



To Do Them Justice (Austen's Magical Girls)

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Category: Historical

Description: What happened to make Netherfield a place of such Darkness? What did the rest of the Bennet and Darcy and Bingley families get up too, during the French Mission? Were Mr and Mrs Bennet truly so oblivious to their daughters activities?

Find out the answers to those questions, and many more, in this collection of short stories from Austens Magical Girls!

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How Netherfield Park became such a Dark place.

“Netherfield was built, after all, by a man who could not seem to entice a bride any other way than by a grand house to live in, but left her a young widow who took a string of husbands who died or abandoned her, after her pregnancies ended in stillbirths or miscarriages, though she lived to a great age.

The lonely, bitter widow of a cold and unlikable man, and a grand house where terrible things happened...”

Mrs. Deirdre Palmer - now the Widow Palmer - lifted the mourning veil she wore, enjoying the brief sunlight on her face.

Odd, how the sun appeared so rarely over Netherfield Park, while the rest of the area enjoyed fine weather, but fitting for the manor’s name.

A shame, too, that she was now forced into at least a year of mourning, upon the news of her second husband’s execution as a Highwayman.

Mrs. Palmer mourned the babies she bore her second husband, who never had the chance to live, more than the faithless wretch who abandoned her, but Society had little care for whether or not a living spouse liked their deceased partner.

Mrs. Palmer still had a year and more of isolation to look forward to, before she could rejoin society and search for a better companion of her future life than the last two.

“Should I hire a Companion, my loves?”

she asked the small grove of saplings, planted as memorials where the church would not permit graves for babies who had not lived long enough to be baptised.

“You might like another person to visit you, instead of just me.”

A companion would make the days less lonely, at least until she remarried.

Re-marry she must, because women who rejected suitors often found themselves whispered about.

Outliving two husbands already had the gossips murmuring, and Mrs. Palmer did not wish to be considered a Witch, on top of her other misfortunes.

Years passed.

The Widow Palmer became the Widow Bates, and eventually the Widow Smythe.

Finally, she was Mrs. Harris, but still living alone at Netherfield after her latest husband ran off to seek his fortune in the American Colonies, leaving her behind.

Perhaps he, too, was dead now, one more unidentified body in a far-off land.

Whether he lived or died, she would never know, because no-one would know to tell her.

None of the many babies she'd conceived survived longer than a year, if they drew breath at all.

With each loss, Netherfield seemed a little darker and more dismal, as if her grief and loneliness had somehow been made manifest.

Companion after Companion deserted her.

Some married, while others left to be helpful to relations in need of care and never returned.

Friends visited once and then never again.

Guests made excuses to leave early.

Even servants proved difficult to keep, unless they had no-where else to go.

A permanent miasma seemed to settle into the estate, a gloom that seeped into everything and everyone, the longer they stayed.

Mrs. Harris pressed an ageing hand to the trunk of a tree, once a mere cutting, but now taller than she was.

“Why does everyone leave? Can not one of them stay? Is my presence such a burden?”

The only answer was the wind through the branches, laid bare by winter.

Surely it was only her imagination, a trick of the wind, that she thought she heard a whispery, malicious voice laughing at her pain.

Civil War raged throughout England, reaching even isolated estates and insignificant market towns in Hertfordshire.

A battle had been fought on the grounds of Netherfield itself, the last man dying on the threshold before a retreat was sounded.

Dozens more had died in the days and weeks after, when Mrs. Harris opened her home as a shelter for the wounded.

Sometimes Mrs. Harris wondered if the ghosts of the slain had lingered, somehow.

Sometimes, she swore that she could feel a malevolent presence, lurking just beyond her ability to see.

Every time someone died within the walls of Netherfield, it seemed to grow stronger.

Sometimes, when she was sure no human ears could hear her, she would speak to the presence.

“Who are you? What do you want here?”

It wasn't strong enough to speak back to her.

Not yet.

Mrs. Harris didn't know if she feared the day it could, or if she would be grateful for any kind of company, even if it was not of this world.

Finally on her deathbed, Mrs. Harris knew that she would never escape Netherfield Park.

She had tried.

Oh, how she had tried.

She'd attempted to sell Netherfield, and made it known that she was willing to negotiate the price.

No one had been willing to buy it.

She'd tried to lease it, next, asking just enough per quarter to keep herself in a comfortable cottage.

On the rare occasions that someone accepted the lease, they barely lasted past the first quarter.

Some bore out the lease at a distance, others decided that the penalties for breaking the lease were worth never having to set foot there again.

In sharp contrast, Mrs. Harris had noticed that the children of Longbourn were spending more time near Netherfield.

Mrs. Bennet had been lucky: with two each of her sons and daughters living to adulthood.

The girls had not married yet, and could often be found roaming the countryside, sometimes even venturing onto Netherfield itself.

Mrs. Harris did not mind, because they always stayed to visit a few minutes when they did.

She fancied that her spectral houseguest was far less fond of these visits than she was.

Ownership of Netherfield would pass to her sister's children upon her death, though since her nephews had estates of their own, it was doubtful that they would live here.

A knock on the door, and the younger Miss Bennet entered, a warm, kind smile on her face.

“How are you today, Mrs. Harris?”

Mrs. Harris tried to smile back, but could barely lift her head.

A maid smoothed the covers.

“It won’t be long now, Miss Bennet, but if you’d be willing to sit with her a moment, I can see what’s keeping Susie.”

Mrs. Harris could feel herself getting weaker, each breath more of a struggle.

It would not be long at all, now, before she was finally free of the place that had tormented her for most of her life.

She’d heard of the mind playing tricks, in one’s last moments, for surely there could be no other explanation for the dark cloud that appeared, or the light that surrounded Miss Bennet, transforming her walking dress into something more like a soldier’s uniform, a sword appearing in her hand.

Then her eyes closed, a death-rattle escaping her lips, and old Mrs. Harris was no more.

But with this longed-for death, after a life of torment, the Malevolence of Netherfield roared to life, and Miss Isabella Bennet, Great-Great-Great-Aunt to another young lady who would bear a more English variant of her name, rose to meet it.

Perhaps she could not vanquish the newly-awakened Evil entirely, but she could drive it back, at least long enough for her siblings to arrive.

It would not be defeated in a single generation; evils of this magnitude rarely were.

But a journey of a thousand miles began with a single step, and a first defeat would pave the way for more.

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Georgiana Darcy is reasonably sure that Catherine Bennet shares her distaste for marriage.

It would be easier to determine if they were not limited to communicating through letters...

Georgiana Darcy had been established in her own home in Lambton, along with her companion Mrs. Annesley, for a little over six months when she sat down to pen the most important letter she would ever write.

If, in later years, one of their innumerable nieces and nephews were to ask where it all began, Miss Darcy would admit that it all began with a letter.

There was nothing so unusual about that; letters between Lambton and Longbourn were very frequent things, enriching and exasperating those who carried the Royal Mail in equal measure.

Georgiana's brother, still considerate and protective even though she was as independent as an unmarried woman ever managed to be, had his messenger stop by the cottage for letters if Mrs. Darcy was sending one to her family, but Miss Darcy and Miss Catherine Bennet corresponded far more frequently than Elizabeth and her parents.

My dear Georgiana, the letter in her hand read,

Longbourn is much as it ever was, though somewhat quieter, and it makes me miss you all the more.

Mama remains thrilled at the news of both Jane and Lizzy expecting their first children, though she was briefly sad at the news of Miss Felicity Elizabeth Bingley.

She says that at least Stonewall is not entailed, and Mr. Bingley is not the sort to reproach his wife for not giving him an heir immediately, and quickly reconciled herself to joy at her first grandchild.

Indeed, Mama may very well have hired a carriage herself if my eldest sisters had not promised to come south for Mary's wedding.

The first of the Banns will be read next Sunday, and for the following five weeks, so Lizzy may be churched before journeying to Hertfordshire.

Has she had the baby yet? Her letters are full of complaints about how difficult it is to move and how bored she is of her confinement.

Elizabeth was, indeed, much annoyed at not being able to indulge in her usual long rambles about the estate.

Or walk much at all, really.

Georgiana's sister was not an especially tall woman, and her pregnancy had made her quite ungainly.

Georgiana suspected that at least part of her brother's hovering was so that he could assist his wife in standing and taking some exercise, even if it was only a turn about the bedchamber, when she became too restless.

If all pregnancies were like this, Baby Darcy might have to resign themselves to being an only child.

Or at least a considerable age gap between siblings.

Mary is adjusting to being an Heiress - a number of young idiots hereabouts and from the Ministry have decided that until the banns are read, they have a chance of increasing their own station.

Three readings are the traditional number, but Matthew took offence to some comments made by Miss Bond, and requested the additional readings both to give our sisters time to travel, and so that anyone wishing to voice an objection has the opportunity to do so... and be thoroughly put in their place.

Lydia's time away seems to have eroded her patience for condescending and foolish men, for she sent one of them home with a black eye when they equated height with age, and very publicly declared their admiration of 'the incomparable Miss Mary Bennet' to her.

Colonel Fitzwilliam congratulated Lydia on the force of her slap (it was no such thing, but young ladies are not supposed to know how to throw a punch) before hauling the young fool off for a less-public dressing down.

Lydia still will not say what passed between them on the journey home, but I believe that you are right and he is merely waiting until Lydia is of an appropriate age.

He does his duty to the local ladies whenever there is an assembly, but Lydia is the only lady he ever dances twice with.

Cousin Jasper could be very stubborn in his opinions.

He had seen too many ladies marry young, only to find themselves utterly unprepared to be an officer's wife, or a wife to anyone at all.

He might have retired from active service now, settling down as a landed gentleman, but that didn't make him any less head-over-heels for Lydia's vivacity and courage.

On the whole, Georgiana agreed that it was wiser of him to wait until Lydia had been out a few years before offering for her, so that they could both be certain of what they wanted, but it didn't make either of them any less obvious in their feelings.

Mama fretted about Lydia scaring off suitors that might be interested in one of us - she is not so changed as all that! - but Mr. Crawley pointed out that any man who would make such a fool of himself without ensuring that the lady was at least interested was no suitor worth having.

For my own part, I am still deciding how to tell Mama and Papa that I have no ambition to marry, here or in Derbyshire, nor in any country under the sun.

I know you will not judge me for it, my dearest friend, but it is still not an easy thing to admit.

With three sisters married or engaged, I can safely be a spinster, but that does not mean that there is no stigma attached to the state.

As a fourth son, Mr. Crawley seems to have been a bit of an afterthought in his own family, and is unsure of how to handle the surplus of parental attention he receives from Mama and Papa.

He has quite eclipsed Mr. Bingley as Mama's favourite son, and while Papa complains that our future brother has entirely too much of the energy of youth, he appreciates someone to debate agricultural practices with.

One supposes that a career of talking Generals and Lords into changing their plans to account for common sense has granted him a degree of persuasiveness.

Papa has even been seen regularly leaving his book room!

Ostensibly, Mr. Crawley was staying at Netherfield Park as Cousin Jasper's guest (and book consultant; the library there really was in a dreadful state) until he married Mary, but he was to be found calling at Longbourn more than he was at Netherfield, between occasional trips to London when his experience as an Archivist and Scholar was required.

Mary, in her last letter, had decreed it quite sensible.

They were to marry in late winter, and planned on a mere two weeks in Bath for their wedding tour before returning to Longbourn for the spring planting.

Mr. Crawley was a fourth son, so his father had never taken the time to educate him on estate management as the Heir and Spare had been taught.

Educating himself before such things became his responsibility was only practical, and anything that encouraged Mr. Bennet to be more active on his estate could only be a blessing.

Have you read the latest novel from Mrs. Radcliffe yet? If you have, you must tell me immediately! Lydia has discovered a love of histories recently, and Maria has been banned from novels by Lady Lucas, so I am in dire need of someone to discuss it with! I do believe you will enjoy it; there is a most delicious twist to the narrative, though I shall not tell you what it is, for fear of spoiling your enjoyment.

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Kitty Bennet.

The letter was much like Kitty herself, careening wildly from one thought to the next like a runaway cart, with Georgiana happily (and metaphorically) running in its wake.

Re-reading the letter, Georgiana could almost hear the words in Kitty's voice, and imagine her bright blue eyes sparkling, her slender hands gesturing to emphasise some point or other.

Missing Kitty, after almost a year spent in each other's company, felt almost like a physical ache.

Mrs. Annesley - a companion was even more important, now that Georgiana was living away from her brother's house - looked up from her knitting at Georgiana's sigh.

"Is aught amiss, my dear?"

Mrs. Annesley was also Gifted, a fact that she'd kept tightly under wraps for most of her life, passing it off as an uncanny knack for determining a person's emotional state.

That had served her well as a Ladies' Companion, and even better during her upbringing as the only daughter of a very strict Parson, and her brief marriage to her father's like-minded Curate.

Georgiana had first met Mrs. Annesley when she'd been working as Companion to an older lady in Lambton, and they'd met occasionally in the markets.

Fitzwilliam and Jasper did not always appreciate the greater degree of freedom afforded a single Gentleman, in comparison to that of an unmarried young lady, and Mrs. Annesley had imparted a great deal of valuable advice to Georgiana on how to fit herself into the hidden world of the Gifted.

Mrs. Younge had been a necessary evil, in order to get close enough to Wickham to discover his plans, but Georgiana had dearly missed her friend and occasional mentor during her time at Ramsgate.

Now, she attempted to smile reassuringly.

"I am quite well.

It is only...

I miss Catherine."

Mrs. Annesley hummed knowingly, giving the impression that she knew everything Georgiana did not say.

"Well, you shall see her in a little over a month, and we are due to visit your sisters on Sunday."

Jane, Mrs. Bingley, had given birth to a girl, Felicity Elizabeth, only two weeks ago, and had finally been permitted to begin receiving visits from family.

Elizabeth was due "any day now", according to the midwife, and extremely ready for her confinement to be over.

At least the distraction of a new baby had stopped Fitzwilliam from hinting that they should start planning for Georgiana's season.

She had no illusions that her brother anticipated the event any more than Georgiana herself did - which was to say, not at all - but there did not seem to be any way of avoiding it.

Aunt Helen and Aunt Catherine would have a great deal to say if Georgiana tried to postpone it indefinitely, and there were already icily polite letters being exchanged over which of them would sponsor her when she made her curtsy to Queen Charlotte.

Or perhaps to Queen Caroline, if the King's health continued to decline.

A knock on the door sounded, and Georgiana frowned briefly, wondering at the source as a maid went to answer it.

Kitty could not have sent another letter so soon, surely...

The maid, Polly, scurried back in, beaming.

"Oh, Mistress, it's such wonderful news! You have a nephew!"

Well, Elizabeth would be pleased, and likely happier as soon as she was permitted to be up and walking again.

Georgiana was conscious of the need for an heir, even if Pemberley were not entailed, but she was quite sure that children, the sweet little hellions, were another thing she was happy to appreciate at a distance.

Much like gentlemen in general and single gentlemen in particular.

She smiled at Polly.

"I doubt that Elizabeth is prepared to entertain visitors today, and the hour grows late,

but please tell my brother's messenger that we will visit tomorrow.”

Preferably when the new baby was asleep.

Georgiana was thrilled for Elizabeth’s safe delivery, but wanted little part of raising the child.

Much like her opinions on marriage.

She and Kitty were quite in agreement on that point; men were nice enough to dance with for half an hour, but their appeal quickly faded when compared to withdrawing with other young ladies for tea and conversation.

If Wickham had not proven himself an entirely disgraceful example of the species, the Gifted Second Sons of the Kingdom were apparently making a concentrated effort to portray the entire male half of the species as utterly unappealing!

Oh, there were a few exceptions, of course.

Georgiana could never think ill of her brother or cousin; one did not stand shoulder to shoulder against the forces of Darkness for so many years with one they thought badly of.

Mr Bingley had always been an object of admiration; kind and good-natured, even when he couldn't journey half a day without attracting trouble of some kind.

The soon-to-be Young Mr. Bennet, too; intelligent and quietly competent, might have been a possibility, had he not fallen for Mary like a ton of bricks.

They were also all related to her, by birth or marriage, and quite happily attached to someone else.

Kitty had spoken of her desire to settle down in a cottage or townhouse with someone who was content to be a fellow spinster.

Georgiana knew of her own matching desire not to marry or raise children, but was it enough for a life together?

Georgiana had a house, and as much as she liked Mrs. Annesley, there was quite an age gap, and Georgiana missed the company of people closer to her age, rather than the twelve years between her and her brother, or the six that stretched between Elizabeth and herself.

Jane and Elizabeth, her nearest sisters in location, if not in age, were married women, part of a sphere that Georgiana had little interest in joining, and newly mothers.

While she doubted that they would ever stop being Warriors against the Darkness, they had cares and concerns that Georgiana would never be able to relate to.

Sitting down at her writing desk, Georgiana began composing perhaps the most important letter she would ever pen.

My Dear Kitty,

If she has not already written to tell you, Elizabeth was safely delivered of a son only a few hours after I received your letter, and at the time of my writing was quite well.

I believe the delighted parents have resigned themselves to the continuation of family tradition, though I have not yet been advised of what his full name will be.

Elizabeth will not hear of any of her children being named George, not after Wickham and that rather disastrous encounter with Sir George Portman, even if other, perfectly fine people have shared the name.

My brother favours Alexander, on the basis that no one else in the family has claimed it yet, and his heir will thus not be subjected to confusion or demeaning pet names.

I imagine I can hear you laughing, even across the many miles that separate us, and I long to see you again in person.

I will be travelling with my brother and Elizabeth for Mary's wedding, and cannot wait for our reunion at that time.

I purchased Mrs. Radcliffe's latest gift to the world only this morning, and put it in aside in favour of your letter.

(Please take that as a compliment to yourself and my eagerness to have your company, if only in the written word, rather than a complaint!) I shall begin reading it tonight, so that I may share my opinions in my next letter.

Perhaps, after the wedding, you might come and visit me in Derbyshire? Discussing books is ever so much easier in person, and with Mrs. Annesley's presence and our brothers not five miles away, you would hardly be unprotected.

(Not that either of us needs such protection, but the argument may be useful in swaying your parents.)

I will write again soon, and eagerly anticipate your reply.

.

Georgiana Darcy.

Sanding the ink dry, Georgiana folded and sealed the letter, setting it aside.

No doubt her brother would be sending a letter south tomorrow, with news of Pemberley's heir, and Georgiana's letter could join it.

Picking up the newest novel by Mrs. Radcliffe, Georgiana settled in to see what Kitty was so excited about.

A little over an hour later, Mrs. Annesley startled and nearly dropped her sewing when Georgiana shrieked and dropped the book, catching it before it could fall to the floor and bend the pages.

The older woman pressed a hand briefly to her heart as Georgiana found her place again.

"I dread to think what you and Miss Catherine might be like together, rather than forced to compare your reactions by letter."

Georgiana did not respond immediately, immersed in the novel's climax.

Mrs. Annesley did not seem to expect a response, anyway.

Still, she could not prevent her mind from wandering.

What would it be like, if Catherine accepted her invitation? They'd had great fun at Longbourn with dramatic readings, and skits of this or that scene from the books they read.

There had also been afternoons where they were merely quiet together, engaged in their own activities.

Georgiana looked forward to finding out.

A Long-Awaited Proposal

As Lydia Bennet's nineteenth birthday draws near, she remembers a promise made more than three years ago, in a tiny boat crossing from France to England...

At the age of fifteen, Lydia Bennet had fallen in love.

How could she have resisted? She had been raised on her mother's tales of handsome officers in red coats, and Jasper Fitzwilliam - Baron Netherfield, now, and just as she had finally become used to calling him 'Mr. Fitzwilliam' instead of 'Colonel Fitzwilliam'! - had fit every ideal she could have dreamed.

As they grew more acquainted, she discovered him to be kind, honourable, steadfast and intelligent.

Perhaps he was not the most handsome man Lydia had ever seen - that honour that still belonged to Orpheus, one of the Continental Warriors against the Dark - but his charming good nature made up for it, and his looks were greatly improved by smiling.

Thus, Lydia endeavoured to make him smile as often as possible.

There was a warm feeling in her chest whenever she had the opportunity to watch his eyes brighten and his worn face soften, to see his military bearing relax in laughter.

Even if it did result in increased competition from the other hopeful young Hertfordshire ladies, the result was worth the effort.

Lydia fancied that she knew Lord Netherfield as well as anyone not directly related to him might.

Before she was halfway to her seventeenth birthday, she had fought at his side against all manner of foes, and they had gone on an undercover mission posing as a married couple.

Thank heaven that had been on the Continent, where they knew almost no-one, and Lydia's reputation could not have been ruined for the ruse!

During their journey home, he had confessed to admiring her, and also that he would not marry a woman younger than nineteen.

He had asked her if she was willing to wait that long, and they had both promised that if they found someone they liked better in the meantime, they would not hold back for the sake of a perceived obligation.

Lydia had been exposed to a greater variety of society, since her secret mission, than her youth had previously afforded her.

She had been permitted to accompany her sisters for the Season that Georgiana and Kitty had reluctantly subjected themselves to in exchange for being taken seriously in their stated desire to be spinsters together.

House parties at Pemberley and Stonewall had brought her into contact with any number of Gifted young - and not-so-young - men.

The steady trickle of those who travelled to Longbourn to seek Matthew's assistance with a research project or some other matter contained ladies as well as gentlemen, but the point remained.

Some of those men introduced to her had been handsome.

Others had been charming.

Some had even seemed to be genuinely interested in Lydia herself, and not just her sisters' connections or the chance to establish a line of Gifted descendants.

None of them were Jasper Fitzwilliam.

Even when they were undercover as a married couple, he had been nothing less than honourable and respectful of her.

He openly admired her skill in both combat and magic (the latter away from unenlightened ears, of course).

He treated her like an adult, not a child to be petted and protected, but someone who had their own mind and was capable of using it.

Lydia sometimes wondered if he knew how rare a trait that was in the average man.

Rarely a day went by when Baron Fitzwilliam did not call on Longbourn, or issue an invitation to join him for tea at Netherfield.

With barely more than a month before her nineteenth birthday, Lydia had been attempting to determine how best to broach a certain topic.

On the journey home from France, the now-Baron had said that he would not offer for a lady younger than nineteen.

As her birthday drew ever closer, with no mention of their past promise, Lydia wondered if he remembered it.

Two years had done nothing to dim her regard, but could he say the same?

Today, Lydia drove the pony trap to Netherfield, with Mary as her chaperone.

Under normal circumstances, Lydia would have preferred to walk, but Mary and Matthew had made the announcement that Mary was expecting her first child only yesterday, and Mama would not hear of her over-exerting herself.

Baron Netherfield welcomed them heartily, much to his Butler's annoyance.

The poor man's duties and sense of propriety was forever at odds with Jasper's ingrained self-reliance.

As a mere friend and sister of his cousin-by-marriage, Lydia couldn't really tell him that he should let his visitors be announced.

Perhaps in the future...

A maid brought in a tea tray, and the pleasantries were quickly dispensed with.

Mary took a plain ginger biscuit - apparently pregnancy brought stomach troubles.

"You spoke of planning something when you called for tea yesterday.

Have you had any new developments?"

Jasper smiled, glancing at Lydia.

"I plan to host a ball in a month, on the 20th of June.

Will your family be available?"

That was the day after Lydia's birthday, when there would be a dinner in her honour, but she did not think that Mama had anything planned for the following day.

Mary's eyes narrowed ever so slightly over her teacup.

"I do not believe we have any commitments that day."

Mary and Lizzy both had very arresting stares, when they chose to use them.

Lydia was almost envious, for the Baron quickly elaborated.

"In truth, it will be the first social event that I host as a Baron.

I would welcome any assistance or advice you might feel able to provide."

With his newly-increased rank, there might be an expectation that the expense of the refreshments and decorations increase to match, but this was the country, and he was a former soldier.

The local guests would not mind a little austerity, Lydia was sure.

She said as much, and was rewarded with another smile.

It was a fine day outside, and after Lydia's third glance out the window, Jasper stood up.

"Mrs. Bennet, would you and Miss Lydia care to view the gardens?"

Mary tired more easily these days, now that she had entered her fourth month, and had never much cared to spend more time outdoors than she could avoid.

"Perhaps at a later date, but I am sure my sister will be safe in your hands, as long as you stay within view of the window."

At some point in the last month, the gardeners had added a trellis arch, currently blooming with honeysuckle.

Lydia closed her eyes, inhaling the sweet scent of flowers.

She opened again to see Lord Fitzwilliam watching her, and blushed lightly.

He patted her hand, nestled in the crook of his arm, reassuringly.

"I'm glad that you are still able to find joy in the little things.

It is refreshing."

They resumed walking, and Lydia considered his words.

"Do you struggle to do so? I have heard of soldiers becoming consumed by battle memories..."

He waved his free hand.

"Less so now, but whenever I find myself falling into melancholy, I think of the joy you find in everything, and my spirits are lifted."

Turning one way would take them into the ornamental maze, but then they would have to deal with Mary coming out after them to fulfil her responsibilities.

Jasper clearly had the same thought, because he continued their circuit around the flower beds.

"In truth, there is a certain matter I have been hoping to speak to your father about, and a question I wish to ask you.

Two questions, really, but asking the second will depend on your answer to the first."

The events of the past several months rearranged themselves in Lydia's mind.

Baron Fitzwilliam did not pay so much attention to every one of his neighbours, nor was he particularly ostentatious.

He had been courting her, but quietly and without fanfare, attempting to determine if his attentions were still welcome.

For all her newly-gained maturity, it was clear that Lydia could still be a touch unobservant at times, at least when the Supernatural was not involved.

Hope blossomed within her, and she beamed at him, bouncing a little.

"Then please, ask the first one."

He guided them in a turn along the roses.

"Have your affections changed since our trip to France three years ago?"

Lydia shook her head.

"Not in the slightest; you are still the only man I can envision myself married to.

Have yours?"

He smiled, and appeared like a man ten years younger.

"Not at all; you are still the most admirable and formidable young lady of my acquaintance.

So, to my second question: May I speak to your father for his consent, before I request your hand in marriage?"

That was a rich compliment, especially from anyone who had encountered Lizzy.

Papa had become more involved as a parent in recent years, as teaching Matthew required him to leave his study more frequently, but Lydia wondered if he saw her as anything more than the silly girl she had once worn as a mask.

"I hope he will welcome you, but you should be prepared for some teasing first."

Papa was rather disbelieving at first, but gave his blessing and agreed to wait to tell Mama until the day of the Netherfield Ball, which would now double as an engagement party.

Lydia's sisters were returning from Derbyshire for the occasion, too.

They had their own lives and responsibilities, now, but it was kind of them to make the effort, especially now that the journey involved travelling with young children.

Elizabeth and Mr. Darcy were the first to arrive, with little Bennet Alexander Darcy, and sharing a carriage with Georgiana and Kitty for convenience.

Jane and Mr. Bingley arrived the following day, two days before Lydia's birthday, with Felicity Elizabeth and the newborn Charles James Bingley.

Lydia was fond of children, but she didn't have much experience interacting with them until they were old enough to be interesting and hold up their end of a conversation.

She expressed this to Jasper, while they were overseeing the preparations for the ball,

and he nodded sagely.

"The curse of being the youngest, I'm afraid.

Darcy and I were at school when Georgiana was born; it took some time to learn how to interact with her."

Finally, someone who understood! "Jane was fortunate; she experienced the four of us, and our Gardiner cousins, before she had children of her own.

Even if little Charlie seems to do little but cry."

Jasper laughed "He is not the only one.

Mr. Nichols nearly wept with joy when I promised to let him announce all of the guests.

He has not stopped praising your influence to the rest of the staff since."

Lydia could not help the giggles that escaped her.

"Then I hope that none of them will object overmuch to a new Mistress of Netherfield."

Lydia's sisters, advised of the announcement that would be made at the Netherfield Ball, had purchased a lovely new dress of sky-blue silk, for Lydia's birthday.

Mama and Papa gifted her a string of pearls.

Jasper, as he had for each of the last three years, gave her a dance manual from countries she had never been to.

It suddenly struck Lydia that this was the last birthday she would spend with Longbourn as her home.

True, she would live only a few miles away, but the distance of a transition did not make it less noteworthy, and tears welled up in her eyes.

She attempted to hide them by enthusiastically embracing the gift-givers, but Kitty saw through her, as she always had.

Lydia's nearest sister offered an understanding smile.

"It is overwhelming, is it not, to know that your life is about to change, and there can be no return to the person you once were?"

That compassion deserved an extra squeeze.

"It is not apprehension, really.

Merely...

nostalgia, I suppose, but for something that has not happened yet."

Georgiana patted them both.

"You are not alone in that, but the point of nostalgia is to look back on something fondly, while enjoying the present and future."

Lydia smiled at them both, and the dinner resumed.

No one had been so indecorous as to actually cry out in dismay when Lord Netherfield announced his engagement to Miss Lydia Bennet, but it had been a very

close thing.

"Mr. and Mrs. Argeiad, and Miss Argeiad."

It took several second for the words to properly penetrate, over the music and the thrum of conversation.

Many heads turned to look at the owners of the unfamiliar names, anticipating new society.

Lydia abandoned her conversation with her sisters and rushed over to greet her old friends as they descended the stairs.

"How lovely to see you all again!"

Pandora smiled and returned her enthusiastic greeting with a sedate but expressive smile, keeping her voice soft as Jasper joined them.

"With Napoleon's defeat, it was...

suggested...

that we make ourselves scarce for a while.

Apparently, we rather un-nerve the local Kings."

Jasper sniggered under his breath.

"That's certainly one way to put it.

In any case, you are more than welcome here, instead, and not only because you just

won me a rather large bet."

Lydia gave him a disapproving stare, but the pot among Jasper and his brother officers had been an extremely tempting one.

Fortunately, Orpheus only laughed.

"On whether Argead was our real name, on whether Pandora and I were married, or on how long it would take before an extensive vacation was suggested for us?"

Jasper clapped him on the shoulder, "The first two.

I lost on the third count; you outlasted my wager by a full month."

Tiresias hid a giggle behind her fan, "Or rather, the French government did.

They'd made up their minds some weeks before, but only mustered the courage to approach us recently."

Jasper beamed, "Oh, excellent, I can make a case for having won, after all.

I'm fortunate that I didn't bet on whose name you took, or I should have lost that one."

Orpheus waved a hand.

"My family name was a touch too distinctive to risk making openly known, but there are Argeiads from Thessaly to the Ottoman Empire.

My true name is Nicholas, and this is my wife Alexandra, and her sister Sophia."

Lydia happily tucked her arm into Jasper's, rejoicing as the last missing piece of the puzzle slotted into place, and their chosen family was complete.

"Then know that you are welcome here, for as long as you choose to stay."

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Source Creation Date: August 9, 2025, 6:46 am

Mary and Matthew Bennet - the less flashy ways of romance and fighting evil.

Mary Bennet was the least romantic of her sisters, but that did not mean she was entirely indifferent to the longing for love.

It just meant that she was practical.

She'd been only just nineteen when they battled the Malevolence of Netherfield Park for a second, and final, time.

She was the third sister, it was only proper for her to wait for at least Jane to marry before she considered her own prospects.

Elizabeth, too, but the second Bennet sister had always sworn she would only marry her equal, and for a long time, it had been difficult to imagine anyone meeting that criteria.

Having now been witness to at least one of the couple's sparring matches, which usually ended with one or the other pinned to the nearest flat surface, it was easier for Mary to see them as equals, despite their opposite personalities.

Mary's own criteria for a spouse had begun and ended with someone who was willing to appreciate and respect her intelligence.

There were other desirable qualities - handsome, kind, well-established - but an interested man who didn't talk down to her seemed like enough of a miracle to ask for.

Best not to push her luck.

Her older sisters marrying had changed everything.

Suddenly, Mary was the oldest daughter at home, taking on many of the responsibilities that Jane and Elizabeth had.

With not one, but two daughters married to wealthy men, Mama's nerves made less frequent appearances, and with Lizzy on her wedding tour, Papa ventured out of his study a little more often in search of company.

Georgiana had all the benefits of education that money could buy, and was happy to pass them on to her new sisters.

In some ways, perhaps it was fortunate that the Bennet sisters had no brother.

Perhaps it was the age gap between them, or the nature of Georgiana's Healing Gift, but her brother and cousin had sheltered her as much as it was possible for any Gifted to be sheltered.

Mary didn't blame them for it, but the Bennet Sisters had never been able to rely on the protection of a man, and it had shaped them in ways that, in the balance of things, Mary thought was for the better.

It just meant that Colonel Fitzwilliam took some adjusting to.

After someone took him aside to inform him that Lydia's height was not commensurate with her age, he had restrained his initial interest, treating the sisters who currently bore the name Bennet much as he did Georgiana.

Mary didn't think that Lydia had been particularly pleased about that, but she had

restrained herself admirably.

Then they went first to Brighton in pursuit of Wickham, and from Brighton to London, and for the second time in less than a year, Mary's life was turned on its head.

Lydia was headed to France on a secret mission - and would bear it better than Mary or Catherine ever could - and for the first time in her life, there was someone who truly saw Mary.

Someone who not only saw her, but liked the view and wanted to know more of her.

Perhaps, Mary thought, she should ask for miracles more often.

The sound of hoofbeats drew her attention, and a slight smile quirked at her her lips.

All three of Matthew's older brothers had the same idea for a wedding gift: to buy him a good working horse now that he actually had a chance of inheriting an estate.

The increase in cost for stabling and feed was not a great one, and there were far fewer arguments over the breakfast table about the horses being needed for the carriage or the farm.

Breaking the entail was not yet a sure thing, but Colonel Fitzwilliam had been correct in that Mr. Collins was in no hurry to leave his beloved Noble Patroness.

Now, it was just down to working out the details of how he would be compensated for agreeing to give up his presumed inheritance.

Doubtless Charlotte would be displeased, once she discovered that she would not be the mistress of Longbourn after all, but she had always claimed to want no more than

a husband and a house of her own.

Matthew entered, his face nearly consumed by a broad smile.

Heedless of the dust on his clothing, Mary ran into his arms.

"It is agreed?"

He nodded.

"Yes, and thank Heaven that fool will never be master of Longbourn.

He'd have it run into the ground within a year."

The statement on Mr. Collins' intelligence could mean either good or ill.

"What did he ask?"

Her soon-to-be husband rested a hand on her shoulder.

"Three thousand pounds, which he agreed to pay in instalments.

He didn't even specify how much per payment, or over how long, until I specified a minimum payment of three hundred a year."

Longbourn brought in two thousand a year, a little over twelve hundred of which went to taxes, expenses, and the paying of servants and hired hands.

The rest, in years prior, had vanished to purchasing rare books and keeping six women in the latest fashions in the hope of attracting husbands.

Battling the Forces of Darkness was one thing; resisting a determined Mama was quite another.

Mary ran over the numbers in her head, now that there were only four women at Longbourn, and only two of them unmarried.

"With a little economy, that should be manageable.

My older sisters think they are being subtle in their plans to purchase my trousseau, so that is one expense saved, and Lydia and Kitty no longer need to be feigning flirtation and purchasing a new ribbon every day."

There was also Kitty's repeated protests that she had no intention of marrying, and Lydia having her eyes firmly set on a very specific red coat...

but both of those were matters for the future.

Matthew looked down at her with warm eyes.

"Longbourn's profits could increase with more direct management, meaning no insult to your father.

There is nothing saying that we cannot pay Mr. Collins off sooner, only that he must be paid at least three hundred pounds per year."

Papa had resisted improving the estate because he didn't believe that his family would have seen the results of such improvement, as long as he lacked a son.

Never mind that improving the estate might have allowed for an increase to his daughter's dowries, or putting money aside to re-build the dower house to ease Mama's fears about the Hedgerows.

Now that one of his daughters could inherit, perhaps he would be more amenable.

Mary smiled at the man she had not expected to fall so deeply in love with.

"Well then, shall we explore some agricultural journals and formulate our arguments to convince my parents? Speaking to the local nature guardians is best done at night, when we can sneak away quietly."

Matthew laughed and offered his arm, leading the way to Papa's book room.

Time passed.

Mary became Mrs. Bennet the younger, with Matthew taking her name for inheritance reasons.

Lydia and Colonel Fitzwilliam returned from a successful mission, and news came of Napoleon's exile to Elba.

Kitty shared a London Season with Georgiana, then moved with her to live in Lambton.

Lydia remained in Hertfordshire with Mary, but was at Netherfield as often as she was at Longbourn.

Papa was happy to hand the day-to-day management to a younger man, and Longbourn began to prosper.

Often, Mary accompanied her husband on his daily rides of the estate, both due to her familiarity with her home - Matthew's family hailed from the North of the kingdom, and the difference in growing seasons was appreciable - and because it afforded them a chance to talk in private.

"Colonel Fitzwilliam is beginning construction on a Hunting Lodge at Netherfield.

Has he spoken to you?"

Matthew nodded as he gazed over the grain fields.

"Yes, the workers arrived yesterday, and he approached me to start looking for Gifted to handle the upkeep of the safehouse."

Colonel Fitzwilliam often said that a good Officer knew how to delegate, and Matthew had worked in Logistics and Personnel for years.

"In that case, I know that we spoke of rebuilding the Dower House at Longbourn, but with the Hunting Lodge, is it needed?"

Mary's husband made a thoughtful sound.

"I think that we will still want it one day, because a single house cannot have two mistresses, but it is perhaps less urgent."

Mary could certainly agree with that.

Mama would protest being superseded far less if she had another residence to preside over, and while hunting lodges were adequate for short stays, only Kings built them to host more than a few people at a time.

"Then perhaps our focus should be on paying off Mr. Collins, and then we can turn our attention to additional safe houses.

Mama does not notice the servants beyond seeing that her needs are met, and a hunting lodge only has so much room."

Matthew smiled down at her.

"Quite, and too many people in each other's pockets risks attracting malevolent spirits.

Have we any engagements this evening? The local guardians still prefer to speak to you, or at least have you present, when we speak."

Adjusting to the abrupt change of topic, Mary recalled no obligations.

They were on their way to ensure that there was no lasting damage to the tenant cottages from the recent minor flooding.

"I believe the river shifted its banks slightly with the spring rains, which means renegotiating boundaries again."

They resumed walking, and the first of the cottages came into view.

"I suppose it could be worse.

At least the local guardians are willing to talk through a mediator, instead of going straight to blows."

Mary briefly wondered if the exasperation in her husband's voice was aimed at other, less amiable guardians, or the Warriors against the Dark that he dealt with more frequently.

They could not all be as sensible as Mary's family, after all.

Slowly but surely, Safe-houses began to spring up on Estates across the realm.

Matthew's journeys to London became, more often, journeys to nearby estates for consultations.

Mary was delighted to accompany him, whenever she was not needed at Longbourn.

Improvements had to be consistent in order to last, and on an estate without a dedicated steward, the work never ended.

There were crop rotations to plan, workers to hire, and endless debates with the elder Bennets over necessity vs extravagance.

Besides, after having missed her courses for the second month in a row, Mary wanted to be certain before she made any announcements....

Likely, a potential grandchild was the only reason Mama was restraining herself.

"We are hardly in need of Austerity measures, Mary! Longbourn is still the foremost family of the area, we cannot present as paupers!"

Mama would always have a flare of drama to her.

It was clear to see where Lydia and Lizzy inherited it.

"Remaking dresses instead of buying new ones is hardly the mark of a pauper, Mama.

Besides, the sooner Mr. Collins is paid off, the sooner we can be rid of him for good!"

Mama threw up her hands, flouncing over to the divan.

"I should have prevented you girls from sneaking out so often.

A bit of frivolity would do you good, instead of being so somber and determined."

Kitty and Lydia had enough frivolity for the entire... Mary swore that she could feel her thoughts halt, like a speeding carriage being suddenly introduced to a tree.

Mama had never so much as hinted... "You knew?"

Mama gave her an arch look and a tiny smile.

"A mother of five daughters does not sleep lightly, my dear girl.

You'll discover that yourself soon enough.

Oh, the number of nights I lay awake until I heard you all come home..."

Mary blinked, trying to wrap her head around this new concept.

"You never said anything!"

Mama smiled sadly.

"I followed you, the first night.

You were all so young, and Kitty's health was so delicate, I knew she should not be out, whatever the rest of you did.

A mist sprung up out of nowhere, and I chased shadows in circles for what seemed like hours.

I feared I would have been lost for good, until I heard your voices and followed them home."

Why could Mama not be having this conversation with a sister who always had a ready answer, instead of ponderous Mary? "Then..."

Mama shook her head.

"I knew then that whatever was happening, it was not for me to see.

But I could wait up, and be sure you returned safely, and be ready to wake the house for search parties if you ever did not."

That certainly showed Mama's ever-present Nerves in a new light! Mary touched her expanding waistline; being Gifted followed Bloodlines, when there was a bloodline to follow.

The Blacks had never had children, and Miss Morris had never married.

Matthew agreed with her theory that whatever Powers granted their Gifts, did so out of pragmatism and practicality, simply choosing those best suited.

Did Papa know? He had been genuine in his belief that Mary's younger sisters were the silliest girls in all England, but the Longbourn Library, separate from his book room, had contained a number of unmarked tomes of Lore and magic... well, that could be Mary's project of the coming months.

Mama might not have known specifics, but she could make excuses for an emergency.

Gifted who did not have to always hide who they were, who had family who supported them, were a better option than those who were forever having to invent excuses for their sudden absence.

Would Mary's children be Gifted, or had the Darkness been sufficiently banished to spare them that?

Well, whatever happened, would happen, whether Mary wanted it to or not.

She and Matthew would face it together when it came, as steadfast as they always were.

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Napoleon's reaction when it is revealed that Colonel Fitzwilliam and Lydia are gone.

His new champions were late to breakfast, and to be shown off for those who had not been present for their arrival.

Napoleon drummed his fingers against the arm of his throne, there was only so much time in a day, and he needed to plan how best to use his magicians against the eternal thorn in his side.

“Send a servant to go fetch them.”

A merry voice instantly set his teeth on edge.

“I'm afraid the lovely young couple won't be coming.

In fact, they are quite some distance away, and I'll be joining them shortly.”

A woman walked through his court, the crowds parting before her like the Biblical Red Sea.

She wore a simple dress that glimmered with magic just like young Mrs. Wickham's had when she demonstrated her transformation for him, and an infuriating smirk.

With an effort, Napoleon unclenched his jaw and managed to speak calmly and politely.

Emperors given to sudden fits of rage tended not to last long, according to the history

books.

“I did not give them permission to leave. Miss...?”

She bowed, but not even a fool could think it respectful.

“Pandora. I see your confusion: you thought that you actually had a say in all this! No, my dear fool, the cards were always in my hands.”

Napoleon roared with fury, and his guards finally caught on and charged at the insufferable woman.

She waited until they were almost within arm’s reach, then darted toward a window.

A soldier lunged, and she dodged, brushing against a freestanding pillar that held a large ornamental vase.

The soldier was not so quick, and collided with the pillar, knocking the vase down, where it rolled across the floor, impeding pursuit.

By the time his guards had picked themselves up, the woman was out the window.

By the time they reached the window, she was out of range for an accurate shot.

"Rouse the army! I want her head on a pike!"

In every loss, every thwarted plan, every failure, enough digging revealed a single name in common: Pandora.

A fitting name, for the amount of trouble she brought with her.

Never the main actor, but the metaphorical distant butterfly whose fluttering wings caused disaster elsewhere.

A bit of supposedly secret information dropped in the last ears that Napoleon wanted to hear it.

A subtle but mostly rational change that just so happened to stymie, block or out maneuver one of the Emperor's plans.

Now, this.

His prize, his trump card to win the war, snatched from him in the dead of night! Behind it all, this slip of a woman who dared to laugh at him even as she ruined his plans!

At least there was one small consolation: Pandora was Gifted, which meant she had required supernatural means to stay ahead of his spies all these years.

Small wonder they had never caught the wretch until now.

Napoleon went to change into his uniform while his forces were mustered.

That would change.

She had only a few minutes head start this time, and fresh tracks.

Napoleon had Cavalry.

Pandora's sister met her at the edge of the woods that Napoleon and his court used for Hunting, mounted on the swiftest horse they had.

“They got out?”

Tiresias nodded.

“Orpheus got them to the Bay.

They’re on the way back to England now.

How far behind is your pursuit?”

There was a cloud of dust on the horizon.

Even at Napoleon’s most infuriated and vengeful, an army could only move as fast as its slowest member could be ready.

“About an hour, I believe.”

Tiresias squeezed her sister’s hand lightly.

“I’ll run on ahead and make sure the trap is set.

Be careful; I want to see you again at the end of all this.”

Pandora smiled, and promised nothing.

They’d lost too many people to fall victim to overconfidence now.

From her sister’s sad smile, she knew it too.

Miss Lydia and Colonel Fitzwilliam had been essential to bait the trap, but the trap itself was the culmination of years of espionage work.

Of risks and losses and ceaseless danger.

Of planting the right rumours and making sure they reached the correct ears, to convince Napoleon and his generals that the only reason England had lasted so long was the presence of the Gifted in their armies, to stop State Persecution and convince the emperor that he needed Gifted of his own.

Careful counter-intelligence to keep the presence and movements of the Sixth Cotillion obscured.

Napoleon had defeated Cotillion forces in several battles earlier in the year, but now, he was too enraged to wait for scouts to report that he was outnumbered.

If something went wrong now... but that sort of hopeless thinking was just as dangerous as overconfidence.

Pandora smiled in what she hoped was reassurance.

“I shall see you on the other side.”

Her sister galloped away, vanishing so fast that Pandora suspected the horse wasn't entirely mortal, either.

The young Gifted who had provided the mount had been far too silently smug about the steed's breeding.

Pandora wasn't sure she wanted to know.

Pandora waited, and prepared a spell.

One that would increase her speed and stamina temporarily, allowing her to outrun

any horse.

She would keep ahead of Napoleons forces, even at full gallop.

But there was a cost.

Even among the first Gifted, the Demigods of legend and myth, there came a point where even the mightiest fell.

The human body had limits, and while magic could suspend those limits for a time, the price always came due.

For the rest of her life, Pandora's legs and lungs would be limited from what they were now.

Pushed beyond their natural limits, they would never regain full function back to the peak of health.

How that manifested was yet to be determined.

Pheidippides, who first used it to run from Athens to Sparta and back, had died shortly after.

Others who had used the same spell and bothered to write down the effects claimed that it varied depending on fitness, how far and fast one pushed beyond their limit, and the power they commanded.

One person's debility was a small price to pay for the sake of peace, and Pandora would pay it gladly.

She finished the spell as the first Cavalry riders caught sight of her, her costume vivid

against the green and brown of the woodland.

Projecting her voice to carry, Pandora laughed with an assurance and gaiety that she did not feel, and ran with a speed and endurance that would come at a cost.

It was over a year before she could walk unaided.

A year in which Napoleon had abdicated, been exiled, attempted to re-take his throne and failed miserably.

Honestly, could a spy-mistress not turn her back for a minute without everything going to pieces? Pandora cast aside her walking aides a mere day before Napoleon abdicated for the second time, which she was a touch annoyed about.

Orpheus, steadfast at her side in disability as he was in health, only laughed at her grumbling.

“He has never bested you before, my hope.

Perhaps he abdicated rather than lose again.”

If that were the case, the little Tyrant should have stayed on Elba.

Pandora said as much, and smiled as her husband laughed.

“I imagine that the new regime will be anxious to reward us with a long holiday as far from them as possible.

Proven opponents of a past regime are not popular.”

Tiresias entered the room with news, “Colonel Fitzwilliam is a Baron now, and has

finally stopped pestering me for advice on how to woo that Dancer of his.

Just in case you needed suggestions for a destination.”

‘Dancer’ had been the codename they had assigned Miss Lydia Bennet, however temporarily.

Great Britain was further away than the other countries of the Sixth and Seventh Coalitions, and several of the Field Generals of the Army could vouch for Pandora.

For a very brief moment, Pandora wished that she’d remained disabled a few more days.

“We had better get packing.

I’d like to be ready to leave when a vacation is suggested.”

They Also Serve, Who Wait In Vigil

A Peek into what was happening at home while Lydia and Colonel Fitzwilliam were in France.

“May I say that I do not like this?”

Elizabeth Darcy, formerly Bennet, had never handled the feeling of helplessness well.

In the past, she had rarely had to.

She and her sisters fought as a team, and Elizabeths own skill with a blade ensured that she could rarely be described as helpless.

Perhaps for a few months the year before she came out, when she broke her leg falling out of a tree and had been confined to gentle exercise until even gentle, loving Jane - another who was more comfortable helping than being helped - was ready to shake her for being “the most insufferable patient in the history of medicine!”

The expression Jane wore now reminded Elizabeth quite a lot of those trying months, despite her increasing waistline.

“If it makes you feel better, you may, for all the good it will do.

We are all worried, Lizzy, and none of us like the idea of Lydia off in France.”

Elizabeth's husband, as solid and taciturn as she was quick and witty, raised an eyebrow.

“Only Lydia?”

He could not be any easier than she was, with the cousin who was as close as a brother also absent.

“Well, one presumes that the Colonel can take care of himself, from what you have told us.”

Mr. Darcy crossed the room to take her hand and stroke it gently.

“Then trust that he can also take care of Lydia, especially with the assistance of the Continental Triad.”

Elizabeth paused, trying to put her feelings into words.

"This is the first time I have had to entrust my sisters' safety to others.

Even in Brighton, we were within an easy distance..."

He nodded, his dark eyes understanding.

"...and now they are far away, with miles of enemy territory between them and any additional aid that they might summon, and there is nothing to do but wait."

She supposed that he must know the feeling.

Colonel Fitzwilliam was not in the Home Guard, and knew Pandora and her team personally, which meant that he must have been deployed to the Continent at least once before now.

"Forgive my impatience, my dear."

They were surrounded by their sisters, so he felt no discomfort in wrapping an arm around her, as he might in a more public or unfamiliar setting.

"You were never made to bear your feelings stoically, my dear.

I was not precisely calm at Jasper's first deployment, either."

Georgiana piped up from her seat near Kitty.

"Oh, he was a black cloud for simply days, and I was little better, moping all over the place.

Papa was quite put out with both of us, saying that we could not always be together, and Jasper must be allowed to make his own way."

Kitty giggled.

"It is difficult when one's parents do not understand the additional dangers, is it not?"

Georgiana nodded, "Aunt and Uncle Matlock, and Aunt Elena, were the generation before us.

I don't remember Aunt Elena, our Papa's sister, very well, she died not long after Fitzwilliam and Jasper left for Eton, but Aunt Matlock's Gift was why the Fitzwilliams approved of an impoverished Baronet's daughter marrying an Earl's heir."

This tradition of first sons and maiden names really could get confusing.

However did the Darcys' maternal relations manage when the maiden name was something like Longbottom or King? A pet name or second name was always a possibility for everyday use, but a surprising number of things required a legal name.

"I will approve Bennet as a middle name for our future son, my dear, but I shall insist on his Christian name being something sensible that he will not curse us for in the future."

If their children were Gifted, the risk of curses became a lot more substantial, and Elizabeth preferred to earn her enemies honestly.

Being cursed because of a naming tradition did not qualify.

Her husband laughed, and the tension was lightened, just a little.

Elizabeth would worry until her sister was firmly back on English shores, but there was little to be done about it now.

"Oh, Mr. Bennet, Lydia invited to a house party, how wonderful! And Mary being

courted! Did I not say that this holiday of theirs was a good idea?"

Mr. Bennet, reading the newspaper in the parlour, rather than his book room, made a vague noise of husbandly agreement.

Longbourn was very quiet, with all five daughters elsewhere, so quiet that he found himself seeking his wife's company, rather than remaining in his book room, which was too quiet without the distant sounds of Elizabeth's laughter, Mary's music efforts or his youngest's chatter drifting through the walls.

His wife of almost a quarter-century continued reading the letter, keeping up a running commentary.

"I knew Jane and Lizzy marrying so well was sure to throw their sisters in the way of eligible gentlemen!"

Eligible, perhaps, but if they were gentlemen worth the name, he should have heard something about it from the young man in question, rather than secondhand through letters between mother and daughter.

Mrs. Bennet often let her excitement get ahead of her.

"I shall not count it as certain until I receive a letter or a visit from the gentleman in question."

His companion in solitude laughed.

"Oh, Mr. Bennet, how you tease me.

There is at least one letter waiting for you to finish the newspaper."

Lowering the paper, Mr. Bennet noticed that she was correct; two letters lay on a small tray on the side table.

One bore Elizabeth's distinct hand, she had been writing with book recommendations from local authors from each stage of their tour.

The other was an unfamiliar script in a more masculine style of writing, eschewing the flourishes common to the literate upper class in favour of a scholar's hand.

That was to say, mindful of the economy of space and paper and very accustomed to making notes.

Well, whoever Mary's suitor was, she had good taste in admirers.

Mr. Bennet affected a lackadaisical attitude toward his estate and parenthood, but his indifference came not from laziness, but uncertainty.

He'd known something was different about his daughters, in the same way something had been different about his Great-Aunt Isabella Bennet, who had died at a great age when he was at school, leaving behind a full three trunks of fantastical journals, books on folklore and mythology and Astronomy, and on the subject of magic.

His daughters had read those books frequently, with a seriousness unsuited for fairy stories.

Mr. Bennet was a heavy sleeper, but no one had ever reported his daughters sneaking out at night, or fears of witchcraft like those that had plagued the Kingdom and Continent a century earlier.

He noticed that some mornings his wife came downstairs looking as though she had slept not at all, but she was a woman of high nerves and limited understanding.

Mrs. Bennet was not cruel or vicious, but she could never grasp that the world did not function according to what she saw as making perfect sense, and others viewed as absurdity.

What could she have seen and understood that he did not? Mr. Bennet's father had taught him about crop rotations and managing an estate, but how did one manage what they had never known to exist? Perhaps it was time to start taking a more active interest in the lives of his younger daughters.

For lack of better options, he opened the letters.

"Elizabeth writes that Mary has had her fill of travel and will be returning home soon, while Kitty asked to stay with the Darcys for their annual visit to Kent.

They anticipate Lydia's house party to be of at least six weeks duration."

There had been an undercurrent of worry in Elizabeth's letter, but nothing so great that she felt the need to commit her concerns to paper.

He reached for the second letter just slowly enough to make Mrs. Bennet wiggle in her seat in anticipation, then opened that one, too.

"A Mr. Crawley introduces himself and requests my blessing to court Mary.

He is the fourth son of a Baron -" He ignored his wife squealing with excitement with the ease of long practice.

"- and until now has had a career in the Home Office."

Mrs. Bennet nearly swooned.

“A Lord’s son and an officer! La, who would have thought it of Mary? I shall write to her at once.”

Mr. Bennet had always preferred conversations to letters.

It was so easy to misinterpret words on a page, without the ability to parse someone’s reactions in person.

Mrs. Bennet would tell him what Mary wrote in reply, and he could speak to her when she returned.

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The Darcy/Bingley wedding tour, prior to the younger sisters' request to meet in Brighton...

Long habit had honed Elizabeth's ability to wake in an instant at any sign of distress.

So, when a sudden cry came from the other occupied room in the Camden Place townhouse, the covers were thrown off and she was halfway out of bed before she registered Jane's soothing tones.

Beside her, her husband was sitting up, awake and alert, but not alarmed.

"Battle dreams.

My cousin had them often, after returning from his first tour of duty."

In the next room, Bingley's voice was becoming calmer, and Elizabeth tried not to listen.

Instead, she lay back in her husband's arms and tried to relax.

"I wished we were older and more experienced the first time we battled the Malevolence, but sometimes I think it was a blessing."

The experience had shaped her younger sisters with a maturity that they might not have gained otherwise for some years yet.

It had made Jane and Elizabeth wiser in ways they would not have experienced in a

small country town.

Elizabeth remembered the visions that the Malevolence had shown her, of women seduced and abandoned, men cheated out of fortunes for a game, and children maimed or worked to an early grave.

The innocent murdered for the crime of being an easy target, and businesses who cared nothing for how their profit was made, as long as the owners became rich.

She had her own nightmares in the weeks and months following that battle, and was glad that her younger sisters seemed not to remember it.

Fitzwilliam nodded slightly, resting his head against hers, "Georgiana was young to her powers, too.

I am glad that she remembered little of the first battles she had to heal us from."

Jane had some talent at healing wounds not of the body, but of mind and spirit.

How much worse would be the wounds of two young men from battles that were physical as much as magical? The Bennet sisters had relied heavily on Jane's gift and Lydia's ability to dance shields, on Kitty's rune stone traps and Mary's encyclopaedic knowledge.

Elizabeth was beginning to realise just how fortunate they had been in each other.

Elizabeth turned her head to kiss her husband's cheek, and then there was little need for further conversation.

The next morning, Elizabeth greeted her sister with a smile.

"Is your maid still complaining about country girls rising with the dawn."

Jane giggled softly.

"I believe I have made it clear that she only needs to bring a tray if Charles's Valet does, since the purpose of breakfast in bed is hard to accomplish alone, and only one tray is inadequate for two people."

Elizabeth burst out laughing.

For all her sweetness, Jane was not one to be idle, and while both couples enjoyed the occasional lazy morning, a lifetime of breakfasting with family was a difficult habit to break.

Filling a plate from the sideboard and listening for footsteps, she lowered her voice.

"How is Charles?"

Jane joined her at the sideboard.

"The Nightmares were worse at Netherfield.

It is filled with reminders of the day he was possessed and tried to kill those he loves."

Well, that Elizabeth could do something about, though Mama would be unhappy at the idea of Jane moving away.

"When we return to Pemberley, Fitzwilliam and I will see if there are any estates available.

My new brother seems easier in the North.”

The wedding tour had begun in Scarborough, meandering through the Lakes District and down to Lyme and then Bath.

Oddly, Scarborough, where Mr. Bingley had grown up, though his grandfather’s factories had been located in a more inland town, had been almost entirely without incident, barring some restless spirits from one of the many battles that had been fought nearby.

It was not until they began to venture south that Mr. Bingley began attracting supernatural attention again.

Elizabeth had a few theories, but absent speedy communication with Mary and her books, and between one thing and another, she’d had little time to ponder them into a solid thesis.

They ceased the conversation as their husbands joined them.

Jane poured tea for everyone, and Charles smiled at her, the shadows under his eyes receding a little.

“Are you looking forward to seeing the Roman baths, my dear?”

Jane beamed, “Oh, yes, I have heard a great deal about them, but never expected the chance to see them for myself!”

They had been to the Pump Room, which adjoined the Roman Baths, a few times, especially since it was a popular venue for concerts, but Fitzwilliam was no more an enthusiast of crowds of strangers than he had been in Hertfordshire, and they were on their wedding tour, so they rarely lingered after the performance.

This early in the day, the streets were busy, but the tourists and the fashionable set were still waking, so the Baths were not as crowded as they would become later.

That allowed the small party of four the opportunity to explore the old stones without fighting for elbow room.

For all their military might, the Romans had an eye for beauty, too.

There was a masculine-seeming face, wreathed in and partially formed out of oak leaves.

Firmly human faces, likely of Ancient Gods, though without any of the symbols that usually accompanied such portrayals, it was hard to say which was which.

Mr. Bingley made a delighted sound as they came to what might have once been a fountain.

“A Shrine!”

A nymph shrine, or some local minor deity? Elizabeth looked at the stagnant waters of the bathing pool.

“I hope whoever made the shrine managed to release the water spirits before this place fell to ruin.”

A female voice, cold and carrying the unpleasant sensation of being doused in filthy marsh water, answered her.

“In fact, they did not.”

The creature that appeared before them, standing above the waters of the bathing

pool, could have been a woman, but her skin was grey and wrinkled, stretched tightly over bone like a famine victim or a bog mummy like the one documented by the Countess of Moria some thirty years ago.

Elizabeth weighed up the chances of being able to transform without being noticed, and didn't like the odds.

So much for a peaceful morning.

Thank goodness for Jane.

“Good morning.

Is there anything we can do to ease your trouble?”

The nymph paused for a moment, staring at Jane in disbelief.

“You, no. But him...”

To all of their surprise, she pointed at Mr. Bingley.

“You may be a guardian of cold peaks and rugged shores, not my beloved spring, but the will is there.”

Charles bowed to her, “Forgive me madam, but I have no magical power.

I will help however I may, but I do not know what to do.”

The nymph scowled, “Two years ago, my spring dried up when the source found a different channel.

A man came and restored it, but it was not rededicated to me as is proper, and in the past year there has been a taint from the nearby coal pits.”

Charles squinted at faded carvings of Latin inscription.

“This... is this the dedication? I can certainly recite it, but will that be enough?”

The nymph bared her teeth in what, on a less desiccated face, might have been a smile.

Elizabeth glanced at Jane, who shook her head slightly: the nymph had no ill-intent.

“From you, it shall.”

He recited the words, and a brief pulse of magic shimmered across the pool.

It briefly enveloped the nymph, too, who reappeared perhaps a touch too thin, but full-figured, with a full head of dark curling hair.

She smiled briefly at them, then dove down into the waters.

Charles leaned against the wall.

“That went better than I expected it to.”

Fitzwilliam’s eyes were fixed on where the Nymph had vanished.

“Perhaps we should move on to the museum.

An angry deity in their own shrine is not an encounter I wish to have twice.”

Jane, on the other hand, was frowning thoughtfully.

“Vice in moderation can be sibling to Virtue, and any Virtue in excess may become Vice.

The nymph was meant to be a protector, but when the waters dried up, protectiveness became fury.”

Elizabeth was used to her sister’s half-formed thoughts; late night conversations were full of such things.

“You mean to say that you think it not a curse, that Charles attracts trouble, but a blessing gone awry?”

They walked toward the doorway.

Fitzwilliam acting as the rearguard.

“Perhaps not even a blessing, specifically.

Do you recall the nymph calling him a guardian?”

Elizabeth looked over her shoulder at her husband.

“Yes, ‘of cold peaks and rugged shorelines, not my beloved springs’.

What does that... my dear?”

He hesitated.

“There is a great deal of our history that has been lost, and much more that is

speculation rather than fact.

There is a long-held theory, but it is not something to discuss in such a public place.”

Jane glanced around.

“There is a tea shop across the street; a ward against eavesdropping will not be noticed there.”

A few minutes later, they were settled at a small corner table, a pot of tea and a platter of bath buns between them, attention riveted to Elizabeth’s husband as he explained.

“There is a long-held theory that being Gifted follows certain bloodlines when it can, and chooses the person most suited when it cannot.

For nearly as long, there has been debate about whether the potential resides in those of such bloodlines who are not Gifted, even if it never activates.”

Elizabeth nodded, “My Great-Great-Aunt Isabella left behind journals.

If you read between the lines, she was the first to battle the Netherfield Malevolence, and she wrote of a ward of the family who eventually married her brother, who inherited Longbourn.”

Charles frowned lightly, "My family only left Scarborough when Grandfather built his factories and my sisters and I were sent away to school.

If we have such a history, I don't know of it."

There was a kind of rootedness that came from a family living on the same land, knowing that one's ancestors were buried in the same land that would eventually hold

one's great-grandchildren.

Their time in Scarborough had been peaceful, and it was only when they left that trouble started appearing.

The possibilities were considerable, though Elizabeth would need her books before she could start testing the hypothesis.

Fitzwilliam clapped his friend on the shoulder in an attempt at comfort.

"It is only a theory.

Come, let us have another subject: how are your sisters."

Miss Bingley seemed to have convinced herself that the Possession at Netherfield was merely a very vivid dream, before she left to stay with the Hursts.

Charles and Jane both smiled.

"Louisa wrote that she is engaged to a Baronet.

A new title, but as the second holder, he is in need of a wife with a large dowry, and Caroline claims to be happy as the future Lady Ramsworth."

No doubt she also liked being the highest ranked of her siblings.

Still, if a husband and a title kept her occupied and away from Pemberley, Elizabeth would wish Caroline Bingley all joy of her new life.

Two letters came in the next morning's post.

One was from Colonel Fitzwilliam, a short note informing them that the Militia was decamping from Meryton and would soon be in Brighton.

The other letter was from their sisters, and rather more detailed.

Elizabeth passed the letter to Jane.

“Brighton is not so very far from Bath, is it?”

Jane hummed distractedly as she read.

“No, and we are starting to draw attention in how frequently we return from outings rumpled.”

Charles winced, and Jane rested a hand on his arm.

“It is no criticism of you, my dear.

Merely something that the Gifted must be aware of, to avoid exposing themselves.”

Elizabeth smiled fondly, “I have lost count of the number of times we had to climb in through assorted windows to avoid Mama seeing the state we were in.

In our younger years, I was often the distraction, since my fondness for climbing trees was well-known.”

Her new brother laughed, “Did you outgrow the habit, or just get better at repairing your appearance before returning home?”

Jane smiled.

“Neither.

We learned to transform earlier, since our normal wear remains in the state it was before the transformation.

I’m surprised it took us so long to think of matching our transformations to what we were wearing that day.”

Elizabeth shook her head.

“I am not.

Lydia was always the most fashionable of our sisters, it is fitting that she should think of it.”

Mr. Darcy gave a small smile.

“I shall write to some people I know in Brighton and make the arrangements.

I will miss the quiet, but I confess to missing my sister more.”

Charles smiled.

“I confess to missing my sisters hardly at all, but would welcome seeing yours again.

The Militia is to decamp in a week, shall we send a carriage for the same time?”

They agreed that would be the most suitable method of transportation, and planned to spend their last few days on relaxed walking tours that would let them come close enough to certain areas to sense any stirring darkness, but not start any fights that could not be quickly finished.

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Lydia's homecoming did not end at the door of Longbourn.

Longbourn was a familiar sight, but it seemed somehow smaller, after almost three months away visiting the larger world outside of a small market town and even smaller village in Hertfordshire.

Mama came running out the door, ecstatic to see her, while Papa and Mary followed at a more sedate pace.

"Lydia! Oh, my darling girl, how I have missed you! Come, you must tell me everything! Oh, and my sister Mrs. Phillips has invited us to tea tomorrow, with Mrs. Bond and Mrs. Long, but I insist on hearing it all first!"

A subtle hand signal from Mary indicated that she wished to hear the unedited version later tonight, after the rest of the house had retired.

In the meantime, Lydia was happy to relax in her mother's warm embrace, and think up a suitable replacement for her actual, rather harrowing adventures.

"The house party was simply delightful! There was a great deal of French art, for you know that is the most fashionable right now..."

She paused as Papa embraced her, for the first time in... longer than she could conveniently remember.

Had something happened, or did it merely require being alone at Longbourn for him to realise that he missed his children? Another thing to speak with Mary about later,

she supposed.

Lydia pulled herself out of her shock as Mama sat them down and poured tea.

“I’m very sorry to hear that you were disappointed in your host, but I am sure there will be others.”

Papa, rather than retreating to his book room, joined them.

“I am convinced that young ladies being crossed in love is no tragedy, for it gives them attention and something to gossip over, and at the end of it they are wiser to the kind of partner they desire.”

Well, then let Wickham be her lesson in the dangers of a charming face.

Lydia would not denigrate Colonel Fitzwilliam in such a way.

“I was not so greatly attached as all that, but I mourn the person I thought I would come to know, if that makes sense.”

Napoleon had, through newspapers and rumours from returned soldiers, over the course of a war that had lasted longer than her own lifetime, been built up into a kind of bogeyman, larger than life, and somehow more than mortal.

The reality had been something of a let-down, and Lydia wondered if all the people destined for the history books might also differ between fantasy and reality.

Perhaps that was unfair to Napoleon, but at the present moment, Lydia did not feel much like being fair to him.

Papa nodded, “It does, and it shows me that you have grown up in your time away.

I look forward to getting to know this new you.”

He rose and returned to his study, either heedless of or discomfited by the flabbergasted expressions of the women around him.

Mama was less astonished, but still took a moment to remember the teacup halfway to her lips.

"Now, Kitty, you must tell me of your adventures with Miss Darcy at Pemberley.

It would not do to give my sister Phillips an incomplete description."

Kitty smiled, "Well, Aunt Gardiner has already told you of Lambton..."

Much later, Lydia took her valise, which she had kept by her side, up to her room.

The footmen had already taken her trunks, most of which had remained with the Darcys while she was absent, upstairs, with the contents unpacked or taken by the laundry maids to be washed.

Quickly checking that the door was locked, she opened it, lifting out the fine muslin underthings.

Mary gasped at the vivid silk gowns beneath were revealed, the jewelry parure, complete with delicate tiara resting on top.

“Lydia, what on earth...”

Lydia could not fault her astonishment.

“They may have been part of the French Crown Jewels, I am not certain, but they

were a gift, so I brought them with me.”

Kitty spluttered in equal amazement.

“A gift? Those?”

Lydia had been almost as shocked when she received them, so she could extend some patience.

“The dress, too.

The emperor wanted to show us off, which meant jewels and clothing worthy of a royal court.

Pandora told you of how none of the French Gifted would work for him, after their fellows died.

Perhaps he hoped to buy our loyalty."

Her nearest sister examined one of the dresses, a rich blue that would look rather nice on Mary, but didn't quite suit Lydia's colouring.

"Well, he certainly wasn't one for half measures!"

Lydia very much hoped that Pandora and her family were all right.

Despite their assurances, the middle of a war zone was not a safe place to be.

"He was not.

Mary, we would need to take up the hem a little, but would you like this one for your

wedding dress?"

Mary hesitated for a moment, her desire to avoid notice warring with the inclination of any bride to look unforgettable.

Mary had always been one of the most vocal of the sisters about the need for economy, after all.

"Thank you, Lydia, that is very generous."

Lydia caught herself before she could say anything that Mary would take as demeaning, like it being less suspicious if all of them had lovely new dresses that could be explained as gifts from their brothers-in-law, instead of just Lydia alone being singled out in finery well beyond what the Meryton dressmaker could accomplish, or that the blue dress made Lydia appear washed out, anyway.

"Kitty, would you like the yellow day dress?"

It was a pale yellow that reminded Lydia of sunshine, rather than the kind of bright citrus yellow that, in Lydia's opinion, looked good on no-one, and would flatter her sister quite well.

Kitty looked at her in a way that suggested she was not fooled, but they had never been very good at hiding things from each other.

It was nice to know that some things had not changed.

"Thank you, Lydia.

It will go very nicely with my green shawl."

Aunt Phillips had not changed, either, as lively and doting upon her nieces as she ever was.

Mrs. Bond and Mrs. Long, the premier gossips of Meryton after Aunt Phillips and Lady Lucas, were also unchanged in essentials, though Mrs. Bond was a trifle more smug than usual, having recently married off one of her daughters.

Mrs. Long had only sons, none of whom seemed inclined to distinguish themselves in a race to the altar, and her nieces were newly Out, leaving her on the hind foot in the eternal competition between Mamas.

Aunt Phillips beamed at Lydia and Kitty as she finally took her seat after making sure everyone was well supplied with tea and treats.

“It is good to have you girls home, though I am surprised your older sisters did not see you home.”

Lydia could not help smiling in return, something about Aunt Phillips’ enthusiasm was infectious.

“I am not, given their current conditions.

The Midwives advised against excessive travel, and Derbyshire to Meryton is no short distance.”

The matrons gasped, and Mama could not have looked prouder if she were the one expecting.

Lydia selected a Queen Cake, and relaxed in her chair.

If matters followed the usual course, she could expect them to be pre-occupied with

that for at least a quarter hour, long enough for Lydia to finish her tea and at least one more cake.

It was good to be home.

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Book 3: A Surfeit of Sisterly Affection

It was startling, how swiftly Lydia's life had changed from dull monotony to a series of novel new experiences.

First, Netherfield Park being let at last.

Then, a suitor for Jane who wasn't an utter bore.

and utterly undeserving of Lydia's eldest sister.

Mr. Bingley (who actually looked past Jane's beauty to the person underneath) was swiftly followed by the arrival of the Militia, and the shattering of Lydia's fantasies about the suitability of an Officer husband.

For Mr. Wickham to have run up so much debt in only a few months, he certainly would not be able to afford a wife in any degree of comfort.

and Lydia had seen quite enough of slums the one time she accompanied Aunt Gardiner on one of her Charity visits in London.

Besides, Jane was married now, so the main attraction of marriage - the ability to go first before all her sisters for once in her life! - was no longer the option it had been.

Even if Lydia were to marry Mr. Denny tomorrow, Jane would still go before her.

The idea of marriage had not entirely lost its charm; Even if Mary was engaged, she

was not married yet, and Lydia might still go before Kitty and Lizzy, if she found a husband in the next year or so.

But the death of one dream led to the realisation of another; Lydia was finally being permitted to travel beyond the bounds of Hertfordshire, and not merely to the confines of Uncle Gardiner's house in Cheapside!

True, she was not the only one of her sisters travelling, or soon to do so.

Lizzy was visiting Charlotte in Kent, and had a promised trip to the Lakes with Aunt and Uncle Gardiner later in the year to make up for enduring Mr. Collins for a month or more.

Mary was the only sister remaining in Hertfordshire, busy with plans for her own wedding and the establishment of a schoolhouse.

Kitty was absorbed in some new field of study, and disinclined to have to wait weeks or months for news of Sir Jasper.

Though nothing had been offered when Lydia left Longbourn, Kitty was also hopeful of Mama orchestrating an invitation for her to join Sir Jasper and his family on their annual visit to London.

Lydia wished her closest joy of it, touring dusty art galleries and museums, while Lydia would be enjoying Scarborough and Scotland.

Yes, she would be in the company of Mr. Bingley and Jane, who had promised to be far less lenient than Mama if she tested the limits of acceptable behaviour, but she would be travelling! Besides, they would be meeting Mr. Bingley's investors and business partners, who would be far less in need of liveliness and casual flirting than a soldier was.

That was what the men of the Militia had claimed, at least, in between describing their far-away homes and the places they had been stationed.

Having realised just how few of them had seen genuine combat, Lydia was beginning to doubt their justifications of 'the grimness of war, banished by flirting with a pretty girl'.

Lydia had always tailored her behaviour to what the people around her were most receptive to; a gossip, a capable dance partner, flirtatious compliments.

If her holiday was to come at the expense of socialising with businessmen like Uncle Gardiner, Lydia could emulate Jane for the duration.

Sir Jasper Longbottom's estate lay some miles outside of Scarborough.

Not so very far as the crow flies, but the winding road seemed to circumnavigate the entire estate before reaching the front door!

They had been invited to Dinner, and then to stay overnight, but three mares went into foal over breakfast, so the Bingleys and Lydia departed early, rather than oblige their hosts to entertain them.

Lydia had seen foals born before, and it was an awkward, messy process that she wanted as little to do with as possible.

They arrived in Scarborough shortly after luncheon, late enough that Lydia's stomach had been grumbling for the last several miles, but early enough that Mr. Bingley had suggested pressing on rather than stopping at an inn.

Bingley house was a townhouse equal to any of those in Grosvenor Square, or the woodcuts of the Royal Crescent in Bath, if one discounted being located several hundred miles north.

What must the interior look like? No sooner had the carriage drawn up outside, than footmen were opening the doors and a staff of at least ten were lining up outside to greet them.

Lydia thought that staff were supposed to wait outside to greet the family, but perhaps that was only for country estates.

Besides, it would have been unreasonable to have them waiting outside in the chill of early March.

Mr. Bingley handed down first Jane, then Lydia herself, and greeted the Butler and Housekeeper cheerfully, before performing the introductions.

"This is my dear Jane, the new Mrs. Bingley, and her youngest sister, Miss Lydia Bennet.

My dear, this is Mr. and Mrs. Fields, who have been the most capable stewards of Bingley House that anyone could wish for."

Mrs. Fields curtsied, "I will be most happy to give you a tour, but would you care to refresh yourself first? Have you eaten already?"

Jane smiled warmly.

"If you could have wash water sent up to our rooms with the bags, it would be greatly appreciated.

No need for full baths at the moment.

We did not stop for lunch, if something simple could be arranged for perhaps half an hour from now?"

Mr. Bingley nodded.

"No need for anything fancy, Mrs. Fields, Aunt Claire has invited us for dinner this evening, but I hoped to invite the Board to dine with us tomorrow or the day after."

Mrs. Fields smiled, seeming to restrain herself from patting him on the head.

That seemed to be characteristic of Housekeepers who had watched One grow up; Mrs. Hill often treated all the Bennet sisters as though they were fresh from the Nursery.

"Mrs. Bingley, I will have some Menu suggestions available for you to review after the tour."

She gestured to one of the maids.

"Madeline will act as Abigail for you and Miss Bennet, while you are here."

That was a blessing.

Susan, who had performed the duty at Longbourn, did not travel well, and Maggie, who had taken on the duty at Netherfield, had fallen ill just before their departure.

Jane and Lydia had been making do with maids at whatever Inn they stopped at, but a proper Abigail would be wonderful!