

The Veil

A Pride and Prejudice Fantasy Novel

Summer Hanford

CHAPTER ONE

Elizabeth strode through the forest behind Longbourn's manor house, seeking her favorite glade. Spring dotted the open patches between the dark trunks with bluebells, early morning sunlight slanting through to warm the tiny blossoms. The orange-tinted rays emphasized a hazy, almost-mist, bringing the air about Elizabeth to life and making each touch of green glow.

She heard the cheerful babble of the stream before she caught sight of the waterway, but not before the scent of fresh earth reached her. Smiling, she pushed through the denser brush that hemmed the glade, raspberry bushes encouraged by the brighter sunlight the open space yielded, and stepped free of the trees.

Sparkling rays danced off the gurgling water and emphasized the deeper green of moss where it cushioned hemming stones, and in the center of the clearing, a large, flat rock waited, moss free and streaked with quartz. To that Elizabeth went. Removing her heavy, deep blue cloak, she folded the garment and set it atop, then settled to kneel there. Rummaging in her skirt pockets, she pulled out several small stone beads of various compositions. Some crystalline, others as drab and common as sparrows unless, as with sparrows, their viewer paid enough heed to see the beauty in them.

She ran her hands over the lot, testing which beads seemed ready this morning. Elizabeth could never properly convey what *ready* meant when it came to the stones, and even her sisters felt she was a bit mad for the way she almost communed with them, but she could sense which were primed to accept power. Which aligned with the hum of force that radiated through their world at any given moment, and which stones must wait for another day.

Finally, she put all away again except for a dark bit of granite and an orange quartz that matched the early morning sun, though that had already mellowed to yellow as the fiery orb rose higher in the sky. She took up both beads, one held lightly between thumb and forefinger in each hand, closed her eyes, and sank into the feel of the glade around her. The loamy earth. The soft moss. The chatter of the brook. Sunlight warmed her, and birds and insects gave the morning a gentle hum. About her, spring smelled bright and crisp, damp and full of life. Touching the power that radiated from the earth, she coaxed, gently funneling it into the slightly warming stone beads.

Of all her sisters, Elizabeth was most accomplished at imbuing. She did not practice as diligently as her middle sister Mary, or study so very many essays on the correct way to go about infusing stones with power, but instead had a natural affinity for doing so. Elizabeth could feel the strength inherent in their world, and could likewise feel the stones, something no amount of study could ever truly convey. This morning, awakened by the spring sun and bursting with life, the power beneath the rock on which she sat bubbled and flitted but, with her help, found a happy home in the two stones she held.

As she channeled that power, she concentrated on shaping the stones' purposes, infusing that as well. One would store the power of their world to be released in mending, in the return of order to that which was torn, be it muslin, cracked pottery, or skin. The other would give forth motion. A push, she thought, sculpting the power. She'd long since found it more effective to give stones very specific purpose. A push, after all, was not a pull, nor a lift. When capturing the power of movement, Elizabeth infused only one motion in any given stone.

To be truly accomplished, she recited to herself as she worked, *a young lady should have thorough knowledge of portent, imbuing, etching, dancing, and the arcane languages*. She smiled, her eyes still closed. She would never be as proficient in etching as her older sister Jane, nor as skilled with language as her youngest sisters, Kitty and Lydia. What Elizabeth excelled at, were portent and imbuing, for both meant working with the stones, and the stones spoke to her.

To her left, a bird cheeped, the unfamiliar thrum to the sound catching her attention. Elizabeth furrowed her brow as she redoubled her concentration, not yet done with the quartz and granite, let alone any of the others in her pockets. She liked to imbue several ever morning, to put by for when they were needed.

The cheep sounded again, louder and more urgent. From the forest floor, she thought, noting the angle of the sound this time. Was a bird injured, or a fledgling fallen from a tree?

“Chur-ur-ur-up.”

Definitely an injured bird, but of what sort Elizabeth couldn’t guess. If the creature would stop breaking her concentration, she could finish infusing the agate, and use the power she’d gathered to mend what ailed the fowl.

“Chur-ur-ur-up.”

Elizabeth’s eyes popped open. She frowned down at the beads, and her naked wrists. Why had she gone out without her bracelets? She carried mending stones on those. She never left Longbourn without them. But then, she had not left Longbourn. Merely entered the forest for morning meditation, as she did nearly every day before breakfast.

“Chur-ur-ur-up.”

This latest chirp came out so desperate, so pathetic, that Elizabeth stood. Stuffing the beads back into her pocket, she went to the edge of the glade to peer into the forest. Whatever manner of bird it was, perhaps she could aid it without magic. Or take it back to Longbourn with her. Assuming the creature would permit her to do so.

“Chur-ur-ur-up.”

She pushed through the fortunately still-new raspberry bushes, their thorns not yet large enough to overly impede her, and into the trees. With the sun higher, no longer able to slant between the wide trunks but rather bouncing off their newly unfurled leaves above, the forest was darker. Elizabeth blinked, trying to adjust her eyes to the gloom. A thick layer of last autumn’s dead leaves still moldered on the forest floor, giving way to heaps of lichen-skinned rock, and no sight of a bird.

“Chur-ur-ur-up.”

She followed the strange chirps, wending deeper into the forest, until she entered a stretch of old, large elms. The air held a chill beneath their sweeping boughs, and she recalled her cloak, left in the clearing. Fortunately, a band of sunlight waited ahead, opened by the fall of one of the great trees. The elm, trunk wide enough for Elizabeth to walk along, had obviously toppled years ago. The ancient half sank into the forest floor, moss a blanket atop the nearly horizontal trunk.

“Ch-ur-ru-up,” the bird squeaked sadly and a head popped up from behind the fallen elm, bathed in sunlight.

Intelligent, luminous yellow eyes set against aqua scales on a narrow face met Elizabeth’s gaze.

Elizabeth went still, awe and fear skittering through her. A clawed front paw appeared, the little creature, what could only be a fey drake, pulling its way onto the green pillow of moss atop the trunk to reveal a slender body, four limbs, and a long tail. Two once-lovely, tattered, luminescent wings hung limply from the creature’s back.

“Oh,” Elizabeth gasped, reading the pain in the little fey drake’s eyes. The flash of fear she’d felt upon sighting it, a creature from beyond the Veil, vanished at the drake’s obvious plight. She rushed forward.

Then slowed, drawing near. The fey drake watched her, no larger than her forearm, triangular dragonesque head hanging low. It swayed. The glow in its eyes dimmed.

“Chu-ur...” it murmured sadly, then slumped flat against the trunk, eyes closing.

“No.” The protest left Elizabeth’s mouth almost unnoticed as she rushed to the little creature.

Tentatively, she touched the soft hide, uncertain if she should be able to feel the beat of a heart. The delicate aqua scales, surprisingly soft and almost velvety, were warm still, but already dimming to a dull blue-gray.

“No,” Elizabeth whispered, stricken. If she had been quicker...if she had her bracelets... She shook her head. She could not, other than the ruined wings, see anything amiss with the creature. What stone would she even have used to aid it? Would magic from this side of the Veil even work on a fey drake?

Fresh fear rising in her, she darted a look about. The forest was still.

Too still?

Nothing was meant to pass through the Veil. Even the smallest child knew that. The Veil, the wall of magic that separated their world from the Other, was all that kept them safe from all manner of beast. Beyond the Veil were many magical creatures, some inclined to good, like fey drakes, and others to unspeakable evil. One never broke through without bringing another. Never. That was the balance, and rule, the magical law that governed the Veil. If the fey drake was here, something evil had also come through. Something dire. But would it have come through here, in their woods? No one had ever found rhyme nor reason to where else the Veil tore when a creature came through.

She must tell her father. As master of Longbourn, Mr. Bennet could enter the druse, the hollowed cavern beneath the manor house, and commune with the heartstone. The stones of Longbourn, reached deep into the earth, and would know if evil had come through the Veil and to their land.

Elizabeth took a half step back from the sad little fey drake, leery. She rubbed her arms, chilled by the cool of the woods and the knowledge that an unknown evil had crossed through the Veil. She should go, now, to her father, but could not seem to turn away. The little fey drake was so flat. So gray and cold. Surely, she should bury it and mark the location?

After all, it wouldn't be the fey drake's fault it had come through the Veil. Only humans could open a rift, a strictly forbidden act. Whatever evil had been summoned through the Veil, for she had no thought such a rift would be opened in error, a human was responsible. The little drake had only been pulled through to balance whatever mankind had done.

Would Papa report the fey drake? He must, and then there would be an inquiry. Even though the little drake appearing in their forest didn't mean the summoning had taken place here, Hunters and Judicators would come. Elizabeth scrunched her nose. Hunters were pleasant enough, with their military air and their general good humor, even though they dealt in death. But Judicators were horrible, stuffy gentlemen, generally considering themselves above anyone else, with their calling to ensure the enforcement of law.

Yet she must tell her Papa, and Mr. Bennet must report the drake, and in the meantime, Elizabeth would not leave it here to be feasted on by the creatures of the forest. She crept closer again, to gather up the sad little body. As she leaned over to assess the most respectful way to lift a dead fey drake, which closer examination revealed to be mauled, by a weasel at Elizabeth's guess, a gleam caught her eye. Something bright, half buried on the forest floor, glinted in the slash of sunlight that cut through the gloom.

A drake's treasure? Lore held that drakes, and their larger cousins, coveted the treasures of Elizabeth's side of the Veil, stealing them when they could, and hoarded them. She went around the log to better see.

Dropping into a crouch, trying to ignore the sad, tattered, almost butterfly like wings of the fey drake, Elizabeth dusted back dried leaves. The motion revealed not one, but five opalescent, oval shaped stones. Lightly, she touched one.

And yanked her hand back.

The stone was no stone at all, for it was leathery and ever so slightly soft, and warm. Tentatively, she plucked one up. Larger than most songbird eggs, but far smaller than a chicken's, and gleaming pearlescent like stone...but definitely not stone. Swallowing, stunned by the notion of what she must hold, Elizabeth pivoted to hold the little egg between her and the sun.

Inside, curled and with little wings folded around it, was a tiny fey drake.

Her hand shaking, Elizabeth lowered the little egg to cradle it in her palm. Her gaze went to the other four, then she lifted her head to look about, although who might observe her, she didn't know.

Was keeping the eggs a crime? Their mother had no way to carry them, meaning she had come through the Veil with them unladen. A creature of good to balance whatever evil had been summoned. Surely, by the laws of magic, keeping the eggs would not bring five more, less savory, beasts through. After all, keeping them did not re-open a tear in the Veil.

The law, which Elizabeth had studied along with every other child in England, did not forbid keeping eggs. It expressly stated that any creatures that had passed through the Veil must be reported, and that opening a tear in the Veil was forbidden and punishable by death. No mention was made of what to do if a drake came though, then laid eggs.

A Judicator would have a far stricter interpretation of the law. Some reason the eggs would need to be destroyed, and likely some archaic case knowledge to back up their ruling. A Judicator would insist.

Well, Elizabeth was not having that.

She gently set the egg back in the nest of leaves, then emptied one pocket of stones, putting them in the other. Next, using fresh leaves as padding, she carefully stowed the eggs into the pocket she'd emptied.

Elizabeth didn't know precisely how, but she would care for the eggs. Likely, Mary would have an idea of what was best, with her love of lore and study. Regardless, Elizabeth would keep them, and try to see that they hatched. She would shelter the little fey drakes, as their mother had obviously hoped she would. She had no notion of what she would do with them once they were born, but no Judicator was going to take them away from her. Of that, she was certain.