A New Addition

The time of Mrs. Darcy's lying-in has arrived.

Elizabeth Darcy shifted uncomfortably in her bed, trying not to wake her husband.

It had been their normal habit since the beginning of their marriage to sleep in his bed, but as her time grew nearer and nearer, they had begun to pass the nights in her chamber instead. They had reasoned that if the child came in the night -- and he seemed to have decided to oblige them -- it would not necessitate a wait while the room was prepared and a fire lit.

Her pains had begun shortly after she and William had retired for the night. She was not sure how much time had passed as she had lain awake listening to her husband's even breathing, but she was certain that it was now in the small hours of the morning. The sun would most likely not rise for hours yet, but she could no longer lie abed. The pains were becoming much stronger.

Moving slowly, and as carefully as the bulk of the child would allow, she slipped out of bed and fumbled in the dark for her dressing gown. She had decided to go into their shared sitting room to ring for her maid. She knew that when Sarah and Mrs. Reynolds arrived, they would have to wake William, but she wanted him to sleep undisturbed as long as possible.

He was worried. He tried so hard to hide it from her, but she knew him better than he knew himself.
The pain came again, sharpening in intensity until she could not help the cry that burst from her, nor the way she grabbed at the edge of the bed for support.

Her husband sat up with a gasp. "Elizabeth!" he cried, his voice thick with sleep. He reached for her, encountered only empty space, and began to panic. "Elizabeth! Where are you?"

"I am here," she said breathlessly.

He lit a candle. In the dim light, she could see that his face was pale, and his eyes were huge. She imagined she looked much the same. "Why are you -- is the -- is -- is it time?" he stammered.

She nodded. "I need to call for Sarah. I... I simply need but a minute to rest."

He leapt out of bed and pulled the cord. There was only one reason right now for a summons in the middle of the night, and he knew Elizabeth's maid would notify Mrs. Reynolds before she came to her mistress. Mrs. Reynolds would check in, and then summon the midwife.

"Are you well?" he asked as he rushed to her side. Then, he shook his head impatiently. "No, of course you are not, I am not thinking."

He led her to a chair by the fireside, where she sat and watched him hurry around the room, stoking the fire back to life and lighting all the lamps and candles.

When that was done, he came and knelt before her, taking her hands in his.

"Elizabeth, please, is there anything I can do for you? Anything at all?"

She tried to think, but the panic was rising in her. Jane, I need Jane! "Please, William, will you send someone to bring Jane to me?"

He stood and reached for his dressing gown. "I will go myself, dearest," he said as he slipped on the garment and stepped into his slippers. "Do you want your mother as well?"

Elizabeth thought of her mother's shrill voice, and her nerves, and the horrible, dark hints she had been dropping, and she shook her head, shame heating her cheeks.

Her husband nodded, and understanding and compassion mixed with the worry in his dark eyes. "I will return as quickly as I can."

There was a knock at the door, and William opened it, stepping aside as her maid entered, clearly still in the process of awakening.

The pain came again, stronger now, and Elizabeth could not bite back a whimper. Her husband was at her side in an instant, his worry written all over his face.

"Elizabeth?"

"Please, William, I need Jane."

He nodded. "Of course." Before he could tear himself away, he gently took her face in his hands and rested his forehead against hers.

She could feel him trembling. She wanted to soothe him, to tell him all would be well, but she could not. She was so frightened of what lay ahead. Jane had tried to reassure her, but each of her calm statements had been loudly overridden by their mother's nervous exclamations, and Elizabeth did not know what to believe.
She struggled to her feet with his help, and he drew her into his embrace.

"I do not think they will let me back in to be with you," he said anxiously.

"No," she agreed. "Promise me you will eat, William. You have not been eating well -- do not protest, I know it is so -- and I do not want you to faint from hunger."

He gave her a poor attempt at a smile along with his promise. She stroked his cheek, rough with the night's growth of beard.

"Elizabeth..."

Ignoring her maid, who was doing her best to pretend to be furniture, Elizabeth kissed her husband. He pulled her as close as their child would allow, pouring all of his love and his worry into the kiss.

He pulled back with a gasp as the pain came again and he felt her muscles contract against him. She gripped his shoulders, taking strength from him, until the pain lessened.

"He is anxious to meet you," she said with a weak smile. "Go. Bring Jane to me. All will be well, and the next time I see you, I will have an introduction to make."

With one last squeeze of her hand, he left the room.

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Bathed, dressed, and newly shaved, Darcy stared down in dismay at the plate before him. He was alone at breakfast, unsurprisingly, as it was just past dawn. The news of the impending birth had swept quickly through the house, and the staff had prepared an early meal. He had done as his wife asked and served himself a hearty breakfast. He feared that if he tried to eat a single bite of it, he would be sick.

He glanced up as Bingley entered, yawning through his greeting. He retrieved coffee and toast, and then seated himself next to Darcy.

Stomach churning, Darcy simply stared beseechingly at his friend. As unusual as it was in the course of their long friendship, in this situation, Bingley was the experienced one.

With a reassuring smile, Bingley slapped him on the back. "Eat!" he ordered as he sipped his coffee. "It will be a long day."

Mindful of his promise to his wife, Darcy picked up his fork and began.

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Unable to force down another bite, Darcy excused himself. He longed to close himself in his study, but he knew he would not be able to concentrate on even the smallest matter of estate business, and he feared the solitude would drive him to madness. He made his way to the drawing room instead, pacing the length of it.
Bingley joined him after a short while, and the rest of his guests eventually trickled in. Lost in his nervous pacing, Darcy did not acknowledge them.

"Darcy, do sit down," Bingley chided. Throwing him a black look, Darcy continued to walk.

Caught between amusement and sympathy, Mr. Bennet watched Darcy's long strides across the drawing room for some time before turning to Bingley and enquiring after his estate. The younger man mentioned an issue he was having with several of his tenants, and the two men conversed pleasantly on that topic and several more.

"The morning is fine," Bingley observed after a while. "Shall we go for a ride, Darce?"

"I do not intend to leave the house today," Darcy answered curtly.

"A game of billiards, then?"

The only reply Bingley received from his friend was a sharply negative jerk of his head as he passed.

Eventually, Bingley tried again. "Chess?"

Another sharply negative jerk, and Bingley subsided with a sigh.

Darcy slowed to a stop as something gradually filtered into his consciousness.

The room was far quieter than it should be. He glanced around. Mr. Bennet sat near the window, with his nose in his customary volume. Bingley sat beside him, perusing a newspaper. Not yet a mother, and thus barred from joining the rest of the females, Georgiana sat on the sofa, frowning delicately as she sewed. Her husband of two years, Lord Breesbruck, remained in London.

"Where is Mrs. Bennet?" Darcy exclaimed in alarm.

That lady's husband looked up from his book. "She was rather upset when she realized that, in all of the bustle, Mrs. Reynolds had quite forgotten to inform her of the situation," he said, aiming a sly smile at Darcy. "She has gone to offer her assistance, as she is certain that it will be required."

"But -- " Darcy swallowed his protest. He could hardly announce to all of his guests that Elizabeth did not want her mother present. Shaking his head and offering a silent apology to his wife, he resumed pacing.

The door opened, drawing everyone's gaze. They all stood as Jane came in, her smile tired, and Darcy quickened his stride until he stopped before her.

"Not yet," she apologized. "I just came in to tell you that my sister is well. Things are progressing as expected."

"Is there -- " Darcy swallowed harshly. "Is she -- "

He stopped. He knew very little about what went on behind the door of a lying-in room, but he knew that it involved pain. And danger.

Jane reached out and grasped his arm. "She is well," she said softly. "And now, I must return to her."

He nodded wordlessly. With a reassuring smile for him, and a glance at everyone else, she left the room.

Rubbing a shaking hand over his face, Darcy began to pace once more.
Time passed. He knew it did, for the shadows changed, but it felt as though the clocks had stopped.

Jane returned several times, with the same message. Darcy grew weak with anxiety, with hunger and fatigue, but still he paced.

He stopped short as a hand thrust a filled glass in his face.

"You need this, brother," Bingley said, offering the glass of brandy again. The crystal sparkled in the late spring sunlight streaming through the windows.

Darcy shook his head. "No, thank you."

"It will help, Darcy."

"I do not -- If she -- I cannot -- " He could not bring himself to finish the sentence. If, God forbid, the worst should come, he did not want to be insensible.

"One glass will not incapacitate you, and it will help to calm you." He placed his free hand on his friend's shoulder in support. "You must not worry so, Darce. All will be well."

Darcy's already tense shoulders stiffened even more. "And I suppose you were perfectly sanguine when it was Mrs. Bingley," he said in a low, angry tone.

Bingley only laughed. "Darcy, Jane and I have been married for nearly four years. Surely you can relax enough after all this time to call her by her Christian name."

When there was no reply, Bingley went on in a quieter tone. "To answer your question, no, I was not. I believe I would have done something dramatic and ridiculous if not for Mr. Bennet and Hurst."

The mental image that Bingley's words provoked was enough to momentarily distract Darcy from his anxiety.

"Somehow I cannot see Hurst offering much in the way of gentle reassurances," he mused.

Bingley laughed again. "No. Strangely enough, it was Mr. Bennet who offered the reassurance. Hurst provided the spirits." He pushed the glass into Darcy's hand. "Come, Darcy, one glass. Take your medicine."

Darcy took the glass more to pacify Bingley than in the hope that it would be of any help. Just as Bingley had ordered, he swallowed the fine brandy down like a tonic.

"There's a good lad," Bingley murmured, even as he winced at the waste. Darcy scowled in reply and shoved the empty glass at him. Unoffended, Bingley merely smiled as he took it.

Darcy made to resume his pacing, and then he stopped and faced his friend. "I am sorry, Bingley, that Elizabeth and I could not be there for you and Mrs. Bi -- for you and Jane."

Bingley waved off the apology. "We would not have had you risk the roads from Pemberley in January. Thomas was earlier than we expected, but he was strong and healthy. Just as your babe will be."

With a nod, Darcy slipped around Bingley and began pacing once more. The brandy only served to dull the sharpest point of his fear, leaving the rest to twist wildly within him, a sharp-toothed knife scraping on bone.

Setting her sewing aside, Georgiana rang for a servant. When the maid entered, she quietly asked for
Darcy turned to her as the maid left the room, ashamed that he had been so inwardly focused that he had ignored the comfort of his guests.

"Georgie, I am sorry --"

She smiled gently at him. "Your mind is occupied, brother. But I wish you would sit with me and have some tea, and something to eat. Mr. Bingley says you hardly ate anything at breakfast."

He sat, shaking his head. "I cannot eat," he told her.

She grasped his arm, gripping it tightly. "She will be fine, William. She and the child. All will be well."

Mr. Bennet closed his book with a snap. "She is right, son. Lizzy is a strong, country-bred girl, just as her mother was. Mrs. Bennet bore five healthy children with no difficulties, and her mother before her bore seven."

Darcy wanted to believe them all. He wanted to believe that he was worrying for naught, but all he could remember was that one day his beautiful, lively, loving mother had been so happy preparing for the new babe, chattering and laughing, and then her chamber door had closed him out, and he had lost her forever.

The very same chamber door behind which Elizabeth was now hidden from him.

*Please, God, do not take her from me,* he prayed. *She is everything. I could not bear it.*

He sat in numb silence as his sister and Mr. Bennet sipped tea and spoke across him, conversing about he knew not what.

The shadows were lengthening into late afternoon when the drawing room door opened once more, and Mrs. Bennet strode in, followed by Jane.

His wife's mother was not smiling, and Darcy shot to his feet in a panic. The others stood as well.

Mrs. Bennet sighed and shook her head.

The world began to revolve sickeningly.

"I am sorry, Mr. Darcy --"

"No!" The word tore jaggedly from him in a strangled cry, and he swayed on his feet. Alarmed, Bingley hurried to his side to support him even as his sister grasped his other arm.

" -- but it is a daughter."

Lost in his agony, Darcy heard the remainder of her words through a dense fog, and they did not register.

Tightly gripping his friend's arm, Bingley asked sharply, "Elizabeth is well? And the child?"

Jane pushed past her mother. "Yes," she answered firmly. "They are both well, Mr. Darcy. William! They are both well!"

Bingley shook his friend's shoulder. "Darcy!"
Darcy turned tortured, unseeing eyes on him, and Bingley shuddered at the raw agony they held.

"Darcy," he repeated, shaking his friend once more. "Listen to me, man. She is fine. Elizabeth is well!"

Bingley's brusque tone penetrated the fog, and it slowly began to clear. He shook his head, dazed. "She is well? Truly?"

Bingley nodded, and relief stormed sharply through Darcy, cutting him off at the knees. He dropped onto the sofa behind him like a puppet with cut strings, his hands over his face, oblivious to their cries of alarm. In his relief, he had no time for fury or anything else. There was only one thing to do. Shaking off their supportive hands, he struggled to his feet.

"I must see her."

"There is no need for that," Mrs. Bennet scoffed as she stepped into his path. "She is fine, sir. And we will have the girl brought down and presented in a while, if you wish to see her."

Darcy completely ignored her words as he stepped around her and kept moving toward the door.

Mrs. Bennet tried to grab at his arm. "She is sleeping, Mr. Darcy!"

He shrugged off her touch. "I will not wake her, but I must see her."

Jane turned angrily to her mother as Darcy rushed from the room. "Mama, how could you! That was very badly done!"

"What nonsense are you speaking, child?"

"Surely you can see how you frightened him! He thought the worst!"

Mrs. Bennet shook her head in confusion. "But why should he be frightened? The babe is healthy and spirited, for all it is a girl, and Lizzy is strong and sturdy! Next time, she will bear him a boy."

Too angry for speech, Bingley led his wife away from her mother, ignoring Mrs. Bennet as she turned her confused and indignant exclamations on her husband.

Unconcerned about the lapse in propriety, and ignoring her father's disapproving look, Jane stepped into her husband's embrace.

"That was so awful, Charles," she murmured as he tenderly dabbed a tear from her cheek with his handkerchief. "How could she?"

"It makes me so very glad for our Thomas, if only so that I did not suffer that," Bingley whispered in her ear. They held each other quietly, their thoughts on their young son, who rested above in Pemberley's nursery.

"Jane?" Georgiana said softly from beside them. "Mr. Bingley? Excuse me, I do not mean to interrupt."

Jane smiled wanly as she stepped out of her husband's arms. "There is no need to apologize, Georgie."

"They are both well?" Georgiana asked her anxiously. "Truly?"

Jane nodded. "Truly."
"And it is a girl?"

"Yes, a beautiful little girl."

Georgiana's smile was blinding, even in her worry for her brother. "Oh! A niece! A lovely little Miss Darcy! Oh, Jane, I am an aunt! How wonderful! And my Edward an uncle! How I wish he were here! How does she look?"

Taking the younger woman's hand, Jane led her to the sofa and began to describe their niece in great detail.

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Darcy hurried down the hall toward Elizabeth's bedchamber with a haste he would have thought unseemly had he witnessed it in anyone else. Stopping abruptly before the door, he struggled to master himself. Elizabeth was sleeping, and he would not wake her, but he needed to see her. Only when he felt that he could open the door without ripping it off the hinges did he do so.

Elizabeth's maid looked up, startled, as the master burst wildly into the room. Keenly aware that he had eyes for nothing but the woman who lay sleeping, she quietly made her exit.

On trembling legs, Darcy strode to the side of the bed. He could no longer stand, but neither could he take his eyes off Elizabeth to find a chair and pull it closer, so he knelt by the bed instead. He longed to throw off the blankets, to study every inch of her in his need to know she was unharmed. Instead, he focused his gaze on her face.

It was pale and drawn as she slept, but her chest rose and fell evenly -- strongly -- with each breath, and Darcy raised his shaking hand to his mouth to stifle his raging emotions.

Her hair was dull and plastered to her face after her exertions, and he ached to brush it back, to caress the softness of her cheek, but he would not wake her.

She was not out of danger, he knew. His own mother had survived his sister's difficult birth, only to be carried off days later by the ensuing fever. All he could do was continue to pray, and that he did, silently and fervently.

Darcy pushed to his feet and circled the bed. A small -- very small, nearly too small to be believed -- bundle of blankets nestled against Elizabeth's side.

His breath left him in a rush, and he found himself kneeling again. That very, very small child was his. With God's blessing, he and Elizabeth had created life.

A daughter...

His brow furrowed, a brief surge of fury flashing through him at the reminder of Mrs. Bennet's thoughtlessness, but his anger could not hold as he looked on his child for the first time.

Shakily rising to his feet, Darcy sat on the edge of the bed, careful not to wake his exhausted wife. He reverently picked up the swaddled bundle, bringing it to his chest for closer study. The babe was wrapped quite snugly, and he could see nothing but her face. But oh, what a face! he thought, awestruck.
Her eyes were tightly shut, her lashes dark on her cheeks. Her nose was perfectly shaped, Elizabeth's in miniature. Her mouth was a tiny rosebud, a beautiful little bow of perfect pink lips. Dark, wispy hair peeked out of the edges of the swaddling cloth.

My daughter!

Her face was not enough. He had to see all of her.

He unwrapped the swaddling cloth with awkward, unaccustomed hands. Her downy skin was so soft under his fingers, and he felt like the clumsiest of oafs as he examined each perfectly formed limb. He lifted her hand with one of his fingers, mesmerized by her tiny, delicate fingers.

She was a miracle. A miracle created by the love he shared with his beautiful Elizabeth, and he was overwhelmed.

Fitzwilliam Darcy had not cried since he was a boy. But now, as he stroked a trembling finger over his daughter's lips, he could not stop the tears from welling up. He struggled to blink them back.

"You will want for nothing," he whispered fiercely. "Whatever you wish, if I must go to India or America or China for it, if I must slay dragons for it, I promise, you shall have it."

There was more to being a father, however, than that. Darcy knew that much.

"I will protect you," he swore. "No harm will ever come to you."

He thought of his beloved sister, and how unconscionably he had failed her, and he vowed that he would learn from his terrible mistake and be more vigilant. He would not put his little girl in danger. He would do better by this Miss Darcy.

Her tiny body moved in the slightest of shivers. Alarmed at the idea that she might catch a chill, he hastily did his best to re-swaddle her before cuddling her close to his chest to warm her body with his own.

He wondered who she would be. Would she have his dark eyes? Elizabeth's teasing smile? He hoped, for her sake, that she had her mother's lively disposition rather than being afflicted with the painful shyness of the Darcy family.

Captivated as he was by the tiny movements of her eyelids and mouth as she slept, he did not fail to see his wife stirring beside him. He tore his gaze from the miracle of his daughter to focus on her face.

"William?" she whispered.

"I am sorry, dearest. I did not mean to wake you. You must rest."

"You did not wake me." She blinked sleepily at him, and then smiled proudly. "I see you have made a new acquaintance."

"She is... oh, my love, she is magnificent."

"She is. And she is ours, William. Our daughter."

The words sent a fierce, wild stab of joy through him. He swallowed around the lump of emotion that clogged his throat.
"Elizabeth. I... I am so prodigiously happy. You cannot know how happy you have made me. What a gift you have given me."

"She is a gift we have been given together."

"We are very lucky," he said hoarsely.

"I had begun to despair," she murmured. "We have been married -- "

He stopped her lips with a gentle fingertip. "She is worth every minute of the wait."

They shared a smile, but hers turned puzzled. "What is it?" he asked as she reached over and smoothed the rumpled swaddling.

"Our daughter is quite disheveled, sir."

His cheeks grew warm. "I am not adept at swaddling."

Elizabeth laughed. "I would not expect you to be, William, but heavens! She looks like the parcels I used to receive from my Gardiner cousins when they were small."

Mortified, he sought to change the subject to one more pleasant. "What shall we call her?"

"I thought... I thought perhaps Anne, after your mother, and Frances, after mine."

Too moved for speech, Darcy could only stare at his wife and hope that she could see the love and gratitude that surged within him. Oh, Mother, he thought wistfully. How you would love her so!

"Miss Anne Frances Darcy, of Pemberley," he said after a moment. "How well that sounds."

"Indeed," Elizabeth said with a smile. She did her best to stifle her yawn, but he saw it.

"You must sleep. I will go."

He made no move, his gaze drifting between his wife and his daughter, and Elizabeth smiled in weary fondness.

The door from the hall opened, drawing their attention.

The nursemaid stepped in and stopped at the sight of the little family intimately gathered on the bed. "Pardon me," she murmured, preparing to step back out.

"Oh, wait!" Elizabeth called as Darcy reluctantly handed his wife their daughter and stood beside the bed, resisting the need to cross his suddenly achingly empty arms. "I am afraid I have made rather a mess of the swaddling," she offered with an embarrassed smile. "Perhaps you could help me repair it."

Darcy would not have Elizabeth thought of as less than perfect at any aspect of motherhood, not even by the servants. "Mrs. Darcy is quite generous," he countered. "I am the one who destroyed your careful work."

Bemused, the nursemaid stepped closer. "Of course, ma'am. Sir."

"I must dress for dinner, dearest," Darcy said, stifling a sigh as he glanced at the clock.

Elizabeth glanced up from where she was watching the nurse rewrap the blankets around Anne.
"Must you go?"

"I cannot ignore our guests," he told her. The much as I would like to remained unspoken. "I will return before I join the others, I promise. You must try to rest."

Restraining his urge to haul her up in his arms and kiss her frown away, he settled for stroking a fingertip over her pale cheek. With a fond, longing look at his now re-swaddled daughter, he strode toward the door between Elizabeth's chamber and his own. When he glanced back, his wife was already absorbed in whatever the nursemaid was telling her.

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Elizabeth waited impatiently, shifting in bed and stifling a groan. The nursemaid had whisked her precious girl away for a wash and a change, but had promised to return shortly. She missed her darling babe already. She wanted to clasp her daughter -- and her husband -- to her and bar the door so they might never be disturbed.

The door flew open, and Elizabeth looked up with a smile, expecting her husband. It was the door from the hall, not the door between their chambers, and her smile wilted momentarily at the sight of her mother, and then bloomed again.

"Oh, Mama, she is beautiful! You must --"

"Good, you are alone. You have had a chance to rest, Lizzy, and now I must speak with you! You know your duty is to provide him with a son. How could you fail so?"

Stunned into silence by the harsh, shrill words, Elizabeth only blinked at her mother.

"Your sisters have all done their duty! Oh, Lizzy! Why could you not do yours? Your first child, after you waited so long, and it is a girl!"

Her mother's cruel reminder of how long it had taken her to have a child brought Elizabeth's unsteady and tangled emotions even closer to the surface. The crushing disappointment that had come every month with her courses was not so long past that she could not remember it.

"You do not understand," she said shakily. "Mr. Darcy is happy with our daughter."

"Oh, yes, I am sure he is. I suppose he told you so?"

Elizabeth nodded tearfully. "He did!"

"Oh, Lizzy, you foolish girl! Of course he did. He could hardly say otherwise!"

"But he did! He is!"

"What does a father want with a daughter? Fathers want sons, Lizzy! Not daughters!"

"Pemberley is not entailed, Mama --"

"Oh, that does not make a whit of difference. A man wants a son, an heir!"

"But William is pleased with our daughter --"
Her mother snorted derisively. "Do not be stupid, girl! Mr. Darcy does not want a daughter! He needs a boy to carry on his name! He does not need a daughter that will take her husband's!"

The onslaught of her mother's words fell like blows. Exhausted and vulnerable, Elizabeth could not protect herself from them, her normal defenses stripped clean away.

"He wants a son, to pass on his legacy, not a daughter that will leave his home for her husband's! Think of your brothers, your nephews!"

Helpless not to, Elizabeth thought of the fond affection that was so plain on Mr. Bingley's face whenever he beheld young Thomas, and she recalled the way Kitty's husband proudly boasted about each of Robert's milestones. She clenched her shaking hands as she remembered the happy way her husband had discussed teaching a son his duties as Pemberley's future master.

She had wanted a boy, of course she had. She had wanted to do her duty and give him an heir, but their daughter was so beautiful, and William had seemed so happy with her...

Could she have been mistaken? Could she have been so pleased with her daughter that she had failed to see his displeasure? No, it could not be so. Could it?

She endeavoured to think clearly, but she was so very tired, and her mother was so absolutely, hysterically, loudly certain.

"But he told me he was happy," Elizabeth struggled to get out. "That she was a gift!"

"Of course he did, you foolish girl! Do you not think Mr. Bennet told me he was pleased, each time I gave him a daughter? But I knew it was not so! I looked into his eyes, and I knew! Men want sons, not daughters!"

"Mr. Darcy is not Papa." Her tears spilled over, and she wiped them away with trembling fingers.

"No, he is not! Oh, no, he is not! Mr. Darcy is rich, and powerful, and very proud, and still in need of an heir! Why would you displease him so?"

"Mama, please -- "

"Why could you not do as your sisters have done? Jane and Kitty have Thomas and Robert, and Lydia has two stout boys! You have seen how happy their husbands are with their sons. Oh, why did you give him a daughter! Thoughtless, thoughtless girl!"

Utterly overwhelmed, Elizabeth could not listen anymore. Slumping against the pillows, she turned away from her mother's accusing glare to stare at the wall. "Please, Mama, I need to rest," she pleaded dully.

"You must, Lizzy, as soon as possible, take him back into your bed. You must give him a son. No more foolish waiting and delaying! It is your duty as his wife!"

Sick and miserable, Elizabeth did not answer.

"Oh, Lizzy! Why must you always vex me so! I cannot listen to you anymore."

She hurried out of the room, exclaiming about her poor nerves, and calling for her eldest daughter.

Elizabeth continued to stare blankly at the wall, not bothering to wipe away the tears that spilled down her cheeks and soaked the pillows. She wanted to believe that her mother was wrong, but she
could not.

It had taken them so long to have a child. Though William had never said a word, she had felt his mounting sorrow as deeply as her own. Surely after waiting so long for an heir, her husband had to be disappointed to have been presented with a daughter.

She had been so anxious for her husband to return. Now, she hoped he would stay away. She did not know how she would bear it if she looked into the eyes she loved so dearly, only to find disappointment there.

There, at least, her mother was right. Whatever words William might say, the truth would be in his eyes. *And if she is right about that...* she thought miserably.

The nursemaid quietly entered with Anne in her arms, and Elizabeth felt her heart lift. Even if her husband could not love their daughter, she would. It would have to be enough.

She fought to hide her distress, hastily wiping her face and smiling through trembling lips as she raised her arms for her daughter.

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Darcy strode quickly through the sitting room he shared with his wife. He had sat down in his bedchamber for only a moment to rest after he had finished dressing, and had fallen asleep in his chair. Nearly an hour had passed before he awoke.

With only a brief knock, he rushed into his wife's bedchamber. She sat in bed, their daughter in her arms, the tears on her cheeks glistening in the firelight.

Touched by the sight of his wife's joy, Darcy hurried forward, a smile on his face. It vanished as he saw the unmistakable signs of her distress.

"Elizabeth! What is it? What is wrong?"

She wanted to look in his eyes, to see if her mother was correct, to see the disappointment she knew must be there, but she could not bring herself to meet his gaze. She shook her head as he anxiously sat beside her on the bed.

"Is it the babe? Is something wrong with her? Shall I send for the doctor? Please, Elizabeth, you must tell me!"

She could not ignore his anguish. "No," she whispered. "She is fine. I am... I am sorry I could not give you a son, William."

Bewildered, he could only blink.

"What?" he managed after a moment, but she would not look at him.

"I... I know you must... I..." She trailed off, lost for words. She took a deep breath and tried again. "Next time I will have a boy, I promise you."

He reached out to brush her hair away from her face, to try to make her look at him, and she flinched. Alarmèd, he drew his hand back.
"Elizabeth, not an hour ago, we sat here together, the three of us, and I told you how supremely happy I was! You seemed to share in my joy... what has changed -- "

_I am sorry, Mr. Darcy, but it is a daughter._

His expression hardened as white-hot fury blasted through him. "Your mother. She has been here."
He stood up. "Excuse me, Elizabeth. I will return shortly."

"No!" she cried. She grabbed his arm, stopping him from moving away from the bed. Jarred by the sudden movement, Anne woke and began to cry. "No, you mustn't!"

"Elizabeth -- "

"It is nothing, I swear!" she exclaimed, tightening her grip on his arm so that he either had to stay or pull her and Anne off the bed. In their nearly four years of marriage, she had never seen him so angry, and she was worried for him, and for what he might do in his rage. She knew he would never harm her mother, but his wrath might engender a family rift impossible to repair.

"Elizabeth, you are sitting there, our newborn babe in your arms, and you are crying as if your heart is breaking! That is _not_ nothing! I will not have it!"

"Please, sir, do not do this! I beg of you!"

Her voice grew strident in her distress, and their daughter's cries intensified. Elizabeth's face crumpled, but she did not take her eyes off him, and she did not remove her hand from his arm.

"Please, sir."

Torn between anguish and rage, he forced himself to sit beside her once more.

"Tend to the babe," he ordered softly.

"I am not sure I know how," she answered nervously.

He watched as she rocked and soothed the child, her voice soft and cajoling. He wanted to be able to smile, to be captivated by the loveliness of the image, but he only felt sick and empty.

After only a moment more of fractiousness, the child yawned and returned to her slumber.

Taking his handkerchief, he wiped the tears from Elizabeth's face, tucking a wayward curl behind her ear as he struggled for control.

"Elizabeth," he started, but his voice broke, and he stopped. Taking a deep breath, he tried again. "Elizabeth, I will not allow anyone -- _anyone_ -- to make you unhappy, today of all days. Surely, you must know that!"

"My mother's words did not hurt me," she told him, but her soft, wounded voice told him otherwise. "I only... I only wanted to make certain that you were not unhappy."

Her words sliced him to the core, and he wrestled for composure. How could she think him so heartless that he would not love their daughter? "Until ten minutes ago, this was the happiest day of my life!"

Helpless, his cursed his own selfishness as he watched her tears spill over again.
"I am sorry," she whispered.

"Do not dare," he said sharply. When their daughter stirred again in Elizabeth's arms, he did his best to soften his voice. "Do not you dare apologize to me for what that woman has done to you. You are not to blame for any of this. What have you done?"

When she said nothing, he took her chin in his hand and forced it higher. His heart broke again at the tears swimming in her sad eyes.

"You have carried our child within you, nurturing her and protecting her, enduring hours and hours of I know not what to bring her forth into this world, exhausting and weakening yourself in the process. Tell me, Elizabeth, what have you done that you should need to apologize to me?"

She smiled weakly. "You are too good to me, William."

"It is only the truth! Elizabeth, I love our daughter, I swear to you. She is beautiful, and perfect, and I would not give her up for twin sons!"

"But surely you wanted a boy, William."

Yes, of course he wanted an heir, but did that necessarily signify that he would be unhappy with a daughter? Was this his fault? Had he done or said something to make her mother so easy to believe? Slowly, he shook his head, trying fruitlessly to remember every conversation and discussion they had had since she had laughingly informed him she was carrying his child at long last.

They had both yearned for so long, and he was sure that their mutual anticipation had been nothing but joyful.

And now it was all in tatters.

Had she had noticed his anxiety of late? Perhaps he had not been as careful about keeping his fears for her safety hidden as he had thought. Surely she would not have assumed he had been that concerned about the sex of the child?

"William?" she asked softly. Hesitantly.

He forced himself not to demand why she would think him such a villain. He would not add to her distress. When he replied, his voice was steady and even. "I wanted a healthy child, Elizabeth, and an easy birth. I wanted you both safe."

"Pemberley needs an heir."

"My estate is not entailed. Your mother's ridiculous notions hold no sway here."

"Even so..."

"Elizabeth..." Darcy trailed off, baffled and frustrated. The urge to seek out and throttle Mrs. Bennet was not fading. How could he make his wife understand?

He prayed for the wisdom to know what to say, and in his prayer, he received his answer.

"God has seen fit to bless us with a daughter," he told her. "You would have me question His almighty will?"

Her mouth dropped open in shock. After a moment, she closed it and shook her head.
"N-no," she stammered. "Of course not."

"Elizabeth, I know I do not say it enough, but you must know how precious you are to me. You are the most precious thing in my life, and I thank God every day for the gift of your love, and the opportunity to prove myself worthy of you. And now... oh, Elizabeth... she has been here so short a time, but our daughter, our Anne, is equally as precious to me."

His gaze was inexorably drawn to the sleeping child. That others would think him likely to see her as less worthy because she was not born male was disgusting to him. He reached out and stroked a finger along her downy cheek, unable to stop himself.

Elizabeth watched, seeing the great tenderness in the touch, and her doubts began to fade.

"God, in His infinite wisdom, may grant us more children," he told her, his dark, solemn eyes imploring her to hear him. "He may bless us with a son, and if that happens, I shall be overjoyed. But even if He chooses to bless us with five daughters, I will be no less happy. Please believe me. I beg you."

Her tears broke free once more as she realized how wrong her mother was. "I do. Oh, William, I do. I am so sorry, I have been so foolish!"

He wrapped his arm around her, rubbing his cheek in the softness of her hair. "Do not apologize, dearest. I can only imagine what your mother must have said to you."

He vowed to make sure she never found out how Mrs. Bennet had told him of his daughter's birth.

"If it is so easy to ensure a boy, I wonder that she never took the trouble to do so," he said angrily.

Elizabeth stared at him, and then she laughed in shock. "I was so much taken by surprise at the things she was saying that it did not occur to me to point that out."

He smiled mirthlessly and pressed a kiss to her temple.

"William... I do not believe I want our daughter to bear the name Frances," she whispered.

Darcy was silent. He wished that he could disagree, for her sake, as he knew how painful a decision it must be for her, but he could not force himself to be dishonest. He did not want his daughter named after that woman.

"I do not want her to bear the name of a woman that does not value her," Elizabeth continued.

"It is fortunate that in my weariness, I did not have an opportunity to announce her yet," Darcy mused. "Though I would give anything, Elizabeth, to have been here when your mother attacked you so. I left you defenseless."

"She would simply have waited for a different moment to express her disappointment," she reasoned.

"Perhaps," he began, but his voice failed him. He had not meant to bring it up, but he found he could not be silent. Her tearful doubts had brought back all the self-loathing and dread that had consumed him after his failed proposal in Kent.

He cleared his throat and tried again. "That may be true, but perhaps if she had waited longer, I might have had time to convince you that I... that is, you might not have thought me so cold as to be unable to love a daughter."
Elizabeth stared at her husband in horror. His head was bowed, his shoulders hunched, and her own recent misery was forgotten as she beheld his.

Without thought, she shifted Anne into the crook of one arm, reaching out with her other hand to grip his forearm.

"Oh, William, no!" she murmured. "No, my dearest love! I could never think -- "

Further words were lost in a flood of tears, and Darcy looked up in dismay.

Then, to her disbelief, he gave a tremulous laugh. Shocked out of her tears, she stared at him.

"We are preposterous! Absurd, my dear. Preposterously absurd. I will not allow your mother's blind cruelty to cause us one more moment of sorrow. Elizabeth, no more tears. This is a joyous day. We have a daughter, and she is beautiful and healthy and strong."

He cupped their daughter's tiny head in one large hand, and Elizabeth could not help but smile at the sight.

"You are right," she said resolutely. "No more tears."

With the handkerchief he had held in one clenched fist, he dabbed at her cheeks once more. "We are decided then that our daughter will not be Anne Frances. What would you name her instead?"

Elizabeth did not require much time to decide. "I would like to honor Jane, but Anne Jane Darcy sounds so..."

"Short," he supplied, and she laughed.

"Yes."

"If you are not opposed, my love, I would like to honor my sister as well."

"Oh!" she said as she glanced at him, her eyes wide. "Yes, of course! Whyever would I be opposed? Dear Georgie! That would be lovely! Anne Georgiana Jane Darcy," she said with a smile.

"My mother's name is first. Your sister's should be second. Do you not think Anne Jane Georgiana Darcy sounds better?"

Her smile widened. She knew that the order he had chosen was a mark of respect for Jane, a sign of the regard he held for her sister.

"It is a lot of name for such a small girl," she teased.

He smiled. "She will grow into it."

She stared down at their sleeping daughter, and she could not keep her mind from flying toward the future, wondering what it might bring for Anne, for all of them.

"I begin to see how your mother and Lady Catherine felt," she murmured after a moment. When he glanced at her, puzzled, she smiled. "She and Jane's Thomas are of an age," she clarified.

Darcy's heart lurched as he realized her meaning. "Elizabeth!" he cried, aghast. "She has not yet been mine a day. Do not make me think of giving her away!"

Her smile turned teasing. "Not even to your dearest godson?"
"Not even to him," he said firmly, and she laughed.

They sat together, his arm around her, her head on his shoulder, watching their child sleep.

Darcy strode into the drawing room, unsurprised to find his guests assembled and waiting.

"I do apologize for the delay," he told them all. His gaze found Mrs. Bennet, and his jaw clenched in anger. "It was unavoidable," he finished, his words choppy with anger.

They all waved off his apology with a smile, clearly unaware that he was struggling to master his temper. His hands fisted momentarily at his sides as he fought to keep from marching over and shaking the woman that had caused his family so much distress this day.

His thoughts flew upstairs to those that awaited his return, and he found his anger could not hold. This is a joyous day, he reminded himself. And with that in mind, he took a deep breath.

"Elizabeth and I would like to announce the birth of our daughter, Anne Jane Georgiana Darcy," he said, and he found he could not stop smiling.

He had only a moment to register Jane's pleased smile and the happy congratulations of the others before his sister flew into his arms.

"Oh, William!" she whispered. "I... and Mother... oh, little Anne... I cannot wait to meet her!"

She trailed off into sniffling, and he laughed as he embraced her. "Tomorrow morning, I promise. She is so beautiful, Georgie."

She gazed up at him adoringly, her eyes glistening. The elegant and accomplished Lady Breesbruck had vanished, and she was his baby sister once more. "She is so lucky to have you as a father, William."

"I hope I will be a good one."

Her tears spilled over. "Oh, William. You have been since Father died."

Undone, Darcy pulled her back into his arms. When he was certain that he would not embarrass himself, he cleared his throat and stepped back, tucking her hand into his arm.

"Shall we proceed into the dining room?" he asked the group at large. "I fear I have kept you all from your meal long enough."

They went into dinner in high spirits, amid much laughter and conversation.

As the meal progressed, the fatigue of Darcy's exhausting day began to catch up with him once more. He did his best to keep up his end of discourse, but he felt as though he had been dragged behind a carriage on ten miles of rough road. He mechanically lifted his fork to his mouth, completely unaware of what he was eating. He did not wish to be rude to his guests, and he knew that he needed sustenance, but he wanted nothing more than to finish this meal and retire to his wife's chambers to be with his family.
Mercifully, Bingley on one side of him and Georgiana on the other did not require any stimulating conversation of him. It would have been quite beyond his reach. He was content to simply let them talk across him.

The meal was far more boisterous than was usual for Darcy's table, but there was, of course, one voice that often rose above the rest.

Darcy saw with weary amusement that whenever Mrs. Bennet's voice climbed high enough to reach his notice, either Bingley or his sister would comment on the meal, or the weather, or some other inanity, just loud enough so that he could not easily hear what she was saying.

He tried harder.

"...and of course she will be quite left behind by all her boy cousins, poor little chit," she was saying to Jane, who looked as angry as Darcy had ever seen her. "But just think of the gowns and the jewels she will have! She will be quite spoiled, I am sure. Though once an heir is born, I imagine that the poor thing will be completely forgotten."

Darcy glared at his plate. His normal reticence made confrontation difficult for him, and he did not wish to upset his wife by openly quarrelling with her mother, but he knew that if he did not check her attitude now, it would only worsen with time. He would not allow his daughter to be made to feel inferior to her male cousins nor, indeed, to any male Darcys who might one day be born. And he would never allow the woman to treat his Anne the way she had today treated his Elizabeth. He would bar her from his home first.

"Mrs. Bennet," he said loudly, and the table fell silent at his sharp tone. "My daughter is not a poor little chit. She is a Miss Darcy of Pemberley. She will want for nothing. Least of all, her father's esteem. Or his love."

Mrs. Bennet smiled widely. "Of course, Mr. Darcy!" she said obsequiously, but he could see the patronizing pity in her eyes, and his ire grew past the point of control.

"I am quite serious, madam. I will brook no disrespect toward my daughter or my wife, especially in our home. From anyone. Is that understood?"

He watched, satisfied as the pity in her eyes began to flicker with alarm and confusion. She glanced worriedly at her husband, who was watching his son-in-law with his usual detached amusement. Darcy angrily wondered if he would remain so detached if he knew how his wife had treated his favourite daughter.

"I am waiting for the courtesy of a reply, madam."

"Of course, sir," she said, her voice shaking. "I meant no disrespect."  

With a curt nod, he sat back and picked up his fork, suddenly aware that the whole table was staring at him with various degrees of shock. Disconcerted by their attention, and by his own outburst, he carefully placed his fork back on his plate. He imperiously swept his gaze over all his guests, meeting none of their eyes, and with the barest of civilities, he excused himself and made his way back to his family.

Once in Elizabeth's bedchamber, he dismissed her maid and removed his boots before stripping off his coat, his cravat, and his waistcoat. In his shirtsleeves and breeches, he carefully lay beside his sleeping wife. He wanted to gather her in his arms, but he knew that even that would have to wait.

Exhausted, he stared at the ceiling. There was much to be done. He had to contact his solicitor to
amend and approve the changes to his estate that they had previously discussed. He would thus ensure his daughter's protection and finalize the terms of her dowry.

There were the letters to be written to their family and friends, and the birth announcement for the newspapers.

He smiled as he thought of his most pleasant task to come. In the morning, he would present Elizabeth with the gifts he had procured to be given on the occasion of their child's birth. He hoped she would be pleased with the emerald pendant and earring set. The rich tone of the jewels would show well against her dark curls and set off the sparkle he so loved in her eyes.

The jewels were more for him than her, he knew. He loved to see her draped in treasures, and she loved to wear them and make him happy. For Elizabeth, there was a beautifully bound leather journal, in which she could begin to record their daughter's life. The jewels would make her smile, but the journal would tease out an impish grin. His lips curved as he imagined it all.

His smile faded into a frown. He knew there would be consequences for the scene in the dining room, but he could not bring himself to worry about them just now, when it was a struggle even to keep his eyes open.

His thoughts full of his beautiful Elizabeth and his darling Anne, he drifted off to sleep.

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