

# ENTRANCING THE EARL - SAMPLE

SCHOOL OF MAGIC, BOOK 5



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**Entrancing the Earl**  
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## ONE



*CASTLE YATES, YORKSHIRE, SEPTEMBER 1871*

“HOW DOES ONE CHOOSE A WIFE?” GERARD, EARL OF IVES AND WYSTAN gazed upon the choicest maidens in northern England waltzing about in acres of colorful silk and lace. Castle Yates wasn’t London, by any means, but the duke’s dazzling ballroom sported the same hazards for a man avoiding matrimony.

His friend, unfortunately, could no longer avoid it.

“Amenable disposition, I suppose.” Jasper, Marquess of Rainford, resplendent in his usual tailored aloofness, frowned at the buffet of femininity imported just for his selection. “Beauty doesn’t last. A modicum of intelligence would be pleasing.”

Having given up his mistress some months past for lack of funds, Gerard was studying the vast array of non-virginal chaperones. “It’s a shame we can’t test for enthusiasm in bedplay.”

That response produced an unrefined snort from the normally proper Rainford. “I suppose I could look among widows if intercourse mattered for more than the production of heirs. But I’m fairly certain my father

did not invite the impure for my selection. He wants an heir of his own blood, however unstable that blood might be."

Gerard hid a wince. The duke's clan had a strong strain of what must be called *eccentric*, even more so than the usual Malcolm family aberrations. Concealing his own weirdness was difficult enough, but Gerard hadn't the wealth to take it to extremes, as Rainford's family did.

He juggled the medallion in his pocket, the one that whispered to him of treasure to be found at Wystan. "At least you don't have to choose a wife for her fortune. If I'm to keep Wystan, I'll have to find gold or marry a bank account."

Should he ever make the mistake of mentioning that he was listening to treasure-seeking voices in coins, any income from a political future was doomed—as well as any chance of marrying wealth.

Thankfully, he didn't actually *see* spirits. He simply heard them speak when he touched a propitious object.

As a scientific, logical man of the world, he had too much cynicism to believe legions of penniless Ives would have overlooked any treasure buried in Wystan.

But beneath his pessimism lurked a flicker of hope. What if he was actually hearing the spirit of an ancient Roman who may have buried treasure on his estate? Even a small store of coins might stave off the decision between marrying for wealth or heaving his female relations from a crumbling castle he could no longer maintain.

The spirit voices had been correct, if less than useful, in the past. He'd learned his lesson as a lad when he'd told his hosts they had a body buried in the cellar. Hysteria and skeletons only achieved notoriety. These days, Gerard favored tactful diplomacy and kept the voices to himself.

Until these past weeks, he'd never had an artifact mention buried treasure. He feared it might be his desperation speaking.

"Marry, invest your wife's fortune in improving Wystan's assets, and you'll have wealth enough to live on," said the lord with more gold than Croesus and the imagination of an accountant.

Gerard shrugged. "I'll inherit the marquise one day. My future is fated. Before I must retire to dry responsibility for a few dozen

intractable Ives and their families, I'd rather not tie myself down to one woman."

"And you want to see sunny climes and foreign maidens," Rainford added knowingly.

Well, yes, Gerard had always wanted to take his gift and explore real Roman ruins in Italy, but his pockets had always been to let.

He retaliated by pounding the slender marquess on the back. "And you're procrastinating on joining the assembly where all those mamas are regarding you hungrily, and the demure maidens your father has chosen are surreptitiously watching you from under their lashes, judging you as husband material. Go forth and match-make."

"You should do the same, if funding is what you need. My father invited the wealthiest, most respectable damsels to be found in this part of the kingdom."

"On the theory that London ladies would not wish to languish in rural Yorkshire, even if this estate is large enough for a small town?"

"On the theory that I have rejected everyone in the south. You take the right hand side. I'll take the left. We'll see if we find any likely prospects and meet in the middle." Rainford stalked off.

Thanking all that was holy that his own father wasn't pushing for an heir since the family had more relations than the marquess could afford already, Gerard ignored the young lovelies and aimed for Lady Alice, a widowed chaperone. He'd known Alice since infancy. She had a wicked tongue, a prosperous father, and put the *merry* in merry widow. She'd be better sport than simpering virgins.

"YOU SHOULD DANCE," IONA MALCOLM ROSS ADVISED HER COMPANION AS they studied the marquess's splendiferous ballroom.

The music was heavenly, as one would expect from the wealthy and generous Winchesters. The floral arrangements—sent Iona into sensory overload. Had she not wished to remain invisible, she'd dance from bouquet to bouquet, deliriously sniffing the fragrances.

Unfortunately, the price of her freedom was a great deal of constraint, an irony she did not appreciate.

The dancers were a portrait in elegant blacks, colorful silks, and scents of excitement and agitation that Iona itched to escape. "Do not let my research hold you back," she encouraged her companion. "I can find the library on my own."

Lydia Ives, the Calder Castle librarian, gazed dubiously at the gliding dancers. "I might manage a reel or two, but even if Max is as light-footed as an angel, he couldn't make me float the way they do."

Iona almost managed a grin at the image. "The two of you would clear the dance floor in your magnificence. None could compare. Just picture it. Make it happen!"

The librarian and her husband were not small people. They towered taller than most of the gentlemen, and while they were young and athletic, they were not light on their feet. But they were splendid in their fine array and happiness with each other.

Lydia smiled a little. "Perhaps we should try a reel or two. Who knows when I may escape my library again, especially after the little one arrives." She caressed the barely noticeable bulge beneath her frilled apron-front bodice.

"Look, your husband has seen you. I'll leave now. And again, thank you a thousand times for bringing me here. I've been longing to see this library ever since I heard of it." Iona retreated into the shadows.

Lydia pinned her with a knowing gaze. "Your sister is invaluable to me. I'd like to hear your story one day."

Iona chilled. No one must know that she had a sister. The librarian was too perceptive. "Maybe after I'm dead. You'll have my journal then."

She hurried away before Lydia could interrogate her. Iona looked too much like her twin, which was why Isobel had dyed her blond hair, and Iona had cut hers. Then Isobel had gone to Edinburgh and Iona now hid in the wilds of Northumberland. Small and mousy when dressed as servants, they normally went unseen by wealthy aristocrats.

But in her eagerness to finally lay her hands on the bee book, Iona had stolen this opportunity to leave her hiding place, even knowing the risk. Now she knew why the Calder Librarian had taken the time to help a humble beekeeper—Lydia had recognized Iona's resemblance to her steward back in Scotland, despite their disguises.

Iona didn't have time to worry about consequences. She'd jeopardized her safety to make this trip. She needed to find the book.

Leaving the lights and music, she hurried down the backstairs, away from any guest who might notice her. Once inside the darkened library, Iona lit a gas sconce by the door. Yates Castle wasn't a library of Malcolm journals, but a real, honest-to-gosh library with every book known to mankind collected by the duke's family over the centuries. It smelled like heaven should smell—of polish, leather, and wisdom.

The duke's library was immense, a palace of knowledge as well as beauty. It extended the entire length of this wing, with two-story stacks along the walls, more accessible ones in the center, and a ceiling painted by some long-gone artist. To Iona, it was a church and university all rolled into one.

Apparently influenced by his journal-collecting Malcolm ancestors, the duke paid a full-time librarian who catalogued and labeled each bookcase by topic. Lydia had vouched for Iona and obtained a key for her. Iona had already made inquiries and knew exactly which shelf she needed.

Carrying an oil lamp placed at the entrance, she wandered through the shadowed stacks, reading the labels. She located the area on beekeeping with a sigh of satisfaction.

*Langstroth on the Hive and the Honey-Bee: A Bee Keeper's Manual*, finally. She lifted it from the shelf with reverence. She had begged her stepfather for this book since her eighth birthday, a few years after the book had been published. It had taken fifteen years to finally hold a copy in her hand.

One did not find many books on beekeeping in the Highlands and certainly not in her stepfather's non-existent library. And now that she had escaped his hold, she had no money to buy books.

Everything she knew, she had learned from her mother, but those methods were primitive. Few real beekeepers used skeps these days. Burning out a colony to cut out the honey was too destructive. She'd been perusing the books in the Wystan library, but Malcolm journals were equally outdated on the subject.

In her one brief visit to London when she'd been sixteen, she'd been

able to find a few pamphlets on modern beekeeping and learned how to build a movable comb. It had been imperative that she learn to do so. Now, finally, she was ready to advance her skills in honey collection and hive construction.

A descendant of generations of Malcolm queen bees, her queen required the best care available. If she could never go home to her other hives, Iona had to protect this one.

She found a table and took a notepad and pencil from her pocket.

Lost in the intricacies of building wooden hives with movable frames, she didn't hear the intruders enter. Only when the scents of lust and duplicity wafted back to the stacks, followed by a lady's moan, did she register the intrusion.

Curling her lip in disgust, Iona tried to determine which door they'd entered by—the one she'd left unlocked, of course. Shame on her. She simply hadn't thought anyone would be interested in a cellar library when there was a ball in the glorious ballroom above. She could see the door but not past the center shelves to where the amorous couple must have availed themselves of an empty table.

The duke's librarian did not like to have his books removed from the library. Iona respected that. But she might not have another chance to read this manual. She had to leave for Wystan on the morrow.

Did the fools not notice her lamp? Probably not, she realized. The library was immense and if the shelves hid the couple, then they hid her and her small light.

She could remain—she'd simply have to listen to passionate moaning or draw attention to her presence so they would leave. She couldn't *think* with all that going on, but being noticed wasn't safe. Removing the book was her only choice.

Quietly, she tucked away her pad and pencil and blew out her lamp. She had already determined all the other exits. She'd simply take the one on the end opposite the intruders. She doubted they'd notice.

Discreetly gathering up her unfashionable ankle-length skirt and single petticoat, Iona mentally apologized to the librarian and vowed to return the book before he knew it was gone. She lifted the volume and slipped toward the exit.

The woman screamed.



Iona halted.

"Pardon me," a male voice said in puzzlement. "Did I hurt you?"

The scent of lust died out, replaced by that of suspicion.

"You beast," the woman cried. "How could you?" In the echoing silence of the enormous library, ripping fabric resounded loudly.

"Alice, don't play insane," the gentleman said firmly. "You know me. I'm the worst possible choice for your schemes. Being a countess isn't all you might think."

"You rake," the woman cried, disdaining the gentleman's logic. "Taking advantage of a helpless widow!"

Iona sighed. She recognized the woman's scent now. She'd only met Lady Alice yesterday but had smelled her fear and worry and recognized her predicament. The lady's father was a wealthy baron hoping to rise in rank. He would not appreciate his widowed daughter bearing a bastard.

Crying rape to force an—earl?—into marriage was not the solution. What did she do now? She owed nothing to either of the couple, but that poor unborn child deserved better than this.

Hiding in plain sight was a tight-rope Iona walked every day. It was simpler in Wytan, where everyone accepted her as the beekeeper and knew better than to question. She'd risked her invisibility by stepping too close to society, but the book was worth it.

Now, she had to deal with the consequences. Circumstances might force her to hide, but hers wasn't a naturally retiring nature.

Donning her best simple-minded servant expression, Iona hastened toward the couple, calling herself every kind of fool but knowing she couldn't allow this scene to carry out to its inevitable conclusion. She might have been a wallflower in London all those years ago, but she'd learned a lot since.

"May I help, my lady?" she inquired, interrupting a dramatic scene where the lady in her ripped bodice clung to the gentleman's lapel with one hand and beat him with the other.

Tall, dark, and possibly handsome if he hadn't been scowling fiercely enough to terrify a phantom, the gentleman warily glanced at her. "The lady has been taken by a fit, I believe. Would you have smelling salts?"

"No, but if you smacked her, she might come around," Iona responded cheekily. "If you are too gentlemanly to do so, shall I try?"

She knew she looked small and weak, but helpless, she was not. The lady reeked of duplicity, and the gentleman. . . among other things. . . exuded incredulity.

The lady shrieked a protest. "He has assaulted—" She shut up when she recognized Iona as the librarian's companion.

If she'd actually recognized *Iona*, there'd be hell to pay, but Iona was fairly certain she'd never met Lady Alice before this week. The world was full of people she'd never met, including the gentleman.

Iona crossed her hands over the book at her waist and applied her best domestic-servant expression. "Perhaps I could find your maid, my lady?"

The gentleman's fury had reached the level of a smoldering fire. She could swear she heard him growl. He towered over her, which was annoying. He was excessively large across the shoulders, but his beautifully fitted tailed coat clung neatly over narrow hips. From the way he backed off once released, she gathered he had muscles on top of muscles that he'd courteously restrained while being assailed.

"I can fetch a footman to find the maid," he said stiffly, with that slight rumble still in his voice to indicate his displeasure.

"That would be best," Iona advised, doing her best to hide in the larger lady's shadow. The flickering of the one gas sconce should render her dull gray gown and pale features nicely invisible beneath her servant's cap. Lady Alice wept and didn't protest as Iona steered her toward the door.

"Go to Wytan," Iona advised in a low voice as she led the lady to the main staircase. "The ladies there understand. You and the child will be safe."

Pretending she had not heard, the lady lifted her chin and grasped the polished mahogany banister, dismissing Iona. The frilled train of her fashionable, ebony silk gown swished as she climbed the curving stairway, leaving Iona behind to take the service door.

The gentleman's smoldering scent lingered in the wide corridor. She could hear him speaking with a footman. The servants' network would find the maid. All was as well as it could be. Hugging the precious book to her bosom, she headed for the back stairs where dozens of servants scurried up and down to the ballroom.

Even when she heard the gentleman shout after her, she kept going. In her mind, she donned a cloak of invisibility and vanished behind the baize-covered door. He would forget her by tomorrow, and then she'd be gone. She couldn't risk being seen again.

+++ *End of sample* +++

