

Chapter 6 – The Copernicus Society

The West's' smaller, unmarked town coach was waiting for Teagan around the corner from Roscoe's residence, which was too far from Caxtons for her to go on foot. Sedan chairs made her feel claustrophobic and vulnerable to attack after dark, plus Giles would never let her go unattended when she was in town, the worrywart.

"Good evening, gentleman." Teagan saluted her coachman and footman by touching the side of her hat.

The footman held the door open and she leapt up the step.

"Damn me, if 'twere not fer yer voice, miss-", the footman started.

"An' her imper'inence-", the coachman added.

"I ne'er would 'ave know'd it were you, miss." The footman scratched his head.

"Ah, well, that is the point, you see. And the name is *Mr Ellis Stark*, remember?"

The footman nodded.

"I shall take it as a positive omen that neither of you recognized me."

"Omen, shmo-men," the coachman grouched, "ye takes too many chances, if'n ye asks me."

Teagan's lips twitched with a suppressed grin. She knew the coachman's grumbling was his way of expressing his concern for her safety. She settled herself onto the bench facing the horses. The footman closed the door and the coach shifted as he climbed onto the back. Then she heard the slap of the reins on the horses' backsides.

"Come on, me beauties," the coachman said and they lurched into motion.

They headed east out of the theatre district towards Lombard and Gracechurch streets, where Caxtons occupied the northwest corner of the intersection. The coach stopped. The footman opened the door.

"Evenin', Mr Stark." An adolescent boy doffed his cap. Handy was one of several street urchins employed to attend to the men's mounts outside of Caxtons.

"Good evening, Handy." Ellis stepped down to the pavement. "How goes it, lads?" He leaned towards Handy and pulled the collar of the boy's jacket up against the chilly night air. Ellis surreptitiously dropped a couple of coins into Handy's cap, so he could treat himself and his friends to something to eat and drink.

"Ye gotta full house in there tonigh'," Handy said, cocking his thumb over his shoulder.

"Excellent news." Ellis walked down the street towards a side entrance to Caxtons. He was headed to a large room which hosted meetings of the Copernicus Society—as Teagan had named this gathering of tinkerers, natural philosophers, and whatnots.

"Oh, and t'ank ye, sir," Handy called out. Ellis heard the sounds of several boys dashing towards Handy.

"Wha' he leave us," a boy asked.

"Ne'er ye mind," Handy said, "t'ere's enough here fer a nibble and sumpin' hot te drink fer all us."

Jamie, another street-smart recruit, acted as the side doorman on Copernicus evenings. "Good evenin', Mr Stark." Jamie was tall, broad shouldered, and older than the others. He held the door open for Ellis.

"Good evening, Master James."

Jamie snorted.

"How is your mam?" Ellis asked.

"T'a' healer ye sent helped. My mam isna' coughin' so much," Jamie said.

Ellis smiled. "I am glad to hear it, but she needs to get out of the city, Jamie—. You both do."

The boy dropped his gaze and bobbed his head in agreement.

"Have you given my idea any thought?"

"About takin' her te the country, ye mean?" he said.

"Yes."

"Oh, aye, I given it t'ough', awrigh'. I jus' dunno how I could make a livin' ou' t'ere. I ne'er been anywhere. Ye knows t'a', sir."

Ellis put his hand on Jamie's shoulder and squeezed. "I do, Jamie. The way I figure it, your mam needs good food and sunshine. I do not know anyone who works as hard as you. If you say yes, I know I can find a place for you and your mam, along with a position for you."

"Really?" Jamie's head came up quickly.

"Really," Stark said.

"Then do it, Mr Stark, I says yes."

"I am glad of it. I shall talk to someone about it tomorrow and if he is not in town, I will write to him. I know I can make this work."

Jamie chuckled. "Ye always sez t'a'."

Ellis gave him a cheeky grin. "Have I ever let you, or one of the others down?"

"Naw, I dunno hows ye do it, when ye promise somet'in', it 'appens."

"Well, I better get inside. Do not want to miss anything." Ellis stepped through the open door, waving his hand over his head as he walked away.

The meeting room in the rear of Caxtons, which had been set aside for the Copernicus Society, was full, jam-packed even. Ellis cast his eyes around the room. Every chair at every table seemed to be occupied. Servers running hither and yon squeezed between attendees standing against the plastered walls and hovering near tables engaged in animated conversation.

They'd been open almost eight months. A week after opening, Stark had held the first meeting of the Copernicans. He'd thought it would take a while for word to spread and so had scheduled meetings to occur monthly.

How woefully Stark had underestimated the hunger of these inventors to gather and share ideas. The Copernicus Society meetings were now twice monthly to accommodate the robust response. Such success was most gratifying.

Stark and his silent partner had already invested in several new, non-volatile inventions. They'd also purchased and started renovating a second building to provide space for promising inventors who needed a place to do their work.

Giles was still adamant—nothing explode-able. However, Teagan thought that if they purchased a third building on the edge of London, she could put inventors pursuing more hazardous endeavors in that location.

"*Stark!?*" a thickly accented male voice hailed Ellis.

Ellis turned to find his co-convener of this chaos-

the multilingual Peter Malvado, hailing him.

Malvado had the complexion, intermittent charm, and surname of a Spaniard, but the blond hair, build, and Christian name of a Dutchman. Peter had introduced himself to Ellis at the first Copernicus Society meeting and had attached himself to Ellis' side like a pilot fish. Ellis had been unable to dislodge the fellow, so in essence, Malvado had become Ellis' right-hand man at the meetings, which conveniently left Titus free to run Caxtons.

"Ah," Ellis said, extending his hand, "Malvado." They shook. "We are already overflowing."

"Si, si, nuestra fama se está extendiendo."

"Fame?" Ellis guessed.

"Si, fame, it iz spreading." Peter swung his long, powerful arms in an encompassing circle, indicating the entire room. He was thick-chested, with a broad grin, and a good nose for business. Peter was half a head taller than Ellis, and wore what hair he had long and tied back. He sported a large black patch over his left eye. Purportedly a hunting accident, whatever had caused the loss of his eye, it hadn't slowed Malvado down. Where Giles shied away from the more explosive inventions, Peter embraced them with vigor.

"Come along. Time and money wait for no one," Ellis said.

Peter's grin grew larger and he slapped Stark on the back.

Ellis stumbled forward from the force of the blow.

Peter caught Stark's arm. "You need to eat more. You too skinny. A man need's his strength." He wagged his

thick, dark brows.

Ellis wasn't going anywhere near that thinly veiled comment for all the coin in the King's purse. He moved forward and raised his arm, motioning for Peter to follow. "Come, let us get the evening started."

Ellis jogged to the dais at the front of the room, waving at those who called out hellos as he dashed by them. He leapt up onto the platform without breaking stride. Peter slowly lumbered behind, his size and agility reminding Ellis of a large bear.

The platform Stark stood on was a modest raised area against the wall with a small table set near the edge of the platform, a gavel, and two chairs. Peter moved to the table, raised the gavel, and began to pound it against an oak sound block.

Bang.

Bang.

"Order! Order, I say!" Peter raised his voice above the din.

Ellis lifted one of the chairs off of the platform and set it down on the floor, with its back against the wall. He sat down, crossed one leg over the other, removed his bicorn and placed it upon his knee.

A great deal of emphatic shushing followed Malvado's orders. Gradually the room quieted, punctuated by seats being scraped across the bare wooden floor.

"Gentlemen," Peter said, scanning the room, "let us begin. We Copernicans have a great deal to talk about this evening."

"Speak for yourself, Malvado!" shouted a deep voice emanating from the center of the room.

"Sit down, Simpson," Peter hollered back.

"I *am* seated," Simpson said.

The entire room burst into laughter, even Peter.

Peter waited for the laughter to die away. "Since you are already sitting on yer brains, Simpson, perhaps you should stand up!"

More laughter, including Simpson.

Peter turned his head and gazed over his shoulder at Stark.

"You started it." Ellis shrugged.

Peter opened his mouth to rebut Stark's statement, but Stark was done with what passed for male humor. Standing up, he set his hat on his chair and joined Peter on the platform. Malvado stepped back.

The room quieted.

"Who is first tonight?" Ellis asked Peter.

Malvado gazed over at a chalkboard hanging from the wall beside the dais, where the Copernicus Society members would write their names and invention.

"Miller," Malvado said.

"Would Mr Miller kindly make his way up here so we can hear what he has to say?" Ellis gazed over his shoulder at Peter and whispered, "What is he speaking about?"

"Mah-geh-net-ism," Peter whispered.

"Really?" Ellis said. "Intriguing."

Peter shook his head. "What is mah-geh—"

"The word is magnetism."

Peter grunted.

"Magnetism is an invisible force that draws metal things together," Ellis said.

"So?" he shrugged.

Now Ellis rolled his eyes. "Sometimes, I wonder why you bother with us, you seem more suited to the business of commerce, than the business of invention."

Malvado's eyebrows went up. He turned his head away and cleared his throat.

The look on Malvado's face gave Ellis pause. Peter seemed embarrassed, as if he'd been caught doing something he shouldn't, which made no sense.

When Malvado turned his head back, and his eyes returned to Stark's, his usual mask of sangfroid was back in place.

Ellis cleared his throat and gazed out at his audience. A tall, lanky man of indeterminate age, whose frock coat hung awkwardly from his bony shoulders, stood up.

Ah, Mr Miller.

Miller's coat looked worn, probably second hand, and his shirt, what Stark could see of it, was wrinkled.

No wife to iron it for him.

As the inventor walked towards the platform, Ellis noted that he'd lost the ribbon which would have held his rather lifeless hair back, so that it hung about his long face. The shadow of his beard made his lower jaw look as though he'd stuck his face into a meat pie. Mr Miller stopped before the dais.

Ellis extended his hand. "Mr Miller?"

Miller nodded, and as he reached for Stark's hand, the folio he had tucked under his arm slipped out and landed on the floor, spilling its papers.

Ellis hopped down and began to help the socially

awkward Mr Miller. Stark gathered most of the papers and handed them to Miller, who tucked them back into his folio. Stark offered his hand, again. Before Miller grasped Stark's hand, he wiped the palm of his right hand against the side of his coat.

"Thank you, ah, thank you for your assistance, sir," Miller said.

Ellis looked up. Peter was shaking his head and pinching his nose like he smelled something foul.

Ellis put his hand on Miller's shoulder and turned him about. "Shall we? I am quite eager to hear what you have to say regarding your experiments with magnetism."

"Really?" Miller stepped up on the platform clutching his folio to his chest.

"Indeed. I and our benefactor have a great curiosity for all things new."

Miller smiled.

Ellis followed Miller up onto the platform and turned to address the membership. "Mr Miller is going to talk to us about magnetism. I, for one, am eager to hear what he has to say." Ellis cast a stern gaze upon the room.

The room stilled.

Ellis returned to his seat as Miller told his audience about what he'd been doing.

Malvado continued to look bored. He took out the short blade he carried in the top of his right boot and cleaned his nails.

Ellis thought about kicking him; it was like watching a cat lick its private parts center stage. Stark sighed. *To each his own.* To distract himself, Stark let

his eyes roam the room. Quite a motley assemblage: a few well-heeled, deep-pocketed sorts positioned front and center; a sober, curious group seated around them, hanging on Miller's every word; and a younger contingency plastered against every wall.

Servers darted hither and yon.

Miller was nearing the end of his presentation and preparing to open the floor for questions when there was a crash at the back of the room. Ellis leapt up on the platform and off the far side, making his way quickly through the crowd. One of the servers was lying face down on the hardwood floor, and a small man was crouched beside him with his hands wrapped around the server's upper arm.

"Sorry, so sorry, let me help you up, young man," the crouching man said.

The server rolled to his side and shoved the man's helping hands away. "Ger off. 'Tis yer damn faul' I ended up on the floor. You and dem big feet of yers."

One of the other servers ran up with a mop and began sopping up spilled coffee.

Ellis stepped up, took the server by the arm, and hauled him to his feet. "That will be enough."

The server's head shot up and the curse that he was about to utter died on his lips when he met Ellis' eyes. "Sorry, sir," he said.

"Are you alright?" Ellis asked the server.

"S'pose so, but wha' will I tell Titus?" the server said. "Look at dis mess."

"Leave Titus to me. Now help clean up and take care of our patrons," Ellis said.

The server bobbed his head. One of the patrons handed him his serving tray. He took it and bent to pick up the broken crockery.

Ellis looked around for the short fellow with the purported big feet.

Stark waved his hands. "Go on everyone, back to your seats." He raised his voice. "Carry on, Mr Miller. I believe you were about to open the floor for questions."

"Yes, Mr Stark, I was," Miller said.

The crowd disbursed, returning to their places.

Ellis spied the little man moving quickly, his head down. *Ah making your escape, I see. Not so fast.*

"Are there any questions?" Miller asked his audience.

Stark caught Peter's eye to let him know he was leaving.

Night had completely fallen by the time Ellis exited the building. The alley was completely dark except for a pool of light from the small torch they kept at the entrance to the back room of Caxtons. Jamie had left, so there was not a soul in sight.

Ellis heard the little man's footfalls moving away. Not wishing to scare him, Stark called out in a friendly voice. "You are not interested in magnetism?"

"Vh-vhat?" came a startled male voice from the darkness, just a short distance ahead.

Ellis caught up to the little man.

The small fellow was breathing hard and fast.

Ellis lowered the pitch of his voice and spoke calmly. "My name is Stark."

No response. The darkness and silence felt heavy.

Ellis tried again. "My coach is at the end of the alley. Allow me to drop you somewhere."

"Coach?" the little man's voice squeaked. "No, no, I am fine."

Ellis took the man's arm and began moving towards his coach. The little man put up no resistance. As they neared the opening of the alley Stark said, "I mean you no harm."

Stark's reluctant companion cleared his throat. "I know who you are, Mr Stark. You are a patron of the Copernicus Society and the owner of Caxtons."

"Yes and no. I am a patron, but I am only one of the owners of Caxtons."

"I stand corrected," he said. The little man only came up to Ellis' shoulder and that was with his hat on and his heeled shoes.

"And, you are?" Ellis said.

Silence.

"Fish. My name is J Fish."

The two men exited the alley and the coach was where Stark had said it would be. A footman was standing beside the open door. "Shall we?" Stark asked.

"There is no need, truly," Fish said.

"Have I offended you in some way, Mr Fish?"

"Heavens, no."

"Then what is preventing you from taking me up on my offer?" Stark asked.

Silence.

Based on Fish's clothing and the cut of his hair, Stark had his suspicions about what was preventing Fish from accepting the offer.

Fish sighed and his shoulders heaved and sank. "Very well."

Stark spoke to the footman, "Please go fetch my hat. I left it on a chair that is located against the wall beside the raised platform."

"Yes, sir," the footman said, then strode away.

"Come along, Mr Fish." Stark entered the coach and Fish followed.

The footman returned quickly, handed Ellis his bicorn and closed the door. A moment later the coach shifted as the footman jumped up onto his rear platform, then the trap in the ceiling was opened by the coachman. "My driver is awaiting your direction, Mr Fish."

Mr Fish sighed and his shoulders dropped again.

Ahh, capitulation. Ellis pinched himself to keep from chuckling.

Mr Fish cleared his throat. "The corner of Fenchurch and Billiter, please."

"Aye," the coachman said as he closed the trap door. "Come along now." They heard the sound of the reins being maneuvered, the jingle of harness and then the coach lurched into motion heading east.

Ellis tossed his hat, gloves, and cane onto the bench he was seated on. Mr Fish had positioned himself on the bench opposite, with his back to the horses and in the corner farthest from Stark. Ellis pushed back, stretched out his long, breech and stocking-covered legs, and crossed his ankles in a very mannish manner. "Now, tell me about yourself, Mr Fish."