

THE PERCIVALS: THE BENNETT BENEFIT

By Eboni Dunbar

Anna Maria Percival, widow and Diva extraordinaire, woke abruptly as the coach passed over a particularly rough patch of road. She reached instinctively for the blade under her skirt but Eleanor stayed her hand. Anna Marie looked up and found her lover laughing at her.

"And what has you so amused Mrs. Percival?" Anna Maria said, sitting up.

"Forgive me, Mrs. Percival but you are most amusing," Eleanor said. "You are ready to vanquish even the most dangerous of potholes."

"I have half a mind to take you over my knee."

"Gladly I shall go," Eleanor said, her smile quirked mischievously.

Anna Maria turned away, out at the afternoon scenery. She touched her hair briefly, grateful that she had spent so much time pressing it that morning. She never liked to arrive in the country with too much of her natural nappy hair; it seemed to put the English gentleman and his wife on edge, regardless of the fact that they had begged her to come.

Eleanor grabbed her hand, pulling it away from her hair and pressing her lips to it. Anna Maria watched her lover carefully kiss each of her fingertips through her gloves. Eleanor raised her gaze and they locked eyes.

"Mrs. Percival, there is Hampshire House," called the carriage man and Anna Maria sighed. Eleanor kissed her fingers again.

"Would that we had more time," Eleanor said. She let Anna Maria's hands drop.

Anna Maria looked out the window at the old stately Hampshire House. She recalled the details of Mr. Andrew Bennett's letter, remembered the florid loops of his handwriting and the fear written beneath the polite communication. She steeled herself for the task ahead of her.

The carriage pulled into the drive and Anna Maria fixed her hat, taking another moment to check her reflection in the window. The wife had no idea why she was here, but she was most excited to have the Diva in her home.

Mrs. Andrew Bennett rushed out of her home as the carriage pulled up, followed by the butler and three well-dressed maids. Anna Maria threw a smile on as the carriage driver opened the door. He helped her step out and she opened her arms to Mrs. Bennett.

"Mrs. Bennett, I cannot tell you how happy I am to be here,

your home and lands have provided the most charming scenery for our arrival," Anna Maria said, talking quickly as she kissed both of Mrs. Bennett's cheeks. The woman seemed utterly shocked, but Anna Maria took it in stride, being sure to press her cross against Mrs. Bennett's bare skin.

"Mrs. Percival, you honor me with your coming. My husband has been singing your praises for years. Oh my! That was quite a good joke don't you think? Is that gentleman your guard?" Mrs. Bennett said.

Anna Maria turned her head, looking Eleanor over as she spoke in hushed tones to the Butler. She did look fine in her dark navy suit with her long cane. Her skin was darker than Anna Maria's was and she tended to intimidate without opening her mouth. She'd plaited her long hair into two neat braids and those she'd tied back into a low ponytail. Anna Maria smiled.

"That is my sister-in-law and traveling companion, Mrs. Alexander Percival. You have no idea how much trouble two beautiful women get into when they are on the road alone. Mrs. Percival is always glad to dress in men's clothing to keep young men from trying something untoward," Anna Maria stage whispered to Mrs. Bennett, gently patting her hand. The other woman's blue eyes went wide and she nodded enthusiastically. Here was a woman who would make this whole thing easy, bright enough to take her hints but not so bright as to look for deeper meaning.

"I can only imagine," Mrs. Bennett said. "Is Mr. Alexander Percival related to your James Percival?"

"Oh yes, brothers. Sadly, both our husbands have returned to the Lord," Anna Maria said, turning Mrs. Bennett toward the house. They walked slowly, their feet crunching over the pebbles of the drive.

"How truly sad! It must be such a hardship for you," Mrs. Bennett said. Anna Maria tightened her grip on Mrs. Bennett's hand when the other woman tried to pull away.

"If we did not have each other it might be, but Eleanor is such a comfort to me. Forgive me." Anna Maria dabbed at her eyes with her handkerchief while looking around at the large foyer, noting the wide-open curtains and the light pervading the room.

"Oh no, of course, my dear. We hope you will enjoy your stay with us. Will you take tea or would you like to go up to bed and rest?"

"Oh I would love some tea after the long ride. Will I meet Mr. Bennett this afternoon or this evening at dinner?" Anna Maria said, allowing Mrs. Bennett to lead her into her sitting area. Mrs. Bennett waved to one of the maids who disappeared.

"He's in his study, would you mind waiting a moment and I'll see if I can get him to join us. Parker? Go and fetch Mr. Bennett," Mrs. Bennett said, indicating another maid who had followed them into the sitting area. "My poor husband can be so

tied to his--"

She stopped as the man in question strutted into the room.

Anna Maria straightened her back, holding out her hand for Mr. Andrew Bennett to take. He took it and kissed the back of her hand. She smiled sweetly at him as he stood back to his full height, noting the way he surveyed her form and figure. She hoped Mrs. Bennett didn't notice. Eleanor slipped into the room, moving to stand behind Anna Maria. Mr. Bennett's eyes flicked over to Eleanor for a moment before he returned his attention to Anna Maria.

"Darling, Mrs. James Percival and Mrs. Alexander Percival," Mrs. Bennett said.

"Mrs. Percivals, such a pleasure," Mr. Bennett said.

"The pleasure is entirely ours, Mr. Bennett," Anna Maria said.

"Darling?" Mr. Bennett said, dropping her hands. "Would you mind fetching the program we had made up for this evening? I'm sure Mrs. Percival would like to see it."

"Oh of course, Darling! What a splendid idea. Parker—" Mrs. Bennett said, turning again to the maid.

"Darling," Mr. Bennett's voice was sharp and Anna Maria flinched at the tone. "I would rather you bring it."

Mrs. Bennett smiled just as warmly as she had been, though Anna Maria noticed the slight glistening in her eyes. She gave a

quick nod to her husband and then to both Mrs. Percivals.

"Will you excuse me a moment?" Mrs. Bennett said before she left the room.

"She's a lovely woman," Anna Maria said, sitting down. Mr. Bennett sat down on the sofa across from her, his back perfectly straight. He smiled but it was tight and spare. "Now, Mr. Bennett, tell me about your brother. Henry I believe?"

"Yes, Henry Bennett. You must understand, Mrs. Percival, if I had not known your husband personally I would not believe any of this," Mr. Bennett said.

"Of course, Mr. Bennett. I understand completely," Anna Maria said, though internally she sighed. "Please tell us what happened."

Mr. Bennett looked up at Eleanor. "You're involved in this...family business too?"

Eleanor bowed her head slightly but said nothing. He stared at her for a moment longer before he returned his attention to Anna Maria. "Fourteen days ago, my brother and I went for a ride in the forest. I'll admit to behaving badly; we were racing and I had been losing and I bet him that he could not beat me through a particularly dark stretch of wood. It was rather late but I thought...I've never heard of the sort of monsters James used to speak of here. It never occurred to me--"

"It rarely does," Anna Maria said with a smile. "Please

continue."

"Yes, well. I bet him that he couldn't beat me and of course we took off racing. I beat him through the wood, coming out into a clearing at the other side. He never did. He didn't return to our home that evening. In the morning, I took a few men to search for him, and we found him in a heap in the center of the wood. He was... We were certain we would lose him. The doctors didn't believe he would survive the day, let alone the night. However, as darkness approached, his strength increased and it became clear he wasn't going to pass on. For three days, he seemed to get worse during the day and improve in the night. Then on the fourth night he came down to dinner, looking a bit pale but otherwise as though there was nothing wrong. He asked for meat and, though we advised him to take it easy, he ate it. He was almost immediately sick and went back to bed. The following morning, our family dog was found mauled. That was when I wrote you. I knew the signs. James always made sure his friends did," Mr. Bennett said.

Anna Maria turned her head so that she could look up at Eleanor. To the average person she looked utterly still, her back straight but not rigid, her hands resting behind her back. Only Anna Maria could see the change in her lover, the tension in her bicep, the way her eyes surveyed the man before them, searching for signs that he had become a familiar of the

creature that had once been his brother. Then slowly she met Anna Maria's eyes. Anna Maria turned back to Mr. Bennett.

"We'll know soon enough if he is changed. Does he take his meals with you?" Anna Maria asked.

"Oh no. He always has some excuse or another about why but he shows up for after dinner socializing. He did seem interested in hearing you sing," Mr. Bennett said.

"He won't be able to resist the music. You can leave the whole thing to us. But I want you to understand there is only one option if he has changed," Anna Maria said.

Mr. Bennett's already thin lips thinned further but he nodded. "'Death is the only answer', that's what James said. I know what you'll have to do and I am prepared for it."

Anna Maria smiled, standing as Mrs. Bennett and the maid returned. She kindly oh-ed and ah-ed over the program, noting that Mrs. Bennett had even included the date, June Twelfth, Nineteen Hundred, as though she thought it would be some sort of keepsake. Mrs. Bennett's excitement was almost charming. Anna Maria sipped tea while asking Mrs. Bennett the sort of inane questions that bored country gentleman's wives were used to. When Anna Maria could take no more of it, she very sweetly asked about their rooms.

"Of course, you must be exhausted from your journey," Mrs. Bennett said, getting up and leading them through the house.

Anna Maria was not surprised to discover that she had been given one of the smaller guest rooms. At least she had the benefit of Eleanor in the room next door. Anna Maria quickly dismissed the maid Mrs. Bennett had offered her, ignoring the woman's wide eyes and shocked expression. She meant no offense, but she did need privacy.

Anna Maria removed her own clothes from her case, hanging them easily while she waited. She took out her second cross, the less austere one that she genuinely preferred, then her kit filled with all the things she would need: holy water, garlic essence, and wooden stakes. Finally, she lifted her photograph of her husband from the case and a second one of the four of them, taken shortly before the boys had died. James and Alexander Percival had been extremely close as children and as hunters even closer. Anna Maria had fallen in love with James the instant he set foot in the little pub in London where she'd been singing. She'd fallen in love with Alexander shortly there after. Eleanor had come to them by chance and Alexander had made things easy by marrying her and bringing her more firmly into their complicated life.

Anna Maria ran her fingertips over her three loves before she set the photograph down. Just outside the door, she heard the floor creak and waited to see who it was.

Eleanor didn't knock, she simply slipped inside, closing

and locking the door behind her. She turned and took Anna Maria in, her eyes going to the photograph and then back up to Anna Maria's face.

"Alright?"

"Better now," Anna Maria said. Eleanor smiled and crossed the room, sitting down at the little vanity. "What did you find?"

"Parker is quite chatty once you get her going. The maids haven't been allowed to clean his rooms since he's been ill. He's in there all day, with particular orders not to be disturbed. His valet has been dismissed. Big brother has been keeping him on the payroll just in case," Eleanor said, her American accent centering Anna Maria. She could not forget that she was the Diva tonight; she needed to mind her manners and speak in a way acceptable to the guests of the Bennetts. But Eleanor's accent, short, clipped, and full of slang, made her relax.

"Any debts for either of the Bennett boys?" she asked, moving on to her other gowns. "New mistresses?"

"Do you want a hand?" Eleanor asked, pulling out a cigarette.

"No, love, but if you're going to smoke do it at the window," Anna Maria said.

Eleanor stood, opening the window and holding her cigarette

out of it. She lit it and took a quick drag before holding it out again. "Nothing as far as Parker knew. I'll have a look in big brother's documents this evening during dinner."

"Don't miss your meal. It can wait until the entertainment."

"You won't want me watching you? They may not let me sit at the table but I can at least be nearby."

"No, love. He's new-made and hasn't had any interaction with his maker. He should be more than easy to handle. I'd rather you focus on whether we have two Bennetts to remove from the household or only one. If I can help it, we'll manage everything tonight and be able to enjoy a country holiday."

"You make it sound easy." Eleanor took another drag of her cigarette and then put it out, putting the unused end back in her jacket.

"Everything is easy with you by my side," Anna Maria said with a smile. Eleanor rolled her eyes but crossed the room, pulling Anna Maria into the softest, sweetest of kisses.

"Get a little sleep, my heart," Eleanor said.

"As you wish," Anna Maria said.

She took off her travel gown and lay down on top of the bedclothes. She listened for a while to the sound of Eleanor hanging up her other gowns. Then she slept.

When the dinner bell rang, Anna Maria made her way down the long staircase carefully. The front door was opened wide and several of the guests were standing just inside, having their coats and accessories taken. She felt attention shift to her and smiled warmly. Mrs. Bennett turned to look up at her.

"Oh here she is! The diva Percival," Mrs. Bennett said, clapping her hands. Some of the guests played along giving light claps here and there but many of the men simply stared.

"It is an honor for me to meet you," Anna Maria said with a slight curtsy.

She allowed Mrs. Bennett to introduce her to each of the couples first and then the oddly large group of men that made up the rest of the party. She did her best to put names to faces but knew that she would struggle with it by the end of the evening. Names and faces were Eleanor's purview. They went into dinner when Mr. Bennett arrived. He took his wife on his arm and led her into the table. One of the men took Anna Maria by the arm and led her in, sitting her closer to Mrs. Bennett, and she noted it for the slight it was. For all the woman's kind words she hadn't seated Anna Maria in the place of honor beside her husband.

"You have been singing for many years, Mrs. Percival?" One of the wives asked as the first course came in.

"Oh yes, since I was a girl. I did not reach my true

heights until I met my husband," Anna Maria said.

"Mrs. Percival has been a widow these last, is it two years, dear?" Mrs. Bennett said and the men all seemed to sit up straighter. She knew what they wanted of course, the perfect mistress. Pretty, charming, exotic, and with a skill that was not inconvenient. In fact, it might allow the perfect excuse for seeing her.

"I'm so sorry, Mrs. Percival," said one of the other wives. "I do not know what I would do without my dear Dickinson."

"Spend far too much money," Mr. Dickinson said, to a resounding laugh from the group.

"Was your husband from Africa, Mrs. Percival?" A Captain asked.

"No, my husband was from England. Just as I am," Anna Maria said.

"James Percival attended Harden Academy with me as a boy. Then we both attended Oxford," Mr. Bennett added and Anna Maria sighed. Harden Academy would tell the Captain all *he* needed to know about James, that he was moneyed and that his skin was the acceptable color and that his family were of a certain class. "His brother Alexander did as well."

"And do you live now with Mr. Alexander Percival?" Mrs. Dickinson asked.

"No. My poor brother-in-law has also passed. He followed my

James no more than six months later," Anna Maria said. She could feel the mood heading south.

"Was Mr. Percival a musical man?" One of the other wives asked. Both Anna Maria and Mr. Bennett laughed.

"My James had no talent for music," Anna Maria said.

"He tried the violin at school and broke it merely by touching it," Mr. Bennett added. "And we all begged him not to sing."

"No, my love was not a musician but he loved hunting. It was his favorite past time."

"Was he any good?" Bachelor A said with a roguish smile. "I happen to be quite the hunter myself."

"They were excellent, both James and Alexander. Every kill they attempted they completed. Every one. That, I think, was the problem. James did not back down from a fight," Anna Maria said.

"Is that how they died?" One of the other soldiers asked. Anna Maria nodded.

James had found a small nest of creatures when he'd been hunting alone. Instead of coming home and collecting them, getting all the gear he would need and preparing, he had gone in alone with only a few stakes and a small amount of Holy water. His body had been left utterly broken and barely recognizable. That had set Alexander off. There had been no convincing him to slow down or let himself be helped. He'd found what remained of

the nest and he'd destroyed it, dying in the process.

"Hunting accidents," Anna Maria said.

"I am so looking forward to the singing this evening, Mrs. Percival. Music is such a relief," Mrs. Bennett said. She dabbed at her chest with her handkerchief nervously, her discomfort with the conversation clear.

Anna Maria was grateful for the distraction. They spent the remainder of the meal talking about less sensitive subjects, each of the Bachelors trying his hand at impressing her. They were at least good for a laugh.

The ladies adjourned to the drawing room after dessert and Eleanor appeared with a cup of special tea for Anna Maria. She noted the way the women got silent at Eleanor's entrance and picked up again when she had gone. The group all but ignored Anna Maria now, preferring their polite society and she was happy to prepare herself for what was to come.

Before long, the gentlemen joined them, along with a few other guests who had been unable to join them for dinner. Anna Maria did her best to make small talk and wait for Mr. Henry Bennett but he seemed to want to thwart her intentions to meet him before the performance. She decided to make things easier on herself.

She went to the piano that Mr. And Mrs. Bennett kept, a beautiful instrument that went unused but was well tended. She

played a few notes, enough to get the room's attention before she stood again. Mr. Bennett cleared his throat.

"Dear friends, thank you for joining us this evening," He said. "We are delighted to present to you, the Diva Percival."

"Ladies and Gentlemen, thank you very much for having me here, and for the wonderful conversation. Mrs. Bennett has been kind enough to prepare programs for this evening but if you don't mind, I shall sing a few different songs for you. These are not the most popular but they are my specialty. You may continue your conversations though I will try to mesmerize you. To draw your silence. Are we up for the challenge?"

There was a resounding applause and Anna Maria sat again. All the talk about James made her miss him. She could have had Eleanor or Alexander play if he were still alive, while James scoured the house for Henry. She played the first few notes without thinking and let her voice take up the familiar words:

Here lies my friend

Here lies my keeper

Here lies my heart

Death takes my man

And if I'm lucky

He won't rise

For every man gets only one

Life

*But oh the demon makes a deal
My heart he says that he can heal
All it takes is just one touch
And my love may blush again
But he no friend
With his darkness
He begins again
To take my heart
To twist and break
His soul he'll take
And leave me lonely again*

She repeated the words a second time and glanced up at the group. She could see a few horrified expressions but mostly they were enraptured. She quickly switched songs:

*Once the old man in the dark
Once the night was cold
Once you had your soul
Now you have lost control
Seeking what was lost but
At what cost
You must take
You must take
You must take*

Where is your hope now

This life you lead

Is not a life

It's a balance on the knife

It's a chance

It's a choice

It's your song

This is your voice.

At what cost?

At what cost?

She played for a few minutes, letting her voice rest but feeling her spell falling among the group. Eyes had glazed over and people were truly entranced. If she stopped playing, she would hear a pin drop. She switched songs, picking up the tempo and letting the music take her to its wild and dangerous place. It was time to call the creatures from their hiding places.

Come

Dark ones, come

Here I sing this song to you

Here is such a gift

Come

Dark ones, come

See the blood

Watch it thrum

Through their veins,

In your name

Come and feast

I sing this song to you

The door opened with a heavy creak. She continued to play and sing, but she got her first glimpse of Henry Bennett. He was utterly pale. His dark eyes seemed even darker with the magic drawing him into the room. He staggered forward, as though something were trying to stop him. She continued to play until he stood beside the piano. She stopped playing, standing up and putting the piano bench between herself and Henry, but did not stop singing:

Here you are

I can save you

Now you are

Here with me

So much you given

To live again

Take your taste

Feast my friend

She turned her head, allowing him to see her exposed neck. He licked his lips and surged forward.

Anna Maria pushed the piano bench into Henry's knees, grateful she had forgone her corset though cursing her skirts.

Henry landed with a loud bang on the piano keys and Anna Maria pulled the stake she kept at her bosom out of her dress. Henry stood up, turning his monstrous face on her. His long fangs hung out and he hissed at her, lunging again.

She backed up, ducking to just miss his taloned hands and forcing herself to jump over the guests on the sofa. She pulled her skirt up for better ease of movement and whatever remained of the human man inside of Henry Bennett stopped, entranced by her ankles. Or perhaps by the five stake-carrying garter she wore on her upper thigh.

She kicked him then, under his jaw, sending him back into one of the gentleman who fell over like a rag doll. He stood and snarled, leaping for her.

Anna Maria let his momentum plunge her stake into his heart. He flailed wildly. Anna Maria pushed him backward so that he wasn't on top of her. Henry fell to his knees, still shaking.

She watched, as he died the second time, the last of this false life leaving him. She crossed herself and then pulled out her stake. "Poor Henry."

"Poor Henry indeed," Mrs. Dickinson said.

Anna Maria stood up straight as Mrs. Dickinson stood from where she had been sitting, seemingly entranced. She crossed the room and Anna Maria noticed that she moved differently now, every movement sharp and unnatural. Mrs. Dickinson smiled.

"It was worth it, all this effort, just to hear you sing. Your husband was right," she reached out and ran her fingers across Anna Maria's cheek. "You are extraordinary."

Anna Maria surged forward, punching at Mrs. Dickinson's face but missing. Mrs. Dickinson lifted her knee, knocking all the wind out of her. Anna Maria gasped as Mrs. Dickinson threw her out the window.

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Anna Maria scrambled across the lawn, trying to catch her breath and put some distance between herself and Mrs. Dickinson. Soon the magic would work itself out, the partygoers would awaken and they would find Henry's body and the mess from their fighting. She hazarded a glance over her shoulder and watched as Mrs. Dickinson jumped down from the window.

Anna Maria clambered to her knees and then finally stood, stumbling forward for the maze of the Bennett's garden. She pulled out another stake from her garter and wrapped her cross around her fist. If she got another shot she needed all the power she could muster. Anna Maria prayed that Eleanor was safe wherever she was.

"Now Mrs. Percival, is this anyway to treat a fan of your work?" Mrs. Dickinson called. "Don't you want me to tell you about how your husband died?"

Anna Maria froze. She was lying. Alexander had killed the

nest that had killed James. There was no way this woman was part of it.

"Poor Alexander, thought I was just a poor woman, being bled by the house. He was so naive. I disabused him of that notion," Mrs. Dickinson said. "And then I decided I was tired of hearing about all of these Percivals. Percival this, Percival that. You'd think we were in King Arthur's court."

Anna Maria moved again, as the voice was getting closer. She was being too noisy. If she wasn't careful, the demon beast would find her. She took a deep breath, trying to quiet herself. She was a huntress. She could handle this.

"You and yours took my family from me. So I decided to destroy yours. If it makes you feel any better, your sister-in-law was quite delicious," Mrs. Dickinson said, her voice becoming slightly slurred and more difficult to understand.

If that was true, if Eleanor was dead... Anna Maria stood up straight and made her way to where she could hear Mrs. Dickinson rooting around.

The creature's face had changed, her eyes glowing red and her fangs so long she could not properly close her mouth. Her smile was a vicious snarl.

"There you are. Decided you're ready to die?" Mrs. Dickinson said.

"Decided that you must be," Anna Maria said letting her

polite accent fall. "I mean to end you."

"Let's see how that goes."

They ran at each other.

Talons tangled with stake and Anna Maria thrust her sanctified cross into the creature's cheek. Mrs. Dickinson screamed and Anna Maria hit her again, knocking her to her knees. But the creature would not be brought down so easily. Mrs. Dickinson swept out her arm, knocking Anna Maria onto her back.

Mrs. Dickinson moved too quickly for Anna Maria to get free. The creature straddled her hips and placed one taloned hand around Anna Maria's throat. Anna Maria tried to punch and scratch the creature. She cackled in delight.

Anna Maria's vision blurred, the creature's face going ragged around the edge. Her hands tried to grasp at something, any small thing that might save her now.

You are a Diva, are you not? James' voice in her mind was clear, crisp, and amused. He'd been training her harder than he ever had and if he'd been the enemy he would have killed her. *Your weapon is your voice. If you can use it, do.*

Anna Maria reached up, circling the cross at her wrist to smack the creature in the mouth and burning her tongue. Mrs. Dickinson shrieked, releasing Anna Maria's neck. She allowed herself two big breaths and then she sang, a single piercing

note. The creature pulled away, trying to cover her ears. Anna Maria took a few more breaths and repeated the note, turning over onto her hands and knees and pulling the last of her stakes from her garter.

Anna Maria stood on unsteady legs. Mrs. Dickinson changed back into the kind woman, her face average and unremarkable, if battered and bruised.

"Please...Please...we can make an agreement. We can both live happily. We could both live forever," Mrs. Dickinson suggested.

"God forgive me, I wouldn't make a deal with you with your soul," Anna Maria said. She kicked the woman onto her back and staked her through.

She quietly watched the woman, her second death less violent than Henry's. It was as though the false life had simply left her between one breath and the next. Anna Maria hauled herself up, standing on shaking legs. Gravel crunched behind her and she raised her head, body tensing. Eleanor was running through the garden and Anna Maria felt her knees give at the sight of her lover crossing the garden. She was bleeding from her head but otherwise looked unharmed.

Eleanor fell to her knees, grabbing Anna Maria's face in her hands. Anna Maria winced slightly and Eleanor loosened her grip. "Alright? You're killing me, heart, say something."

"You're not dead," Anna Maria said.

"Of course I'm not. You don't think you'd feel if I was? Like with the boys?" Eleanor said.

Anna Maria sobbed. She wrapped her arms around Eleanor and held her tight. It took a few minutes before she was willing to release her but they both knew they had business to attend to before the magic faded in the room. Eleanor stood first, drawing up Anna Maria with her. Together they made their way back to the house and made quick work of both Henry Bennett and Mrs. Dickinson, Eleanor staying in the garden to supervise the burning of their bodies. Anna Maria changed her gown and applied a healthy amount of make up.

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By the time the magic of her songs had dissipated, Anna Maria was back at the piano and singing the final notes of a less powerful song. The group clapped as though they had enjoyed a full performance and Anna Maria stood, bowing to the group. The murmuring began as soon as people saw her injuries.

"Mrs. Percival! What has happened to your face?" Mrs. Bennett said, jumping up from her seat. Mr. Bennett moved forward as well, blocking the room from seeing her.

"Only an allergy I think Mrs. Bennett," Anna Maria said loudly enough for the room to hear. Then she lowered her voice.

"It's done."

"What's done? Darling?" Mrs. Bennett said. He shushed her but his focus was on Anna Maria.

"And?"

"He's run off with Mrs. Dickinson. I saw them leave the gallery while everyone was focused on the music," Anna Maria said. Mr. Bennett nodded as Mrs. Bennett's eyes bulged.

"I'll talk to him," Mr. Bennett said. He turned and walked over to Mr. Dickinson, stiffer than he had been before. He pulled the other man out of the room. Anna Maria turned to Mrs. Bennett.

"I think I should go upstairs, don't you? Would you ask for someone to bring up some cold water and some meat?"

Mrs. Bennett nodded quickly and Anna Maria made her way out of the gallery, letting the Bennetts handle the aftermath.

They stayed for three days, Anna Maria giving another two performances despite Mrs. Bennett assuring her it wasn't necessary. She always felt an obligation to leave people with a happy song. Particularly those that had suffered loss in some way. Mr. Dickinson didn't attend any of the other performances, though she couldn't blame him.

On the morning of their departure, Mr. Bennett kissed her hand and then he held it firmly. "Thank you for all that you've done."

"I am sorry that you needed us but I am glad that you had someone to call," Anna Maria said.

"James would have been very proud of you," he said. Then he took Eleanor's hand and shook it. "And Alexander of you."

"Thank you," Eleanor said quietly.

Mrs. Bennett was polite but cool in her send off, her enthusiasm having waned after the first night. Anna Maria smiled warmly and hoped she'd never have to see them again. Then they climbed into the carriage and started on their long journey back to Grosvenor Square, Anna Maria curled against Eleanor's side. She needed all the rest she could muster.

Who knew what next adventure awaited them in London?