outside the bedchamber when a footman approached him.

“May I help you, Mr. Darcy?”

It was the same footman who had taken them to their quarters. He had returned from taking Richard to the barracks where he was staying and was now hovering outside Darcy’s bedchamber.

Given how famous the court was for its intrigue, Darcy was not surprised that the footman was hoping to gather information about them. Darcy shrugged inwardly. He cared little about the politics of Carlton House. His presence was required here. He would fulfil his obligations, and that was all there was to it.

“We need to begin our tasks as soon as possible. Who should we contact, to receive our instructions?”

“That will be Lord Scarsbrook. Or possibly Lord Walsworth. I will enquire and let you know.”

Both gentlemen were the Prince Regent's cronies. They were Talented mages who had a great deal of influence in Court. Darcy had not dealt directly with them before. Knowing there were rivalries among the Prince Regent's closest advisers, Darcy decided it would be wise to speak to both. They could not put the Royal Mages in the situation of appearing to favor one over the other.

"Inform them both that my wife and I would like to meet with them, along with Colonel Richard Fitzwilliam."

"Certainly, Mr. Darcy."

"And arrange to have another bed set up in our quarters."

"Of course. I will have the housekeeper see to it at once."

He would also like to speak to the Prince Regent himself, but that could wait until they had a clearer sense of what had happened.

Word came from Lord Scarsbrook within the hour, asking them to meet him in the Gothic Room as soon as possible. Darcy sent the footman scurrying in search of his cousin Richard, and as soon as he arrived, they headed in the direction of Lord Scarsbrook.

Lord Scarsbrook turned out to be a distinguished gentleman in his late fifties, with pale blue eyes and dark hair with silver sideburns. He greeted them warmly as they walked in.

"Mr. Darcy. Mrs. Darcy. Colonel Fitzwilliam. How kind of you to join us. As you can imagine, we are working hard to understand what has happened. The theft of His Royal

Highness's jewel was rather shocking, as you can imagine. I am happy to answer any questions you may have. Ask anything you like, and I will do my best to answer."

"We are hoping you will provide us with some insight into why a robbery has led to His Highness feeling threatened."

"Feeling threatened?" said Lord Scarsbrook with a little smile. "I do think that is overstating the matter. His Royal Highness is understandably worried that there is someone out there who has the audacity to target the Prince Regent himself in a robbery."

The colonel nodded. "It suggests someone either very daring or very foolish."

Lord Scarsbrook nodded. "Indeed. I am more inclined towards him being foolish. Whoever it is, will be caught. And there will be no mercy when that happens."

"We certainly have every intention of catching this person," said Darcy. "I wonder if you can tell us exactly what happened."

"There is very little to tell. Here are the key facts of the matter. The Prince always wears this particular moonstone pin, except of course when he is sleeping. It has sentimental value. Unfortunately, it had become dirty, so His Royal Highness sent it to be cleaned. The robbery occurred just outside the jeweler's shop, in broad daylight."

"Could it not simply have been a pair of footpads or common thieves who took the opportunity to steal from a

footman, not knowing the jewels belonged to the Prince?”

“There was no mistaking the situation. There was an armed guard, including a mage who had set Wards around himself and the moonstone. The coach was marked with His Royal Highness’ coat of arms. It was not a footman but the Prince Regent’s private valet who personally attended.” Scarsbrook shook his head emphatically. “No ordinary footpads could have access to magic that would disable those Wards.”

“Were there traces of magic at the scene, then?”

Scarsdale shook his head. “The Prince sent out several Royal Mages to look into it. None of them were able to pick up anything. That must be why he sent for you and Mrs. Darcy, since you are the most prominent Warders in the Kingdom. You are more likely to discover the truth.”

“Was anyone injured?”

“No.”

“We would like to speak to the mage who was there,” said Elizabeth.

Lord Scarsbrook bowed his head. “Naturally. I will have him come to your rooms so you can question him.”

“And the valet as well,” she continued.

“Of course.” He smiled amiably at Elizabeth. His gaze shifted to the two gentlemen. “Anything else I can do to assist you?”

“Nothing at the moment,” said Darcy. “But we may need to talk to you again soon. And of course, we would like to have an audience with the Prince himself.”

“I am at your disposal. I am as eager as you are to recover the moonstone and bring the perpetrator to justice. I will ask His Highness if he can meet with you today. As you can imagine, he has many state matters to attend to, but I will do everything I can to persuade him to find the time as soon as possible.”

“If not,” said Darcy, “I can always talk with him over brandy after dinner.”

“Oh,” said Lord Scarsbrook, looking chagrined. “I am afraid that will not be possible. After the assassination of the Prime Minister, he has eschewed large gatherings, and only dines with a small select group. He is not issuing dinner invitations to anyone other than his closest acquaintances. I am very sorry.” He looked embarrassed and crestfallen.

Darcy was surprised, though he should not have been. That was what the letter had expressed, after all. It was just hard to reconcile himself with a prince who was willing to curtail his enjoyment. Things had truly changed at Carlton House.

“Perfectly understandable,” said Darcy. “That is why we are here, after all. To get to the bottom of what happened.”

Lord Scarsbrook smiled graciously. “Thank you for your understanding. I would not have liked you to feel insulted when an invitation failed to materialize. It will be a relief for us all when things return to normal. I am pleased you have

come. Having two Warders staying in Carlton house will make the Prince safer. And I will sleep better in my bed once the thief has been caught and punished. If you are returning to your chambers now, I will send the two men to you as soon as possible.”

He took up Elizabeth’s hand and bowed over it. “Mrs. Darcy, it is finally an honor to meet the mage who was so crucial in protecting Founder’s Hall. I have heard nothing but praise for your role.”

Elizabeth blinked. Darcy hoped she would not respond with a remark about how the Council viewed the ‘Bennet girls’, but he need not have worried.

“Thank you. I did not win the battle alone, however. Everyone did their part.”

“Charmingly modest as well, I see. Darcy, you are a lucky man.”

She smiled cordially and dipped her head.

As they returned to their room, Elizabeth noticed that the palace was much quieter than she expected. She had expected to see people milling around, but there were only small groups of people who walked around speaking in hushed voices.

When they were back again in the Darcy suite of rooms, Elizabeth quickly set up a Ward against eavesdropping.

“Well, what do you think?” Darcy flung himself into an armchair and rubbed his eyes.

“I am still surprised that the Prince has taken the theft so much to heart. Perhaps we are seeing the beginnings of a reformed Prince who has given up his extravagances.” Colonel Fitzwilliam perched on the edge of a chair, frowning into the distance.

“I do not suppose it will last,” said Darcy.

“More to the point,” said Elizabeth, “if the Prince has been reformed, does it follow that the whole Court has been driven into austerity? Where are the other members of the court?”

“You have forgotten that in London people sleep late.” The colonel stretched and yawned, as if to illustrate his point.

“I have never stayed overnight at Carlton House, so I cannot judge.” Darcy pinched the bridge of his nose. “But the change in the Prince’s behavior is worrying. It makes it all the more crucial that we talk to him to determine the reasons for his caution. He is the only one who can tell us. There may be something we do not know.”

“Well, we cannot force His Highness to meet us. We will have to wait until he condescends to do so,” said Richard.



True to his word, the valet appeared at their door minutes later, followed by the mage who had been at the theft. However, their conversations did not reveal anything new that was significant. Both confirmed what Lord Scarsbrook had told them earlier, and had very little to add.

The mage, Mr. Althorp, was a bald man in his sixties with a careless appearance. His cravat was loosely tied, and he gave the impression of someone who had been woken up and made to dress quickly.

“Did you see the mage who attacked you?”

“I did not. He came from behind, just as I went out of the jeweler’s shop, and hit me on the head.”

The valet had not seen the assailant either. He had been waiting in the carriage, and had not even seen the incident until the thief was long gone.

“I wonder if the mage stole the moonstone himself,” said Elizabeth, slowly, after they left. “It would have been very easy for him to simply unravel the Wards and let the thief in without anyone noticing.”

“It is possible. Or he could have imbibed more than his share the night before and was careless,” said Richard, coming to his feet and striding to the door. “I will see if I can find out more about the mage.”

Meanwhile, there was little they could do other than wait patiently until they heard from Lord Walsworth or had the chance to speak to the Prince Regent. It was a fine October day, and it was vexing to be confined inside with nothing specific to do. They spent the time reinforcing the Wards and learning how many mages there were in the building so they could recognize their signatures.

Richard returned in a while with more information about the mage, Mr. Althorp. He was not one of the Prince's inner circle of friends, but he had been with the Prince for more than twenty years. He was not known for his excesses and was a fastidious gentleman who generally took great pride in his appearance.

“So it is unlikely that he was the worst for drink on the day of the theft,” said Elizabeth. “That leaves us with the other possibility.”

“It does not necessarily follow that he was collaborating with the thief,” remarked Darcy. “I wonder why he was looking so unkempt today, though.”

“It looks like Lord Scarsbrook dragged him out of bed and sent him to us,” remarked Richard. “We will have to speak to him again later. I must say, I am glad Lord Scarsbrook has proven so helpful.”

“At least we have some basic information,” said Darcy.

“We have a long way to go before we find the thief. I still do not quite comprehend why the Prince Regent would choose us to look into this.”

“We will know his reasons soon enough,” replied Darcy. “Meanwhile, why don't we go over everything we have discovered so far?”



A note was delivered at around two o'clock from Lord Walsworth. The woman who delivered it was a white-haired lady with a haughty demeanor and sharp, black eyes. They could discern from her signature that she was a mage.

She introduced herself as Mrs. Pryor. "I cannot stay, but will return with a message if Lord Walsworth is available."

She excused herself and left immediately, without waiting for them to read the letter.

Mr. Darcy,

I am not certain I will be able to meet with you. If I am able to find a way, I will meet you in the gardens later in the afternoon. I will send word with Mrs. Pryor and no one else.

If you do not hear from me, be aware that Prinny takes breakfast daily at eleven in the dining room. If you wait for him to go down, you may be able to intercept him and set up a meeting. It is crucial that you speak to him directly.

Walsworth

Lord Walsworth's message seemed typical of the general air of suspicion in the palace. It was as cryptic as possible and gave little information.

"It seems odd for him to send a mage instead of a footman," said Elizabeth.

"I suppose he is being cautious. A mage is less likely to be intercepted than a servant."

"Or bribed," added Richard.

“Or bribed.”

Darcy did not remember things being that bad when he was here last. There was always intrigue at Court, but he had never seen messages delivered by mages. It seemed the combination of war, assassinations and unrest was taking its toll, and everyone was on edge. Walsworth’s use of the Prince’s popular name – Prinny – was a striking contrast to Scarsbrook’s formality, but Darcy did not want to jump to any conclusions and make the assumption that Walsworth had the Prince’s ear. He would have to make that judgment later.

Meanwhile, after a brief discussion, they decided to take Walsworth’s advice. They discussed the best way to approach the Prince.

“If he is with others, how are we to draw his attention?”

“What better way to draw his attention than to introduce him to a beautiful young lady?”

Darcy frowned at his cousin. “I will not throw my wife in the path of a profligate—”

“Hush, Darcy.” Colonel Fitzwilliam interrupted by putting his hand on Darcy’s mouth. He gave his cousin a severe look. “Have you forgotten where you are? You cannot insult His Highness in his own home.”

“Well, I will not use Elizabeth to draw his attention.”

Elizabeth put a hand on Darcy’s arm. “I would like to meet the Prince Regent,” she said, with a smile, “if only to give Mama the advantage over Sir William Lucas. He is forever

bragging about how he was invited to Carlton House and knows the Prince.”

The tension in Darcy’s shoulders slackened. “I would be happy to introduce you, Elizabeth. But I will not dangle you on a hook before him as my cousin seems to be suggesting.”

Richard shook his head and laughed “I only said—”

“I don’t want to hear another word about it, Richard.” Darcy’s voice was icy.

Richard put his hands up in mock surrender. “Mum’s the word, Cousin. I am going back to the barracks where I belong, with the rough soldiers and those who cannot hold their tongue. I will see if I can get some of those same tongues to wag and if anyone knows anything about what is going on.”

And with that, he beat a hasty retreat.

CHAPTER 12



When Mr. Smith had suggested that they elope together at the Meryton Assembly, Lydia had imagined something completely different. She had thought they would drive hell-bent to Scotland to make sure no one could catch up with them. It seemed like the most romantic thing on earth to ride all through the night to Gretna Greene.

What a joke it would be when everyone found out she was a married woman! She would saunter in her fine clothes into Netherfield and show off the ring on her finger. No one would ever tease her again, especially those horrid apprentices at Netherfield.

She had met Mr. Smith a while ago in Meryton village. Lydia had dropped one of her hat boxes – she was carrying two when she left the shop – and he had picked it up and very kindly offered to take it all the way home. Kitty was supposed to be the one carrying it, so Lydia did not care if he did or not, but Mr. Smith was a good-looking gentleman and if she walked through Meryton with him holding one of her boxes,

everyone would envy her. Since then, they had met a few times. He had taught her a few new magic spells, and he was planning to teach her a lot more once they were together.

It was all a big secret, of course. He had even followed her when Elizabeth and Darcy took her away, on the day of the fire. How she had laughed when she saw him out of the window at the inn! And Elizabeth had been so prim and proper! Lydia had almost given the game away, but luckily, she had managed to cover it up just in time. Lizzy was going to be very surprised when she found out!

It was all very thrilling. He had proposed running away together when that horrid Sir William Lucas had asked her to leave the Assembly Rooms. She had been mortified. She had agreed to leave with Mr. Smith at once, because he was the only one who ever understood her.

Anyway, climbing out of the window with her bags and waiting outside for Mr. Smith to come and get her was much more of an adventure than being a Royal Mage. Luckily, Kitty was there to help her pack and go out of the window. Otherwise, she could not have done it. Though she supposed she could have gone out through the front door. But what was the fun in that?

But when she stood outside the house and looked for Mr. Smith, there was no sign of a carriage. He had dropped her off in his carriage, but he had gone back to Meryton and left it at the Blacksmith's Arms. Instead, Mr. Smith had brought two horses. He had looked at her large bag in astonishment.

“I said to bring *one* change of clothes,” said Mr. Smith, when he saw her portmanteau. “Not a whole wardrobe.”

“But if we are to go to dances and to the theater, I will need them.”

“We can always buy you new clothes.”

Lydia had tossed the bag aside at the prospect. Kitty would find the clothes tomorrow. She could keep them if she wanted. Lydia did not need them anymore.

“I do hope you know how to ride,” said Mr. Smith. “I would rather not have to take you up behind me.”

Lydia had thought it might be more romantic to ride behind him, but without a lady’s saddle, it might be uncomfortable to go all the way to Scotland. Besides, she wanted to show him she had a good seat.

“I can ride,” she said.

“Good.” He cupped his hands to help her up. She tried to get him to smile, but his face was like waxwork. He barely looked in her direction. He was probably worried they would be caught.

By now they had been riding for some time, and Lydia was getting tired. It must be close to midnight. Or maybe not. She was trying her best to keep up. It was dark, and even though there was a full moon, it was hard to avoid the potholes in the road. At first, Lydia had been jealous of Mr. Smith’s sleek gray, but now she was glad he had given her a dobbie because she was not *that* good at riding. Oh, she had taken lessons, of

course. All five of the Bennet sisters had. But Lydia hated having to practice every day, so she had given up. If she had known Mr. Smith expected her to ride, she would have made more of an effort.

Still, it was an adventure, and she was glad that she had run away, if only to show hoity-toity Lord Redmond and those friends of his! She cared nothing for them, not when she was with such a handsome gentleman who loved her and would teach her all the magic she could ever want to learn. Those stuffy Royal Mages could stay stuck in that gloomy old house. She was riding away into the night instead. What a lark! She only wished she could see Lizzy's face when she discovered Lydia was gone!

Something moved across the road very suddenly – a mouse, or maybe an adder, which was much more thrilling – and Mr. Smith's horse was startled. It veered off and for a moment Lydia could see Mr. Smith's face in the moonlight. The light must be playing tricks on her, because, for a moment, she thought she saw a different face underneath Mr. Smith's handsome features. It was not an ugly face, but it looked older. She must have imagined it because, when she looked harder, it was the same old familiar face again.

Except that Mr. Smith was not being very friendly. Come to think of it, he had not spoken a word to her since they left Longbourn. "You have become very dull, Mr. Smith. Surely you do not mean to be silent all the way to Scotland?"

“Scotland?” he said. “No. We are not riding all the way to Scotland. We will stop at an inn soon.”

“Oh, good! I was worried I would have to ride all night. I am not in a hurry, you know. Gretna Green will still be there in the morning.”

“We are not going to Gretna Green.”

“Where will we get married, then? I cannot marry without a guardian’s permission. I am only sixteen.”

“We are not getting married. I am taking you somewhere where you can develop your Talents. We will be training you and making you into a powerful mage.”

She stared. She must have heard him wrong. “That is not what you told me. I didn’t run away with you to become a powerful mage.”

“Didn’t I tell you I would help you develop your magic?”

“Yes, but now you are talking about others. Who are those others?”

“You will see. It is a surprise.”

The idea of running away with a handsome mage had seemed exhilarating, but, actually, it was not interesting at all. It was a bad idea to stay with him.

“I changed my mind,” she said. “I do not want to go and train with you after all. I am not going a single step further,” said Lydia.

She expected him to comfort her, to tell her he did not mean it. Instead, he snapped at her. “What do you think you are going to do, then, alone in the middle of the night? You do not even know where you are.”

Even his voice seemed different. Somehow, he did not seem as fine-looking as before.

“You were lying all along. I don’t trust you anymore. I’m going back.”

“This is not a game, little girl. And it is too late for you to go back now.” His voice was harsh. “Your reputation is in tatters. The Royal Academy will not take on a young lady whose reputation is suspect.”

She knew this was true, because Miss Bingley had made that very clear on the first day she arrived, and everyone had harped on and on about it. But the indifference on Mr. Smith’s face made her shiver. He seemed older. She did not like the way he called her a little girl, either. She thought he liked her, but now it was obvious he had only pretended, so she would go away with him.

She felt like she was in one of those novels where a young lady was abducted by a villain. It sounded all very well when you were reading about it under the blankets. In real life, it was frightening and horrible.

She tried not to cry. Sometimes, tears were useful to get what she wanted, especially with Mama, but her instincts told her it would not work with Mr. Smith. So instead of crying, she tossed her head defiantly. “I don’t want to go back to the

Royal Academy again anyway. I hate it there. I just want to go home.”

“It is too late for that as well. Your bed is made. Now you must lie in it.” Mr. Smith gripped her by the arm. “You are coming with me, and that is the end of it. You will not come to any harm if you are a good girl and follow orders. We will train you and you can join us. You could even become a spy. That would be quite the adventure, would it not?”

“How about if I do not want to become a spy?”

“Well, you will be punished and cast off with nowhere to go.”

Joining Mr. Smith and his group wasn't much different from the Academy. Why was everyone constantly threatening to punish her? No one ever asked her what she wanted. They only wanted to use her for her Talent.

She suddenly felt very sorry for herself. The whole world was against her.

“Come on, Lydia. This isn't so bad. We will be at the inn very soon. The main thing to remember is you must behave yourself. If you can do that, everything will work out.”

She nodded because that was what he expected from her. She was very vexed with him. She would do as he said for now, but meanwhile, she was going to find a way to get back to Longbourn.

But first, she had to work out where she was and in which direction they were traveling. Papa did not like to travel, so the

Bennets only left Meryton on rare occasions when they went to visit the Gardiners in London. Lydia had not recognized any landmarks on the way.

She did not have a map, either. Not that it would do much good. She had never had a governess to teach her geography. Papa had taught Jane and Elizabeth, but Lydia had not cared to learn. How was she to know she might need it one day?

If only someone happened to pass by. She was sure if she explained her situation, people would help her. She was pretty, and people liked to help young ladies who were pretty.

No one passed by, and the later it became, the less likely that it would happen. Now that she was paying attention, though, she began to see there were milestones by the wayside counting down the distance. Many of them mentioned London, which must mean they were going that way. If they got to London, she would escape to Uncle Gardiner's house when Mr. Smith was not paying attention.

"Do hurry up, Lydia," said Mr. Smith. "If we continue at the same pace, we won't arrive at the inn until tomorrow morning."

From the way he kept looking backwards, she could tell he was worried someone was going to catch up with them. Papa would come after them, of course, if he found out she was gone, but Lydia had told Kitty to hide the letter until tomorrow.

What if Lizzy had discovered she was missing from Netherfield and told Papa, especially if that dreadful Redmond

had snitched about her to Mr. Darcy. Though now that she thought about it, it might be a good thing if he had. Then someone would come to her rescue.

The problem was, how would Papa know which road they had taken? They had not taken the main road. There was nobody here. She had not seen a soul since they set out.

She had to let Papa know which way she had come. Papa always called her silly, and maybe her idea *was* silly, but it was better than doing nothing. Elizabeth had once told them a story about two young children lost in the forest who had left a trail of breadcrumbs so that they could find their way back home. Or was it string? She could not remember how the story went. It did not matter in any case, because Lydia did not have any string with her. Or breadcrumbs. All she had was a ribbon. She secretly dropped it when Mr. Smith wasn't looking. She thought about dropping her hairpins, but then her hair would come undone and Mr. Smith would know.

She wondered if Mr. Smith had any food she could use.

“When do we eat? I am hungry.”

“We will eat as soon as we reach the inn.”

“But I have hardly eaten anything all day.”

She knew how to wheedle things out of people. Mr. Smith grumbled under his breath, then fumbled around in the saddlebag. He produced a man's kerchief. Lydia noticed the initials 'GW'. He unfolded the napkin and revealed a piece of cake.

“You can have it,” he said.

She took it quickly from him before he could change his mind. The cake was crushed from being in the saddlebag, but she did not mind that. It turned out she was hungrier than she thought, and before she knew it, she had eaten more of it than she had planned to.

Still, there was plenty left. She was not very happy to give up the food, but it was for a good cause if it would help her family find her. She began to secretly throw some of the crumbs on the ground.

She looked back over the pothole-ridden path to see if the crumbs were visible, only to see two field mice darting towards them and gobbling them up.

Disappointment made her stomach hurt. So much for believing in a fairy tale. How was she going to let Papa know what road they had taken?

She had to find a way. She puzzled over this, wondering if she could get away with tearing small pieces from her clothes and throwing them in the hedges along the road. Someone in a story had done that once. Without scissors, though, it was hard to tear off bits of clothing using her bare hands. Besides, the moon was full, and bits of cloth lying on the road were likely to be visible. Mr. Smith would catch her when he looked back. Then he would task her to pick them all up.

She thought and thought about it until she finally came up with the perfect solution.

Magic.

If she left traces of magic along the way, Papa would recognize them. But she had to be careful not to make it obvious. Carefully, very slowly, she released a small puff of air. She had to control her magic carefully to make it seem natural, as if the wind had suddenly picked up.

She thought she was being very clever about it, but Mr. Smith looked at her sharply.

“What are you doing? Stop it at once! You are not allowed to use magic of any kind.”

He was sounding more and more grumpy. How could she have ever thought him charming?

“Why don’t you just let me go? I am no use to you. It will take years to train me properly. I do not understand why you are eloping with me. I thought you loved me, but clearly you do not.”

“I already told you. I am not eloping with you.”

“If you do not want to elope, where are you taking me then?”

“Somewhere where I will be paid handsomely for a Talented mage like you.”

Lydia recoiled in shock. He was planning to sell her to someone. Never in her wildest dreams did she imagine he would do something so detestable.

Then, just as they came around a bend in the road, and an inn appeared ahead of them.

“It looks like we are almost there.”

Panic seized her. Time was running out. Once they reached the inn, who knew what would happen? They might take her away. She might not even be with Mr. Smith anymore. She may not like him, but at least she knew him. If he left, she would be at the mercy of strangers.

He had told her not to use her magic, but what choice did she have? It was the only way. If she played a trick on him, she might stand a chance of running away. The one with the bees always worked. The bees would keep him busy for ages.

Quickly, while he was looking at the inn, she wove together a spell. The sound of buzzing filled the air. The bees gathered into a cloud, ready to swarm and attack him.

“I told you not to use magic!” he said. He muttered some words and a small membrane appeared out of nowhere. It surrounded the bees, trapping them inside. She stared as they whirred around desperately. Then, as they ran out of air, he watched them as some of the bees started to drop down dead.

His cold reaction sent chills through her. She knew the bees were not real, and he did, too. Why was he wasting time ‘killing’ them?

“Don’t play with fire, little girl, or you will be burned. Just like you burned that barn in Meryton. Stupid thing to do.” He turned and came towards her. “I warned you not to use your magic, but did you listen? No, of course not. Well, you will have to suffer the consequences.”

Lydia started to think of another spell. She would not give up. She would use Elemental magic to unseat him.

But by the time she had formed the idea, Mr. Smith had already brought his horse alongside hers. He took out a gold chain and leaned over to whisper something in her ear. She bent towards him to listen. Maybe he wanted to say sorry, that it was all a mistake.

Instead, he slipped the chain over her head. It settled around her neck. It felt strange – both cold and warm at the same time. He touched it and muttered the words of a spell.

A feeling of lethargy spread over her. She suddenly felt very drowsy. She had to fight not to topple off the horse. There was a strange buzzing in her head, and she felt as if the world was spinning around her.

“What happened?” she said, through the fuzzy feeling. Her words sounded slurred.

“Nothing to worry about. I have just made sure that you can’t access your magic. I’ll be taking you to see my friends now.”

CHAPTER 13



The next day, Elizabeth took a great deal of care preparing herself for her encounter with the Prince Regent, lamenting the fact that she did not have something more fashionable to wear. The last time she had been to the modiste was more than a year ago, and she did not even know what the current fashions were. She did not want to attract the Prince Regent's attention for all the wrong reasons – namely that she looked hopelessly old-fashioned.

Fortunately, with the help of a maid assigned to her by the Court, her appearance was vastly improved by the new way the maid made up her hair, and she emerged from the dressing room feeling confident that she would pass muster.

Darcy's reaction was everything she could have hoped for.

“Have you taken my cousin's suggestion to heart, Elizabeth? You look very pretty.”

“It is all thanks to Millie, who has worked hard to achieve this beautiful style of braiding.”

Darcy handed the maid a coin. She curtsied and left, looking pleased.

Elizabeth turned to Darcy, her eyes dancing. “If I must be dangled in front of the Prince Regent like a worm to catch a fish, I must do my best to look like one.”

“A worm? I was not thinking about worms, or fishes, more like a delicious, appetizing fruit.” He came over in two long strides and looked down at her. “You are too tempting to be resisted.”

She smiled. “I think you are resisting very well.”

His eyes darkened with emotion. “If we continue to share a bedchamber, I am not entirely certain I will be able to.”

A knock on the door had them jumping apart guiltily. It was the valet. Darcy turned away from her with a grimace, which brought a smile to her face.

She was still smiling when there was a scratch on the door and a footman arrived with a sealed message for Elizabeth. She frowned as she took it, wondering who could have sent her a message to Carlton House. The seal was unfamiliar. Only a handful of people knew she was there, and she could not think of any reason anyone would contact her other than Papa and Jane. Her heartbeat quickened. It had to be about her sister.

She tore open the message impatiently, unable to bear the suspense of not knowing. She recognized the handwriting immediately. It was from her father.

Dear Lizzy,

I hear you are in London. I have news to impart. I find myself in London on business. I am sure you will want me to give you the latest gossip in Meryton since you have not been there for a while.

If you have the time and inclination, Lizzy, I will be riding in Hyde Park today. Shall we meet at the usual place around two o'clock? If not, I will wait in the same place for whatever time is convenient for you to come. We can go somewhere and dine together.

Your Papa

Papa had worded the letter very carefully, making sure not to give anything away, but to Elizabeth, the message was abundantly clear. He had not found Lydia. She has spent the night away from the Academy, and by now, her absence must have been discovered. More worrying, they had not yet discovered the identity of the man she had gone with.

Elizabeth had hoped for better news. Her stomach clenched. She shut her eyes, trying to breathe in and calm herself. She looked over towards Darcy. The Court-appointed valet had just finished shaving him, and was wiping his face with a towel.

As Elizabeth caught his eye, Darcy pushed away the towel and rose to his feet in a graceful movement. "Elizabeth?" He was with her in an instant. "Is it bad news?"

She shook her head. Mindful of the valet's presence, she tried quickly to think of a way to phrase it. She did not want

any gossip about her sister spreading.

“It is about that gown I ordered. It will not be finished in time for the dinner invitation.”

Let the man think she was a ninny-headed young lady. She could not think of another way to phrase it without giving anything away.

Darcy looked baffled. Fortunately, he quickly realized what she was doing. He nodded to let her know he understood.

The roiling of her stomach eased as she wondered with some amusement what Darcy was thinking of her statement.

“Well,” he said. “That is certainly disappointing, my love, but you can always have one of the Carlton House seamstresses alter one of your other dresses so no one recognizes it. I am sure they are more than capable.” He turned to the valet. “Do you know the seamstresses here?”

“Of course,” said Green, haughtily.

“Good. Please let them know we may require their services later.”

“Certainly. Anything else, sir?”

“That will be all.”

When the valet had shut the door, Elizabeth gave him an impish smile. “You should have seen your face when I talked about the gown.”

Darcy put a finger to his lips. “Green may be listening.” He went to the door, opened it, and looked out. The valet was

making a hasty retreat down the hallway. “I do not trust anyone here.”

“And you called me ‘my love’. You have never done so before.”

“You *are* my love. I hope you know it by now, Elizabeth.”

“Of course, but – you have never said it in public.”

He came over to her and cupped her face with his hands, his eyes darkening. “If it were up to me, I would do so all the time. You should never doubt my love, Elizabeth.” He kissed her lightly on the lips, then let her go.

As always, she felt that sense of disappointment, of loss. There was always a barrier between them.

He gave a hopeless shrug. “You know how it is in the Academy. We work together. We cannot express our intimacy openly. Here at Carlton House, things are different. The Court has different rules. It expects – even encourages – such expressions.”

She sighed. “I know only too well what our situation is. Being a member of the Royal Mages means being under scrutiny at every moment of our lives. In a way, I am glad we have been sent here. But as always, there are other matters that demand our concern.”

She looked down at the note she was still holding in her hands. “Like this note.”

She swiftly put up a Ward around them to prevent anyone from overhearing.

“Will you give me your news?”

Still mindful of being heard, she phrased her words in a similar way to Papa’s. “My friend continues to be ill. But I will not give up hope. I will be meeting a friend in the afternoon who will give me her news.”

“That is what I thought,” said Darcy. “I am sorry to hear it, but there is always hope.”

Elizabeth was vexed that they could not even talk about Lydia properly, but there was a time and place for everything, and she needed to turn her attention to the task at hand.

“Well then,” she said, trying her best to sound cheerful and push the gloom away. “I need to prepare for myself to go downstairs. Colonel Fitzwilliam will be expecting us.”

As if on cue, Richard pushed open the door and poked his head inside.

“Did I hear my name spoken?”

“We were discussing your dreadful manners,” said Darcy.

“Is that all? I thought it might be something worse.” He seemed in good spirits. “Are you ready? It is almost time.”

Darcy drew a deep breath and nodded, his face set. “I am ready.”

“So am I,” said Elizabeth.

“Then let us go and set up our siege.”



The three of them found a judicious spot in an alcove near the breakfast room and waited. As Walsworth had predicted, the Prince Regent came walking in their direction at eleven o'clock.

“Good morning, Your Highness,” said Darcy approaching him slowly and bowing. Two of the courtiers around him blocked Darcy’s way, but the Prince stopped and raised a hand to give Darcy and his party permission to approach.

As Darcy drew closer, the Prince squinted at him, as if he could not quite see him properly.

“Darcy, is it?”

“Yes, Sir.”

“And who is this charming young lady?”

“Your Highness, may I present my wife and Janus Mage, Elizabeth. Formerly Miss Elizabeth Bennet. And this is my cousin Colonel Richard Fitzwilliam, younger son of the Earl of Matlock.”

Elizabeth disliked the Prince Regent on sight. Or rather, she disliked the strange thick Wardings that surrounded him. To her, they seemed distorted somehow, a greasy surface that her mind slid away from instinctively. She felt profoundly uncomfortable.

She wished she could say something to Darcy, to find out if he shared her discomfort, but they were standing in front of the Prince Regent and she could not break Court protocol to raise the question.

Instead, she curtsied deeply.

The Prince Regent turned opaque blue eyes on her. Something strange hovered inside them. “I did not know you found a Janus mage to Bond with. And a pretty one at that. Congratulations.” He blinked and looked at the three of them. “To what do I owe this unexpected visit? I am not receiving many guests these days.”

Darcy gave a little choked cough and looked at a loss to answer.

Elizabeth plunged in, as much to distract Darcy as to use the opportunity to question him. They did not know how long they would have his attention. They had to seize the moment.

“We are here to investigate the theft of the moonstone. Your Highness invited us to come to Carlton House.”

“Did I really? Why a moonstone? Is it important?”

Elizabeth tried not to reveal her consternation. She watched him closely, trying to work out what was happening. Was he afflicted with blindness? Was his confusion feigned?

“We were hoping you would enlighten us, Your Highness.” Darcy’s voice was firm. He seemed to have recovered himself.

“Enlighten you? I am afraid I am at a loss. I cannot help you.” He turned his head away, as if listening to something

they could not hear. “Well, I must be on my way. Pleased to see you again, Darcy. Keep up the good work.”

He strode away in the direction of the stateroom while they bowed and curtsied. Elizabeth stared after him, thoroughly baffled by the encounter.

“Pssst.”

They turned quickly to find an elegantly dressed gentleman gesturing to them from behind a column. He put his finger to his lips to indicate they must not reveal his presence, then pointed to the stairs before starting to go down.

Elizabeth looked towards the others. Darcy gave a quick shrug and nodded in agreement.

By the time they reached the stairs, the man was already at the bottom. Why were they going down, rather than up? Were they going to the servants’ quarters? Elizabeth soon discovered her error. The building was built on a slope, and what she had assumed was a basement was in fact another floor, with the sunlight slanting through tall windows. The man stopped abruptly and waited for them to catch up.

“I can’t stay long,” he said, breathlessly. “I could not meet with you yesterday. There were too many spies around, and I was being closely watched. I am sorry to forgo formalities, but there is no time. I am glad you have met the Prince, because now you can tell there is good reason to be concerned about him.”

This had to be Lord Walsworth, then.

“Since the theft of the moonstone, Prinny has not been himself. People are starting to whisper that the Prince has inherited His Majesty’s –” he cleared his throat awkwardly “–condition.”

Could it be that the Prince was mad, like his father? She tried to remember what she had heard about King George’s affliction. She had heard about bouts of incoherent babbling and uncharacteristic behavior. She had no idea if this applied to the Prince Regent as well. He had not seemed incoherent to her, only confused.

“I am not convinced, however. I think there is something else at play.” Lord Walsworth hesitated. “I need to know if I can trust you.”

Just then, they heard Lord Scarsbrook’s voice from the top of the stairs. They all looked in that direction. Did he know they were here? Was he going to follow them? They waited to see if he would appear at the top of the stairs.

Elizabeth held her breath. A few minutes passed. When he did not appear, they turned back to continue their conversation with Walsworth.

He was nowhere in sight.



After their strange meeting with Lord Walsworth, the palace appeared full of shadowy corners and listening eyes. The sense of openness Elizabeth had felt when she first arrived had

dissipated completely. By general agreement, the three of them decided it would be better to postpone any conversations until they were outdoors. In any case, it was almost time to go and meet Mr. Bennet in Hyde Park.

As they made their way down Pall Mall to the stand where they could hire a hackney to head to the meeting place, they discussed what Walsworth had told them, as well as his sudden disappearance.

“It is impossible to determine whether Lord Walsworth disappeared because he heard Lord Scarsbrook, or whether he had other reasons,” said Colonel Fitzwilliam.

“He claims he is the one who sent for us,” Elizabeth pointed out.

“If you can believe him.” Darcy looked strained.

Elizabeth remembered the strange slippery magic she had sensed surrounding the Prince Regent. She had not yet had the chance to ask Darcy if he had felt it. She quickly described it to the two of them.

“I felt something was wrong with the Wards around him, but I did not have the same sense of the magic as you did.”

Elizabeth began to doubt her perception. “I cannot be sure. I would have to go close to him again.”

“Well, one thing we do know,” said Darcy’s cousin. “The Prince Regent did not send the letter.”

Darcy let out a scoffing laugh. “Or, the Prince did send it, but forgot.”

“Stop!” said Elizabeth. “We are going in circles. We have two people who are saying the same thing. Surely that is enough evidence. The Prince said he did not send the letter, and Lord Walsworth said he did. If we believe them both, then Walsworth is telling the truth.”

“But what if he is not?” objected Fitzwilliam. “We have no way of knowing.”

“Under normal circumstances,” said Darcy, groaning in exasperation, “I would consult with other mages, but if the Prince Regent is going mad, I am bound to secrecy. My role is to defend him, not to reveal his weakness.”

They fell silent as they contemplated the heaviness of the burden they were carrying.

“If only we could discover more about Lord Walsworth,” said the colonel, glumly. “It would help us to know if he is trustworthy or not.”

Elizabeth was suddenly struck by an idea. “I know. Since I will be meeting with Papa, we can ask his opinion. He has been around longer than us. He might know something about Walsworth. And he can tell us more about the King’s madness.”

“I do not want to offend you, Mrs. Darcy,” Colonel Fitzwilliam, “but I am not sure how much we can trust Mr. Bennet. Or anyone, for that matter.”

Elizabeth drew back, surprised. “Darcy. Do you agree?”

Darcy was silent for several heartbeats, then he sighed. “I believe we can trust him. He is an honorable gentleman.”

Elizabeth let out the breath she was holding. She had not been sure what Darcy’s answer would be.

“Then I have no objection to you asking him,” said the colonel. “We need any help we can get.”

CHAPTER 14



They had walked past the hackney stand some time ago, in tacit agreement that it was better to talk about such matters away from listening ears. At a gesture from Darcy, they began to walk back.

“That brings me to another matter,” said Darcy. “Are you absolutely certain the letter you received was from your father, Elizabeth? What if the note is not from your father but from the same person who took Lydia? What if it is an Imperial mage, and this is a trap? There may have been Imperial spies watching Carlton House who have seen us arrive and arranged to have it sent.”

Elizabeth wanted to weep. Was there nothing at all she could take for granted anymore? She thought hard. What proof did she have that the letter was from Papa?

“An Imperial mage would not know what our ‘usual place’ is,” she said, still pondering the matter.

“*He* may not, but your sister Lydia does.”

“What about Papa’s handwriting? I would recognize it anywhere.”

Darcy thought about it for a moment. “What if your father was held captive, and Compelled to write the letter?”

“I am ashamed to admit I never thought of that possibility. I can see I have a long way to go before I can think like a villain.”

The two gentlemen smiled as they hailed a hackney carriage. As they climbed in, Darcy said something to his cousin. Elizabeth did not listen. Could Lydia have been taken by French mages? Had she passed on the information? But then, how would Lydia know she was in London? She wished she had kept the note, but at Darcy’s suggestion, she had destroyed it rather than risk having someone find it. Her mind flitted from one thing to another. There were so many unanswered questions, and too many potential answers.

Elizabeth caught herself chewing on her nail through her glove. She quickly pulled her hand away.

“I think it would be better if I met Papa alone,” she said, breaking into their conversation. “It would be easier for me to discover if it is a trap, and if there are others involved. You can linger a short distance away. If I am in danger, I will put my hand on my head, and you will be close enough to come to my rescue. If all is safe, I will take out my handkerchief and blow my nose.”

“I hope I will be able to remember the signals, and don’t muddle them up,” joked Colonel Fitzwilliam.

“I will keep track,” said Darcy, shaking his head. “It sounds like this is beyond you, Cousin. I do not know how you survived the Campaign trail.”

“I had mages protecting me,” said the Colonel.

They left the hackney carriage at the entrance to the park and walked past walnut trees until they were almost at the Keeper’s lodge, with the Serpentine visible through the trees. They stopped there, and Elizabeth continued to the spot overlooking the water where they had sat together when she was younger. Her magic reached out, searching for any magical presence. There were spots of magic here or there in the distance, but nothing very strong.

She felt Papa’s magic just before she spotted him standing next to Mary. She was so relieved to see them, she had to stop herself from running towards them. Instead, she eyed them carefully as she approached.

“Lizzy, I am glad you could come. I did not know if you would receive the letter.”

“Papa, can you do something magical?”

“You need to be certain that I am actually your father?” he guessed. “Good. You should not trust blindly.” He extended a faint warmth towards her. It was like an embrace. It lasted no longer than a few seconds, but she had no doubt it was him. No one could disguise their signature.

“How could you possibly doubt Papa?” said Mary.

“Every young lady should possess a healthy dose of suspicion, Mary. Look what happened to her sister. If Lydia had been more cautious, she would not have been tricked into running away.”

That must mean that Papa had found Lydia. “Where is she? Is she in London? Is she safe?”

He shook his head. “I know where she stayed last night. I was able to trace her to a small inn. If I did not know Lydia better, I would think she had deliberately left traces of her magic behind, knowing both you and I were good at recognizing magical signatures.”

“That is good news, is it not, Papa?” she said, doubtfully, taking in his glum expression.

“That is what I thought at first. Then the trail abruptly ended. All traces of her magic disappeared without a trace. Poof! If I did not know better, I would have thought Lydia had Concealed herself. But your sister does not possess that level of skill.”

Elizabeth closed her eyes, her stomach churning at the implications. Lydia had spent the night at an inn, in the company of a gentleman. There was no possible misunderstanding. And now she was trying to hide from them. It was beyond belief.

“Are you certain she was there?”

He passed his hand over his face in a weary gesture. No doubt he was thinking the same thing.

“I am certain Lydia spent time at the inn, but I cannot tell if she stayed overnight. The traces of her magic are very faint. If she were not my daughter, I would not even have noticed them.”

“Did you question the innkeeper?”

“Of course,” Mr. Bennet threw her an amused glance. “Despite appearances, I *do* know my business. No one at the inn knew anything. None of them remember seeing a young lady who answers to Lydia’s description. I left quickly, before anyone could notice my magic. Of course I used subterfuge to hide it.”

“I then returned to Meryton, where I made some enquiries about the Meryton Assembly. It appears there was a mysterious gentleman who came there briefly.”

Elizabeth scrunched her nose. “I am sorry. I should have told you. That was probably Colonel Fitzwilliam.”

“Ah.” Mr. Bennet smiled. “Then *that* is not helpful information. Luckily, there is more. I also asked at the Blacksmith’s Arms. I received information that supports Mary and Kitty’s statements. There was a gentleman there who had rented a carriage first. He returned the carriage and then hired two horses. One of them had a lady’s side-saddle. He rode out alone. There was no lady with him. When I asked for a description, no one could tell me what he looked like.”

Elizabeth thought of the man Lydia had waved to at the inn. Elizabeth tried hard to remember what he looked like, but it

was as if she had never seen him. Kitty had said something similar when she described the man she went with.

“Mary, did *you* see anyone you recognized?”

Mary shook her head. “Not in the taproom. Papa told me not to stay long, so I did not look anywhere else.”

“Yes, of course. It will help no one if you are caught.”

“Do you believe her to be still at the inn, then?”

Mr. Bennet shrugged. “I have no idea. That is why I would like you to come with me to the inn. You have a stronger sense of magic signatures than I do. I know you have other matters to deal with, but the inn is not too far. I can bring you back to Carlton House tonight.” He gave her a heart-wringing look. “We have to find her before all traces of her magic disperse.”

Elizabeth shut her eyes. The impulse to save her sister was overwhelming. She thought of Darcy. Darcy would not relinquish his duty because of personal concerns.

“Before we do that, Papa, we need your assistance. Are you acquainted with someone close to the Prince Regent – Lord Scarsbrook or Lord Walsworth? Lord Walsworth, in particular. He has given us some disturbing information and we do not know whether to believe him or not.”

“I know Walsworth from my Academy days. He was a decent enough type, at least in those days. A powerful mage, of course. I don’t know Scarsbrook. He was older than us. I never had anything to do with him.”

“Would you be willing to talk to Walsworth if you could reach him? He has vital information concerning the Prince.”

Mr. Bennet looked pained. “I know the wellbeing of the Prince Regent is paramount for the Kingdom, but my duty as a father belongs to my daughter. I cannot put her life on hold for anyone’s sake.”

“I understand, Papa. I would not ask it of you if it was not crucial. It will not take long. Darcy will explain the situation to you.”

“Elizabeth, we are in a hurry. I cannot put your sister at risk.”

He was asking her to choose. But he should not. “Papa. It pains me to say this, but we are in a hurry, too. His Royal Highness is in danger, and we need to save him. Hear Darcy out, at least.”

Mr. Bennet gave a sigh of resignation. “Very well. Let me hear what Mr. Darcy has to say and I will decide.”

Elizabeth took out her kerchief and blew her nose loudly, then gestured for Darcy and the Colonel to join them. In moments, they were by her side.

“I have told Papa that we need his help, and he has agreed. I told him you would explain everything.”

Darcy took a deep breath. “What I am telling you is in the strictest confidence. It would not be an exaggeration to say the fate of the Kingdom might lie at stake. Walk with us, Mr.

Bennet. I would rather not stand next to the trees where we could be overheard.”

“You go,” said Elizabeth. “I will wait here with Mary.”

“I will stand guard,” said Colonel Fitzwilliam.

As they walked away, Elizabeth turned to Mary. “Allow me to introduce Colonel Fitzwilliam. Mary, the colonel has seen action in the Peninsular campaign. You may ask him about it if you wish.”

When Elizabeth was still at home, Mary liked to collect articles about the campaign. It was one of her interests.

Mary turned to him enthusiastically. “Really? I have never met anyone who has been there.”

Elizabeth left them to their conversation and went to stand apart, looking around and checking that no one had followed them. She hoped Darcy would convince Papa to help them, but at the same time, she wanted to go with him to save Lydia. Duty and emotion battled inside her. Lydia was nothing compared to the Prince Regent to most people, but she was her sister, and Elizabeth would never forgive herself if something happened to her while they were here in the park discussing the Prince Regent.

She waited on tenterhooks for them to come back, trying not to let her anxiety show.

“Well, what have you decided, Papa?”

“I told Darcy I would give my answer when we are all together, to save time.” He waited for Colonel Fitzwilliam to

join them. “I do know something about that moonstone of the Prince Regent’s because it was of great interest in the news at the time. It was a gift from one of the great Maharajas of India. Moonstones are generally believed to have the magical ability to provide emotional balance and clarity of mind. I have heard – and this is merely hearsay, mind – that this particular moonstone holds a spell protecting the Prince Regent against his father’s condition.”

“It would explain why His Highness was so distressed that the moonstone was stolen,” said Darcy.

“And it would also explain why he has declined so rapidly,” added Colonel Fitzwilliam.

She had never thought of it that way, but what must it be like to live in fear of being overtaken by madness? King George’s madness had deteriorated so badly that Parliament had named his son as Regent. Would the Prince Regent follow in his father’s footsteps if the moonstone was not found?

“We do not know anything for certain.” Darcy considered the information. “It is Walsworth who mentioned the Prince’s madness. All we know is that his character has changed. Whether this is related to the theft of the moonstone or not, we cannot tell yet. It could be that the moonstone did have healing properties as long as he wore it, and his health has worsened since it was stolen. Its magic must have been very potent.”

“And remember,” said Elizabeth. “We are still going by what the letter said, but we have no idea who sent it. How can we be sure it was Lord Walsworth who sent it?”

“I will speak to Walsworth,” said Mr. Bennet.

“Provided he will see you,” said the Colonel gloomily.

“He will see me,” said Mr. Bennet. “I have a way to contact him.”



Mr. Bennet made his own way to Carlton House, claiming he did not want to risk being seen with them. Everyone else piled into a hackney and made their way to St. James' Park, where they walked around, waiting for Mr. Bennet to return. Elizabeth was on tenterhooks, knowing that if her father did not succeed in speaking to Lord Walsworth, they would have wasted precious time that could have been used to find Lydia.

But to her surprise, Mr. Bennet was as good as his word. They did not have to wait very long before they saw him in the distance, walking towards Pall Mall. They hurried to catch up with him.

“Well, Papa?” asked Elizabeth breathlessly. “Did you discover anything of interest?”

Mr. Bennet nodded. “I learned two things. Lord Walsworth is doing everything he can to help the Prince. He is genuinely desperate to find help. Unless I am very much mistaken, you can trust him.”

“And the second thing?” probed Darcy.

“And the second thing is that there is something terribly wrong. I suspect that Walsworth’s odd behavior is the result of a Compulsion spell that prevents him from speaking directly about the Prince Regent.”

He turned to Elizabeth. “I hope you are satisfied, Lizzy, that I have done my duty to King and Country. If you will excuse us, gentlemen. Now we need to set out to take care of a small family matter.”

CHAPTER 15



It went against the grain, but Darcy had to stay behind in London, at least for now. The information that Mr. Bennet had provided had confirmed what they feared, that the Prince Regent was at risk, and that, in some way, the theft of the moonstone was connected to the Prince's current condition. Given how rapidly the Prince's health had deteriorated, it was imperative that they get to the bottom of it quickly.

Still, Darcy did not like that Elizabeth was going to the Crown Inn to confront an unknown danger. Not at all. The villain had already bested the two of them once, and who was to say what he was capable of?

"You must send for me immediately if my presence is needed. If you do not return later tonight, we will come looking for you."

Elizabeth smiled. "I am far more anxious about you than about myself," she said. "Given what Papa has told us, you are in more danger than I am."

“Let us say we are both equally in danger. But in London, I can call on other mages for assistance. You are going alone.”

“Do not forget that my father is a strong mage. Not as Talented as you, perhaps, but I can assure you, he has many spells at his disposal.”

With Mr. Bennet signaling his impatience to leave, Darcy had to content himself with that, and not fuss any further over her. His heart clenched as he released her hand. As the hackney took them away to hire a carriage for their journey, Darcy battled with the instinct to go after her.

“Come, Darcy. We need to visit the jeweler’s before it closes,” urged Richard.

“Do you think I am making a terrible mistake letting her go without me?”

“You worry too much, Darcy. She is more than capable of protecting herself.”

“I know.” Darcy rubbed at the back of his neck. “It is not rational. She is just as capable of defending herself as I am. I cannot help it. I want to take care of her. Is that wrong?”

“It is not wrong to feel that way. But like it or not, Elizabeth is a Royal Mage. Her role is to protect the whole Kingdom. How can she do that if she is cosseted and treated like fragile china?”

This was exactly what Elizabeth had pointed out numerous times, accusing him of not believing in her. It had been the

source of many of their disagreements since they met. She had proven herself, over and over. What more did he need?

Darcy sighed and nodded. “You are right. But you cannot expect me not to fear for her.”

Richard clapped him on the shoulder. “Of course not. Very few men enter battle without fear. It is only natural that you are afraid for someone you love. Unfortunately, the moment the two of you married, you condemned her to live this life. You cannot hold her back now.”

“It is like a curse,” said Darcy, bitterly. “I wish we had never married.”

“Would you really have preferred not to have her in your life?”

Darcy gave a rueful smile. “No. I cannot imagine my life without her.”

“Then you will have to accept that the turmoil is part of it. There is nothing you can do about it,” said Richard, “except to show that you have faith in her ability to deal with any situation she may encounter.”

Easier said than done.



It was an easy walk to Gray’s on Sackville Street where the theft of the moonstone had taken place. Darcy walked up and down the street, trying to separate the different magical

signatures he was picking up. There were several distinct ones that were clearly marked. But there was an additional sign of magical activity that was oddly blurred, as if the person had tried to cover it with a Concealment spell. Every time Darcy thought he had grasped it, it would slip from his mind. He wished Elizabeth was here. She was more adept at this.

He came back to Richard, who was examining the ground for any objects that might be of use.

“Anything?”

“Nothing.” Richard looked at him hopefully. “Anything on your part?”

“I have found some specific signatures, and one rather baffling one. I am not sure if that last one is important or if it is faded magic that has left some broken traces. Elizabeth would have been better at answering that question.”

“How do you do it? Are magic signatures so very distinctive? Is it possible to mix them up?”

“It is easiest to think of magic signatures as scents. Each person’s scent is distinctive. It would be very difficult to mix them up. Like hounds, we can track other mages by scent.”

“So, what next? Have you gleaned any useful information?”

“Nothing yet. I would recognize the signatures if I came across them, but it does not mean any of these mages are guilty of theft. They just happened to use some form of magic when they were on this street. They may have done something

as simple as trying to keep dry in the rain. There is no way of knowing.” Darcy shook his head.

“Next we should talk to Mr. Gray to compare accounts with what we have been told, and also to determine exactly where the jewel was stolen.”

They walked into the elegant brick building. The clerk was attending to a gentleman who was commissioning a diamond pin for his cravat. Darcy and Richard waited patiently for him to finish.

“May I help you, gentlemen?”

Darcy introduced himself and his cousin. “We represent the Mage Council. May we speak to Mr. Gray outside? It is a rather delicate matter.”

“Of course.”

The jeweler emerged a few minutes later.

“This is regarding His Royal Highness’ moonstone pin,” said Darcy. “We are investigating the matter on behalf of the Carlton House.”

“Not again!” explained Mr. Gray, looking piqued. “I have told everyone the same thing. I did not see what happened. I did not see the criminals. I was in the back dealing with a distinguished customer. Mr. Mason was in front when the theft happened. He did not see anything because there was a thick fog that covered the street. While I am as loyal to the crown as anyone, and I would do everything I could to assist his Royal

Highness, I have nothing further to say. I said so this morning, and I will say it again.”

“Someone was here earlier, asking questions?” said Darcy, sharply.

The jeweler frowned. “Yes. He said he was from Carlton House.” He

“If anyone else comes asking about the moonstone, you must not answer any of their questions. We are the only ones dealing with this business presently.”

Mr. Gray pulled at his cravat. “Come to think of it, he asked me several strange questions.”

“What kind of questions?” Darcy persisted, now on full alert. He reached out again to the different signatures he had found, making sure to remember them. If only there was a way of classifying them and storing them somewhere so he could examine them more closely later.

“He asked me if the moonstone had any kind of flaws.”

From the corner of his eye, Darcy saw Richard make an impatient gesture. “And you did not suspect that he was not from Carlton House? Why would someone from the Palace ask such a question? They would know the answer.”

His voice made it clear what he thought of the jeweler. It was the voice of an officer reprimanding one of his men.

The man blanched. “He was a gentleman. I did not think to doubt it until Mr. Darcy raised the issue. In retrospect, I

recognize that I should have been more suspicious. I will certainly be more particular next time.”

Darcy could see that Mr. Gray was embarrassed enough. He did not want to add to his embarrassment.

“No harm done, Mr. Gray. It is a terrible business, and no one knows what is going on. I am sorry you have been inconvenienced so many times. I hope in the future to have the pleasure of doing business with you.”

Mr. Gray brightened. “Certainly, sir. Meanwhile, I assure you of my absolute discretion. I will send word if anyone else comes here asking questions. Are you at Carlton House?”

“Yes. Many thanks, Mr. Gray” It was a dismissal.

Mr. Gray bowed and retreated into the shop.

“Well, that was a strange question. Unfortunately, your reprimand prevented me from seeking the answer,” said Darcy. “I will assume that the moonstone does have a flaw, and that it has to be significant if someone will take the risk of coming here to ask about it.”

“We had better address the question to Lord Scarsbrook. He will know.”



Since they would not be dining at the Prince’s table, and Elizabeth was away, Richard proposed dining at their club, but Darcy wanted to return to his rooms. Darcy knew it was too

early to hear from Elizabeth yet, but he wanted to be at Carlton House in case Elizabeth sent a message.

The Colonel grumbled good-naturedly and muttered about marriage making Darcy dull company, but he knew there was a real chance of trouble. They returned to Carlton House, talking along the way of what they had learned.

Someone must have been watching the Wards for their arrival. No sooner did they step into the building, when a footman came up to them, asking them to join Lord Scarsbrook in the Gothic Room again. Darcy decided he would have to make more of an effort to hide his magic whenever he walked through the Wards. It would prevent him from being identified so quickly.

Lord Scarsbrook stood up quickly when they entered the room, smiling cordially.

“I have been eagerly awaiting you. I have excellent news. I have managed to procure an invitation for you and your excellent wife for dinner. Colonel Fitzwilliam too. The seamstresses will be at your wife’s disposal immediately. I heard that you were requiring their assistance.”

Darcy bowed, pleased that he would have a chance to question both the Prince Regent and Lord Scarsbrook.

“I am glad to hear the Prince is in better spirits. This business with the Prime Minister seems to have affected him badly.”

“It would be unnatural if it did not. They were close friends.”

“Indeed?” remarked Richard. “I thought they disagreed about many things.”

Lord Scarsbrook waved his hand expressively. “Politics. Nothing more than politics. The whole thing has come as a shock.”

“I can well imagine,” said Richard. “Bellington has a great deal to answer for. I heard there was magic involved.”

Lord Scarsbrook turned away. “I know little enough about the matter. The culprit has been caught and punished. That is good enough for me.”

Was it Darcy’s imagination, or did Lord Scarsbrook seem uneasy at the mention of Bellington? Darcy decided to push further.

“He was a troublemaker. They say he was insane. However, I believe there was more to it than that. The investigation suggests he was not acting alone.”

Lord Scarsbrook looked surprised. “Is that so? I assure you. I have heard nothing of the sort. You must be mistaken.”

A strange buzzing sound reached Darcy’s ears. He felt suddenly dizzy. He looked towards Richard, who was looking around him in confusion.

“Mr. Darcy, you are looking rather pale. Would you like to go to your bedchamber first and refresh yourself? Have you eaten anything today? You should have food brought to your room.”

He *was* feeling hungry. *And* tired. Perhaps it would be a good idea to rest for a while before attending the Prince Regent's dinner.

"Yes. I have not eaten since the morning. Some refreshments would not be amiss."

"Colonel Fitzwilliam will keep you company."

"I would be happy to do so."

Lord Scarsbrook accompanied them all the way to Darcy's bedchamber. "Perhaps it would be best if you did not attend the dinner if you are so fatigued. I will see you tomorrow, gentlemen. Please convey my greetings to Mrs. Darcy. I am sorry I did not manage to see her today."

The mention of Elizabeth suddenly cleared Darcy's mind and the mist that had filled his mind evaporated. As the door closed, a whiff of magic reached him.

The hairs at the back of his neck stood up. His mouth was suddenly dry. Forming Wards quickly around him, Darcy turned to Richard. His cousin had a vague look on his face. Darcy quickly uttered a spell and watched as Richard's eyes cleared.

"I recognized his magic," he said in a whisper, even though the Wards blocked anyone from listening. "It is similar to the one I sensed on Sackville Street. Lord Scarsbrook used a Conjuring spell to influence us."

Richard blinked. "What does it mean?"

“It means Lord Scarsbrook was in that location, and he used magic there. He is worried that we have discovered something.”

“In that case,” said Richard, “We had better find a way to decamp without alerting Lord Scarsbrook.” He paused and grimaced. “Oh, and Darcy, I would strongly suggest avoiding the food that is brought to our room as well.”

CHAPTER 16



For the first time in her life, Lydia was truly frightened. She was usually good at getting out of bad situations, but how was she supposed to escape when she could hardly move? Mr. Smith had done something to her magic. Every time she tried to use it, Lydia felt so dizzy, she had to stop.

As they entered the inn, Lydia looked around her. The tap room was not very busy, but there was a group of officers in the corner. She would try to catch the eye of one of them to see if they could rescue her. As if guessing her thoughts, Mr. Smith took her arm and drew her closer.

“Don’t even think of calling out,” he said.

He led her to a private sitting room and knocked three times on the door.

“Who is it?”

“Mr. Smith.”

There was a moment’s silence. Lydia thought she could hear the rustling of paper. “I take it you have someone with you?”

“It’s a girl. A young mage.”

“Come in.”

Lydia shrank back. She had no idea what she would find inside. What if there was a group of uncouth men inside? Without her magic, she could not defend herself.

Mr. Smith gave her a little shove, propelling her into the room. There were seven people there, three ladies and four gentlemen. They all stared at her with hard faces. It was going to be difficult to convince any of them to help her escape. Still, she was good at twisting people around her little finger. She would find a way.

“Go on. Don’t be shy.”

She was relieved to see that the group occupying the private sitting room looked – at first glance – genteel. They were all sitting around the table, busy looking at some large architectural drawings and maps. They quickly rolled up the drawings and set them aside.

“Look what I found for you,” said Mr. Smith, looking very pleased with himself. “A powerful Elemental Mage – straight out of the Royal Academy. She set up a conflagration that can be detected for miles. And she is a blank slate. She was only acquired by the Academy a few days ago. Which means she had not been ruined by their training.”

They had to be Rogue mages then, thought Lydia, if they thought the Academy ruined magical training. Her heartbeat quickened. Maybe she could use this to her advantage. She

could convince them she hated *The Compendium*, and then they would unbind her magic.

A tall gentleman in his fifties was seated at the top of the table. He was holding a quill and was in the middle of writing something long, to judge by the number of pages. He looked her over dismissively.

“What use is an untrained mage to us? Did you think we are setting up a school for lost waifs?”

A younger man with a tall neck and a thin face cleared his throat. “Actually, yes. We talked about that. Well, not exactly that, but a magical school for commoners. Once everything is over.”

“Yes, well, we will discuss that matter when we reach that point. For now, we have a specific plan, and we have no time to waste on a raw recruit.”

He appeared to be the leader of the group. Certainly, he was the one who made the decisions.

“You are passing up the opportunity to enlist a powerful mage?” said Mr. Smith.

“How do you know she is a powerful mage?”

Mr. Smith shrugged. “She is the daughter of Thomas Bennet, of Longbourn. As you requested, I have been watching Longbourn to see if I could convince Thomas Bennet to join us. I have not had an opportunity to approach him yet. The house is heavily Warded, and I need an introduction to be admitted. I was planning to do so at the Meryton Assembly

last night, but he did not attend. However, I have found you someone better. Someone who will not need convincing.”

The leader examined her sharply. “Thomas Bennet’s *daughter?*” He slammed the quill he was holding splattering ink everywhere. “Why did you bring her here, you fool? Do you want to risk destroying our plans? You could have kept her locked up somewhere until this whole thing was over.”

Mr. Smith examined his nails. “Well, I did consider running off with her to Scotland. But I thought you might have a use for her first.”

“If she is such a strong mage as you claim, then I might keep her myself.”

“Finders, keepers,” said Mr. Smith.

Normally, she would have been happy to have gentlemen fighting over her. Under the circumstances, she felt more like a broodmare. She did not like the way they talked about her as if she wasn’t there.

“I intend to choose my own husband,” she said, defiantly.

They all stared at her. Their gazes seemed to be assessing what she was worth, and she was suddenly afraid.

“I hardly think you have any choice,” drawled the tall man. “It remains to be seen if you could be useful to our cause.”

“If I am not, will you let me go home?”

“Now that you know of our existence, I’m afraid that will be impossible.” He turned to Mr. Smith. “You should have

consulted me before bringing her here. She may be a liability if her magic is uncontrolled. If she is no use to us, we will have to get rid of her.”

Lydia stifled a gasp. What did ‘*get rid of her*’ mean? She broke out in a cold sweat. Everything had gone terribly wrong. Surely he did not mean to sound so ominous? It must be some kind of trick. He wanted to frighten her, that was all.

“I brought you a gift, and this is how you reward me?” Mr. Smith looked angry. Good. That might work in her favor. If he regretted bringing her here, he might be willing to help her escape.

“I have no time for this nonsense now, Wickham. I will think about it overnight and decide how she can be useful.”

Wickham? Well, she could not accuse him of lying. He had told her Mr. Smith was not his real name. So that was what those initials on his handkerchief stood for. ‘GW’. His first name had to be George.

Wickham looked daggers at the tall man. “I thought we were keeping our identities secret.”

“She is not going anywhere. Besides, we will very soon be beyond worrying about that.”

It all sounded very mysterious. She had no idea if he meant he would be getting *rid of her*, or if they meant to imprison her here. Lydia was tired, and she was hungry and she had other concerns.

“You promised you were going to order me some food when we reached the inn, Mr. Wickham.”

The tall mage raised his brow. “And now we are supposed to provide food as well, are we?”

Lydia looked at Wickham. He shrugged.

Meanwhile, the tall man had turned to the two ladies. “Mrs. Younge and Miss King, take this woman to your room and lock her up until we decide what we are going to do with her. And make sure she does not use any magic.”

Miss King was a plain young lady with lots of freckles. She stood up at once and took Lydia by the arm.

“Come with me.”

Lydia tried to use her magic to get away, but as soon as she tried, she started to feel dizzy. She could see stars swirling around in front of her, and she had to lean on Miss King to stop herself from sinking to the floor.



It turned out Lydia had to share a room with the two women. A trundle bed was set up for her. Her legs were trembling when she climbed into bed, but she did not know if it was the effect of the spell Wickham had cast or because of all the riding she did. The bed was not as comfortable as she was used to, but she did not care. She just wanted to sleep so she could pretend none of these terrible things had happened.

Tomorrow, when she woke up refreshed, she would be able to think more clearly.

As she started to settle into sleep, Mrs. Younge came and stood above her, crossing her arms and staring down at her with an intimidating expression. Compared to her, Miss Bingley was *nice*.

“I have set a spell on the door. If you try to run away while we’re sleeping, you will have an unpleasant surprise.”

Much as she would like to escape, Lydia was feeling too exhausted to try anything. She had always dreamed of going on an adventure, but this was nothing like she’d imagined an adventure would be. She wished Mrs. Younge would go away.

Besides, she couldn’t escape until Wickham removed that necklace. Whenever Lydia reached for the familiar magic, it wasn’t there. She knew that it had something to do with the necklace. No matter how much she tried to take it off, it always seemed to slip through her fingers.

What was she going to do? She needed her magic. She hated the dark, and she always set up Illusions of stars above her on the ceiling to help her sleep. They comforted her.

She would not give them the satisfaction of seeing her cry. She hid her face in her pillow so no one would hear her sobbing.

Somehow, she managed to fall asleep, though it seemed as if she had barely had any sleep when someone shook her awake.

“You need to get down and get ready,” said Mrs. Younge. “We are taking you to test your magic. We have to go before everyone is up and about.”

“What time is it?” She looked towards the window. It seemed too bright to be early.

“The hour just struck eight.”

Lydia snorted. Clearly these were city people. “In the countryside, most of the farmers are in the fields by six.”

Mrs. Younge made an impatient sound. “Just make sure she is dressed and ready to leave in half an hour.”

She spoke the words to release the spell on the door and went out, leaving Lydia with Miss King.

“Since when was I supposed to take orders from Mrs. Younge?” grumbled Miss King.

Lydia wondered if Miss King could be a potential ally if she tried to escape. At least she may be able to ask her for something.

“Will I be able to have something to drink before we leave?”

“There is food in the private sitting room downstairs.”

There were three mages downstairs when Lydia went down. They were talking quietly but stopped abruptly when she and Miss King entered. Lydia wished she had made an effort to listen to their conversation.

“How are our two young ladies doing today?” said a short, wide-shouldered gentleman with pale blue eyes and floppy

hair.

Lydia smiled at him. “Very well, thank you. It looks to be a pleasant day.”

She gave a very proper smile that Jane and Mary would be proud of. Lydia decided she was going to be on her best behavior, in case she had misunderstood the situation yesterday, and the rogue mages were not as bad as they had seemed.

The three mages nodded, but did not smile back. “Are you ready to do some magic?” said the one with the floppy hair.

That sounded positive. It meant they were going to take the necklace off. When they did, she would startle them with an Illusion spell and run away.

“I am always ready to do magic.”

Wickham showed up a few minutes later. “It’s time to leave,” he said to everyone. “Check your Illusions are in place.” He looked at Lydia. “You too. I need to do a Concealment spell to hide you. Stand still.”

She considered kicking him hard in the ankle and running away, but the others were outside, and she would not get far. Anyway, there was bound to be another chance, especially if they were distracted. She would keep a lookout, and when it happened, she would take it and get as far away from him as possible.



They took her to a field. There was a pit in the center where they had placed an object on a square stone. As Lydia came closer, the sun glinted on it. It looked like a needle. When they brought her closer, she realized it was a pin, with a pale stone set into it.

“Do you see this pin?” said the leader of the group. Lydia had thought he was imposing when she first saw him sitting at the table, but now she saw he was bent and scrawny. Almost fragile. She considered whether she could knock him down and run away, but she was surrounded. It would never work.

“Of course I can see it,” she said, sullenly.

“We want to test how accurate your magic is. If you stand over there next to Wickham—” he pointed to where Mr. Smith was standing at some distance “—do you think you could strike the moonstone with Elemental fire?”

“You want me to destroy it?”

There was snickering around her. She did not see what the joke was.

“I would certainly hope not. This is a very valuable jewel. You need not worry. I have built several spells around it. You cannot destroy it, no matter how much you try. And I want you to try as hard as you can. Throw all your magic into it. But you must focus on the pin. You do not want to set the whole field on fire.”

There was a gleam in his eye. He believed himself more powerful than anyone else.

“What if I do destroy it?” she said.

He gave her a superior smile. “You will not.”

“But if I did? What will you give me?”

“I will set you free. You can go wherever you like.”

She looked at him suspiciously. “On your word of honor?”

He looked amused. “On my word of honor as a gentleman.”

She nodded and strode over to where Wickham was standing. He was unsmiling. He did not meet her gaze.

“Ready?” said the leader.

“Ready.”

She gathered all her strength into her, building it up and making it grow bigger and bigger until it surrounded her. She had never tried to do this before, and part of her was afraid she would lose control because it was beyond anything she had ever done. It was her chance to be free, and she was not going to hold back anything. She would destroy the moonstone, and she would show them how strong her magic was.

Once she had gone as far as she could, she gathered everything together to form a fireball. It had to be a small one so it would only strike that one small area on the stone. She did not want to cause a fire again. She imagined a hollow globe, not much larger than an egg, and centered all her Elemental fire magic inside it. It was hard to squeeze it into such a small space, and she began to see stars in front of her eyes.

When she was certain she had done her best, she sent the ball tearing through the air towards the moonstone. She smiled in triumph, knowing that her strike would be stronger than anything she had ever done.

It remained to be seen what would happen to the moonstone. She waited anxiously for the moment the ball would land, crossing the fingers of both hands behind her back for good luck.

Just as her little globe reached the moonstone, the words of a spell reached her. Everyone around her was muttering the same spell. Instead of landing, the ball hovered just above the pin. A strange glow came out of the moonstone. It rose up to surround her fireball. As the fireball was swallowed up, she felt a tug pulling her forward like a rope. She struggled against it, but it held her tightly. Panicking, she looked at Wickham, but he was chanting with the others. He was helping them do this to her. She tried to resist the pull but her feet were rooted to the ground. Something was draining her magic.

She was angry now. They had deceived her. They had promised her a freedom they never intended to give her.

With all her remaining energy, she struck out, sending an Elemental flare towards the stone, putting everything she had into it. If they were going to destroy her, she would take the moonstone with her.



Lydia came to herself to find she was on the trundle bed in the same bedchamber as before. She felt drained, her body limp and her throat parched. She felt around her neck for the necklace that Wickham had used to control her, but it was not there. They had taken it off when they wanted her to cast a fireball. There was no one else in the room. They had left her alone.

She felt a surge of triumph. Had she destroyed the moonstone and won her freedom after all? Well, it would be simple enough to find out.

She pushed herself up and sat at the edge of the bed. It took her two tries to be able to stand. Her legs were unsteady and refused to carry her, but she was not concerned about that. She had used a lot of her magic, and it was to be expected that she would be weak.

Finally, she was able to walk to the door. She stopped in front of it, then put her hand out to open it. The knob turned, but the door did not open.

A crushing disappointment flooded through her. They had not set her free after all. She leaned her forehead against the door. The feel of the solid wood pushing against her skin brought her a moment of clarity. They had forgotten to put that necklace on, perhaps because she was knocked unconscious. But she was alone, and this was her chance to get away. She would unravel the spell on the door and walk out. She was good at undoing Wards. Surely a spell to keep her in was not that different.

She tried to reach out with the threads of her magic. It was something she did all the time, sometimes without thinking. The threads were like a snail's feelers. They helped her reach out for the magic around her.

Nothing happened. She frowned. She must be weaker than she thought because instead of the magic threads, there was – nothing. Unable to believe it, she tried again. And again. Still nothing.

Many minutes later, she slumped to the ground, dizzy and disoriented. She tried to use a few simple magic spells, spells someone with the barest amount of Talent could do. Nothing.

By now she was getting more and more dizzy. She crawled back to the trundle bed and lay on it, trying to work out what had happened.

The answer was staring her in the face. Somehow – she did not know how – they had stolen her magic.



She must have lost consciousness. She woke up, determined to escape. The first thing she did was try and light a candle. It was the simplest of spells. Practically anyone could do it. But no matter how long she stared at the candle and willed that little flame to come to life, nothing happened.

She had not imagined it, then. Her magic was gone. The Rogue mages had tricked her into sending her Elemental magic into the gemstone.

A wave of misery struck her. She had nothing now, nothing at all. Her life was destroyed. She could never join the Academy without magic. And no one would ever marry her, because she was ruined.

She had been so foolish. Elizabeth had warned her not to be foolish. If only Lydia had heeded her! Now it was too late. If only Lord Redmond and his friends had been kinder to her! If only they had not laughed at her and made her ashamed! Then she would not have run off to the Meryton Assembly, and she would not be in such a terrible fix.

She missed Mama. Mama was annoying, but she at least always took her side. As she thought of Longbourn, a powerful feeling of homesickness struck her. It made her stomach hurt. She would give anything to be back there now, quarrelling with her sister Kitty when she stole her clothes. She would even be happy to listen to her sister Mary's dreadful piano practice. Mary worked so hard on it, poor thing. She suddenly admired her sister's persistence, even though Papa always made fun of Mary's playing.

Papa made fun of Lydia, too. He called her and Kitty the silliest girls in England. But Lydia wasn't silly. Not really. There was nothing to do in Meryton. They saw the same old boring people over and over again. She was desperate to go somewhere else.

And now she couldn't stay in Meryton even if she wanted to. Everyone shunned her because of the barn. It was all they thought about when they saw her. The apprentices at

Netherfield knew about it as well. They mocked her because she had lost control of her magic.

She knew it was bad of her to burn down the barn. Of course it was not deliberate. She would never deliberately destroy something that belonged to her friends. But she had not lost control, either. She didn't like Anthony Lucas. He had tried to kiss her in the barn, and her temper had exploded. Then the hay caught fire.

She had started a fire in the field today too. She remembered now. Her clothes and hair and skin all stank of burning, and she didn't know if she would ever be able to wash the smell away.

CHAPTER 17



The Crown Inn was located near the small village of Hornsey, halfway between Meryton and London. Mr. Bennet estimated that it would take them less than two hours to get there.

At the beginning of their journey, as they made their way through the London crowds, they talked about how best to find out if Lydia was in the inn or if she had left. The plan was for Mr. Bennet to sneak upstairs and examine the bedchambers to see if he could find out where Lydia had been. If he could discover the number of the bedchamber she was in, he could ask more specific questions about who had stayed there. Mary would ‘accidentally’ go into one of the private sitting rooms and see if she recognized anyone there. Meanwhile, Elizabeth could comb the area around the inn to see if she could determine which direction Lydia had gone after staying at the inn. It was a simple plan, but it was the best they could come up with at this point.

As soon as they left Town, Elizabeth paid particular attention to see if she could pick up any trace of Lydia's magic, but she did not find the smallest whiff. It was possible that Lydia and her companion were avoiding the main road. It would be impossible to tell, unless she found something new.

"Do you think the man she left with may have French connections?" Since Mary could not do anything beyond keeping a general lookout, she wanted to talk.

"We cannot dismiss any possibilities," said Mr. Bennet.

"Do you think Lydia did something improper?" From the perturbed tone of her voice, it was clear that Mary considered this a worse fate than being captured by French mages.

"Hush!" Mr. Bennet snapped. "I am trying to concentrate on finding Lydia."

Mary slumped back into the squabs sullenly. Papa had hurt her feelings. Elizabeth sent her sister a smile and reached over to squeeze her hand. Mary was appeased enough to smile back, but she continued to sulk whenever she looked in Papa's direction. Papa was always impatient with Mary. When this was over, Elizabeth would have to talk to him about it.

"We are drawing closer," said Mr. Bennet. "This is where we have to pay particularly close attention to see if we can track the direction of her movement."

Mr. Bennet had been careful to hire a carriage, in case the ostlers recognized the one he had used earlier.

Try as she might, Elizabeth could not sense any sign of Lydia's presence. "They might not have gone south," she said.

"I searched in every direction, but there was nothing. That is why I needed you to come."

He was looking bone-weary. Elizabeth wondered if he had managed to have some sleep.

As soon as they reached the Crown Inn, Elizabeth immediately picked up Lydia's magic traces.

"I can feel her magic. It is strangely muted, but there is no doubt it is hers."

Mr. Bennet's shoulders sagged in relief. "I am glad I was not imagining it."

Their carriage passed through the stone archway and into the courtyard. Mr. Bennet descended first and entered the inn. A few minutes later, Mary stepped down. Then, once her sister had disappeared into the building, Elizabeth made her way back through the archway and skirted the building until she stood at the back of it.

Lydia had been here. Elizabeth could see what Papa meant about how hard it was to discern Lydia's magic. It felt hazy, as if surrounded by a dense mist. Normally, Elizabeth would have stayed in one place and sent out tendrils in search of the traces, but because they were so faint, she had to come close enough to find them. The only way to do so was to explore the area on foot.

There had to be signs somewhere, leading away from the inn, unless Lydia was still inside. Or unless she had been carried away unconscious. Her mind shied away from that prospect. She refused to believe it had come to that.

She walked along the small road that led north, away from the inn. It was not long before she found a small burst of Lydia's magic. She must have cast a spell, but the magic was already fading, which meant it had happened some time ago, most likely on the first night of her journey. Could she have gone back the same way she came? Was it possible she had escaped and was on her way to Longbourn? It would certainly account for the lack of other trails. Elizabeth tried to find evidence of more recent magical activity, but there was none. She reluctantly concluded that it was very unlikely Lydia had retraced her steps.

There was other magic there, too, magic that felt muffled and erased, the boundaries of it unclear. This had to be the mysterious man from the inn. It felt similar, but like Lydia's, it was already fading, and it was hard to be certain.

Satisfied that there was nothing more to be discovered along this road, Elizabeth returned to the inn to seek out different directions.

To start with, Elizabeth went around in a full circle, but she did not manage to pick up a trail. She was hampered by the necessity of Concealing her own magic. She was also forced to keep an eye on her surroundings, aware that the longer she

loitered, the more likely it would be she would be spotted. She had to be prepared to react in case she was attacked.

By now, the sun was setting. Elizabeth persisted, moving faster. She was not going to give up until she really had to. Once it was fully dark, it would be unsafe for her to use a lantern.

Then suddenly, as sunset transformed into twilight, she picked up something. She sprinted forward until she reached a large open space with a stone in the middle. The ground around the stone was scorched. Grass, plants and roots were shrivelled and blackened in a wide circle. Elizabeth's heartbeat drummed in her ears, relief warring with alarm as Lydia's magic became apparent all around her.

Her sister had been here as recently as the early morning, but what had Lydia done?

Elizabeth had been concentrating too hard on Lydia's magic. Now she frowned as she realized it was not the only magic in the air. She counted at least five signatures, maybe six. But before she had time to examine them further, there was a rush of heat, coming at her from all directions. Powerful magic that was different from anything she had encountered. The magic came at her from all sides, hemming her in as she tried to run. There was a flare, then an explosion. Elizabeth stumbled in the darkness, tripped over the branch of a tree, and fell forward, hitting her head.

She plunged into darkness.



It was dark all around her when Elizabeth awakened. She sat up, but her head was swimming and everything hurt. She lay back down again.

A figure was coming towards her through the darkness. Elizabeth prepared to fight, ignoring the ringing in her head, and started to mutter the words of a Warding spell. Her tongue was tight and sluggish.

“Oh, Lizzy, you are awake!” said Mary, kneeling down next to her. “I was beside myself with worry.”

Elizabeth sank back down in relief. No one was going to attack her. At least for now.

She struggled to remember why she was there. “What happened?”

“You tripped and fell into some kind of a hole. It was in the middle of a field. It is lucky that I found you when I did. I managed to pull you out and drag you out of the way just in time. There were some people searching, but I was able to hide you in the bushes. I am sorry if you are feeling crushed, but I sat on top of you. I was not sure if my lack of magic could hide yours, but I thought it was better to risk it than not. It seemed to have worked since they did not come this way at all.”

Elizabeth’s head was still spinning, and she could barely follow her sister’s words. She tried to focus her muddled

thoughts, but it was hard to concentrate. Who on earth was Mary talking about? Elizabeth remembered a flash of magic. It seemed to have addled her brain.

“Where is Papa?”

“Our plan failed miserably, Lizzy. Papa has been captured. I don’t know where he is.”

The words were like a splash of cold water. If Papa was in danger, then they had to do something at once. She wished she had not decided to do this alone. But how could she have known they would be facing six mages and not a single seducer? And that Mr. Bennet would be captured immediately?

“Wait, Mary, slow down. Tell me everything. Don’t hold back any detail, no matter how insignificant it seems. It may be important.”

Mary nodded. “Well, we walked into the taproom, and there were about fifteen people there. Or maybe sixteen. I don’t know if any of them were mages. Some of them were eating ___”

Elizabeth sighed. This story was going to take a long time, especially now that Elizabeth had asked Mary not to leave anything out. Mary tended to dwell on details in the best of times. In this case, perhaps there might be something useful to be discovered, but Elizabeth would have to sift carefully through everything.

In any case, Elizabeth was not going anywhere soon. She was still feeling as if her head was stuffed with wool, and she was not completely sure her legs would hold her up if she stood. She had been blasted with a strong dose of magic, but oddly enough, as she examined it, she felt that Lydia's magic was there as well.

“Are you even listening, Lizzy? There is no point in me telling you everything when you are not even paying attention.”

She decided to ask her own questions. “Are you certain there were six mages looking for me when I fell?”

“I think there may be more of them, because I heard someone else talking, but I only counted six. One of them was the man I saw with Lydia.”

Ah. So they had found him. “He is here, then. Which means Lydia should still be here as well.”

“Still?” Mary was quick to pick that up.

Elizabeth quickly explained what she had discovered.

“Do you think Lydia set the fire?”

“I have no idea. Why would she start a fire in the middle of a field?”

“They may be training her for something.”

Elizabeth mulled this over. Things looked very different now than they had when they first arrived. Whoever the man was who convinced Lydia to go with him, he must have been after

her magic if he had brought her to these mages. The question was, why?

“Did you overhear what they were saying, Mary?”

“They said there had been a strange flare.” She frowned in concentration. “They said it must have been an echo of the girl’s magic. I think they meant Lydia. I can’t think of anything else. The main thing is they don’t know you’re here. I don’t know if it was because I hid your magic, or whether the other magic overshadowed yours.”

“In either case, I’m very grateful to you, Mary. You saved the day.”

A rare smile lit up Mary’s face. “I am glad I could be of use after all.” The smile disappeared as quickly as it had appeared. “I felt so helpless when I couldn’t do anything when Papa was taken away. You cannot imagine how much I wished I could cast a spell at that moment.”

“If you were able to, you would have been no match against so many mages. They captured Papa, after all. They would have captured you, too. If they had, you could not have saved me.”

Her words cheered Mary up. “Very true. I suppose it is just as well. Though I cannot imagine how they managed to overpower Papa so easily. I don’t understand it.”

“I don’t understand it either,” said Elizabeth. “I am convinced we are dealing with Rogue mages. That flash of magic felt different to me from anything I have encountered

before. Papa may have been unable to resist whatever spell they used against him.”

“So what are we going to do, Lizzy?”

Since Elizabeth had joined the Royal Mages, she had come to trust her instincts. At this point, they were screaming at her not to do anything hasty. Were it not for Mary, she might have fallen into the hands of those mages, and there was no knowing what that would have led to. She desperately wanted to charge in and free Papa and Lydia, if she was there. But to take the chance of being captured as a Janus mage and used by a group of Rogue mages was to put the whole Kingdom in peril. What if they handed them all to Napoleon?

She had to be practical. In any case, it would be foolish to act until her head was clearer. For now, they were stuck in the dark, with no means of escape. This is what Darcy had worried about. There was no one who could help her.

She reached a decision. “Darcy will be coming for us eventually. We agreed that if I did not return tonight, he would come looking for us. If Lydia is still at the inn – which is very likely – then we can keep an eye out to make sure she is not taken elsewhere, but we cannot do anything else. I cannot act alone, and neither can you. I have often been called foolhardy, but this time I will not take any risks. We do not know what these mages are up to, nor what they are capable of. I would rather not confront them without the help of another strong mage.”

“I am sorry that I cannot do more.”

“Nonsense,” said Elizabeth. “You have already done many things, and now you can do one more. You will have to send a message to Darcy at Carlton House.”

“But how am I supposed to get hold of the implements to write? Everyone will notice me if I march up to the innkeeper and ask for ink and paper.”

Elizabeth’s shoulders drooped. “Very true.” She considered the matter. “I am sure if we put our heads together, we can come up with a way. We just need to give it some thought, that’s all.”

Elizabeth could never have imagined when she promised Darcy she would send for him if she needed him that it was nearly impossible to do so. It took them some time, but in the end, they came up with a plan.

The first thing was to find out when the next coach was coming that way. Unlike many of the posting inns on the main road, where coaches arrived at all hours, this was a quiet inn, and stagecoaches were very infrequent. Their plan was to bribe one of the stable boys to obtain what they needed while the innkeeper was busy with the passengers, then buy his silence. They would send the letter with the coachman, who regularly carried packages and letters.

The execution proved more challenging. Mary could not simply walk up to the stables. It was nighttime, and the presence of a young lady alone would immediately draw attention. Elizabeth was too weak to set up an elaborate illusion. It was not her Talent, and using Illusion spells was

very taxing. She was able to provide a temporary disguise for Mary as a young gentleman, but Mary was barely able to ask when the next stagecoach was coming before the Illusion began dissolving, and she had to make a quick escape.

She returned with the bad news that the next stagecoach was not due to come through until ten o'clock the next morning. They were forced to abandon their plan.

“Fortunately, we know that Darcy will be coming. We don’t know when. He cannot travel by night if there is no moonlight, so we cannot expect him until the morning.”

“If only there is something else I can do. I would like to be useful.”

“You have done remarkably well so far, and you have already proven that you are very useful, and I have no doubt you will do it again. At least we now know we cannot send a letter until morning. I will need your help again if Darcy does not arrive by morning.”

Mary nodded, looking pleased. Mary rarely received any praise, yet she was the one that never caused any trouble. Elizabeth felt sorry that she had not valued her sister more. She reached out to take Mary’s hand.

Mary looked surprised, but she did not try to draw back. “What do we do now?”

“We have to take it in turns to catch some sleep, with one of us acting as a lookout, and the two of us keeping each other warm.”

Mary settled down next to Elizabeth. They sat side to side on the moss, their backs against a tree.

“I wish I had something to read,” said Mary. “Along with a candle, of course.”

“I wish I had something to eat,” said Elizabeth. “Along with a fire.”

They smiled at each other, knowing none of those wishes could come true.

CHAPTER 18



Locked and forgotten in her room, Lydia cried for the loss of her magic. For the loss of her chance at being a Royal Mage. For losing her dowry. For ruining her reputation and losing the chance of finding a good husband. She was worth nothing now. Nothing.

She must have fallen asleep because the sound of the leader talking with the other mages woke her up. The private sitting room must be right beneath her. She could hear their voices, but not well enough without magic. She wanted to know what they were planning to do with her.

Without thinking, still half-asleep, she tried to hear them more clearly using her listening magic. She had often used it when Papa and Mama argued about what to do with her. That is why she knew Papa did not want to send her to an Academy if he could help it.

Her magic senses encountered a privacy bubble, but Wards had never held her out. To her utter delight, she realized that

they had taken her Elemental magic, but she still had remnants of her other Talent.

“What was that?” said one of the mages. “I felt some magic stirring.”

Lydia withdrew quickly, her pulse racing. She could not let them know that she had any magic left. Carefully, very slowly, she wrapped the strands of magic in a bubble of their own, cushioning them from view, making them invisible.

It took her a while. By the time she achieved it, she was bathed in sweat. Magic had always come easily to her. Now it was a struggle trying to do something she could have done in her sleep. But finally, she was satisfied.

Cautiously, she reached out with the threads of magic. They had strengthened the Wards surrounding them, but she could still slide her way in through the tiny gaps. People always thought Wards were solid, but no matter how close the threads were, there were always tiny spaces between them. As far as she knew, she was the only one who knew how to find those spaces, apart from Elizabeth.

Carefully, she made her magic seep in, like smoke.

“With the moonstone keeping the Prince Regent in check, no one will notice that anything has changed. Lord Scarsbrook has things well in hand. If people suspect anything, they will think the Prince takes after his father. But if we remove the Prince Regent, everyone will know we have taken control. Killing the King alone is a simpler and more elegant solution. No one will miss him anyway.”

Lydia struggled to make sense of what she was hearing. Were they actually talking about – killing the king?

“I strongly object to killing His Majesty. It is treason,” said Miss King. “I want to abolish the monarchy and establish a more equal society that includes all mages, whatever their origin, but I think the king should be banished, not killed.”

“And allow history to repeat itself? The last time a king went into exile – Charles II – he returned after only nine years. We cannot afford to be lax. No one likes the Prince Regent now, but if the King is sent into exile, the people will rally around the Prince Regent. We cannot have that.”

A chair scraped against the floor. “I cannot be part of this. I will not agree to commit treason.”

“Are you certain you want to abandon the cause just as our plans are about to come to fruition? If you cannot fall in with us, Miss King, we shall have to get rid of you. You know too much. You and the Bennet girl. She has fulfilled her purpose, and you are no longer useful to us.”

“This is not what we agreed on when you invited me to join the group after my father’s death. We talked about changing the rules and establishing an Academy that was open to everyone with Talent, regardless of their bloodlines. That is what my father wanted.”

“We cannot change things unless we remove those at the top. We are not the French Revolution, but we cannot avoid bloodshed, either. With the King gone, and the Prince Regent under our thumb, we control the Court and we control the

Royal Academy. It is simple. I am sorry we cannot agree. Does anyone else have objections to the plan?"

There was a long silence. No one was willing to question their leader.

"In that case, Mrs. Younge, take Miss King to the bedchamber and tie her up. Put a necklace on her and cast a spell on it so she can no longer access her magic."

Lydia sprang to her feet at once, her pulse beating frantically. Here was the opportunity she had been waiting for. If they were bringing Miss King here, and Miss King still possessed her magic, there was a chance the two of them could escape together.

She had only seconds to come up with a plan. She had been planning to escape through the window for some time, but, at two floors up, it was too far of a drop. When Mrs. Younge brought Miss King to the room, she would have to undo the spell on the door that stopped Lydia from leaving. As long as the door stayed open, Lydia could get away.

The first thing was to stop Mrs. Younge from controlling Miss King's magic.

She looked wildly around the room for an object to use to hit Mrs. Younge on the head. There was a vase on the mantelpiece. Lydia ran to fetch it and hid behind the door.

Footsteps approached. The door opened. Lydia peered through the small gap in the door to make sure she did not hit Miss King by mistake. Mrs. Younge was behind Miss King,

nudging her forward with a hand between her shoulder blades. Lydia squeezed back against the wall, holding her breath, her heart thundering in her ears.

Lydia waited until Miss King had entered the room. As soon as she caught a glimpse of Mrs. Younge's orange gown, she sprang from behind the door. She raised the vase as high as she could and brought it down hard onto Mrs. Younge's head.

Mrs. Younge fell to the floor with a loud thud. Lydia winced. Surely everyone in the building had heard it. There was not a moment to be lost.

Lydia took hold of the stunned Miss King's hand and pulled her down the hallway. She needed Miss King to help her retrieve her magic from the jewel.

“What are you doing?”

“Do you want to die?” said Lydia. “If they heard the thud, they will be after us any minute.”

Miss King looked frightened, and for a moment Lydia considered abandoning her. She would worry about getting her magic back later. But then Miss King took a deep breath.

“We can't go in that direction. That is where they are holding their meeting. We will run straight into them. We had better take the servants' stairs.”

She began to walk quickly. Lydia followed impatiently. The window was the better idea. She wished she had stripped the sheets off the bed and made a rope of them instead of wasting time sobbing and feeling sorry for herself.

Footsteps sounded on the stairs. Lydia looked back. The mages had reached the landing.

“Run!” she said with a desperate cry.

“Lydia, is that you?”

It was Papa’s voice.

“Papa?”

“Can you open the door?”

Lydia stopped and rattled the door handle. It was locked. She did not have the key, and the Rogue mages were upon her. She could not help Papa now. If she could get away and alert the innkeeper that her father was imprisoned, he would help her. The important thing now was to get away. She would have to come back for Papa once she got some help.

She was about to tell him that, when a surge of Elemental wind came roaring after her. If she did not get behind a door, she would be knocked down. She sprang through the servants’ door and closed it behind her as a loud blow tore one of the hinges. She picked up her skirts. If she took the stairs one at a time, she would never get away. Instead, she slid down the bannisters as she used to do when she was younger at Longbourn. Luckily, the banisters were smooth, and her dress did not snag. She was showing an improper amount of leg, but there was no one to see her except Miss King, who squeezed back against the wall to let her pass.

The door crashed open. She did not look up. She would not let herself be captured again. She had to get away.

“Help!” she cried. “Somebody help! They are going to kill me.”

Surely someone would hear her.

Someone appeared – the innkeeper’s wife. Lydia sobbed in relief.

“Oh, thank goodness!” she said. “You have to help me get away. Tell the innkeeper—”

“Stop right there, young lady.” The innkeeper’s wife advanced threateningly towards her. “Your husband warned us you might try to run away to go to your lover.”

“What husband?” Lydia cried in disbelief. “I don’t have a husband. He’s lying.”

“Come on,” said Miss King, catching up with her. “They’re under a spell. You won’t get any help from them.”

If she had tried to escape by herself, Lydia now realized, they would have caught her.

“If we make it to the stables, I have horses there. I suppose you can ride.”

Lydia’s thighs were still sore and chaffed, but she would do anything to escape. “I can ride. Anything to get us out of here.”

“Wait here,” said Miss King. “If they see you, they might stop us, but no one will question my right to be here. Come to think of it, how did you know I was in trouble?”

Lydia thought quickly. She had learnt her lesson about trusting people blindly.

“I was planning to hit both of you, but when I saw Mrs. Younge pushing you, I knew something bad had happened.”

Miss King nodded. “Well, I’m glad you came to my aid. I will have the horses saddled and we will be out of here in a few minutes. I’ll meet you behind the building.”

Lydia nodded and watched as Miss King strolled confidently across the courtyard. She handed a coin to the ostler. Satisfied, Lydia began to edge her way to the back of the courtyard and the small path that led outside.

“Oi, there – stop that girl from getting away!”

Lydia looked towards the stable in despair, thinking that they were going to stop Miss King. But the ostlers stopped everything they were doing and started to converge on Lydia.

“Miss King!” she said. “Please hurry.”

From where she was standing, Lydia could see Miss King stepping up to the mounting block and settling onto the side-saddle. As the horse began to move, Lydia ran towards it. Miss King made her way into the courtyard, heading for the archway.

“Miss King, I’m here.”

“I can’t stop. I’ll be caught. I am truly sorry.”

The horse picked up speed, forcing the ostlers to step back and scatter.

Lydia began to run as fast as she could, thankful that Elizabeth had often forced her to walk quickly. The ostlers came after her, their footsteps pounding behind her. Knowing that if she was caught there would be no mercy, she kept running even as her lungs began to burn with the effort.

“Lydia.”

A man stepped out of the tress. It was Wickham.

“No!” She ran wildly onward towards a thick group of trees.

“Stop. I am not trying to take you back to them. I’ll help you get away. You don’t have to be afraid of me.”

And just like that, she was caught. Wickham took hold of her arm roughly and pulled her into the cover of the trees.

“You are worth a large sum of money to me, Lydia. I have no intention of letting you get away.”

She desperately wanted to use whatever magic she still possessed, but she knew what would happen if she tried, and she did not want to faint and be at the mercy of Wickham again.

She let out the tiniest thread of magic, just as she had sent the tendrils to listen to the rebel mages. She already knew they would not find her.

“Oh, I should not have used my magic. I am going to fall,” she said, raising her hand to her brow and swooning straight into his arms.

“Don’t expect me to carry you!” He let out an irritated grunt and lowered her none too gently onto the ground. “Darcy will just have to come here to find you.”

Darcy? Was Mr. Darcy here? Lydia jumped up at once. “Are you taking me to him?”

“You’ve recovered, have you?” said Wickham. “I knew you were feigning it. Come on before they catch up.”

As they emerged from the cluster of trees, a calloused hand appeared out of nowhere and clamped around her wrist.

“Not so fast,” growled a voice. “The master asked me to bring you back, and that’s what I intend to do.”

The hand belonged to a large, burly man. He was grinning, showing a missing tooth. He pulled at Lydia’s arm so hard, it almost wrenched her shoulder. She tried to dig her feet in, but he was too strong.

“You might want to reconsider that,” said Wickham.

The man’s hand tightened. “I don’t think so.” He turned to Lydia. “Do you want to come genteel-like, or do you want me to throw you over my shoulder?”

“You will let go of her at once,” said Wickham, speaking the words of a spell. A stick flew out from amongst the trees and struck him on the head, knocking him down.

Lydia looked at the man on the ground.

“You killed him,” she said, with horror.

“So what if I did? You wanted to be free, didn’t you? You should be thanking me for helping you.” The man on the ground gave a faint moan. “Come along. He’s not even dead.”

She rubbed the bruises that were forming around her wrist.

“I’m not going anywhere with you. I’m not making the same mistake twice.” Lydia folded her arms in front of her and stared at him defiantly. “How do I know you’re taking me to Mr. Darcy?”

“You can come with me, or you could go with the next ruffian who comes in this direction. You know what they say about the devil you know? I think I’m the better choice, don’t you think?” Wickham’s smile tipped into a sneer.

As she hesitated, he took her arm. “I am going to hide you until I work out some things. I would advise you not to scream. You will only bring the other mages to you. Sit down right here. Hurry. We don’t have all day.”

He patted the ground. She sat down, holding onto the hope that he might be speaking the truth for once.

“Can I trust you to stay here, or will you make a run from it?”

She did not answer.

“I am sorry, but you are leaving me with little choice.”

Muttering a few words, he bent the branches so they wrapped around her, forming a cage. The branches scratched her skin as she fought against them, making her bleed.

“Wait here. I’m going to see if the coast is clear. But I warn you, if you mess up my plan, you will suffer the consequences.”

CHAPTER 19



The food trays that had been brought to them had been left untouched, and the food had gone cold. Despite his earlier advice that they should not eat from them, Richard was eyeing the trays with a hungry look.

“I could try a small bite of the food. If I do not come to any harm, we will know that it is safe.”

“You were the one who came up with the idea in the first place,” said Darcy.

“So you believe it is safe?”

“It is not *unsafe*,” said Darcy. “But it may be laced with a sleeping draft, intended to keep us in our rooms.”

“So what are we supposed to do? Stay here until we starve to death?”

Darcy gave his cousin a contemptuous look. “For a military man, you are very fastidious. Are you incapable of missing a meal for once?”

“May I remind you that it is not *one* meal that we have missed? *I* have eaten nothing since breakfast, and I am parched.”

“If you are so worried about starving to death, why don’t you go to the barracks and unearth some food?”

“Will you come with me?”

Darcy shook his head. “I prefer to stay here, in case a message arrives from Elizabeth.”

Richard sent him a pitying look. “I will find you some food, Cousin, if you will agree not to spend your time moping and imagining the worst.”

“I am not moping,” said Darcy. “I am waiting. That is very different.”

“Waiting in a *moping manner*,” said Richard. “Mayhap a full stomach will give you a better perspective on things. I will return with food as soon as I can.”

“Mayhap I can have some peace while you are gone,” said Darcy, through his teeth.

As soon as his cousin left, however, Darcy relapsed into brooding. It was the first time he had been away from Elizabeth since they had moved to Netherfield. He missed her. It had only been a few hours, but he was used to feeling her magic everywhere. Now that the thread of magic connecting them was gone, everything felt hollow. He had never felt as alone as he did now.

He expected a knock at the door any minute to announce her return. Every time he heard a sound outside, he rose in anticipation. As the night advanced, however, he was forced to accept that she would not be coming. His longing to see her was replaced by worry.

When finally the knock came, it was Richard, not Elizabeth, who appeared at the door. He had managed to bring them some cold pie, along with a bottle of brandy, and was making a show of being happily drunk to the footman by the door.

“Pleased to see me, Darcy?” said Richard, snickering at the look of disappointment on Darcy’s face.

“It is no laughing matter.” Darcy snapped the door shut and set up a Ward. “Elizabeth has not returned or sent a message. That means there is something wrong. We need to join her.”

“Or it may mean this is not a good night for traveling through country roads. Have you looked out of the window? There is no moon, and it is pitch dark in the middle of the countryside. Have you considered that?”

“I have. It is the very reason I am not riding post-haste to that inn at this very moment. But what if she’s in trouble? Are you willing to live with being wrong?”

Richard exhaled forcefully. “I am not. You’re right. Better to be safe than sorry.”

Darcy gave a quick nod and turned his attention to practical matters. “I think your earlier suggestion of decamping is a

good one. We could go to the Darcy Townhouse and leave early in the morning.”

“A welcome suggestion. I do not like it here, Darcy. Those footmen out there are watching every single move we make. I have a feeling that if we try to leave, they will prevent us. You may have to use magic to get us out. There is no other way.”

“There is another way,” said Darcy. “Your little show out there gave me an idea. I do not know if it will work, but it is worth a try. We cannot leave just yet, but we can set the stage. I cannot risk having Elizabeth arriving when we have already left. It would mean leaving her alone here to deal with Lord Scarsbrook, and that is something I will not do.”

Richard observed him solemnly. “Very well, let us plan to leave after midnight. Meanwhile, you can tell me how you intend to get us out of here.”



It was a simple plan, and to their astonishment, it worked. It consisted of pretending to become increasingly drunk and noisy as the night went on, sending the footmen outside their door for more brandy every twenty minutes, and growing more and more boisterous. Rather than staying quietly in their bedchamber, they kept coming in and out, opening and slamming the door, wandering around drunkenly, and singing at the top of their voices. It was a testament to some of the Prince’s more unruly gatherings that the footmen did not question the amount of brandy the two were gulping down.

By the time Darcy and Richard judged themselves ready to make their escape, the footmen were utterly exasperated with herding them back in and running down to the cellar to fetch them more drink. So when Richard announced that he was bored and that there were far better amusements to be had in the barracks, the footmen were glad to see the last of them. Richard brought one bottle with him and they made their way together out of the building and down to where the officers were quartered.

They made an exhibition of fumbling with the keys to get into Richard's room, laughing and talking loudly so that they would be seen to enter. Once there, they continued with the same charade until one of the commanding officers arrived and ordered them to be quiet.

An hour later, they were at the Darcy Townhouse, ringing the doorbell.

A sleepy butler emerged in his night clothes, peering suspiciously out of a half-open door.

"I just wanted to be sure it was you, Mr. Darcy. And the colonel. The Wards would not have allowed you so close otherwise, but you never know. And you have not been here for such a long time."

"I know. It was not by choice, I can assure you," said Darcy stepping into the house. It was good to be in a familiar place. "How are you these days?"

"Well enough, sir," said the butler, taking their hats and coats. "Will you be staying long with us?"

“I do not know. All I can tell you is I am leaving at the crack of dawn. This means we will need horses brought from the stables. The fastest I have. We have an urgent mission to fulfil.”



He barely slept, his mind cluttered with uneasy images. Where was Elizabeth now, and what was she doing? He was glad when a footman knocked at his door and told him the horses were ready. He was eager to set out. Having to submit to the customary rituals to maintain his appearance tried his patience. Bath, shaving, clothes. He just wanted to be on his way.

Then finally they were on their way.

“What a waste of good brandy yesterday, pouring it all out of the window,” said Richard. “It is a crime. If I could have found a way to bring those bottles with me, I would have.”

Darcy chuckled. “It might have aroused their suspicion if you had emerged carrying six full bottles. Though how they could have thought we would drink so much without collapsing, I cannot imagine.”

They were forced to fall silent as they left London behind and picked up speed, the sound of galloping hooves accompanying Darcy’s thoughts. It seemed to take forever before they finally saw the signs for the village of Hornsey, followed by the welcome sight of the sign bearing the name The Crown Inn in gold letters.

They stopped just before the inn for Darcy to Conceal his magic, and then clattered through the archway into the stable yard.

“Psst. Mr. Darcy.”

Elizabeth’s sister Mary was concealed behind a barrel. “Mr. Darcy. I am very glad to see you here.” He went towards her in alarm. She slipped out from behind the barrel and indicated for him and Richard to follow her, her finger on her lips.

She walked for some way until they were out in the fields. He looked around for Elizabeth but saw nothing but a burned area and cows grazing. Finally, Mary stopped and turned to them.

The questions poured out of him like a torrent. “Where is Elizabeth? Is she injured? Why is she not with you? What has happened?”

She curtsied. “Elizabeth is safe, Mr. Darcy. Nothing to worry about. Just winded from a blow she received when she fell. I will take you to see her. She is there, hidden amongst the trees.”

Darcy’s mind was racing. *Injured? Fell? Blow?* Ominous words indeed. Had there been a battle? Just how injured was she? And where was Mr. Bennet?

She was sitting on the ground under a tree. When she saw him, she leapt up, her face lighting in a smile that went like an arrow to his heart and sent him soaring with joy. She was alive, and well, and all his fears had come to nothing. He went

straight over to her and clutched her hand, peering into her eyes.

“I was worried when I did not hear from you, my love.” He whispered the words, aware of the people around them.

“We had no means of writing you a note,” she said. “We spent the night outdoors.”

His joy turned to concern that they had been exposed to the October night, but both Elizabeth and Mary assured him they had not been cold.

They all sat down on the ground on a blanket of yellow leaves since there was nowhere else to sit while Elizabeth and Mary took turns recounting all that had happened since they arrived.

“So there are a whole group of Rogue mages at the inn? And they have captured both Mr. Bennet and Lydia?”

“I would say that is a good summary,” said Elizabeth, with that impish smile of hers. At least this whole debacle had not reduced her propensity to laugh.

He laughed with her, because she was safe and her spirits were uncrushed, even if the situation was frankly alarming. A group of Rogue mages gathering at an obscure inn in the middle of the countryside was a matter of serious concern, especially after major events had happened that involved unknown mages.

“Now that you are here,” announced Mary, standing up and brushing yellow leaves from her clothes, “you can stay with

Lizzy, and I will go to the inn to look for Lydia and Papa.”

“We did not come all the way here to sit under the trees while you take all the risks.”

“Someone has to go in and look for Lydia and Papa,” said Mary, obstinately.

“It is too risky, Mary. If they remember you from yesterday, they will be suspicious. We don’t want you disappearing as well.”

“We need some food as well. Elizabeth needs to get back her strength,” Mary responded, sounding practical. “Something warm, so we do not catch a chill.”

Now *that* was something Darcy could easily manage. There was a village nearby.

He gave Elizabeth and her sister a swift smile. “Give me a few minutes and I will have something for you.”



As he went through the archway back into the yard and handed his horse to the ostler, Darcy spotted a man moving in a clandestine manner behind the stables, looking in his direction. Darcy did not recognize him. He could have sworn he had never seen him in his life. Yet despite the evidence of his eyes, Darcy would have known him anywhere. His magic signature was muted, but it blazed in Darcy’s mind. Wickham.

Darcy considered retrieving his horse and riding away, but he knew already it was too late. His own magic signature had to be just as obvious to someone who had grown up with him, despite the Wards he had set up around himself. And it was very likely his signature led straight to Elizabeth.

He had no choice but to talk to him, but not here, in full view of the inn. Darcy walked slowly away, confident that Wickham would follow him. When they were some distance from the inn, he heard quiet footsteps behind him. He smiled grimly and turned.

“Well, well, if it isn’t my childhood friend. Mr. Fitzwilliam Darcy. The great mage himself.”

“Wickham. What are you doing here?”

“Traveling,” said Wickham, narrowing his eyes as he tried to work out what Darcy was doing there. “I can ask the same of you. I saw you coming in earlier, and I could not believe my good luck, but then you went away, and I thought I had lost the chance to talk to you. But here you are, and all is well. What a coincidence that we are meeting each other like this, at such an out-of-the-way inn.”

“I don’t believe in coincidences.” Darcy knew Wickham liked to play cat and mouse, but he had no intention of playing along. “I should have known you were involved in Lydia’s disappearance.”

“I don’t see how you could have known,” said Wickham, in a reasonable tone.

Darcy cursed inwardly as Elizabeth, seeing him coming in her direction, emerged from the cover of the trees and came to join them. He watched with a sinking feeling as she approached. It was too late to do anything about it. Her hiding place had been exposed. There was nothing to do but deal with whatever consequences might arise. Meanwhile, perhaps they would finally discover where Lydia was.

“Aren’t you going to introduce me to your beautiful wife? I can see she is dying of curiosity to know why one of your closest friends had anything to do with her sister’s disappearance.”

“My closest friend? Is that what you call yourself?”

“Well, I would have been if your father had his wish. Alas, since your father died, you have made it a point of driving me away. He is turning in his grave.”

Wickham tut-tutted and turned to look at Elizabeth. “Did Darcy ever tell you how he turned me away from his home, even though his father’s dearest wish was for us to be as close as brothers?”

He smiled at Elizabeth. “But I am sure you do not want to hear my sad story. You are far more interested in knowing where your sister is.”

Elizabeth did not answer. She was leaving Darcy to handle Wickham.

“As it so happens, I know exactly where Lydia is. I could bring her to you right now, in fact, if I were so inclined.” He

paused. "There is a slight problem, though. I am not entirely sure I want to give Lydia up," said Wickham, examining his fingernails with studied nonchalance. "If I marry her, she will guarantee my entrance into Society."

"They say a bird in the hand is better than a bird in the bush." Darcy knew his childhood companion well. He was greedy. "Giving up a current opportunity is risky, especially for something that may or may not happen in the future. Even supposing you do marry Lydia, you cannot be sure your offspring will inherit her Talent. Of the five sisters, only three are really Talented."

It was bending the truth, but Darcy was not going to sacrifice Lydia to honesty.

"Then, if they are girls," he continued, pressing his point, "you will have to wait until they reach a certain age and hope they will make good matches. Knowing how headstrong the Bennet girls are, that may not work as you wish. If they are boys, you must wait until they come into power. It would require a lot of patience, which is not your strongest trait."

Wickham rubbed his chin, considering the matter. "There is something to what you say."

"Besides, Lydia was recruited by the Royal Mages. Who is to say they will not reclaim her, and have your marriage annulled? I am sure they have plans for her. As they had for Mrs. Darcy and me." He made it clear that Lydia had influential protectors. "And if you are accused of abducting a Royal Mage, things will not go well for you."

“Very well,” said Wickham, sullenly. “But if you wish to prevent a scandal, you will have to buy my silence. Unless you wish me to announce that the chit warmed my bed along the way—”

Elizabeth gasped.

“How dare you even suggest such a thing!” said Darcy, seeing red. His magic came out, raw and uncontrolled, in a blast of wind that picked Wickham up and flung him against a tree trunk.

Wickham slumped to the ground.

“Really, Darcy,” he said, amused. “Is this how you negotiate?” He rose, dusted himself off, and began to saunter away. “Perhaps I will find someone else who is willing to pay me better coin for the privilege of possessing a powerful, untrained mage. I could think of several people who might be more – appreciative of my help.”

Wickham was right. As long as he was the only one who knew where Lydia was, Darcy’s hands were tied.

“How do we know you are able to bring Lydia to us?”

“You don’t.” Wickham smirked. “You just have to trust me. Alternatively, you can go and look for the people who stole her magic.”

Elizabeth spoke for the first time. “Stole her magic? That’s impossible. I have never heard of such a thing.”

Wickham looked amused. “Have you been studying Rogue magic behind your husband’s back?”

“Ignore him.” Darcy glared at him. “*I* have not heard of such a thing. It does not exist.”

Elizabeth raised her brow at Darcy. “I suppose if *you* have not heard of it, it *cannot* exist.”

Darcy shot her a quizzical look.

“She has your measure, Darcy,” said Wickham, his lips curling in a cold smile. “He is far too arrogant for his own good, Mrs. Darcy, is he not?”

Darcy hoped Elizabeth would not be drawn into Wickham’s game. He was trying to cause a rift between them.

“I have no intention of discussing my husband with you, Mr. Wickham,” she said.

Elizabeth’s voice made it clear she was not prepared to put up with any nonsense. Not for the first time, Darcy thought about how clever she was and marvelled at her presence of mind in such a trying situation. She must be seething with impatience to go to Lydia.

“But I would be happy to discuss what is happening to my sister. What makes you think they stole her magic?”

Darcy observed Wickham closely. Was he telling the truth? Did someone have the power to do such a thing? Had they done something similar to Mr. Bennet? It could explain why he had not returned. Though there could be other explanations.

Darcy preferred not to consider the possibilities.

“Because I was there.”

“You stood by and allowed it to happen? You were part of the group?” Elizabeth was outraged.

For the first, Wickham looked uneasy. “I was, but I have thought better of it. I do not agree with their principles.”

“Their principles?” Darcy’s voice was heavy with sarcasm. “Or the amount of coin they paid?”

Wickham shrugged. “I have gambling debts. I do not want to end up in a debtor’s prison. I would prefer to right a wrong and earn money doing it at the same time. It is a winning proposal for both of us. Except that I am the one taking the risk. This group is ruthless. I could be killed for my trouble.” He looked at Elizabeth. “So rather than wasting time, I would suggest reaching an agreement before it is too late. Do you wish to save your sister, Mrs. Darcy?”

“Of course.”

He looked at Darcy. “Do you agree to pay the sum of my gambling debts?”

“Only if we agree on the sum.”

Wickham’s eyes blazed. He knew he had what he wanted. He named a sum. It was a large sum, but not more than Darcy expected.

“Very well. Once you have handed over Lydia, I will speak with my bank and we can make arrangements.”

“Agreed.”

“Wait,” said Elizabeth. “What about my father? Where is he?”

“Now that is something I cannot help you with. He is too valuable to the group. I can only hand over your sister.”

He began to move away. Elizabeth followed.

“No, you cannot go with him. He could be leading you into a trap,”

“We have to risk it,” said Elizabeth.

“You cannot go into the inn.”

“No one has to go into the inn,” said Wickham. “I have hidden her somewhere else.”

Darcy could feel no trace of Lydia’s magic. Wickham had to be lying. “Are you sensing her presence, Elizabeth?”

She closed her eyes, concentrating. “No. Nothing.” Then her eyes opened suddenly. “Yes. Just a faint trace. I know where she is. I will find her.”

Wickham shook his head. “You will put yourself in danger if you go. There are people everywhere, looking for her. I will bring her to you.”

CHAPTER 20



Lydia groaned with frustration as she tried for what must be the tenth time to free herself from the branches that held her captive. What did people do who did not have magic? How could they just depend on physical strength? For the first time, she considered what it must be like to feel so helpless. She understood why Elizabeth was always pestering her about not using her magic against those who did not possess any.

Well, the tables were turned. Now she was the one in that position. She disliked it intensely. It made her feel weak and at the mercy of people like Wickham and the other mages.

What if he had gone away? What if she was stuck in the dark forest and wolves came by? Well, not wolves, because there weren't any wolves in England, but some other animals?

Just then, she saw Wickham coming towards her, carrying a hooded cape.

“Since you didn't do anything foolish, I'm going to reward you. Come with me. I've arranged to get you to safety.”

If he had made plans for her, why not for Papa?

“I will not leave my father behind.”

“Ungrateful little girl! I’m trying to save you. Your father can take care of himself. Do you remember why I was in Meryton? I was supposed to bring your father here. It is your father they wanted, not you. I thought if I brought you here, I might draw him out. It worked.”

“So you were never interested in me?”

“Let’s say, I seized an opportunity. And I was right.”

Lydia still did not understand.

“Why would they want Papa?”

“To join them, of course. I do not know all the particulars, but it seems he has some knowledge of arcane magic they are looking for. They want him to work with them.”

She snorted. “Papa would never work for criminals like them.”

“I would not call them criminals. They are called the People’s Mages. They are fighting for justice for everyone who is Talented, regardless of bloodlines.”

“They are going to kill the King.”

He looked startled. “Are they?” He gave her a probing look that sent chills through her. “You’d better make sure they don’t know you overheard that. You must get away quickly.”

“I would be happy to, if you would just release me from this cage. *If* you actually had a plan.”

“As it so happens, I do.” He looked remarkably pleased with himself, like a cat who had licked the cream.

“Where are you taking me?”

“It is a surprise.”

“I don’t like surprises.”

“You will like this one. If I release you from the branches, do you promise you will not run away?”

She would promise anything at this point.

He uttered the words of a spell, and the sharp branches slowly snaked away, leaving Lydia free. He handed her the hooded cloak he was carrying.

“Cover your hair. I will cast an Illusion spell on you, but it will not hold for long. I will hire a carriage, and then we will be gone.”

But as they approached the courtyard, a cry suddenly rose up. One of the stable boys gave a loud shout, and several men came running into the courtyards, looking at Wickham.

He frowned. “They are after me. Someone must have reported me to the People’s mages.” He looked panicked. “I did not count on that.”

Lydia did not say anything. What did he expect, when he had practically killed that man?

They ran behind the building and squeezed into a gap between two buildings as the men ran past them. Wickham

watched uneasily until they had disappeared, then he turned on her.

“Look what has come from helping you. You have brought me nothing but trouble. I have half a mind to turn you in.”

He cautiously put out his head to see if anyone was coming, then gave her a considering look. “That might be the best thing for me to do. I could pretend you escaped from me and I have been looking for you all this time.”

It was Lydia’s turn to panic. She had to stop him from taking her back.

“Why don’t you disguise yourself?”

He gave an ironic laugh. “I am already disguised. What you see *is* my disguise.”

She stared at him with shock, tinged with respect. It was notoriously difficult to maintain an Illusion spell for more than a short time. “You have been using Conjuring magic all this time?”

“I have.”

Lydia remembered how he had looked when the adder had frightened the horse. She had seen the hint of another face. She had thought it a trick of the light at the time.

“If you can maintain an Illusion for so long, surely you can create another one so they do not recognize you.”

He hesitated. “It was not my spell. I could never have sustained it all this time myself.” He reached below his shirt

collar and pulled out a necklace that was identical to the one he had placed on Lydia before they arrived in the inn. “The spell is cast onto the chain, and that is what enabled me to keep up the Illusion.” He brightened. “Once I take it off, the Illusion will dissolve, and I can create another one. The only problem is, I will not be able to make the new one last.”

“What do you really look like?”

“You will see when I remove the chain.”

She hesitated. She had learned her lesson about not trusting anyone, but she wanted to get away, and she had to convince him not to turn her in.

“I still have the ability to cast Illusions. Once you remove the chain, I can create an Illusion that will conceal both of us. Illusion magic is my second strongest Talent.”

“I thought they stole your magic.” He was looking skeptical.

“They stole my Elemental Magic, but I have other Talents they did not steal because I did not use them to target the moonstone.” She was still furious at the trick they had played on her. She would get her revenge.

“Some people have many Talents, some have none. How can anyone ever believe in the idea of fairness?” There was bitterness in his voice.

“Are we going to talk about fairness all day, or are we going to escape before those ruffians find us? Just remove the chain so I can cast the spell.”

“Very well. I have never removed a chain before, but it should not be difficult. I memorized the words they used when they removed yours.”

Lydia wished she had thought of that. She had been too focused on the moonstone and proving how powerful her magic was.

Wickham shut his eyes and murmured the spell. She listened carefully to try and remember it, but he was not saying the words loudly enough. She waited for his appearance to change, curious what he looked like.

As he finished the spell, he raised the chain to take it off. It clung to his skin.

He opened his eyes, looking stunned. “It did not work.”

“Are you certain it is the right spell?”

“I am more than certain,” he said, irritably. “I remember the spell very clearly.”

“Then try again. You may have missed out a word somewhere.”

He repeated the spell, and again, nothing happened.

“The spell does not work!” There was a wild look in his eyes. “I cannot remove the chain!” He tugged at the chain, trying to break it, but to no avail. “They tricked me. They made me wear it, and now they can control me.”

She smirked. “Serve you right! Hoist with your own petard.” She felt an intense sense of satisfaction that he had fallen into

his own trap.

“Do not be so quick to gloat. Do you realize what this means? That I cannot escape. As long as I am wearing this chain, I am their puppet.”

“But you possess your own magic. You are free to come and go.”

“As long as I do not provoke or defy them.” He looked defeated. “Much as I would like to help you get away, I do not want to be killed for it.”

“But what about me? They have no use for me. They will kill me.”

Wickham shrugged. “I told you before. You made your bed. You should not have left the safety of the Royal Mages.”

Lydia thought quickly. Would he be swayed if she cried and begged him to save her life? She did not think so. He had not shown any signs of sympathy for her plight when they were taking her magic. The only thing he cared about was himself.

If he took her back to the People’s Mages, he would tell them about her other Talents, and then they would take them as well. She could have kicked herself for revealing it to him.

She grasped desperately for an argument that would convince him to give her up.

“You can marry me, as you proposed, so you can be considered a gentleman.” She suddenly thought of something. “Once we are married, Papa will introduce you to many of his acquaintances so you can establish yourself. That is why you

must free Papa. If he is killed by the People's Mages, he will be no use to you at all."

For a moment, he looked like he might agree. But then he shook his head. "In a matter of days, the People's Mages will have overthrown the King, and will take his place. If I play my cards right, I will benefit far more from them than your father. Everything is going to be very different when they take over, including your precious Royal Mages."

"But what if they lose? Then you will be hanged for treason. You cannot escape the People's Mages, as you have just proved. If they fall, you fall, too."

Wickham smiled slowly. "I think I have a solution that will work for both of us. You will use your magic to conceal us and get away, and I will take you with me as surety. You will not come to any harm. If the People's Mages fall, I will demand a ticket to the New World, in exchange for sparing your life."

By now, she did not care what his reasons were for helping her escape. "It is a very clever solution," she said. "I would be happy to come with you as surety." She did not know any more where the ruffians were, but suddenly the faint tug of a familiar magic signature reached her.

"Lizzy?" The name came out as a sob. "Lizzy!!!" she said louder. She ought not to shout and alert the People's Mages, but she was terrified Lizzy would pass her by.

"Hush," said Lizzy, appearing beside her. "We need to get away quickly before they find us."

Then Mr. Darcy arrived. Mary was there too, and Lord Matlock's son Colonel Fitzwilliam.

“Oh, thank goodness. Lizzy!” She ran and threw herself into her sister's arms, then Mr. Darcy's. She was just so thankful that they had come to save her. Mr. Darcy looked startled, which made her want to laugh and laugh, except that she started crying instead of laughing.

Then she turned to Mary. Mary could not have helped, of course, because she had no magic, but still, she was her sister. She threw herself into Mary's arms.

She caught a movement from the side of her eye. Wickham was slinking away.

“Stop him!” she cried. “He is going to turn me in.”

“I am not going to turn you in, silly girl,” he said, full of amazement, as if the idea had never occurred to him. “Who do you think brought your sister and Mr. Darcy to you?”

She looked towards Lizzy for confirmation. She did not trust a word that came out of his mouth.

Lizzy nodded. “Darcy and Mr. Wickham reached an agreement.”

Did Mr. Darcy seriously trust Wickham to keep his part of the agreement? It was certainly not the impression Wickham had given.

But she was tired, and she did not care about Wickham anymore.

Then she remembered that she could not just walk away. Papa had been forced to work for the People's Mages, and she had to tell them about the King.

"We cannot leave without rescuing Papa." Lydia was determined. She knew which room he was in. Lizzy and Darcy could fetch him.

"I am touched by your refusal to leave without me, Lydia," said a familiar voice. She spun round. There was Mr. Bennet, standing right in front of her. "But since I had to use magic, they will be upon us in an instant. I have asked them to hook the carriage and saddle some horses. We must leave at once."

Lydia threw her arms around his neck.

"Papa, I am sorry I left you earlier."

"There is no need to be sorry. I heard the footsteps behind you, and then your cry for help. I would have come out to help you, but it was important to discover what they were up to."

"They are planning to assassinate the King."

Everyone stared at her in shock, except Papa. "Yes. I know. Look, the carriage is ready. We have to go to London and gather the mages together to protect the King."

"Would it not be better to attack them here, when they are all in one place?" said Colonel Fitzwilliam.

Lydia shook her head. "You cannot. They have Wards around the rooms and everyone in the inn is on their side. And they have stolen my magic. It is in a stone."

“A milky white stone?” said Darcy.

“Yes. How did you know?”

“Because it is a moonstone, and it was stolen from the Prince Regent.”

“That means the stone is in the possession of Lord Muirhead,” said Mr. Bennet, slowly. “He is the leader of the group gathered at the inn. They call themselves the People’s Mages.” He made a sound of disgust. “Lord Muirhead is not only a powerful Academy-trained mage, he has also been collecting books on arcane magic since before you were born.”

“*I* am interested in arcane magic,” said Mary, defensively. “I have studied it, too.”

“It is not the same, Mary,” said Elizabeth, by way of explanation. “You never meant to use that magic. Lord Muirhead was learning it for nefarious purposes, in order to strengthen his powers.”

Mary nodded, satisfied that no one was blaming her for gathering arcane knowledge. “It is a pity someone so knowledgeable is using it for such undesirable goals.”

“It is more than a pity,” said Mr. Bennet. “From what I have gathered, Lord Muirhead is planning to use the moonstone to kill the King. And because it is Lydia’s magic, Lydia will receive the blame.”

CHAPTER 21



Lydia stared at Mr. Bennet in horror.

“It will not come to that, child,” said Mr. Bennet, with a look of determination. “We will not allow them to use your magic. We will be leaving at once. We will warn the mages at Founder’s Hall and their leader, Lord Muirhead, will be stopped.”

“How did they capture you?” said Elizabeth, wondering how he knew the name. “And how did you get away?”

“They did not capture me. I handed myself to them – in exchange for my daughter. Lord Muirhead and I are prior acquaintances. But that is a long story, and we have more urgent matters now.”

He hesitated, then cleared his throat. “There are other things I must talk about, though. I would not mention them now, but I don’t know when I will have another chance. If we have to face them soon – and it is clear we will have to do – I need to warn you. You must be very careful never to underestimate

them. These are very powerful mages, perhaps the most powerful in the Kingdom.” He looked towards Darcy and Elizabeth. “Lord Muirhead may well be as powerful as the two of you when you Bond together as Janus mages.”

Elizabeth gaped, her certainties suddenly demolished. How had Lord Muirhead been left to run Rogue and had not been conscripted?

Her gaze met Darcy’s. His face mirrored her turmoil. “And the others?”

“I have no way of assessing the others. I can only speak about Lord Muirhead, who was several years older than me when I toyed with joining them. He has been collecting books on magic since before you were born. It is an admirable library.”

He looked away, embarrassed by his admission that he had been there.

Elizabeth was consumed with curiosity. Had he joined the People’s Mages at some time? She wanted to probe, but she could not ask him if he had been allied with a group who had abducted her sister and planned to overthrow the King.

Mr. Bennet gave her a twisted smile, seeing the questions in her eyes. “You do not need to know about my past now. I promise I will tell you later, but for now, I just want you all to know that you must not underestimate them, not even when it looks like you might have defeated them.”

“They have the advantage of having studied the *Compendium*, so they are familiar with all the spells you know, Darcy. In addition, Lord Muirhead has been practicing arcane magic for years. It has been an obsession with him since he was a boy.”

As Darcy opened his mouth to ask a question, a great wind swept through the courtyard, sending everyone stumbling backwards. Elizabeth struggled to breathe as the air was sucked out of her lungs.

“Take cover!” shouted Colonel Fitzwilliam. Fireballs flashed in the air around them, filling the air with smoke. People ran in all directions, screaming and taking refuge wherever they could. The air swirled upwards, then came whooshing back, carrying with it bits of all sorts of debris, dust and straw.

It ended as quickly as it started. Elizabeth’s eyes were stinging. Dust crunched between her teeth and coated her tongue. People were coughing and sneezing and fumbling for their handkerchiefs to wipe their tears.

As the cloud of dust settled, Elizabeth made out six figures on horseback moving swiftly away.

“They’re leaving,” she cried.

“Cowards,” said Colonel Fitzwilliam. “Why don’t you stay and fight?”

“They don’t want to waste time on a fight,” said Mr. Bennet, his voice heavy with dismay. “They think I’ve gotten away, and I’ll be raising the alarm to move the King elsewhere. They

have moved their plans forward. They intend to implement their plan to assassinate the King today.”

He stopped and coughed heavily into his handkerchief, then turned to Colonel Fitzwilliam. “Quick. Tell me. Are they going to Kew Palace? Is the King in residence there?”

The colonel nodded. “As far as I know. He was moved there from Windsor after the Prime Minister was assassinated. It is in Richmond, close to Founder’s Hall. Now that the repairs have been completed and many of the mages and apprentices have moved back, it is safer for him there.”

“Some of the Netherfield mages will be moving there as well, as we speak,” added Darcy. “They may well have arrived there already.”

“We do not know if we have time to reach them,” said Mr. Bennet. “We will have to hold them off by ourselves.”

“We can do it. We are three mages. Five if Lydia and Mr. Wickham’s magic is restored,” said Elizabeth.

She looked around for Wickham. He was nowhere to be seen.

“Three of us, and Lydia,” she amended. “The carriage is ready. We can leave. What are we waiting for?”

“We cannot go by carriage,” said the Colonel. “We will never catch up with them.”

“I know this area well,” said Mr. Bennet. “I have ridden to the hounds here many times. I can take us another way on horseback. We might even reach there before them.”

“Then you will have to go ahead without us,” said Elizabeth. “I am a poor rider, and so are my sisters.” Never had she regretted it more than today. Because of her, the Kingdom might lose its king.

“It would mean splitting the group and leaving the ladies to their own devices,” said Darcy.

“A mere few minutes might make a difference whether the King stays alive or dies,” said Colonel Fitzwilliam, decisively. “We cannot stand here arguing what to do. We must leave. Now! I will come with you as far as Kew, then continue to Founder’s Hall for help.”

“I do not see any other choice,” said Mr. Bennet. “Darcy and I will hold them off until Elizabeth arrives.”

Elizabeth stared at him in dismay. Their eyes met. Mr. Bennet’s lips quirked.

“You need not worry, Elizabeth. I am still in full possession of my magic. I have a few tricks up my sleeve.”

Darcy nodded, his face set in grim lines. “I will see you at Kew House.”

He gave Elizabeth a look full of longing and regret.

The look cut through her, leaving her with a gaping wound inside. Was this the last time she was going to see him? There was no time for them to take leave of each other, no time for more than a quick touch of gloved hands. She breathed in the scent of him, holding onto his hand as long as she could until

he gently disengaged himself and, with a last glance backwards, galloped away.

Her gaze caught that of Mr. Bennet. “I will keep him safe for you,” he said.

“Papa!” Her throat was burning. She could not bear it.

He turned and sped after the others.

Would she ever see either of them again? All the odds were against it. Darcy and Papa alone against half a dozen or more ruthless mages who would give no quarter? How were they supposed to hold them off? Lord Muirhead and his group had planned this for a long time. Darcy and Papa were riding in blindly, with no time to prepare. And Darcy wasn’t even an Elemental mage trained to attack. His role was to defend and protect. As for Papa, he had hinted that he had a few things up his sleeve, but how long had it been since he had practiced arcane forms of magic?

By the time Elizabeth and her sisters arrived, the battle – such as it was – would surely be over, and the King would be dead.

“Papa ought not to have gone,” said Mary. “He may fall off his horse.”

“Thank you, Mary, but I would rather not think of that.”

Lydia gave a little sob.



The ladies piled into the carriage and sat staring at each other in stunned disbelief. They were all thinking the same thing, but no one wanted to say it.

Elizabeth could not allow herself to sink into despondency. She refused to accept defeat. She looked at her sisters' anxious faces and knew she had to rally her spirits, if only for their sake.

“We will get there in time,” she said to them. “We will find a way.”

It pained her to see the hope that sprang up in their eyes.

There was no way to redeem the situation. Elizabeth could not link her magic to anyone. Lydia had lost her Elemental magic and could only access her weaker Talents. And Mary did not have any useful magic that they could use at all.

“Is there a spell we could use to go faster?” said Lydia, expectantly.

There was none, as far as Elizabeth knew. That did not mean it was impossible. If she could combine more than one type of magic, they might cobble together something that would serve them. But how?

She had memorized the spell for raising the carriage above the ground to make the ride smoother. It was one of the most common spells in the *Compendium*. There was no spell for making a carriage move faster. If there was one, everyone would have used it.

She refused to believe there was no solution. Elizabeth had to get there in time and Bond as a Janus Mage to Darcy. It was their only chance.

Lydia was an Elemental Mage. Was there something she could do that would help propel them forward a bit faster? Could there be some remnants of her Elemental magic they could draw upon?

“I know you said they stole your magic using the moonstone, but if you do have any Elemental magic left, I can connect with you and strengthen it.”

“I didn’t know you could do that.”

“I didn’t either. But now I am teaching it at the Academy.”

“A large part of my Elemental magic is gone. Mostly the Fire one. I have some air magic left. Those are my two Elements. Just tell me what to do,” said Lydia, resolution on her face. “I want to save Papa and Darcy and the King. And I want to get my magic back.”

“Good. Then let us experiment together. There is a spell in the Compendium that enables you to lift the carriage off the ground one or two inches so we can travel more smoothly. The horses still pull it, so we move at the same speed, but it does not jolt you around as much.”

Lydia looked at her, wide-eyed. “You will have to teach it to me.”

“Not now. I will take care of that part. I need you to put your effort into trying to propel us forward, so we can move faster.”

“But I do not know how.”

“Neither do I. But if we put our heads together, we can find a way.”

They sat for a while in silence. Elizabeth tried not to think of what would happen if they did not come up with something quickly.

“If you lift the carriage off the ground, I can try using wind to push us forward, like a ship,” said Lydia, doubtfully.

Elizabeth was willing to try anything. “It could work,” said Elizabeth.

Elizabeth put her head out of the window and called out to the coachman. “Hold on tight to something. Things are about to become bumpy.”

Elizabeth spoke her spell and the carriage hovered about the ground.

“Your turn, Lydia.”

Lydia closed her eyes and gathered her magic together. Beads of sweat formed on Lydia’s forehead. Elizabeth felt Lydia’s magic pushing against the carriage, but the carriage continued to move at the same speed.

“It is too heavy,” said Lydia, presently, opening her eyes. “I cannot get it to move.”

This was what it meant to be an untrained mage. Moving objects was one of the first things taught in magical training.

“Lydia, you must not think of the carriage as an object. You need to free your mind from the physical world.”

It was an essential concept, but some mages were never able to grasp it. She had seen it at the Academy, where Elemental mages able to accomplish many feats could not lift a small object. Elizabeth tried not to give in to despair, even if she wanted to scream with frustration. Everything depended on Elizabeth and Lydia getting the carriage to Kew as swiftly as possible. Yet here was Elizabeth, trying and failing to teach Lydia an elementary lesson in magic.

“Let’s try again. Think of the carriage as light, like a bird.”

Lydia closed her eyes and tried again. This time, the carriage lurched from side to side for a few seconds before returning to normal. Lydia released the magic and leaned back against the squabs, looking pale.

At this rate, they would deplete all their magic before they reached Kew. Clearly this was not going to work.

“We cannot exhaust ourselves, or we will be no use to anyone in a battle.”

Lydia sat straight up. “I cannot believe I am going to be in a battle,” she said, her eyes shining with excitement.

Even Mary looked thrilled.

There was nothing exciting about a battle. Elizabeth closed her eyes, trying not to think of all the things that could go wrong. That would *undoubtedly* go wrong. Darcy and Mr. Bennet were no match for the Rogue mages.

Her mind went back to the prospect of speeding up the carriage. They had to get there in time to confront Lord Muirhead. They were saving their magic to use it in the battle, but what use was that if the battle was already over?

“I wish I could find a way to explain it to you, Lydia,” she said.

“I am sorry, Lizzy,” said Lydia. “Maybe my magic is just not strong enough. Or they took too much of it.”

“It is not about strength,” said Elizabeth. “It is about believing it can be done.”

“It is difficult for the rational mind to let go of the illusion of reality,” said Mary. “But that is precisely what philosophers like Descartes urge us to do. The physical world does not exist. It is the product of our imagination.”

“I did not understand a word you said, Mary,” said Lydia, yawning.

Elizabeth sat up in her seat. “That is it! Mary, you are a genius!” She gave her sister a hug and kiss on the cheek.

Mary looked bewildered at first, then a smug expression settled on her face as she threw Lydia a look saying *I told you so*.

“So now Mary’s gobbledygook makes her a genius?”

Elizabeth grasped Lydia’s hands. “No. It makes perfect sense. That is exactly what magic is about. Don’t you see, Lydia? As long as you think of the physical world as real, it

will weigh you down. You cannot perform magic because your mind will not let you do it.”

Lydia shook her head. “More gobbledygook, Lizzy. You are no clearer than Mary is.”

Elizabeth tried again. “If you believe that everything around you is just an Illusion, then you can use your magic to shape your surroundings.”

She could see Lydia’s mind absorbing the idea, turning it over in her mind.

“So if I convince myself this carriage is not real,” said Lydia, “then I can turn it into whatever I want? A pumpkin, for example, like in the fairy tales.”

It was usually the other way, but never mind. “Yes,” said Elizabeth, squeezing Lydia’s hands. “Now do you understand?”

Lydia still looked skeptical. “If it was that easy, then why do we need spells?”

“I would rather not discuss the purpose of spells at the moment. Let us all concentrate on this particular carriage and how we can make it into something faster. Any ideas? Mary? Will you help us out?”

“It’s easy,” said Mary, as if she was waiting to be asked. “You like hats, Lydia. Why don’t you think of the carriage as an upside-down hat, being blown away by the breeze?”

Lydia clapped her hands. “That is perfect.”

She shut her eyes. Elizabeth said the spell for hovering, and waited for Lydia nervously, trying not to hurry her on. Then suddenly the carriage jerked forwards, the pace of the horses picking up as the weight they had to pull became lighter.

Lydia laughed. “We have done it, Lizzy! We have done it! We will reach there in time!”

CHAPTER 22



As long as she lived, Elizabeth would never forget the look on Darcy's face when he saw her coming towards him. It was a shattering mix of emotions. Hope and relief brightened his face at first, then dismay and fear came quickly after. And love, shining gloriously in his eyes, a raw, naked emotion that was devastating in its intensity.

He did not believe they would survive.

There was no time to dwell on it. She took in the scene at once. The People's Mages were taking down the Wards around the palace, Darcy was surrounded by a strong Warding bubble. He was heroically repairing damage to the Wards every time they tore one section down to stop them from breaking through. It was a hopeless case. There were more people tearing down the Wards than building them. Exhaustion was setting in. Sooner or later, the Rogue Mages would break through the Wards. Or they would destroy the bubble protecting Darcy, and Lord Muirhead would launch his attack with the moonstone. Elizabeth Bonded with Darcy at once,

sliding into a connection that had become familiar and warm, lending him her strength. The strain in his eyes diminished, and he smiled in appreciation.

Meanwhile, Mr. Bennet was keeping Lord Muirhead distracted. They were fighting, using magic she had never seen before. Mr. Bennet was holding the Rogue leader at bay, just barely, but Elizabeth could see the signs of strain. His face was red with exertion, his eyes bulging, and his arms were trembling violently, as if he was pushing back a great weight.

He would not last much longer. From the look on Lord Muirhead's face, he knew it.

He did not look at Elizabeth and her sisters. His gaze was focused on Bennet.

“You are finished, Bennet. Your daughters have arrived, very conveniently, I might add. They have placed their fate into my hands. Do you wish them to perish? Why don't you give up? You were once one of us, Bennet. Do you really want to let the Royal Mages defeat us? Would you have our hope for the future be destroyed?”

“I was never one of you,” said Mr. Bennet, the words squeezing out of him, as if he was being crushed. “Not after I discovered that you were using me for your own unscrupulous ambitions. If you take control of the Kingdom, there will be no hope and no future. You will enslave anyone who has no magic, and bind the rest of us to your will.”

“You have chosen the wrong side, Bennet.” Muirhead gave a twist of his hand, and Mr. Bennet wheezed, struggling to

breathe. “You know better than most what I am capable of, yet you chose the losing side. I will give you one last chance,” said Muirhead. “You are a powerful mage, and there are things I could learn from you. I would prefer to have you on my side. Surrender, and I promise you will be well rewarded.”

Mr. Bennet gathered the last of his strength to send a wave of magic in his direction. “Never!”

The blow struck true. Lord Muirhead lurched as Mr. Bennet’s magic slammed into him. He doubled over, gasping for breath, then stumbled to the ground.

For a moment, Elizabeth dared to hope.

The other Rogue Mages stopped tearing down the Wards and turned to aid their leader. He waved them off. He straightened up and staggered to his feet.

“Get back to your tasks. I can take care of myself. There is no one here who can defeat me. Take down the Wards. We have to reach the King.”

He turned to Bennet. “You have been a worthy opponent, but you have left me no choice but to destroy you.”

He sent a powerful whirlwind towards Mr. Bennet. It picked him up and tossed him high up in the air. Elizabeth tried to create a net to cushion him, but it was only half-formed when Lord Muirhead released him. Mr. Bennet plummeted downwards, bounced off Elizabeth’s net, and with a cry, thudded to the ground, unmoving.

“Papa!” cried Lydia, running towards him.

“No! Lydia!” said Elizabeth as Lord Muirhead raised his arm to strike her.

The attack was a simple fireball. Lydia tried to smother it with a gust of elemental air, but with her weakened magic, she could not act quickly enough.

Darcy acted instinctively. Dropping the Wards surrounding the King’s Palace, he threw up a wall in front of her. Lydia staggered backwards as the backwash from the fireball caught her, but the fire burned itself out.

It struck Elizabeth that it was a mistake to bring Lydia and Mary with her. Rather than helping, they were a liability. Darcy was using up his energy to protect them rather than protecting the King’s Palace.

“Lydia and Mary. Go back to the carriage. Go to Founder’s Hall. We can’t protect you.” When neither of them budged, she appealed to Lydia.

“Lydia, you must save Mary. You have to get her away before it’s too late.”

As if suddenly galvanized into action, Lydia turned to Lord Muirhead, and without warning, sent out a blast of magic.

“You killed Papa!” she said. “You will not get away with it.”

Lord Muirhead laughed. “And what are you going to do about it? I have stolen your magic.”

Abruptly, he blinked and looked around in confusion. His eyes widened and he started to run.

A swarm of bees was chasing him. It was Elizabeth's turn to laugh. She turned her full attention to her Bond with Darcy and threw herself into reweaving the broken Wards.

Even Darcy smiled grimly as he worked frantically, trying to keep up.

“As long as she keeps him distracted.”

It was Lydia's old bees trick, only it was much more real than it had been before. Hundreds of bees were converging on him, buzzing viciously. Lydia was using what she had learned in the carriage, and she was applying it with vengeance. It was perfect.

Lord Muirhead was twisting and turning in different directions, using different forms of magic to keep the bees at bay. Any moment now he would realize that the bees were an Illusion and put an end to it. It was a pity it would not last long enough to deplete his energy.

Meanwhile, Elizabeth tried yet again to get Mary to leave. “Take advantage of this distraction,” she said. “Run and hide behind the trees. Go!”

But Mary was staring at Lord Muirhead, refusing to budge.

“Mary!” said Elizabeth, more desperately.

“I want to help,” she said, stubbornly.

Elizabeth had no time to spare. One of the mages was using something acrid to burn through the King's Wards. Stinging fumes were rising up and the Wards were slipping away from her.

She could hear Mary speaking from a great distance. “Lydia, Conjure an Illusion that the bees are stinging him. You can combine it with a spell I know that creates stinging nettles. You will have to cast the spell because I can’t.”

Suddenly the bees were everywhere, attacking and stinging not only Lord Muirhead, but the other mages as well. They all stopped their attempts to remove the Wards and turned their attention to the bees.

Elizabeth and Darcy worked swiftly to repair the burned-out section and set up a spell against burning.

“It’s an Illusion,” a woman shouted. “It’s nothing but an Illusion.” She cast a Dispelling spell and the bees disappeared.

With the Illusion shattered, Lord Muirhead turned his full attention to Elizabeth and Darcy.

“We have wasted enough time. Get out of my way. You cannot stop this. It was meant to be. I have the moonstone, and no one can defeat me.”

Elizabeth shot a look at Darcy. She did not know what Lord Muirhead meant, but she knew the end was near. With Papa down, the two of them might still stand a chance of stopping him, but they could not do it and save the Wards at the same time. Unless Lydia came up with a new distraction, he would batter down their protections in minutes.

It was all over. The battle was done, but they could still try to take Lord Muirhead down. Elizabeth grabbed Darcy’s hand. He held it tightly in his. His love flowed into her through their

Bond, and gave her the courage to fight, to do everything she could to stop it, even if it seemed hopeless. A strange kind of peace came over her. They would fall together – and be together, always. He leaned over and brushed his lips against hers, then nodded. “Shall we?”

“Very touching, Darcy,” said Lord Matlock, from behind them, “but do you think we could save this for later?”

That was when Elizabeth’s mind registered the thunder of many horses, and knew they were saved.



A line of Royal Mages stood behind them, ready to do battle. It was a sight that made her heart sing. And there was Colonel Fitzwilliam, who had made it to Founder’s Hall after all. She spared him a smile of acknowledgement.

“Surrender, Lord Muirhead,” said Lord Matlock, his voice Enhanced so everyone could hear. “You are surrounded. There is no need for bloodshed. You do not stand a chance.” He gave a signal. “Arrest them.”

But as the Royal mages began to move forward, Lord Muirhead laughed. Elizabeth remembered what her father had warned them: not to underestimate Lord Muirhead, even in defeat. She braced herself, trying to predict the leader’s next move.

“Not so fast, Matlock. This does not end here. I am in possession of a moonstone. It holds enough power to destroy

everything around me. I have placed a spell on it. It will burn up if any kind of magic touches it. If it burns up, it will destroy you and the Palace behind you. And since it is connected to the Prince Regent, he will descend into howling madness.” He stood there, looking triumphant. “You can do nothing to stop me from killing the King and taking control of the Prince Regent. But I can stop you. I would advise you to save yourselves the effort. You will all die, but you cannot stop me.”

They were at an impasse. Silence reigned. Everyone stood still, trying to determine the best course of action.

“Someone has to take the moonstone from him,” muttered Lord Grayson.

“I would be happy to do it,” said Matlock. “If you will tell me how.”

“*I will take it away,*” murmured Mary. “I am the only one who is not susceptible to the influence of magic.”

She began to walk towards him.

“Mary, no!” said Elizabeth.

But Mary took no notice. She marched resolutely over to Lord Muirhead.

The Rogue mage stopped and stared at her. “What do think you are doing? You do not possess any magic. You will be killed. Have you lost your mind?”

“I think we should have a truce,” she said, in a calm, dispassionate voice.

Lord Muirhead threw back his head and laughed. “What is it with the Bennet girls that makes them so unhinged? What on earth makes you think I want a truce?”

“Because you cannot win,” she said, calmly. “I have read all about moonstones. Do you know where the name comes from? They hold the power of the moon. If you draw on the power of the sun – of fire – they will shatter, and you will lose.”

Lord Muirhead looked rattled. “So that is what it is,” he said, muttering to himself. “I thought it was a flaw in the moonstone. I did not believe the jeweler when he said there was none.”

“If you had read the *Magis Lapis*,” said Mary, “you would know the moonstone cannot hold the power of fire. It will destroy you the moment you try to use it.” Mary spoke the word in a flat monotone that was at odds with the terror of the moment, but it was utterly convincing.

“How do you know this?” he said. “Are you some kind of Seer, then? There have not been Seers in the Kingdom since the days of King Arthur.” He peered at her, intrigued, his obsession with arcane forms of magic taking hold. It was almost as if he had forgotten his surroundings.

Elizabeth remembered that her father had said he was obsessed. She had not imagined it would go so far. But she was terrified for Mary, who did not seem to think she was in any kind of danger.

Mary leaned towards him. “If you will just give me your kerchief, we can use it as a white flag of surrender.” She

looked as if she was about to search through his clothes.

“Has Mary gone mad?” said Mr. Bennet, trying to sit. “What on earth is she doing?” He looked at Elizabeth. “Does she think she possesses some kind of persuasion magic?”

Relief and joy flooded through Elizabeth. Her father was alive! At the same moment, Elizabeth suddenly realized what her sister was planning. A feeling of excitement took hold of her. She hoped she was not mistaken.

Mary suddenly lunged.

“Is she trying to kill him with her bare hands?” said one of the mages, incredulously.

There was a tussle. Lord Muirhead’s magic was strong, but he had grown up in the Academy, where physical strength was not needed, and he was no longer young. Mary grabbed him by his cravat and pulled at him. He was choking, his arms waving desperately. No one moved. Everyone was stunned at the strange sight of a proper young lady attacking a great mage.

“Somebody help her,” said Mr. Bennet. “He’s going to kill her!”

Colonel Fitzwilliam bounded across the open space, just as Lord Muirhead managed to free himself from Mary’s grasp with a final tug. He pulled away, instinctively straightening his cravat as he moved out of her reach. His face turned purple, and his eyes bulged as he looked at Mary, an ugly expression on his face.

“What have you done?” he said. “I will kill you for this! I don’t care if you are the only Seer in history.”

Colonel Fitzwilliam dived forward and knocked Mary to the ground just as a fireball sped towards her. It whizzed harmlessly over her head. Mary refused to stay down. She tore herself away from the colonel and started to run towards Elizabeth, waving her hands, her eyes glittering.

“I have it, Lizzy. The moonstone pin. It is safe. You can capture him now.”

Mary was at his mercy. She had said that if magic touched the moonstone, it would destroy everything around it. Lord Muirhead had nothing more to lose. If he was going down, he would take them down with him.

Elizabeth gathered her magic and made it grow. She drew on her Bond with Darcy, then reached out further to any of the mages she could recognize, collecting all the power she could handle. Lord Muirhead fought against her, pushing her back, but she pushed harder, persisting until she enclosed him in a glass jar, trapping him and his magic inside.

“He is going to break free any minute,” she said, as he hammered against the jar. “He is going to break the glass!”

“We need Elemental mages,” cried Darcy hoarsely, fighting to control the turbulent magic coursing through them. “We need something stronger to restrain him.”

He looked towards Mr. Bennet, who was still lying on the ground.

“I can build a cage,” said Mr. Bennet, grimacing in pain as he sat up.

Elizabeth knew he could not do it in time. Even if he did, the People’s Mages had stopped taking down the Ward around Kew and were moving towards them, preparing a collective strike. Lord Matlock and Lord Grayson went on the attack, but that made her more anxious. If one of the enemy mages hit the moonstone, deliberately or by mistake, the consequence would be dire.

They desperately needed more Elemental mages to immobilize Lord Muirhead.

As if conjured up by her thoughts, more Royal Mages appeared, running towards her and Darcy.

“We received Miss King’s message,” said one of them. “What do we need to do?”

From the corner of her eye, she saw Matlock giving orders for the rebel mages to be rounded up.

“Just make sure Lord Muirhead can’t escape,” she said.

In moments, they had the glass jar encased in ice.

Through the distortion of the ice, Elizabeth’s gaze met Lord Muirhead’s, and she understood that they had won. He had given up the fight. Despite all his preparations, he had placed too much faith in the moonstone. Without it, he no longer believed himself invincible.

It was Mary, sensible Mary, who had saved them.

Elizabeth turned to Darcy, amazement giving way to a fierce sense of triumph. She threw herself into his arms.

“We did it!”

He staggered backwards, taken by surprise, and lost his footing. The two of them toppled to the ground and stayed there, too weak to even try to get up. They lay there, holding hands and laughing weakly, until magic exhaustion took over.

EPILOGUE



The traitors were dealt with, in the time-old tradition of being sent to the tower to wait for their trial. Lord Scarsbrook joined them. The Prince Regent was taking a particular interest in the fate of someone who had been one of his closest friends, yet had betrayed him.

Darcy wanted nothing more to do with it. He did not want to know how justice would be served. He just wanted to know the King was safe, and that he, Elizabeth and the others had done everything they could to make it so.

Meanwhile, Darcy had fulfilled his promise to pay Wickham. It was a debt of honor, even though the scoundrel deserved to be punished. In return, Darcy extracted a magically binding promise, in which Wickham was forbidden from approaching any member of the Bennet family again — especially Lydia — unless specifically approved by Darcy or Elizabeth.

For now, Darcy had other matters to attend to, as Netherfield Hall was vacated and they were working to settle the young

mage apprentices at Founder's Hall again. Judging from the volume of the chatter in the Great Hall, they were succeeding. Tonight, they were celebrating the move with a banquet, and there was a high sense of anticipation as they awaited the arrival of the Prince Regent. Judging from the volume of the chatter in the Great Hall, they were succeeding. Tonight, they were celebrating the move with a banquet, and there was a high sense of anticipation as they awaited the arrival of the Prince Regent.

As Darcy passed by the Hall, he stopped to look in. As always, Miss Bingley and her group of apprentices had created a beautiful setting in a Royal theme, but what he enjoyed most was seeing the excited faces of the young apprentices again, with a dozen new faces he had not seen before. They were all eagerly waiting for the Prince so the feasting could begin.

Darcy knew that the Prince would not be arriving just yet. There were a few things to be dealt with first, and Darcy had better hurry.

Elizabeth was waiting for him. She was dressed in the formal Mage cloak, the medal she had been given draped around her neck.

"You look stunning, my love," he whispered. "And regal. It suits you to wear a medal."

She chuckled and swatted him. "You look regal, too. And very handsome. Except, let me straighten this little curl." She put out her finger and moved the curl out of the way. "That's better."

“Ready?” he said, offering her his arm.

“Ready.”

The footman announced their names. Elizabeth took his arm and they walked into the old Council Chamber together.

“Ah, Darcy,” said the Prince Regent. “There you are. And your charming wife.”

Darcy was relieved to see there was no sign of madness in the Prince Regent’s eyes. His gaze was sharp and shrewd.

“Your Royal Highness.” Darcy bowed. “You look well.”

“You mean I no longer look like there is a spell controlling me?” He gave a little laugh. “Terrible business, that.”

He waved them away as Miss King was announced. And Miss Lydia Bennet, who for once was looking intimidated. She curtsied very properly to His Highness and came to sit next to Elizabeth.

Not for long.

“What’s Miss King doing here? She doesn’t deserve anything. She promised to help me, then abandoned me to my fate.”

“But then she saved us all,” said Elizabeth.

“Mary saved us all.”

“We all did it together,” said Darcy. “Including you.”

Lydia dimpled.

“Do you think he’ll grant me what I asked for?” she whispered.

“No,” said Elizabeth. “Because you asked for too many things.”

“I did not. I ask for money to replenish my dowry, because how am I to get married otherwise, and Papa has used it up. And I asked for a new Wardrobe because I need one. And I asked to be admitted to an Academy. And—”

Darcy shook his head and stopped listening. He could only imagine how the Prince Regent must have reacted when he read her letter. He was much more interested in hearing the latest news.

“What word of the moonstone, Matlock? When will I be able to wear it again?”

“As you know, Your Highness, Lord Muirhead has cast some esoteric spells on the stone, using a type no one else understands. We cannot simply extract the magic. It is likely to kill anyone who tries. We still do not know if Lord Muirhead was bluffing that he has somehow connected it to the King himself.”

He indicated Mr. Bennet, who was sitting next to Mary. Mr. Bennet’s head and his arms were wrapped in bandages, but he was at least managing to stay in his seat.

“Mr. Bennet and his daughter Mary have been combing Lord Muirhead’s library trying to find a way to restore the moonstone to its original condition. It must be in that library

somewhere. Meanwhile, we have sent someone to India to speak to the mage who cast the original protection spell. We will have to await their return.”

As the last of the arrivals came in, the Prince asked for silence.

“We have asked you to meet us here before the banquet,” said His Highness, using the Royal ‘we’, “because we would like to thank you for the great sacrifice you were willing to perform for us. You were willing to lay down your lives for us, and you placed yourselves in great peril to protect the Kingdom, and for that, His Majesty and I will be eternally grateful.”

He looked around the room.

“You have already been awarded medals to thank you for your service. We have agreed that we would grant each of you a boon and you have each sent us your request. We have decided to grant most of your requests. In addition, we have awarded titles to some of you. The herald will read out a proclamation of what you have been granted. But before that, I would like to ask something of Mr. Thomas Bennet.”

Mr. Bennet looked surprised. “I am at your Highness’ command.”

“Mr. Bennet, since you did not ask us for a boon, we have spoken to a number of mages in London, and they have unanimously asked for one thing: to reinstate you as a member of the Academy. Do you accept it?”

“I am honored that you have thought of me, Your Highness. I will consider the matter very seriously and will give you an answer. However, I fear it is too late for me. You know the saying. You cannot teach an old dog new tricks.”

“We will not press you on the matter. We will leave it to you to reach a decision, Mr. Bennet, though we hope you will accept.”

The Prince rose, and everyone but Mr. Bennet rose as well.

“I will leave you to listen to the list. I have a banquet to attend. I hope to see you there very shortly.”

Darcy listened to the formal proclamation with half an ear. He already knew what was on it, but there were a few surprises.

Mary had been granted the title of Keeper of the Books at the Royal Academy. He and Elizabeth had both been appointed as Special Mage Councilors to the Prince, alongside Lord Walsworth.

To Lydia’s delight, she had been awarded the wardrobe she requested and was to be sent to an Academy in Newcastle, with the provision that she would eventually return to the Royal Mages.

It seemed everyone had been awarded what they had requested, to judge by the smiling faces as they left the Council Chamber.

Darcy and Elizabeth tip-toed past the Great Hall at Founder’s Hall on their way out. Rather than joining in the

general merriment, they had decided they preferred to spend some time together.

“I feel like Lydia, sneaking away like this,” said Elizabeth, her eyes full of mirth.

“I do not want to hear her name mentioned tonight,” said Darcy.

As they rounded the corner, their way was blocked.

“I feel it my duty, sir,” said Redmond, addressing Mr. Darcy, “to inform you that, if you are planning to go outside, there might be French mages lurking around.”

His gaze slipped to Elizabeth. “And may I remind you, Mrs. Darcy, of the consequences of Miss Lydia’s escape?”

He was completely serious. Did Redmond think he had the right to control their movements? Darcy was about to give him a piece of his mind when Elizabeth’s grip tightened on his arm.

“I appreciate your concern, Redmond,” she said, “but you must be aware that we just faced a battle a few days ago, not too far from here. We are conscious of the danger. It is a risk we are willing to take.”

Redmond frowned. “I did not mean to stop you, Mrs. Darcy,” said Redmond, with a little stammer. “I would not presume —.”

He pulled himself up to full height. He had grown lately, and Elizabeth was surprised to see he was now taller than Darcy.

“I only meant that I would like to offer my assistance. As a kind of guard.”

He looked bashful now, uncertain.

Darcy did not know what to say. They were going outside to have a moment to themselves. The last thing they needed was to have Redmond watching their every move.

Again, Elizabeth stepped in, as she tended to do when Darcy was at a loss for words. “That is a very kind offer, Redmond, but you do not owe us anything.”

“I was not there with you,” said Redmond, “in battle. And I was the one who goaded Miss Lydia. And, Mrs. Darcy, I am aware of how much you did for me – here, at Founder’s Hall.”

A flash of insight told Darcy that Redmond was offering an apology of sorts. Darcy had an inkling of how much it had cost someone from such a proud family to do it. He had to be careful not to step on the boy’s pride.

Darcy resigned himself, silently seeking Elizabeth’s agreement. She gave him a little nod.

“Are you certain you wish to do this, Redmond? Colonel Fitzwilliam will be accompanying us. Wouldn’t you rather go back and enjoy the banquet? Wouldn’t you like an opportunity to speak to the Prince?”

“Begging your pardon, sir, but the Colonel does not possess magical ability. He will hardly be an effective guard. And my family is well acquainted with the Prince Regent.” The arrogance was back.

“Well, if you are sure of it,” said Elizabeth, “then naturally we would welcome a mage to ensure our safety. There was no one else to spare.” She lowered her voice. “Just be aware that there may be – conversations – of a private nature.”

Redmond blushed. “I will stay out of sight, of course. You can call me if you find yourselves in a difficult situation.”

“Very well then, Redmond,” said Darcy, “We can rely on your discretion.”

As they walked out into the night, Redmond followed them like a shadow, keeping a distance. Then, as he had promised, he stayed behind, lounging against the wall of the ancient building, looking away from them and giving them the chance to be alone.

Not for long. Just a few steps later, Richard appeared, striding towards them.

“I see you have found someone to replace me.” He waved towards Redmond.

“He offered. We could not refuse,” said Elizabeth.

Richard clapped Darcy on the shoulder. “So how does it feel for you both to be appointed Mage Advisors to the Prince Regent?”

“The same as it must feel for you to be appointed Extra Equerry to the Prince Regent. It is an honor, but we hope we will not be called upon to do anything.”

“At least it grants me access to good brandy.” Richard chuckled, thinking of their ruse to escape Carlton House.

Darcy had not come out here to converse with his cousin. “Well, then, you had better help us cast off and we will be on our way.”



Founder’s Hall was outlined against the sky. Light was pouring from the candlelit windows and dancing on the ripples in a merry circle. The sound of music and chatter was floating languidly towards them.

As they moved onwards along the bend, the lights disappeared. It was a dark night, and the river was almost invisible. He could hear the water lapping against the bank, but as they floated forward the darkness enveloped them fully, like the blankets that were wrapped around them.

He would rather not be rowing, because he could not do it with Elizabeth next to him. But it was the only way of obtaining privacy. Elizabeth sat in the seat opposite him, balanced in the middle, her knees touching his.

“I wanted us to come out on the river again, like we did when we were first married. I remember you roasted me then about Pemberley, and being born in privilege. Now that I have discovered your father’s past, I can understand it better. I have to admit I was shocked at the time.” He smiled and put down the oar to take up her hand. “You have taught me to see things differently. It is hard to believe I am the same person I was when we came out that night.”

She put his hand to her cheek and kissed his palm. “It seems like years ago. We have been through so many obstacles, you and I.”

He smiled. “We have, haven’t we?”

For once, she did not smile back. “I feel like an old, scarred warrior.” Her eyes darkened with emotion. “When I saw you outside Kew Palace, trying so valiantly to hold up the Wards, I —” She choked on her words and fell silent.

“I would rather not talk about that day. Not tonight. I did not believe either you or I would survive, yet here we are.”

He pushed back the images that came to him, not only of recent events, but of his early marriage and an attack by the French. Reliving those days was a reminder of how close they had come to losing everything. They were alive, and that was a miracle. And they were back in Founder’s Hall, which was another miracle, with all the repairs completed as if nothing had ever happened. They had survived the attack then, and they had survived now.

They had almost died. In that instant when they faced Lord Muirhead, time had stood still. Everything had become crystal clear. Elizabeth blazed bright in his emotions. She was at the heart of his very existence. She was the beating life of his heart. Without her, he was nothing.

They had been gifted with life.

He leaned over and cradled her cheeks in his hands, gazing with wonder at the face that had become so dear to him. He

leaned over and kissed her gently. The boat rocked in protest.

He sat back, releasing her with a sigh, and took up the oars again. They fell into a long, peaceful silence, listening to the sounds of the night as the boat glided gently through the dark water, the oars dipping along with the rhythm of his heartbeat.

“Oh, look,” said Elizabeth, breaking into the silence. “A new moon! You have to make a wish.”

The clouds had opened up like a curtain to reveal a new moon, marking the sky with a silver slither. Darcy started to scoff at the suggestion, but she was in earnest. She squeezed her eyes shut and turned her face upwards.

He put down the oars and allowed the river to carry the boat where it pleased.

He did not believe in making wishes upon the moon, but he knew what he longed for. He longed to stay here in the boat with her forever and never look back. To put down their strife as he had put down the oars. To drift on indefinitely, indifferent to the rest of the Kingdom.

It was a silly idea, and vastly impractical, but he longed for it with all his heart. He put down the oars and carefully lowered himself to sit at the bottom of the boat, at her feet. He leaned his head against her knee, bathing in her warmth.

“So, what did you wish for?” he murmured, hoping it was something he could give her.

“New beginnings,” she said, vaguely, evading his gaze.

Darcy had the sense she had something in particular in mind, but he did not want to probe. She would have told him if she wanted to.

He took out the wine they had brought with them, poured some into two glasses, and lifted his own. “To new beginnings.”

She took a sip. “To new beginnings.”

She bent down and stroked her fingers through his hair. “What did *you* wish for?”

Somewhere close by, an owl hooted, startling them and reminding Darcy that the boat was adrift. Sighing, he lifted himself back onto the seat and checked to see where they were heading. Much as he would like to stay, he did not want to tempt fate. They had defeated one enemy, but the Imperial Mages were still out there.

“We had better get back.”

She sat up in protest. “Before we go back, you *have* to tell me. I will not let you evade the question.”

“I did not make a wish like you did.” It was his turn to be evasive. He gave a little laugh.

She scooped up some water and threw it at him. He yelped as the cold water splashed on his skin. She chortled and bent down to scoop up some more.

“If you do not tell me what you wished for, I will keep splashing you until you do.”

“I surrender,” he said, raising his hands. Now that it came down to it, Darcy was reluctant to say the words. What if she thought him foolish?

“Well?” Her dark eyes were pinned on him.

“I did not make a wish, because I have nothing else to wish for. Everything I could ever wish is right here with me. As long as we are together, alive, I could never want anything more.”

THE END



To be continued...

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Monica Fairview writes Jane Austen variations and sequels. She worked as a literature professor and then as an acupuncturist in Boston, USA, before moving to London.

Monica loves anything to do with the nineteenth century and follows every period drama she can find. On rainy days, she likes to cuddle on the sofa and re-watch ‘Pride & Prejudice’ (all adaptations), ‘North & South’, ‘Cranford’, ‘Downtown Abbey’, ‘Sanditon’, and ‘Bridgerton’. Among her favorite SF/F series are ‘Wheel of Time’, ‘The Witcher’, ‘Shadow and Bone’, ‘The Expanse’, and of course, Harry Potter.

Apart from her avid historical interests, Monica enjoys reading fantasy and post-apocalyptic novels, but avoids zombies like the plague. She loves to laugh, drink lots of tea, and visit Regency houses, and she is convinced that her two cats can understand everything she says.

For news about new projects and releases, sign up for the Magical Austen newsletter <https://magicalausten.com/>

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