What's In a Name?

by jhoom

Summary

On your sixteenth birthday, a name appears on each wrist - one, the name of your soulmate, the other the name of your enemy.

** Note ** This story is currently on permanent hiatus until further notice. I would NOT expect any future updates.

Notes

Oh MAN I had a completely different Elizabeth/Darcy fic planned out but then I saw this post about these soulmate/enemy tattoos and THEN read this obikin fic... All I could think about was how perfect this was for Darcy/Elizabeth. This is probably one of three or four parts.

Check me out on tumblr @jhoomwrites.
Chapter 1

Showing them wasn't considered proper at all. Many otherwise eligible matches went unmade because the names didn't match. It became vogue for people, young ladies especially, to wear long sleeves or elaborate bracelets to hide the names etched in elegant script.

But then too many marriages had been thrown into ruin by it, seeing someone else's name on their newly wed's wrist. Laws had to be put in place to prevent anyone from seeking divorce or legal action against spouses who had perhaps misrepresented the depth of their affection. Occasionally it would help people keep a spouse who later met the man or woman whose name was sitting incriminatingly on their wrist.

It soon became a secret shared among only the closest of people - siblings might show each other, beloved friends as well. Parents might catch a glimpse of the names that appeared on their children's wrists at the tender age of sixteen. (Though many parents avoided it - heartbreaking enough to be married to someone you know wasn't your soulmate, but to force your child to do so... It didn't sit right.)

Spouses might even be lucky enough to affirm to each other that their names were there. Though most weren't, and so most did not share the secret. For even if your spouse's name happened to be on yours, it did not mean that your name was on theirs.

Of course, the absolutely scandalous would reveal their names proudly to all, leaving it for the whole world to wonder which was their lover and which their hated rival. A daring servant girl might announce to all who would listen the name of the rich young man (or sometimes old, no matter) whose name they happened to bear on their wrist. More often than not, they ignored the other name... often a parent or spouse or friend of their dear soulmate, someone with the power to absolutely ruin them.

More often than not, it didn't work out in the lovers' favor.

Although the worst stories were well circulated and gossiped about non-stop, Fitzwilliam Darcy grew up only seeing the good parts first hand. For on his mother's wrist was the elegant script of his father's name, and likewise her name was on his. His mother was a rare woman with but one name - no rival or enemy to speak of. He had no doubt his father had another name, but it was kept hidden and never discussed, so as far as the young man cared it may as well not have existed at all.

On the day of his sixteenth birthday, he woke up excitedly. In the first glimmers of light, he rushed to the window to try and make out the letters he could only faintly see.

His left wrist now bore a name written in smooth cursive letters: Elizabeth Bennet.

On his right, in a familiar script that always had erred towards efficiency rather than elegance: George Wickham.

All morning, he stared at those names. He was at a complete loss. Wickham was a friend. The idea that he could be an adversary seemed unfathomable. They were playmates, their only rivalry being in footraces and the occasional wrestling match. Perhaps the other boy was more mischievous and could be bad tempered, but that didn't seem enough to warrant anything close to the title of "enemy."

Young though he was, he considered the other possibility. That Wickham was his soulmate. He
frowned at that. Whatever his feelings towards the other boy might be, they were hardly romantic. His grandfather had often philosophized about what it means to be a soulmate. Lovers, to be sure, was the more common expression of that bond. But he insisted that a deep friendship or partnership could exist in place of it.

Yet that didn't seem right either. Yes, he and Wickham were friends, but he felt no particular strong affection for the other boy.

He became transfixed with the name on his left wrist. Frowning, he thought it didn't seem particularly fair to this unknown Miss Bennet to assume her to be his greatest enemy. Or soulmate, for that matter.

Sighing, he eventually came to the conclusion that only time would reveal this particular secret to him.

Despite the mid-summer heat, he opted to wear the longest shirt he could find. A jacket followed, just to be sure the sleeves would remain fixed in place. When he came down for breakfast, neither parent remarked on the attire of their only son. They must have decided to let the boy choose how much of the names he shared with them.

The vote of confidence pleased him. The constant reminder of his confusion did not.

Elizabeth Bennet was not afforded such privacy from her parents, nor were any of her sisters.

Jane's sixteenth birthday had been warning enough. Her eldest sister had taken it all with an amount of grace that Elizabeth, even at the young age of thirteen, knew she would never possess. The family had gathered around Jane as her mother fawned over the wonderously beautiful name written on her daughter's wrist.

Charles Bingley.

(Though Elizabeth had never said as much, she had thought the handwriting was a little sloppy - not so much ill-practiced but rushed. She knew there was no point in saying as much since it would only anger her mother and disappoint her sister. So naturally, her father was the one who remarked upon it.)

When they went to her other hand, tugging up the sleeve of her nightgown, there was the overly ornate name written with needless flourishes: Caroline Bingley.

Their mother went on and on about the possible scandals this could mean. Clearly this Charles Bingley was Jane's great love, and his mother/sister/wife was there to stand in the way of poor Jane. (Who this woman was changed from day to day as Mrs. Bennet came up with more and more elaborate stories trying to explain the mystery.) Their father almost immediately retreated to the library with a wry smile.

In the confines of Jane's bed, as the two girls whispered to each other late at night, Jane lamented that she would be the cause of any difficulty for this man. To imagine a future where she would be a source of discord among any family... it wounded the poor girl greatly. Elizabeth did what she could to comfort her sister, but without the particulars, well, there was little to say.

Two years of hearing about Jane this and Bingley that were enough to give Elizabeth a certain amount of dread for her own impending birthday. The day she turned sixteen she was given no peace from her mother.
Hiding in her room did nothing. There were threats that her door would be kicked in and she would be forcibly brought downstairs. Eventually she pushed open her door and fled down to her father's study. A full hour of begging allowed for the following agreement: she would reveal the names to her father and her father alone.

The prospect of knowing something his wife did not delighted Mr. Bennet (the years of teasing it offered apparently seemed to outweigh the years of nagging he would receive). So carefully, she pulled back her sleeves and showed the names.

On her right wrist, the precise letters spelling *Fitzwilliam Darcy*. On her left, the more casual George Wickham.
Chapter 2

Chapter Notes

So I was not expecting the type of support and interest in this fic that I've received. Not gonna lie, I'm lowkey anxious about living up to everyone's expectations. I'll do my best though :) Who knew the P&P fandom was so active!

This story generally follows the events of Pride & Prejudice, but with some changes necessitated by the premise of soulmate/enemy tattoos. Starting with some Darcy and will probably start off with Elizabeth next update. I think I originally said something about 3 or 4 chapters. I should probably mention that I am notoriously bad at knowing how long a story will be... I always tend to *under* estimate the length. That being said, I am amending my chapter count to eight (based on current outline).

Just as an FYI, I'm working on three *other* WIPs and I rotate through them (I find it helps avoid writer's block if I have options on what to work on). So if you're concerned about lack of updates, it's not because I've forgotten about this story or don't intend to complete it. It's just that it's one of several projects I'm working on. My hope is to update every other week (schedule permitting of course).

Despite the initial thrill of his sixteenth birthday, Darcy actually spends little time thinking about the names on his wrists. They are very much there, but at this juncture of his life he has no interest in a wife. And honestly, the idea of George Wickham being his enemy is just laughable. While the strength of their friendship has waned over the past few years, it's hardly enough to be thought of as a "great rivalry."

So no, he spends his times focusing on his studies at Cambridge. He's just so comfortable in the knowledge of his family's name, his wealth, the fact that he *does* have a soulmate guaranteed to him. Perhaps he takes it a bit for granted, that everything will fall into place.

Which, of course, it does.

The semblance of distaste for each other truly appears when Darcy's father dies. Wickham does not want to go into the church, which is hardly a surprise to anyone who knows him, and requests the amount of the living. It disappoints Darcy a little to see a wish of his father's be unfulfilled.

When time passes and George Wickham is once again brought before him, requesting (quite frankly, demanding it in the self-assured way of someone used to getting what they want) more money, Darcy's annoyance with the man grows. He denies the request, but is civil as he can be in memory of his late father. Wickham is less so.

At least, he thinks, this is somewhat more reasonable of a disagreement. A childhood friend, an argument, and the promise to never see each other again. Almost a proper rivalry, though not quite.

He forgets about it altogether. Learning to manage his estate and tending to Georgiana take much of his time. It's an exhausting transition from eldest son to master of a household, but he thinks he does a good job of taking it in stride. Finally, months later, he finally feels that he has a handle on
his life again. Smiling, he writes to a good friend of him looking for some sort of diversion.

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The Bingleys are a unique bunch. Darcy very much enjoys the company of Charles. He's just such a decent man, friendly and engaging in ways that Darcy doesn't quite have it in him to be. His sisters are perhaps not as overtly warm, but they are intelligent, charming women.

He hasn't known Charles more than a few months when the man declares them to be best friends and then proceeds to unburden himself of any secret he ever possessed. Everything from the time he ruined his best shoes and blamed it on his nanny to when he pushed Caroline into a pond when he was seven. And in the same breath that he laughs about a writing assignment he neglected to do as a boy, he goes on about the name etched on his left wrist.

Darcy feels like he's choking, his cravat strangling him as he tries to regain his composure. "I beg your pardon?"

"Isn't her handwriting just beautiful?" His sleeve pulled up to reveal the gentle handwriting of one Jane Bennet. If Darcy's heart had skipped a beat at the impropriety of Bingley showing him the name, it nearly stops when he recognizes the surname. Hopefully his friend will assume his flustered expression is just at his surprise at the situation in general and not the specific name.

For the next hour, he listens to Charles prattle on about his darling Jane. It takes Darcy a good half hour to realize he hasn't even met the girl yet. But is still madly in love with her. He's not sure if that's terribly romantic or terribly naive. Either way, he finds it strangely endearing.

(There's also something disappointing in realizing Charles' connection to the Bennents in as tenuous as his own. He had allowed himself to hope, just for a moment, that he was on the precipice of meeting the still unknown Elizabeth Bennet.)

Since Bingley seems perfectly comfortable talking about the name of his soulmate, Darcy can't help but be curious about his rival. So he asks. But Charles just shrugs, handing over his right hand. In a recognizable, almost sloppy hand is the name Charles Bingley.

Of course it is. Even after their very first meeting, Darcy had been sure Charles Bingley was the most genial man of his entire acquaintance. He's probably never gotten in an argument in his life, never said or heard a cross word. Any one who could possible hate or even dislike Bingley isn't someone Darcy wants to associate himself with.

So no, there is no great rival standing in the way of Bingley's happiness. He as at the mercy of his own capriciousness.

Bingley looks slightly abashed as he covers his own name back up. "At least I can learn from my mistakes and stop getting in my own way," he laughs.

He still neglects his studies. And doesn't take proper care of his finances. And until he meets the mysterious Jane Bennet, he's more than happy to fall in love with any pretty lady he meets.

Charles loves too easily and not too deeply, making him popular among most circles. Strangely, though, the only heart that gets broken in these casual romances is his own. The girls each, one by one, get bored or upset about not being his true soulmate or perhaps even meet their own. They leave, and though he should know someone better is waiting for him out there, he's devastated at each new loss.

Honestly Darcy can't understand it, even years later. With the introduction of each new lady, he
merely smiles politely and makes a wager with himself on how long it will last.

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What makes the Bingleys interesting is that Charles, so open about almost everything and in love with the whole world, is the complete opposite of his sisters. They are the type to *not* carelessly show off their wrists to anyone, bosom friend or not (he suspects that they haven’t even shared them with each other). And as friendly as Charles is, his sisters are not so much cold as distanced. They’re not easily moved by those around them.

Darcy respects that about them, he supposes. While not as much fun and certainly not as readily able to make him laugh, they share his sense of morals and propriety in a way their brother does not.

There are times, over the years of their mutual friendship, that Darcy thinks Caroline might believe herself enamored with him. She dotes on Georgiana, pays them both every compliment, and goes out of her way to engage him in conversation. Once or twice he catches her changing her opinion to match his own. It’s flattering, he supposes. Futile, but certainly flattering.

Many times, out of boredom, Darcy makes speculations about the names that are hidden on people's wrists. When Louisa marries Mr. Hurst, he is quite sure neither of them have the other’s name written on them. He rather suspects that the same words are written on both of Mr. Hurst's wrists - *booze and cards*, his two great loves and enemies. Louisa doesn't seem one to fall in love, nor is she the type to be foolish enough to make an enemy. If he were to bet money on it, he suspects that she is a rare example of someone who has no names.

Caroline, however, is certainly the type who *could* rile people up. Darcy is sure she has at *least* one name, some great rival who doesn't take kindly to her coldness or approve of her airs. The type of man she might fall in love with, well, that is the real mystery.

Until one evening, he catches sight of something he wishes he hadn't. They're playing cards, and she moves to pass the deck to Mr. Hurst. The bracelet she's wearing are not quite tight enough and slip just so. It couldn't have been clearer if it had been orchestrated. Because the way the bracelet dips and the angle of her arm make it easy enough to catch Darcy's eye. And just *part* of a name.

He's damn near uncivil the rest of the evening. After another half hour, he excuses himself because he feels like he's going to bite off someone's head if they so much as look at him the wrong way.

Pacing in his room, he eventually manages to calm down a little.

Clear as day, he had seen part of the name. But it had been more than enough.

*Fitzwilliam Darcy.*

It felt like he'd been dipped in an ice bath when he'd seen it. Not because his name is on the wrist of some woman who is not the Elizabeth Bennet he's looking for. No, it is so much worse than that.

Darcy has a lot of property to manage, a lot of business to conduct, a lot of letters to write. Which means he signs his own name quite often. He is intimately aware of what his signature looks like and in all of its different incarnations, be it neatly penned or hastily scrawled.

And what little he saw on the slender wrist of Miss Bingley looked not a damn bit like it.
I think technically this update is late? I'm kinda off schedule since I barely wrote at all last week and have been sick a great deal of this week. But I knew I'd get an update out today if it killed me!

A lot of the Darcy stuff is going to be left hanging for a bit. Mostly Elizabeth POV next chapter (maybe even some Caroline if I need to), but very limited Darcy (if any). This is where I start to break away from the events of canon (though that's obviously a huge influence), and there will be more and more as this story progresses (i.e. if the dates and order of certain balls and other events don't line up, let's assume it's intentional!).

Also, I think the correct spelling of "Lizzy" in the books might be with a y? I prefer the spelling "Lizzie", so it's the one I'll be using.

Last note - this chapter is somewhat short, but including the next part would take too long to write and I doubt I'd be able to post anything until next week. In the interest in getting an update before the weekend, I'm ending the chapter a bit earlier than initially planned.

The parlor smells too much of lavender, an obvious attempt to cover up the musty smell of neglect. Elizabeth wrinkles her nose once again, hoping she won't sneeze, and tries not to flinch as the woman before her continues to trace the lines on her palm.

This particular room at the inn is rarely let out, yet Elizabeth is all too familiar with it. Every soothsayer, gypsy, reader, or "doctor" who claims to be an expert in affairs of the heart and has graced Meryton with their presence has made use of this room. And each and every time, Mrs. Bennet has marched her five daughters into town to consult on the matter of their soulmates.

Not that they were allowed to see the actual marks the four eldest Miss Bennets possessed. That was simply out of the question. No, these types were more about the reading of palms and the use of crystal balls to divine meaning in what Elizabeth was more and more sure was meaningless superstition.

She'd listened to countless "professionals" claim that which hand the name appeared on was of the utmost importance, whereas her own personal experience had her convinced that was anything but true. Her aunts and uncles, though never having revealed the exact nature of the names hidden behind layers of cloth and jewelry, had hinted often enough that the idea seemed preposterous. Left wrist, right wrist, it mattered not.

_We must leave some things to chance_, she muses while stifling a yawn.

As she continues to allow the reader to peruse each indentation on her hand, a calloused finger running along each groove and a comically large magnifying glass occasionally being put to use, Elizabeth tries to find something in the room to divert herself. While she is intimately aware with the furnishings - those have not changed these last ten years - the manner of decoration can alter
drastically with each new occupant.

The last man, a gypsy who had stayed in town a solid month and who favored tarot cards and reading tea leaves, had brightly colored tapestries strewn over every available surface. They had depicted such marvelous stories, tales of love and betrayal, that had been far more entertaining than anything the man himself had to say.

This woman, however, seems to prefer to shroud things in a sense of mystery. The heavy curtains are pulled tight, letting in no light and only muffled sounds from the street. Candles decorate each table and the mantle, no doubt the source of the inescapable lavender. Heavy robes obscure the woman's form, though do little to hide her growing age.

*It is rather strange,* she thinks to herself. *Were it not for these marks, I doubt society would stomach the presence of such mystics.*

To be sure, there are those like her father who delighted in the nonsense they spewed. The public as a whole is quite taken with the "otherworldly" air they bring with them. But high society views them more as a necessary evil. An indulgence that they are forced to endure for the sake of their sons and daughters making the most advantageous matches possible.

"Mmmmm," the woman intones. Elizabeth starts slightly, but then prepares herself for the no doubt life-altering wisdom about to be imparted upon her. With a satisfied smile, she taps Elizabeth's right hand decisively. "That'll be your soulmate."

"Yes of course, I always suspected as much," she replies, hoping she looks as earnest as the woman.

She neglects to mention that the last reader they'd met with had been equally confident about the other hand. *Ah well, knowing would take the fun out of it anyway.*

An over abundance of predictions about her future followed by her heartfelt thank-yous pass before she's allowed to leave the room. "Your turn, Mary." The middle Miss Bennet nods tightly and enters.

There's a bench in the hallway and Elizabeth gladly takes Mary's now vacant spot.

"Poor Mary," Jane whispers. "She really does hate all this, doesn't she?"

"Aye, of course she does. This isn't as simple as books and concertos, and I'm afraid she's too serious to find any fun in it."

"Lizzie!" she scolds, but there's little bite behind it.

"Did you know," she grasps Jane's hand between her own and says very solemnly, "I'm to marry the man whose name is on my right wrist within the year. We're to be very happy and have six children and four dogs, will continue to live in Hertfordshire where we'll have a large estate. And we will travel quite extensively, as I'm told. Really, I don't know how we'll find the time to do so with six children to manage, but there you have it."

They share a laugh. "Oh Lizzie... one of these days you might actually find some of these things coming to pass. Would it bother you so, if one of these lives turns out to be your own?"

Elizabeth just barely manages to not roll her eyes. "I daresay one of them will be, eventually. But I think the life I make for myself, under my own terms and not under some reading of the stars or some other such nonsense, will be anything but a joke."
Jane doesn't look much appeased, but as always is gracious enough to change the topic.

Mrs. Bennet is waiting for them quite anxiously back at Longbourn. Their mother always expresses an interest in the events of such affairs, but often finds out very little because of the secrecy some of the daughters insist upon. (Most notably Elizabeth and Mary, who only have confided in their father. Jane's rather public reading of names at her sixteenth birthday must have scared poor Kitty as well, because though she would show their dear mama as well, she refused to let her sisters in on the secret.)

There's something different in her demeanor, though, an excess of energy that Elizabeth can't attribute to wanting to hear about their visit in town. They barely get settled in for tea when she finds out why.

"Girls, I've just heard the most exciting news! Netherfield Park has been let at last!" The sisters share a look, each with varying amounts of interest. Disappointed that her news hasn't sparked the excitement she clearly expected, Mrs. Bennet huffs. "And do you have any idea who has taken the manor?"

"There's not much point in asking," Kitty mutters. "You know we haven't."

"Mr. Bingley!" Mrs. Bennet declares gleefully, ignoring or possibly not hearing her second youngest.

A vacuum replaces all the air in the room at the announcement. Someone gasps, but all eyes turn immediately to Jane. To most, it would appear Jane is unmoved by the revelation that her beloved was moving into the neighborhood. To Elizabeth, however, she can see nothing but panic in her dear sister's eyes.

As Mrs. Bennet goes on and on about all the details of Mr. Bingley's alleged wealth, Elizabeth discreetly directs Jane to the nearest chair and motions for her to be brought a cup of tea. In tending to her sister, she almost misses the more important details.

"Now, Mr. Bingley himself will not be making an appearance until after the next ball as he is delayed in town on business." Mrs. Bennet takes a moment to scoff at the idea that a young man of vast fortune should have to do any business. "But his sisters will be in attendance, as they will come ahead of him to help prepare the house."

"His sisters?" Elizabeth asks cautiously.

"Yes, yes, what of it?" Mrs. Bennet seems to remember at that very moment why that might be an issue. "Oh dear Jane, take heart! I doubt there's anything to fear. You're such a sweet girl, and I never put much stock in the notion that someone would ever mean you ill." And then it's back to gushing over Mr. Bingley and plans for their first meeting.

Elizabeth takes every opportunity to check with her sister for signs of distress as their mother prattles on. At the moment, though, there's little support she can offer other than the occasional squeezing of her shoulder or hand. Later, when they have time alone, she promises herself that she will do what she can to ease Jane's worries.
The time passes quickly enough. Jane, at first quite nervous and out of spirits, gradually recovered from the initial shock of Mrs. Bennet's announcement. Elizabeth does all in her power to re-direct her mother's very loud daydreaming and plotting, as well as their father's overdone teasing.

But then it's the day of the ball, and Elizabeth feels nervous on behalf of her sister. While Mr. Bingley might not be in attendance, it is quite likely that the mysterious Caroline Bingley will.

Nearly as soon as they arrive, Lydia and Kitty disappear to find dancing partners. Elizabeth finds it very likely she will see very little of the youngest Miss Bennets for the rest of the evening. It takes Mary more time to drift away, and though Elizabeth would very much like to follow suit, Mrs. Bennet won't let Jane leave her side. Not willing to abandon her sister to both their mother and likely to the still unknown Miss Bingley.

So she endures her mother's comments and constant gossiping. She squeezes Jane's hand in silent support whenever something particularly in poor taste is said. (Their mother's machinations have been embarrassing enough over the years, but they were done in the hopes of securing a marriage. But the firm knowledge that her eldest daughter's soulmate is a man of wealth about to enter their very own neighborhood has lit a fire like none before.

It takes all she can do to calm her mother's rather loud scheming when she sees Mrs Lucas approaching, accompanied by her daughters and two women of fashion. Although the neighborhood has a generous number of families, there can be no doubt to who the newcomers are. Elizabeth hushes her mother and is ready to resort to stomping on her foot if need be.

"Mrs. Bennet, girls, how wonderful to see you. I have recently made the acquaintance of Miss Caroline Bingley and Mrs. Louisa Hurst, whose brother will be letting Netherfield for the foreseeable future. They've arrived before the men in their party to help settle the place." The two women nodded slightly in acknowledgement. "They were quite eager to meet with you, especially when they heard of how delightful the company of both you and your daughters is."

Mrs. Bennet, of course, soaks up the praise. "I dare say we'll all enjoy the mutual acquaintance."

Elizabeth holds her breath and hoped her mother would not immediately start questioning about the "men in their party." The fear turns out to be unfounded. With such an obvious goal in mind, Mrs. Bennet is apparently capable of the necessary tact.

"This is my eldest, Jane, and this here is Elizabeth and Mary. Over there you'll see my two youngest, Kitty and Lydia, dancing with the soldiers." She waits a moment to see if either woman has anything to contribute - neither yet spoken more than two words together - but when they don't she frowns slightly before a bright smile lights her face and she goes on and on about the neighborhood and how lucky their brother is to have found such a fine house with such lively,
genteel folk to keep him company.

Throughout the exchange, Elizabeth eyes the two carefully. There had been something that had passed over their expressions when the introductions were made, something that makes Elizabeth take note so that she can mull over it later without the distraction of the festivities around them. When her mother had said Jane's name, a sort of knowing had flashed in their eyes.

In the elder sister's expression there was something akin to curiosity. She looked over Jane with open interest, and seeming to come to some sort of understanding, she settled into something along the lines of resignation.

The other sister, the long dreaded Caroline Bingley on her dear sister's hand, well, there was no doubting her recognition of the name. She eyed Jane with a look that bordered on disdain (though surely those around them would have thought it perhaps boredom or haughtiness).

Between the two sisters' reactions, Elizabeth is quite sure they know the name Jane Bennet. She hopes fiercely that it is because her name rests on their brother's wrist, and not because its match is on Miss Bingley's. Though that she finds hard to believe. It always broke her heart a little to know that there was someone in the world who could dislike, perhaps actively campaign against her dear, sweet Jane. But the idea that Jane would be someone's, anyone's enemy is ridiculous to the extreme.

No, she is quite certain that if the Bingleys know anything of the Bennets, it must be through their brother.

If only that were the only thing of interest from the meeting. Elizabeth remembers quite well their faces when Jane was introduced, but she remembers just as well the way Caroline's obvious aversion to Jane shifted into something equally palpable when her name was uttered. She had schooled her expression almost immediately, but Elizabeth could still feel the heat of her glare.

*Curiouser and curiouser,* she muses to herself.

The exchange ends rather abruptly when the dance ends. As Lydia and Kitty frolic over - Elizabeth shudders slightly at the impropriety that the shake of Lydia's hips alone manifests - the party breaks apart. The necessary civilities are exchanged, along with an invitation to Longbourn for tea.

"I'm sure it can be rather dull without company," Mrs. Bennet professes sagely. "And Longbourn never lacks for conversation."

Mrs. Hurst offers a polite smile and, though it seems that Caroline would like nothing more than to decline, she graciously accepts. "I believe we would be delighted to visit, perhaps this Thursday."

The plans made, everyone splits off into smaller groups. Elizabeth instantly pulls Charlotte aside. She would love to bring Jane along, but she expects her mother to start some mix of praising, scolding and coaching. With the worst of it behind them, and knowing there is nothing she can do to save her sister, she decides to instead save herself.

"Your mother seems quite interested in the Bingleys," Charlotte prompts after a few moments.

"Yes," Elizabeth sighs before smiling and batting her eyelashes coyly, "But every young gentleman with even half as much fortune would warrant the attention of a mother with five daughters to marry off."

Charlotte is a dear friend, but she had never divulged the information about the Bingleys. It was
quite simply Jane's secret, one she had allowed the family to know, but beyond that it was not
Elizabeth's place to speak of it. Understanding the deflection, perhaps even accepting it, the topic
shifted just shy of what they both would eagerly discuss should propriety have allowed it.

"Caroline Bingley certainly has taken an interest in you, Lizzie. What could that mean?"

A joke that perhaps Caroline thought Elizabeth to be her soulmate is on the tip of her tongue. But
instead of being so brazen, she laughs and rolls her eyes. "I can't imagine why, I should think
there's very little we have in common."

The elegant cut of the woman's dress, the fashionable cuffs to hide her wrists, and her overall
opinion that she was *clearly* above everything taking place around her left no doubt in Elizabeth's
mind that their commonalities were few and far between.

*We are both women,* she concedes to herself with a half smile.

"Still, Lizzie, I'd caution against making an enemy of her."

She chuckles at the warning, emphasizing the bracelets on her wrists just so. "Caroline Bingley is
not a particular concern of mine," she hints vaguely.

"Perhaps not a particular concern, but let's not make her a general one either."

"As always, Charlotte, you are probably right." Grabbing her friend's hands, she pulls her in with a
laugh, "Let's see if we can find ourselves dance partners and if not, let's speculate about which
guests are secretly soulmates and enemies."

Charlotte, with an amused glint in her eyes even if it doesn't quite make it to a smile, follows where
Elizabeth leads.

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Cold eyes watch as the two head off in search of merriment. Caroline has no idea what this
country girl could possibly offer in the way of rivalry, but she suspects. Oh, does she suspect. She
weighs her options carefully. Which threat was greater, which she feared more.

Well, Charles had always been easy to influence. Re-directing him away from Jane Bennet would
likely prove to be no problem. Louisa might even help, though she loathes getting involved with
such matters. Knowing the girl better might even prove beneficial, especially given how prone to
silliness and impropriety her mother and younger sisters seemed to be.

So she would instead focus her intention on Elizabeth Bennet. Her left wrist itches just thinking
about the younger woman, and she discreetly rubs the offending area. There must be a reason her
name is etched across her skin instead of the sister.

Satisfied for the moment, she smiles wickedly at Louisa before continuing her scornful comments
of the assembly before them.
Chapter 5

Chapter Notes

Another update! Yay! And somewhat on time :) I am still currently working with my ten chapter outline, but we'll see how long it takes me to go through the necessary plot points (and if the characters decide to behave as intended). And I hope to continue updating biweekly (time permitting of course).

The next update might actually be sooner - I had originally written some Darcy POV excerpts that I wanted to put in this chapter, but it seemed more cohesive to make this a Caroline-centric update. Next update will probably be all Darcy.

Not going to lie, this is difficult to write. Not because of the characters or plot or anything, but trying to mimic the writing style of Victorian England isn't really my forte. It was really freeing when I started another side project with Pride and Prejudice love to hate, where I was free to use more modern phrasing and verbage. I feel like I'm digging into a thesaurus every time I write. And I'm obviously no expert on this time period - my entire knowledge is based on period literature that I haven't actually read in a few years - so hopefully it comes off at least passable.

There is little if anything that Caroline has found redeeming in the countryside. It would not matter if half the Ton were to reside here as well.

She does concede, however, that Pemberly does have its unique benefits. The property is very well situated and the grounds quite pretty, she will allow. The rooms themselves are spectacularly furnished. If only it were closer to London, it would indeed be perfect.

This place that her brother has picked has little to recommend itself. The upstairs corridor has a draft, the gardens have been neglected and need work, and though she has heard there is a pond somewhere on the property, it isn't visible from the house.

*What use is a pond if no one can see it?* she thinks darkly.

Wrinkling her noise in annoyance, she takes another sip of tea before deciding to get to work. "I believe, sister, that we should perhaps pay our visit to the Bennets this afternoon."

Louisa raises an eyebrow. That they would visit has indeed been agreed upon, but the date was set for a few days from now. Moving the engagement forward would seem strange. "It's only been a day, Caroline. Is there any *particular* reason behind your eagerness in this acquaintance?"

The sisters are close, but it isn't in either of their nature's to be open. Perhaps it would be better to say that they are *allies* in most matters. They read each other well, are of a similar mind in most matters, and share familial goals. Yet each has her own secrets, which is clearly evident as Caroline tries to dance around the true nature of her plans.

"Well, we had best keep on eye on Miss Jane Bennet." This is, of course, the easiest point to make. And if she's lucky, the only one she'll need to.
Louisa inclines her head slightly in agreement. "I suppose." But then adds, "It would be quite indecorous to drop by unannounced so early in the acquaintance. Invite them here instead."

Not a bad plan, since it will allow them to keep their commitment for Thursday. Testing the waters, she adds, "What do you think of the girl?"

Her eyebrows lift and she very carefully chooses her next words. "Jane Bennet is quite the handsome girl with a quiet disposition. It is rather a shame that some of her younger sisters do not seem to share that quality."

"Well, with a mother like that."

They share a laugh. Yes, they are in accord so far. "I merely think we should get to know the girl, the better to be able to advise Charles in how to proceed should he choose to court her."

"Oh Caroline." Louisa tsks slightly before dipping a biscuit in her tea and taking a bite. "You know very well that she's just Charles' type. Even if he hasn't known her name for some years, he would have courted her anyway. I'm actually very curious to see how much different his pursuit will be this time."

Now it's her turn to choose her words carefully. "But should they not be compatible... perhaps knowing her better would help us nudge him away from the inevitable heartbreak that such a realization would bring him."

Silence fills the drawing room as Louisa considers. "Yes, I suppose so," she says in an offhand sort of way. While not a complete dismissal of Caroline's plan, it's not the hearty agreement she had been hoping for.

She bites her tongue to avoid asking for her opinion of Elizabeth Bennet. Their first encounter was so brief, she doubts her own mind has been made about her rival. Though, with an unconscious touch to her left wrist, it seems thoughts on Elizabeth will by necessity or design tend towards the negative.

There's no more talk of the Bennets until they depart to write letters. Louisa takes it upon herself to write Charles about how things are going at Netherfield. She eyes her sister warily as she makes the announcement, and Caroline wonders not for the first time whose side Louisa would take should it come to an argument between the siblings.

(She almost asks her sister not to mention Elizabeth Bennet but manages to stop herself. No doubt Jane will come up in the course of the letter, but Louisa would have reason to mention the other sisters. No, better to leave it alone instead of draw any more attention to it.)

To fill the time, Caroline sets herself to writing Mrs. Bennet with an invitation for them to visit either later that afternoon or tomorrow.

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The Bennets, who apparently don't care about appearing too eager to form a connection with the Bingleys, appear on their doorstep within a few hours. Louisa seems almost impressed, though perhaps a little put off. Caroline merely tries to determine the motivation. Is this a mother of five daughters hoping to marry one of them off to a wealthy man she has yet to meet? Or is this a mother who has a particular interest in a particular gentleman because her daughter's wrist bears his name?

The girls are so loud that their approach to the drawing room is heard long before their actual
arrival. The chatter causes Louisa to give Caroline a disapproving look for having brought this upon them before a smile is pasted on her face. Ever the gracious hostess, she exhibits a patience that Caroline has never quite been able to affect.

All the while Mrs. Bennet goes on and on without end, giving first the history of the house and its previous honors, then about the neighborhood and all the upcoming balls and festivities, and that somehow leads into an admonition against the frivolous lavishness one would find in the Ton followed by an immediate inquiry into the latest fashions there.

It is extremely tiring.

Very few of the Bennet daughters take part in the conversation (with the exception of the younger two, who seem to have quite a bit to say about fashion and balls). Eventually Mrs. Bennet's endless discussion putters out just as tea is brought in.

With little subtlety, Elizabeth Bennet takes advantage of the lull in conversation. "You must be eager to have your brother join you here. No doubt he means to arrive soon and make use of the estate he's found for himself."

The atmosphere of the room becomes suddenly heavy. All eyes are on Caroline and her sister as they impatiently await an answer. No doubt there is something mercenary in their desire to meet Charles.

Luckily it is Louisa who answers, for Caroline is quite sure she wouldn't have been able to hide the venom in any reply she could voice. "He does mean to be here in time for the ball at Lucas Lodge next week. He's always been quite fond of such outings and wouldn't dream of such a chance to meet his new neighbors."

How unfortunate for Louisa that she chose to speak, because she is bombarded with questions about Charles and his preferences for dances (lead by the youngest Miss Bennet whose name escapes Caroline at the moment). Jane has the decency to blush at the questioning while Elizabeth pales but wears a bemused smile.

"How are the gardens?" Elizabeth interrupts after a few moments of silliness and Louisa's floundering under it. "I have heard they are quite beautiful, though it has been some time since a family has taken up residence here and I wonder if they have suffered from the neglect."

Louisa looks so grateful at the change in topic that she almost sighs in relief. "They have, though the gardeners are quite determined to have them presentable by the time Charles arrives."

Feeling that she is slowly losing her sister as an ally against the Bennets, Caroline jumps in. "If you would like, we could all go out and take a turn about them. I'm sure it would do us all some good to have some fresh air after such a long afternoon indoors."

Some of the Bennet sisters perk up at the suggestion, most notably the eldest two. The others agree with varying degrees of interest and Caroline can feel Louisa's eyes boring into her as she leads the way out.

Within moments they form parties as they start out on the walk. Caroline manages to break off at a brisk pace with Elizabeth while Louisa falls back with Jane and Mary. The others trail even further behind, taking far too much delight in each variety of flower and sculpted hedge. Whom they plan to win over with such flattery she's not terribly sure.

Silence reigns for several minutes before they are sufficiently far enough away from the others that
Elizabeth must feel safe in their intimacy. "I must take the opportunity to apologize for our younger sisters." She kicks a stone down the path. "They are... overzealous when it comes to anything involving a chance for silliness and fun. Don't let that scare you though, they are harmless as they will never seek you out as a dance partner. You are quite lucky in that respect, your poor brother will no doubt be hounded to dance with them whenever he has a free moment. Hopefully he won't mind."

"I dare say he'll enjoy the attention," she says dismissively. She catches Elizabeth's frown and reprimands herself. Her goal is to win over Elizabeth as a friend and apparently she's already made a misstep. With great effort she reminds herself to be friendly (though not to go so far as Mrs. Bennet, the very idea making her shudder in distaste). "You needn't worry. I remember my excitement when I was their age, looking forward to each dance the way I now look forward to a chance to stay in and read."

A lie, every word of it, but Elizabeth need not know that.

At the mention of books, the conversation flows more easily. Miss Bennet has a lot to say on the matter and is surprisingly well read, more so than Caroline is. She's never looked kindly upon those of their sex who spent so much time on an activity that's only use is to try and impress men. But she refrains from being anything other than agreeable, mostly claiming to have tastes very similar to Elizabeth's all the while being honest about what she has and has not read.

"I must admit, I did not take you for an avid reader."

"Well," Caroline whispers as if sharing a secret, "I'm not as much of one as I should like, but it is a hobby I would indulge in more, time permitting."

Elizabeth smiles wryly at that but doesn't comment.

Their walk lasts little more a half hour, but definite progress has been made in winning Elizabeth's friendship. Miss Bennet is by no means warm to her, nor is she in return, but the foundation has been laid. Ample time remains before Charles and Darcy arrive, and she is quite confident that she'll have everything in place by then.

The two woman are in fact the last ones to arrive back at the house and the carriage is pulling into the drive. Good-bye's are said all around, the usual pleasantries exchanged, and Mrs. Bennet manages to guarantee that they will come visit Longbourn come Thursday.

"Jane Bennet really is a sweet girl," Louisa says as they watch the carriage depart. "Such a shame she was born to such a family, otherwise I think she could not be more perfect for Charles."

Without waiting for a response, she turns on her heel and returns to the house.

"It is indeed a shame." Jane would suit their brother quite well in nearly every regard. If her family had more (or really, anything) to offer in way of wealth or connections, Caroline would welcome the girl with open arms.

Probably.
I apologize for the kind of late update (not a whole lot of time to write this past week) and the short chapter. The next part of the story is when the two finally meet, and the interactions are kind of complicated and I haven't quite worked them all out yet - I'm posting what I have because otherwise it might be another week before I post anything (and something's better than nothing I hope??).

I also had someone point out in a comment that in my last author's note I mentioned the Victorian Era in error when I meant Napoleonic. Whoops. (Though strange to get a correction about something in the author's note and not about the story...)

When Bingley first contacted him, telling him about his interest in finding a house to let, Darcy was a little surprised. Bingley's not the type of man to settle down, at least not at the moment, so it's a surprisingly expensive whim to be following. But as he always tries to be, he's supportive.

It's not terribly uncommon, for a bachelor in his position, to take on property in new neighborhoods. A young man searching for his soulmate (or at the very least for a wife) is in need of new company once the eligible young ladies in his own neighborhood have been met. Since he has yet to find the acquaintance of the mysterious Jane Bennet, Darcy can hardly blame him for continuing his search.

He almost envies the man the freedom he has. The Bingleys have a house in London, but no family estate demanding their attention. Charles is free to move in and out of neighborhoods as he pleases. Darcy is fixed at Pemberly, and though he would trade the estate for nothing, it does not allow him to roam the country in search of Miss Elizabeth Bennet.

Which perhaps influences his encouragement of Charles. Because he knows that his friend does have that freedom. And that whenever he finds his darling Jane, Miss Elizabeth is sure to follow.

"I've found one," he says without preamble, taking a seat across from Darcy in the drawing room.

Without looking up from his book, Darcy answers. "I assume you mean that you have found a house."

Bingley doesn't wait until his friend finishes the paragraph and puts down the book, already going on and on about the house his agent has found him. "It'd mean very much to me if you'd visit with me." There's a shy, uneasiness in the way he says it. As though he worries Darcy will say no. "You're more versed in these sorts of things, and your opinion would be greatly appreciated-" he adds in a rush.

Taking mercy, Darcy cuts him off. "Of course. When do you plan on visiting?" Then he frowns, "Will your sisters be accompanying you?"

Only the slightest hesitation, but then answers. "I was hoping to arrive by the end of the month, if that's agreeable. The weather should be decent for hunting or fishing, assuming there's any to be had-"
"Bingley," he growls out in warning.

"Well..." He looks uncomfortable, which is answer enough, but he still continues. "Caroline and Louisa will both be coming along. I actually plan on sending them ahead, since they've expressed an interest in attending to some matters there involving the staff. Caroline especially..." He cuts off nervously and coughs a bit.

They've never discussed it. Bingley's not one to push in matters like this, and Darcy is gracious enough not to say anything. But it lies between them, the unspoken event that happened three years ago. All Bingley knows is that one day Darcy stopped speaking to Caroline altogether. That eventually they had some sort of discussion, came to an agreement, and now can barely stand to be in the same room with each other.

Darcy has no doubt that his friend is completely in the dark. He's not a talented liar, not by a long shot, and this type of deception would be abhorrent to him. The truth of Caroline's plan is something only the two of them are aware of, and Darcy for his part is more than happy to keep it that way.

The confrontation he had with Caroline had been uncomfortable for both parties involved. She denied the accusation at first, insisting that the names on her wrists were genuine. When pressed further, she of course had no choice but to confess her misstep. She apologized profusely, of course, because what else could she do.

Darcy shunned her for a while after that. Only at behest Bingley's gentle inquiries did he reconsider his position. Eventually, he forgave her. Although from a wealthy family, without a husband to offer security in the future, she was afraid. At least, Darcy chooses to hope she was motivated by fear rather than greed. Without a soulmate of her own, she feared being alone, saw an opportunity, and took it without truly thinking about the dangers or consequences.

He made an effort to not only see Charles more (an unfortunate side effect of the whole incident was that Darcy felt the need to avoid all the Bingleys, as it seemed the easiest solution) but to be if not kind to Caroline, at least he tried to manage civility. As an unspoken apology, she gave him a book of poetry that year for his birthday. There was a bookmark stuck between its pages, marking a poem on regret.

Their relationship, however, has never recovered. The easy friendship they once enjoyed flounders under the strain of awkwardness. He does not relish the idea of seeing her in general, and the prospect of an extended stay at Bingley's new home with her in attendance...

Well, he'll just have to endure for the sake of Bingley.

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Darcy arrives at Bingley's townhouse just after breakfast. They have a few minor details to hammer out before they begin their trip to Netherfield, and today is just as good a day as any to handle them. He'll have to see to Georgiana, of course, but that has nothing to do with Bingley and can be managed at his leisure.

When he's shown into the sitting room, Bingley is nearly bouncing in excitement at the door. It reminds Darcy immediately of a child waiting for leave to go play or a puppy waiting for a treat. On a grown man it should be unseemly, yet Bingley makes every such breach of social mores endearing.

"I've gotten a letter from my sister."
He frowns slightly, because this hardly seems like occasion to celebrate. Neither sister is particularly warm towards Charles and surely there must be some love between the siblings, but it's never manifested in such a way before. The mystery does not remain for long.

"She's met Jane Bennet."

There's more after that, but Darcy's ears are ringing and he can't quite seem to focus on a word his friend says. Slowly, far far too slowly, his mind processes this information. Jane Bennet has been found. That means Elizabeth Bennet is likely to be there as well. There is the very real possibility that he is within a fortnight of meeting his soulmate.

He does eventually come back to himself, catching only the tail end of what's being said.

"-could be there by tomorrow, could meet her the day after-"

"What?" he interrupts, although there's really no need. Charles, in his recklessness, plans on arriving ahead of schedule. And perhaps Darcy's heart beats a tad faster at the idea of finally being able to behold the woman whose name has been etched on his wrist for a decade. He may feel a flush spread across his neck at the prospect of courting a woman who would surely meet his every expectation, who would be everything he could want in the future mistress of Pemberly-

With a concentrated effort, he reels in that line of thinking and focuses on the conversation at hand.

"I think you may be jumping the gun. No need to rush-"

"No need to rush!" Bingley exclaims, mouth hanging open in incredulity. "I find out my soulmate lives in the neighborhood of my new estate, and you expect me to just wait around London?"

"No," Darcy concedes. It's not in Charles' nature to be patient in matters of the heart. The man has fallen in and out of love at the drop of the hat for the entirety of time they've known each other. Of course he's going to rush into this without thinking things through. (And perhaps his own nervousness more than anything else makes him wish for the delay.) "But it would be unwise to change our plans so drastically." He carefully considers how best to convince Bingley, deciding that honesty is the best tactic. "You don't want to scare the poor girl. Let things develop naturally, a normal courtship, albeit one where you already know the outcome. There are matters to take care of before we can depart."

"But... but..." The poor man seems stuck on the word and a pout marring his expression.

With a sigh, Darcy concedes, "I suppose we could adjust the timeline."

Bingley's eyes brighten considerably. "How much so?" he asks tentatively.

"We could probably leave by the end of the week, I think I'd have all my affairs in order by then-"

"Well, get to it man!"

He doesn't even bother disguising the eye roll his friend's enthusiasm causes.
This chapter was super complicated to write since it required way more planning than I'm used to. I have about 1000+ words of notes in general for the story, but I had to actually outline this chapter individually and had nearly as many notes just for this single update. I needed to go through all the interactions to make sure they made sense (because, you know, the *entire* plot of the story hinges on this chapter being believable. So hopefully it is.

To give you an idea of how my notes look, I've got such gems as... (warning that they are spoiler-ish for this chapter)
- bingley points out that jane was with plenty of other girls, they were all pretty enough; darcy's not impressed, is a dick
- mrs bennet (who has snuck over cuz she's not gonna miss this)
- as subtly as possible, everyone's watching bingley's reaction, who is smiling brighter than the friggin sun
- listening to mrs bennet (loudly) go on and on (and on and on) about jane and how awesome she is (bingley hangs on every word, obviously in complete agreement)
- realizes he fucked up, spends rest of evening too tongue tied to actually fix anything
- caroline talk his ear off about how great friends she and elizabeth are (and he's like wtf, i don't even like you and you're saying you're bff's with my soulmate? oh god, maybe this isn't going to work out maybe this soulmate stuff is wrong maybe there's another elizabeth bennet oh god now he's panicking)

(You can see that there is an obvious change between pre-writing and the published versions haha)

Final disclaimer: I am not an expert on the social mores of this time period. What I know (or think I know) comes almost completely from books I've read. So if I talk about protocol or customs or things and they're wrong, please let me know (because it's interesting), but be aware that I might not be able to incorporate the *actual* societal rules since I kinda need things to go a certain way for plot purposes. Oh, and as I said earlier, I might move events in the story around or add extra balls/whatever as necessary.

They arrive at Netherfield on the eve of a ball to be held at a neighboring estate. An express letter announced they would be coming ahead of schedule, and now that they're here Charles barely listens to anyone when they say he has to wait until the next day to meet Miss Jane Bennet. They're right, of course, and he gives in to their unanimous agreement after some persuasion.

The evening is, of course, spent with Charles grilling his sisters for all the information he can. He insists on an account of every meeting they've had with her, what she looks like, her interests, her family. Everything he hears has him smiling and gushing praise like a school boy, and Darcy is quite convinced that his sisters could proclaim her to be ugly, pock-marked, and lame and he would dote upon her still.
For his part, all Darcy can really gather is that Jane has several younger sisters, of whom she is
definitely the prettiest. Though Louisa mentions offhand that some of the others aren't
entirely irredeemable. After a pause, Caroline agrees, saying she finds some of their company
quite agreeable.

"Once you get over the shock of their situation, naturally, it's easy to find their home cozy and their
manners quaint in a country sort of way."

Darcy nearly rolls his eyes at the condescension of Caroline's assessment, but all Bingley seems to
hear is "cozy" and "quaint" before moving on. With all of the focus on Jane, it's hard to parse out
anything of interest about her sisters. Halfway through the conversation, Darcy notes they have
yet to be mentioned by name. It's too late to ask now, especially since he wants to show no
particular regard for any of them before meeting.

(Charles may through propriety to the wind when it comes to his soulmate, but Darcy will not. He
will do things right, which means making Elizabeth's acquaintance as though she were any other
young lady and over time court her as is proper. Showing undue attention or interest before even
laying eyes on her himself is completely untoward. He might admire Charles' enthusiasm and even
share it in a more muted way, but he dare not show it so openly.)

Even without pressing too much, he feels Caroline's keen eyes on him. He doesn't know why and
he doesn't care for it, but there's no way to say as much without being abominably rude.

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The ball at Lucas Lodge is... not what he expected, to put it mildly. Perhaps he's spent too much
time in London, but he definitely understands Caroline's assessment of things being "quaint." It is
not at all to his taste, and try as he might to keep his expression neutral, he's rather afraid his
disdain for the whole thing might be showing.

They arrive fashionably late at Louisa's insistence. Soulmate or not, Louisa will not arrive early
for anyone. Most of the guests are already there, dancing or talking, when they enter the main hall.
After introducing them to Sir Lucas, the ladies excuse themselves to find their friends.

Charles gives a distressed look after them, no doubt wanting to follow them right to Jane, but
relents when Darcy gives him a hard look. Like it or not, they have obligations to talk to Sir Lucas
before getting a chance to mingle with the other guests.

"Don't fret, young man! I'm sure you'll have a chance to dance this evening, to be sure!" Sir Lucas
beams. "There are plenty of young ladies here who will no doubt catch your eye! I dare say,
London itself could not boast of so many beauties in one place."

"You're quite right!" The prospect of dancing has Charles more at ease. Impatient he may be, but
with a goal in mind he can manage. "I suspect I will have no trouble finding a dancing partner
tonight!"

Darcy mutters something non-committal before their attention is turned to some of the other men.
Introductions are made, politics are discussed, and already Darcy feels himself relaxing in the
mundane nature of it all. Tedious though it might be, it's easy. Especially since a man of his
standing need not say much, and when he does Sir Lucas declares it to be "Capital, indeed!" and
directs the conversation to the next topic.

It only requires half of his attention, which allows him to watch Caroline and Louisa. They're with
a group of young women, and as per their earlier discussion, he assumes them to the Bennets. Or
at least some of them, most certainly Jane. Bingley is also eyeing them often, so noticeably in fact that Sir Lucas offers the desired knowledge.

"Ah, your sisters have taken to the Bennets! Such a lovely family! You'll see the two eldest sisters. The middle girl is not in attendance - terrible cold, so I'm told - and the youngest two are off dancing, no doubt! So lively, those girls! You'll hardly see a ball without young Kitty and Lydia dancing and making merry!"

Both men would no doubt want to hear more, but that's all they get before Sir Lucas is distracted by talking about a ball he attended while in London. It is nearly enough, though, because it eliminates two of the sisters right off. There is a very pretty blond in their group. He suspects from the way Louisa described her that this girl must be Jane. The distance makes it difficult to see, but he takes a moment to note that she is indeed quite pretty.

There are two other women there, neither of them particularly handsome. The older looking of the two appears to be amused with the conversation at hand, occasionally nudging the other. The younger of the two looks far less amused. Even from across the room, Darcy can see a dull sort of bored acceptance in her countenance. As though she has no interest in the proceedings around her. The only time her face shifts into a smile is when the blond looks to her or when the other girl nudges her. But it never quite reaches her eyes.

Darcy decides that neither of them are Elizabeth. Elizabeth must be the sick Bennet sister not in attendance tonight. Which is terribly disappointing, to be sure, but his nerves relax further. There's no one here he need impress at the moment (though based on how Sir Lucas' hangs rapt to every word he says, he's already managed to do so), so he allows his own boredom to start to show. He's eager on Bingley's behalf, but tonight's only prospect for amusement is in meeting Jane. And he's just there to witness it, not be involved.

At some point, Darcy allows his focus to shift back to the young ladies. Although Bingley is bouncing in nervous anticipation and has scarcely taken his eyes off of Jane, Darcy has been attempting to follow the conversation. Now, he notices that they have taken to the dance floor.

Sir Lucas, gracious host that he is, notices their attention shift and once again comments on it. "How capital it is to see a good dance! Don't you agree, gentlemen?"

The dancers come and go, circling about the room. Safely out of the way of their movement, the men are still near enough to see the smiling faces of the happy couples. They are in fact close enough that one could reach out and touch them, if one were so inclined.

"Right you are," Bingley agrees quickly. Perhaps he hopes this will give him an opportunity to leave and meet Jane. "I personally cannot think of anything more enjoyable than a good dance! Don't you agree, Darcy?"

"Only if the partner is agreeable," he finds himself saying. He means it to be teasing, but his tone must not match his intent.

Bingley scowls and scolds him halfheartedly. "My word! There are more than enough pretty faces to be found here, and if you can't find a single agreeable partner I dare say that reflects more upon you than the party present!"

This time, Darcy does actually roll his eyes. Sir Lucas seems uncomfortable at the disagreement and diplomatically turns away. Taking advantage of the moment, Darcy mutters, "You know damn well that there's only one pretty girl so far, and since she's your darling Jane, of course you're in high spirits." Bingley makes no attempt to hide it, his smugness almost radiating off of him. "It
doesn't mean that I need to give consequence to young ladies of lesser stature."

Bingley shrugs. "I still think you're being a pompous ass, but you're free to be a pompous ass all you want." With a playful nudge, he turns back to the chatter of the men behind them.

As Darcy's about to do the same, his eye is drawn to one of the dancers. It's one of the Bennet's party, the bored looking one. As her partner releases her hand and she faces the crowd, there's a moment where she unmistakably makes eye contact with him. It's brief, barely anything at all. But it's long enough for him to think that he might have been mistaken about the dullness in her eyes which are quite lively now. And long enough for her amusement with the dancing to change to a flash of anger.

The spell is broken, she goes back to her partner, all easy smiles again. But he feels the traces of her glare as a physical blow. In a slow dawning sense of horror, he realizes just how close he is standing to the dancing and wonders if she might have heard any of what he said to Bingley.

He's drawn back into the conversation at hand, something about the Americas, but he can't quite shake the feeling that he insulted the poor girl. Though he meant what he said, it was perhaps a little unjust of him to say his opinion so loudly and without care for who might overhear. He never meant to go against anyone's sensibilities. And it would hardly be a good way to start off his courtship of Elizabeth if he were to accidentally get on the bad side of one of her sisters or acquaintances.

At some point Bingley senses his disquiet and tilts his head in question. Darcy forces a smile and promises he'll just have to be more polite to the girl should they meet. The attention of a young gentleman should make up for his possible misstep.

He's so lost in his thoughts that he barely notices how Caroline slips her hands around his and Bingley's arms. "I'm so sorry to interrupt, but would you mind excusing my brother and Mr. Darcy for a moment? There are some friends of mine who have not yet had the privilege of making their acquaintance yet."

Sir Lucas, never one to deny such as Bingley or himself anything, waves them off immediately. Although it annoys him, he allows Caroline to keep her arm intertwined with his - it wouldn't do to make a scene after all - and tries not to sulk at the fact that she has, more or less, saved them from an endlessly boring discussion.

"Which one is she," Bingley hisses.

"Miss Jane Bennet is the lovely blond next to Louisa. The other two are her sister and the eldest Miss Lucas."

Darcy's only half paying attention. One of the girls he will of course have to flatter slightly to make up for earlier, but other than that he merely has a passing interest in meeting her. He's here for moral support since his own soulmate is not present.

Though, of course, he does find it a little strange that Caroline would so carefully identify Jane Bennet, specifying not only her name and appearance but also her location in the small group. The other two she is so vague in description that he has yet to know which is the sister and which is the host's daughter. And there's the simple fact that she passed over their names.

Fitzwilliam Darcy is not a stupid man. But there are times when he is rather foolish.

Upon arrival and the necessary bows and curtsies, Caroline takes over the introductions. "This is
our brother, Mr. Bingley, whose estate you visited earlier. This is his good friend, Mr. Darcy, who will be staying with us." They incline their heads as their names are said. Although all eyes are on Bingley, he does notice the way one of the girls seems startled, eyes wide as she appraises him.

"This is Miss Charotte Lucas, Sir Lucas' eldest daughter." Miss Charlotte, the homelier of the two, gives what might almost pass for a coy smile if she didn't show so much teeth. He suspected her to be a Lucas now that he's close enough to see her father's nose and jaw. His answering smile is hopefully polite and doesn't give away that he's just imagined that her father would look quite similar wearing the same dress.

"And this is, oh-" A stout woman has just made an appearance, elbowed her way between Jane and the other girls. She's out of breath and he wonders if she ran over when she saw the assembled group. "This is Mrs. Bennet." Caroline says it meaningfully, sharing a look with Louisa that speaks of shared suffering. "Her eldest daughter, Jane Bennet." Jane curtsies quite handsomely, a rosy blush spreading across her cheeks - she must perceive all the attention now focused on her - that makes her all the more attractive.

Darcy has just enough time to muse that Bingley really will be done for, smitten by the end of the first sentence she utters, before the final name is said and all semblance of inner tranquility is ruined for him.

"And of course, Miss Elizabeth Bennet."

In other circumstances, he might find it rude of Caroline to so unceremoniously speak of the last member of their party as if she were more an afterthought than anything else. As it is, he's having difficulty breathing and isn't really thinking much of anything at all. He's so startled that his face is frozen in a stricken sort of grimace, mouth hanging open and panic in his eyes. With great effort he schools it into what he hopes passes for... well, anything other than the chaos of emotion he's currently experiencing.

The only way he can survive it is to allow himself to go numb. Following each tendril of thought and feeling that rise up and vie for control is exhausting. It will not do. On his own, as he prepares to fall asleep in the comfort of his bed at Netherfield, he can allow himself to rationally analyze each aspect of this encounter.

For now, though, he must focus on surviving it.

Most of the scrutiny is on Charles - whose face shines brighter than the sun - and on Jane - who blushes and looks shyly at the ground. Most of the conversation is supplied by Mrs. Bennet, who rather loudly goes on and on (and on and on) about Jane. Bingley hangs on every word, obviously in complete agreement with each compliment and praise.

Darcy vaguely notes that it's almost vulgar to be listing her daughter's qualifications like she's some sort of cow up for action, but dismisses it in favor of looking at Elizabeth. He can't help the quiet sigh of relief that she's not looking his way. She is much too interested in her sister and Bingley, a fond smile on her face as she looks between them. It gives him the chance to drink in his fill of her without having to speak - he's quite sure the capability is a bit beyond him for the moment.

The whole world narrows down to this one young woman, this woman that fate says is his soulmate. He's not sure how he feels about that, but he supposes it's natural since they haven't even spoken yet. (Sadly, it does not occur to him to wonder how she feels about it.) He also can't decide if she's pretty or not. He had found her rather plain before, someone he would have passed over before. And yet... there is something alluring about her.
And then she laughs at something Bingley has said and her eyes light up as she quips in herself. He watches as her eyes shine with mirth as she gently teases her sister. The sound of her voice is a soothing melody to the tempest in his heart, and he wonders how he could have ever thought her not pretty. No, she will never be a beauty, but she does have a certain undeniable charm that renders her features quite pleasant.

Time goes on, the conversation continues without any need for him to say a thing, and at some point Bingley asks Jane to dance the next set with him. She agrees demurely, slipping her hand into his as they go to line up. Darcy snaps back to the present and, seeing an opportunity to do the same, is halfway through asking Elizabeth to do the same.

"Miss Elizabeth-"

"Lizzie, dear." He winces at the sharpness of Mrs. Bennet's tone as she interrupts him. "Would you mind coming with me to find my dear sister Mrs. Phillips? I could use your opinion when we discuss the upcoming luncheon in town this week."

Elizabeth's ears turn red but she laughs like it's all in good fun. "Yes, of course mama. Let us go and find my aunt." She raises an eyebrow archly at him before walking away with Mrs. Bennet and Miss Lucas.

Caroline and Louisa crowd in the empty space left in their wake. Louisa says little, merely looks at Darcy in a way that makes him feel like she can see his very soul. Caroline, as usual, has much to say. She goes on and on about how great of friends she and Miss Elizabeth have become.

"Miss Elizabeth and I have become quite the confidants. We've taken many a turn about the grounds at both Netherfield and Longbourn. I'm quite surprised how alike our tastes are in so many regards-"

She continues on like that and it's all Darcy can do to shut her out. Though he wishes to know more about the young woman whose name rests on his wrist (a phantom burn settles into that space, an itch he's merely imagining but can't ignore either), hearing it from Caroline is its own kind of hell. How can his soulmate - his soulmate - hold Caroline Bingley of all people in such high favor? They're supposed to be of one mind, isn't that what they say?

The rest of the evening affords him little opportunity to speak to Elizabeth. Her time is monopolized by her mother, who glares at him distastefully whenever she gets the chance, and Darcy starts to realize how badly things have gone. Elizabeth acts coolly towards him and he knows now, without a doubt, that she heard everything he said to Bingley earlier. That he offended her - and he admits, the perceived offense is justified on her part - and is too damn tongue tied to make any steps towards fixing things.

He gives up after a while, resigning himself to his misery.

Chapter End Notes

Just to make it clear, Elizabeth definitely heard what Darcy said and had enough time to gossip about it while Caroline was fetching the men. So when Mrs. Bennet interrupts Darcy's attempts to ask Elizabeth to dance, she sees it as saving her daughter. Say what you will about Mrs. Bennet, she might want her girls married but she would definitely defend Lizzie against a man she felt wasn't worth the trouble.
Chapter 8

Chapter Notes

I wanted to get a chapter finished before I go out of town this weekend, so I didn't get as much story covered as I would've liked :/ Because of that, it might seem like I picked a strange stopping point (kinda in the middle of things), but I want to switch POV's after that. Basically... the end point might seem awkward, but I did intentionally choose that spot.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

They return to Longbourn late that night, but to Mrs. Bennet's delight they find Mr. Bennet waiting up for them. The sisters resign themselves to a complete re-telling of the evening.

"It was bound to happen eventually," Lizzie sighs as the girls take off their gloves and shoes. With nothing but family, there's no need to fall on decorum, so Lizzie also undoes her hair and combs it out with her fingers, putting the pins in her sleeves.

"Yes, but at least I could've escaped to Meryton if they'd waited til morning," Lydia pouts but joins them all the same. Despite her whining, none of them truly wanted to miss this. For it's not as though it were any ball Mrs. Bennet is about to describe, but rather the ball.

If only you knew just how important it was for all your daughters, Lizzie thought as she sat on the floor beside Jane. But then we'd never get any sleep. She takes her sister's hand and draws soothing circles along her wrist - still covered, but with the lace coverlet loosened so that the name would be visible should Elizabeth choose to look.

The evening starts with regaling Mr. Bennet of how kind and charitable Mr. Bingley's sisters were, spending all their free time with the Bennets particularly. "Such fine ladies, sharp in dress and wit, they sought out our Jane's attention. You can of course guess as to their purpose."

"I certainly cannot," Mr. Bennet deadpans, "But I think it delights you all the more in telling me."

"Why, they must know their brother's marks and that he and Jane are made for one another, of course!"

"Of course,' he agree solemnly. "And did Mr. Bingley himself give any reason to think that he is aware of our lovely Jane?"

Mrs. Bennet does her best to paint a picture of a handsome, wealthy young man totally and completely smitten. Radiating love and warmth. "They'll be engaged by the end of the month, mark my words Mr. Bennet."

"Consider them marked." He turns to Jane but sees her shy flush and averted eyes, and saving her from teasing for the moment, he turns to Lizzie for confirmation. "Shall I start the wedding invitations?"

"That might be a bit premature, but I would say he is well on his way to falling in love. He did dance with several young ladies, but Jane more than the others. And he spent a great deal of time
trying to appear pleasing to her and her alone." Jane nudges her slightly with her foot, eyes wide. "Well, it's true. You'll just have to accept that you've met your soulmate and your day for marital bliss is soon upon you."

"Marital bliss," Kitty mutters to herself while looking warily between their parents.

"Well, if that's all, I think we should head to bed. Wouldn't want to deprive Jane dreams of her beloved."

"There is more," Lydia drawls out. Lizzie scowls at her but she waves her hand dismissively. "If I had to hear about it on the ride home, then Papa gets to hear it too."

"Hear what? What happened?"

"Mr. Bingley had a friend with him." Mrs. Bennet's earlier delight fades into a frown, arms crossed across her chest in a telltale display of disapproval. "Apparently a wealthy man, he possessed none of the amiability of his friend. He slighted our poor Lizzie you know."

"Did he now?"

Elizabeth feels the full weight of her father's curious gaze. With a sigh, she answers but won't meet his gaze. "He did."

"Said Lizzie isn't pretty enough to dance with!" Lydia laughed, as though it were the greatest joke she'd ever heard.

"As if anyone cares about that sort of thing in a dance partner," Kitty scoffs. "It's supposed to be all in good fun."

"Oh, only you would say that! You're plainer than Lizze or me, and if it mattered at all, you'd never get a partner!"

"Mama!"

"Lydia!" Elizabeth hisses.

"Oh, Kitty, you do look rather plain in that pink dress. I told you to wear the blue, but you never listen, child!"

"Mama!"

"And who is this man who scorned by poor Lizzie?"

"Mr. Darcy of Pemberly, some an over inflated with his own sense of importance. What sort of man takes delight in casting aside genial young ladies? Really, Lizzie, you shouldn't dance with him even if he should ask you."

"Mr. Darcy, eh?" Though she doesn't turn to look, she can feel the light dancing in his eyes and the seriousness belying his cheerful tone. "And how do we feel about that, Lizzie?"

For the first time since the topic was broached, she meets her father's eyes. She holds them for a moment before smiling demurely and answering, "You need not worry, Papa, I have no interest in Mr. Darcy's attentions."

"Well good. I'll have no broken hearts in this house! With five silly girls living here, I'm lucky to have gotten this far with success and I'm not keen on breaking that streak now." The jovial tone
doesn't quite cover the sharpness underneath. His look is heavy with the promise that he will be speaking to Lizzie further about the matter.

In private, hopefully.

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The house is dark and quiet. The occasional creak gives nothing away and allows Elizabeth to sneak from her room into Jane's without anyone noticing. Even in the pitch black, only occasionally broken by the moonlight as the clouds pass by, the way is familiar. She has made this trip many times since girlhood and she suspects there are a few more trips left yet.

There's a momentary fear that her sister might have already fallen asleep, since the room remains still as she quietly closes the door behind her. That fear is alleviated as she approaches the bed and her sister pulls aside the blankets for her.

"So," she whispers after sliding in, "What do we think of our Mr. Bingley now that we've met him?"

Jane looks like she's terrified. "Oh, Lizzie... He's better than I'd let myself imagine. I know it's rather romantic to say such things after only one meeting, but I dare say he's everything a gentleman ought to be."

"Well, I dare say you're right. But for him to be your soulmate, no other possibility had ever occurred to me."

Even without candlelight, Lizzie could see that something isn't quite right. That worry still sits heavy upon her sister, and she grasps both hands tightly in her own. "Tell me, sister, what troubles you? If he is all that you could want-"

"I worry that, perhaps... I'm not... What I mean is that perhaps I might not be enough..."

"Jane." She doesn't mean to be harsh, but her voice is hard and she schools it into something more sympathetic. "You are kind beyond measure and the most charitable person I have ever met. You are beautiful as well, proper beyond what our parents can be given credit for, and any such man would be lucky to have your affection." She loosens her grip on Jane's hands but does not let go. "And if you are his soulmate, he will no doubt agree."

"But, Lizzie, what if I'm not his-"

"Jane." She says it firmly and with all the conviction she can muster.

This is an old fear, one that Jane has expressed multiple times. There is talk that there are those who have soulmates that are not mutual. That the name on your wrist indicates your perfect partner, but that does not necessitate you being theirs. It's something only whispered about, rumors and speculation that don't circulate freely because of the implications.

Jane's own feelings of self-worth, so tied to the merits their mother harps on (good manners and a pretty face), have always made her feel less than adequate. What's a pretty face in comparison to Lizzie's humor and intelligence, or to Mary's music, or to Lydia's taste for fashion, or to Kitty's singing voice (little though she might use it). One's looks are so superficial compared to things that can actually carry a conversation.

Shyness bloomed in the wake of anxiety, only compounding the issue, and making it more and more difficult for Jane to become comfortable in new social circles. She's polite and courteous to a
fault, but she lacks the initiative in making new friends. Jane seems doomed to never feel totally at ease with new acquaintances, despite Lizzie's coaching. Perhaps Lizzie's open nature in front of strangers, as well as the lack of a filter the rest of their family seems to possess, further exasperated the issue.

But none of that is any cause for Jane to fret about this. No, Elizabeth will simply not allow it.

"You and Mr. Bingley are a match, I promise you that."

"How can you be so sure, Lizzie?"

Elizabeth bites her lip and wonders how much to divulge. She heard, in addition to Mr. Darcy's not so flattering commentary about herself, the two young men discussing her sister. She knows beyond any shadow of a doubt that they employed the name 'Jane' before actually meeting their small party. How could he have known of Jane so soon? Yes, his sisters might have told him. They have taken an unusual interest in Jane and herself, but it seems more likely that their interest stems from knowing of their brother's soulmate.

And though she is quite confident in her appraisal of the situation, she's not sure it's the time to tell Jane. Jane will believe Lizzie too eager to see things as she wishes to seem them instead of how they are. She'll second guess herself even more in front of Mr. Bingley and Elizabeth dreads such awkwardness on her sister's behalf.

No, she'll hold tight what she knows and wait until Jane is more at ease. No need to put the extra pressure on her now.

"I simply know how wonderful you are and if he's half a good a man as he appeared this evening, he might almost deserve you."

The compliment has the intended effect. Jane laughs and relaxes into the blankets. With little coaxing, she starts talking about Mr. Bingley. How pleased she would be to marry such a man. Elizabeth smiles and indulges in the playful talk. It's nice to see her sister so hopeful and happy.

They don't talk about the other thing. Neither is quite sure what to make of Miss Caroline Bingley. She has been nothing but courteous, nay, more so even. It makes no sense that she should be a rival to or enemy of Jane's. But the name on Jane's wrist cannot lie. Her soulmate's sister is to be an obstacle to her. Jane of course cannot fathom how, given her friendly demeanor.

Elizabeth concedes that it is odd. She doesn't trust her flattery or her smiles, but even she will admit that she might have been looking for them to be false. She's known and hated the name for years, since they first appeared. All too aware that she wants to dislike Miss Bingley, she has trouble finding particular instances of bad behavior to warrant the negativity.

Mrs. Bennet does not have such scruples. She lashes out rudely against every minor thing Caroline Bingley says, whether it can truly be interpreted as negative or not. It leaves Jane flustered and Elizabeth trying to smooth it over. Honestly, at this point she's worried her mother is actually causing the rivalry rather than responding to it.

But again, they don't discuss it. It's a shadow over everything Jane confesses through excited words and bright eyes. Lizzie ignores it in favor of gently encouraging her sister. She's quite hopeful, but the enigma of Caroline Bingley has her cautious. There are no guarantees, not even among soulmates.

It's only when Jane drifts off to sleep that Elizabeth allows herself to examine Mr. Darcy's
behavior. She supposes his behavior suggested he was a rival or enemy to her or those she loves, but honestly she finds him to be nothing more than intolerably proud. Hardly an appealing trait, yet not one that should outweigh all other merits he might possess.

She sighs and rolls away from her sister. Though her heart swells at the possibilities now before Jane, an unease settles in her gut. For better or worse, she met a man today whose fate is supposedly linked to her own. It would be easy, so easy, to assume him her enemy. Wounded ego aside, there's a worry in the back of her mind she's not ready yet to voice. That perhaps Mr. Darcy will pair with Miss Caroline Bingley to separate Jane from Mr. Bingley. Elizabeth is quite convinced it's the only thing she could never forgive anyone for.

That fear nags at her, but she tries to put it aside. She will do her best to give him the benefit of the doubt. She might wonder at the wisdom of it, but she shall try.

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Elizabeth conveys all of this to her father the next day when he corners her in the library. He is less than impressed with Mr. Darcy's behavior, but defers to his favorite's plan to be open-minded. At least he says as much. She suspects it will be even more difficult for Mr. Darcy to improve himself in her father's eyes than in her own.

They've barely sat down to lunch when a message is delivered. Lydia and Kitty continue squabbling about which officer is more handsome (and Kitty's insistent claims that when she turns sixteen and a name appears on her wrist, it will most certainly be that of an officer or she'll assume it's some ghastly mistake). The rest of the family continues eating with apparent disinterest, only Mrs. Bennet perking up until the letter is handed to Jane.

This has the family's attention, all of them pausing their meal to stare (some more openly than others) as she reads the note.

"I am invited to tea at Netherfield this afternoon by Miss Caroline Bingley."

Mr. Bennet's mouth curls up slightly, though otherwise he's a mask of indifference. His wife is much less so.

"There it is! Already another meeting between you and Mr. Bingley!"

"Mama," Elizabeth interrupts. The enthusiasm is shared, to be sure, but level heads must prevail. "The invitation is from Miss Bingley, there can be no guarantee her brother will be in attendance."

"You mark my words, Miss Elizabeth Bennet," their mother huffs, "Mr. Bingley will dote upon your sister!"

"Not that we are likely to know the truth of it," Kitty says. "Jane is too cautious an observer and will never relate what happens in the privacy of their meeting."

"Yes, but..." Their eyes are drawn back to Jane, who fidgets slightly. "The invitation does include Elizabeth as well..."

Now all eyes shift to Elizabeth and it is she who shifts in discomfort.

"Why Miss Bingley should take such an interest in you I shall never know!" Mrs. Bennet scowls, but it's more in surprise than actual condemnation. "All the better, Lizzie can tell us all about the meeting when they return."
Elizabeth thought nothing of it when she insisted the girls go horseback. In fact, she was secretly pleased. Her love of fresh air and the beautiful scenery nearly outweighs how bad she feels for poor Jane, who is not much fond of the exercise. Or at least, she was pleased up until she notices the alarming number of gray clouds and a crack of thunder makes her start to wonder at her mother's intentions.

Sharing a concerned look, the two girls urge their horses on but manage no more than a quarter mile before a downpour is unleashed. It comes as no surprise that the sisters arrive on the steps of Netherfield completely drenched. A maid helps them dry off before announcing them to the ladies of the house.

Caroline Bingley's shocked and utterly scandalized look upon seeing them is quickly schooled into a polite smile. Her teasing is to be expected, Elizabeth supposes, since they are friendly with one another. Though there's an undercurrent of something hostile that Lizzie's not completely sure she's imagining.

"It was of course quite the adventure," Lizzie laughs. "We used to play in the rain as children. Well, I did at least. Jane would always go inside at our mother's first insistence, whereas I had a knack for finding the deepest puddles and ruining my skirts."

The answering laugh is a little overdone and it grates on her, despite her firm attempt to remain neutral towards Caroline.

*At least until you show your true colors. If you dare hurt my dear Jane...*

But unlike their mother, Lizzie is fixed on the idea of not *causing* trouble for Jane. If there is to be any instigation, any wrongdoing, let it be *entirely* on Miss Bingley.

Chapter End Notes

I don't really agree with Elizabeth's decision to keep what she knows from Jane here, but I feel she would try to keep some privacy (whether it be about her concerns regarding Bingley or her uncertainty about Darcy) to protect herself or her sister. Which is something she does in the book...
When Darcy suggested they go to Meryton to manage some business related to the estate, it wasn't merely his usual attempt to herd Bingley towards more responsible behavior. It was indeed at least in part that, but the real motivation was to provide a distraction from the undoubtedly numerous thoughts running through his friend's head. Thoughts centered around the young and admittedly quite handsome Miss Jane Bennet.

It took all of an hour to regret the decision. Instead of keeping Bingley too busy to dwell on a rosy set of cheeks and coy blue eyes, it keeps him from hearing a single word his accountant tells him. And every lull in the conversation is merely an opportunity to praise some new feature of his beloved. Each time they pause to refer to various numbers and figures, they find him gazing with glassy eyes at nothing in particular, a dopey smile tugging at his lips.

Frustrated, the accountant ask but throws them out before they've settled any of Bingley's business. Charles hardly seems to notice, shaking the man's hand animatedly before walking out. Leaving Darcy to apologize sheepishly and compensate the poor man for his wasted afternoon.

"You could've at least pretended to be engaged in what-"

"It's raining," he pouts, staring out at the torrential downpour. It's coming down so hard Darcy's surprised he didn't hear it earlier. Though, he supposes, Bingley's not the only one who's distracted.

"So it is." He chuckles as Charles scowls, the rain personally offending him in its attempts to dampen his good mood. "Why don't we go to the inn for lunch, wait until it lightens up before riding back."

Charles grunts noncommittally but follows when Darcy ducks into the rain and rushes across the street to the inn. Lunch is no better as Charles spends the whole time sighing wistfully and lamenting that it's too soon to propose to the sweet angel that has captured his heart.

By the time the rain lets up, Darcy congratulates himself on not throttling the younger man. His
lovesick rambling was insufferable enough when the object of his affection was nothing but a name and an idea. Now that she's a flesh and blood woman, it's infinitely worse. He's quite fond of Bingley, but honestly he's getting on Darcy's last nerve.

Especially, truth be told, because it's ridiculous. How can he so irrevocably love a woman whom he only just met, and barely spent an evening with at that! Her name being on his wrist has given him permission to go off into all sorts of foolish thinking that Darcy simply can't understand. He also met his soulmate at the same event. He's not declaring his undying love for Miss Elizabeth Bennet.

And yes, perhaps it shakes his confidence somewhat that they didn't start out on the best foot. And yes, seeing the way he stoically sits and eats his lunch while Bingley prattles on makes him question why there's such a difference between them. Surely it's just due to their difference in temperament. It can't be that Bingley truly felt a connection so soon.

"Darcy, are you alright? I feel you haven't heard a word I've said!" And there's a slight apology there in the blush of his cheeks, the acknowledgement underneath the question that he's been monopolizing the conversation.

"Fine." He coughs and shakes his head to dispel the last of his thoughts. "I'm fine."

"You seemed a little out of sorts-

"My mind wandered briefly, I apologize-

"Darcy," Bingely says with unnecessary gravity. "I'm sorry to have damn near taken over the conversation. It's abominably rude of me, and I daresay you're sick of hearing the sound of voice."

"On the contrary. You do your voice little credit, it sounds quite nice." Before Charles can react, Darcy adds, "It's really more the content that I find grating."

There's a pause before he bursts out laughing. "Alright, alright." He manages to compose himself, oblivious to the attention he's attracted from the other patrons. "Point taken. I'll not say another word about Miss Bennet for the rest of the day." Darcy gives him a look. "Until we get back to Netherfield, then." Darcy exaggerates the look. "Well, I should at least be able to make it until we finish our meal."

He doesn't.

With no other plans for the day, they decide to wait out the worst of the rain. Once it calms down to a mere drizzle, they have their horses brought out and start the ride back. Even with the rain, it's a pleasant ride. Darcy's always enjoyed excursions on horseback, no doubt from the multitude he went on as a boy. His mother loved the outdoors and shared her no small appreciation for it with her only son. It's not one he much gotten the chance to indulge in since taking over Pemberly, but he nevertheless takes the opportunities as he can.

"That's strange." Bingley's voice is raised to be heard over the wind and rain. "Seems I've missed a visitor to my own home."

They're still a half mile out, but they can clearly see the carriage waiting out front. The men share a look before urging their horses on. Just as they pull up to the house, Louisa is leading an older gentleman out and down the steps. She has an air of annoyance about her, as though this caller is both unexpected and unappreciated, but if the man notices he doesn't react.
"Well hello there! I've nearly missed you. I'm Charles Bingley, the owner of this estate. Whatever brings you here, Mr. ...?"

"Dr. Clark."

"Pleasure to meet you- Wait, did you say Doctor? Good god, has Caroline fallen ill?"

Louisa looks like she's bracing herself for something when she says, "Caroline is quite well, brother. It's the Bennet girls who are out of sorts."

Bingley damn near falls off his horse, his foot catching in the stirrup as he dismounts. Darcy is equally shocked, but as with most things, he handles it better. Which means that instead of visibly making a fool of himself, blood rushes to his ears and he misses half of Louisa's explanation. That the two eldest Bennet sisters were invited tea and arrived on horseback in the middle of the storm. That Jane Bennet nearly fainted and had to be taken to bed to recover. That the doctor had been called despite her protests that she merely needed rest.

And oh, Miss Elizabeth Bennet has also taken ill but it's not too severe. She's upstairs resting.

While Darcy tries to process the information, Charles repeatedly thanks the doctor for his time and care. He shakes the poor man's hand to excess until Louisa firmly tells her brother to let the poor man get to his next patient.

As soon as the doctor's carriage is on its way, Bingley rounds on his sister. "Why didn't you tell me you were inviting the Bennets here? I would have stayed-"

"You can't go about canceling business engagements because of a girl you met I did not inform you of the invitation because I was not the one who made it." It's said with all the authority of an older sibling. Louisa sounds mildly peeved, but Darcy would wager it's more about the situation than Charles' outburst. "Although Miss Bennet insists she'll be well enough to travel home-"

"Out of the question! Did you not hear the doctor-"

Louisa glares at him and Charles wilts a little. "Although she insisted she could travel home, I had a room made up for her and her sister. The doctor will be back to check on her tomorrow evening."

Mollified, Charles lets his sister lead him inside and tell him all the details. Darcy bites his lip to keep himself from speaking. In an ideal world, it would be his right to ask after his soulmate as Charles so candidly does. But it is not an ideal world and propriety dictates that he not show undue interest in Elizabeth. Society is often not unlike a dance, all the steps carefully arranged for the sake of aesthetics while completely ignoring more practical matters.

The real absurdity of it is to protect lecherous old men in positions of power and wealth from taking advantage of the mystery surrounding soulmate marks. So that they can pursue any young lady that they wish with the promise of a profound bond. Or worse, it can abed the nefarious goals of those wishing to secure a match above their station. To pull themselves out of ruin by dragging the names of good men and women through the mud in scandal.

They enter the drawing room, occupied by a sole figure sitting at the table by the window and reading.

"Caroline!" Although cowed by Louisa's earlier scolding, Charles' voice regains its affronted tone. "You should have told me you'd invited Jane-"
Caroline gives a deep, put upon sigh before placing the book on the table. Darcy can't help but track the movement, mostly because he cannot remember the last time he saw Caroline reading for her own enjoyment. "Really, what's all the fuss about Charles? It was unnecessary for you to be deterred from your business. I assumed the ladies would still be here when you returned - which they are, if you haven't already taken note - so really, there's no reason to be upset."

Without much to counter the points except his own hurt feelings, Charles is left to sulk. Muttering about how inconvenient it is, he slumps down in the nearest seat and anxiously taps his foot.

"I highly doubt Miss Bennet will feel up to joining us for dinner," Louisa warns. "And don't you dream of going up there to pester the poor girl. I don't care whose soulmate she is, she needs rest. You may visit her tomorrow morning if she's feeling up to it."

"Such a showing of maternal instincts," Caroline jokes. "Never knew you to be so sentimental."

Louisa raises an eyebrow. "I am a good hostess." As if that explains everything.

The rest of the evening passes with just their original party. Dinner is brought up to the Bennet sisters and neither makes an appearance. Although he wasn't expecting to see Jane today, he's disappointed when he finally realizes he won't get the opportunity to see Elizabeth again. But the only time he braves mentioning her, Caroline gives him a curious look that makes him feel ill at ease and he drops the matter for the rest of the evening.

When he crawls into bed that night, he's more uneasy than he was before. He has yet to formulate a plan for how to approach Elizabeth and smooth over any lingering dissatisfaction she might have from their first meeting. Of course it does not occur to him to apologize. What could there possibly be to apologize for, after all? Miss Bennet has his name sitting upon her wrist, she must know. He may have been somewhat awkward and flustered (if only he were better at conversing with strangers!), but she will surely overlook it in favor of getting to know her soulmate.

Darcy's conviction waivers at breakfast the next morning. He slept well with the assumption that today would be the day they could properly meet and start their courtship. From what he knows of her condition, she is not nearly so ill as her sister and will in all likelihood be at breakfast. He is not disappointed in that regard.

Elizabeth is the last to enter the room and quietly takes a seat. She looks a little weathered, unsurprisingly. Her hair is a mess and she is no doubt in the same dress she wore yesterday, though it has been washed and dried in the interim. But there's a brightness to her eyes that he finds enchanting. His own spirits lift. Elizabeth Bennet might never be named a beauty, but she is not without her own charms.

"How are you this morning, Miss Bennet?" Bingley asks with his usual amiability. Darcy curses himself for not thinking to ask it himself (and perhaps curses Bingley for depriving him of the opportunity).

"I'm feeling much better. I daresay I'll have a headache by the end of the day if I don't take care, but I should be able to return to Longbourn by this evening."

"I wouldn't dream of it! Your sister would I'm sure take much comfort in having you here, and if you yourself are unwell there's no need to make the trip needlessly."

(Perhaps instead of cursing Bingley, he should thank him.)

Elizabeth's expression warms up a bit as she smiles at Bingley. "If you wouldn't mind terribly?"
"I practically insist!"

The conversation carries on to general concerns for the elder Miss Bennet, who is too unwell to make the trip down for breakfast and will likely need to stay in bed all day.

"Don't forget that Mr. Hurst will be arriving this afternoon," Louisa intones gravely, pointedly changing topics.

After a brief acknowledgement of their soon to be enlarged party, talk moves on to general plans for the day with the occasional interruption by Elizabeth's sneezes and sniffling. The whole time Darcy finds little chance to say much of anything. Bingley is all too happy to inquire after his dear Jane, and once the topic shifts it's Louisa and Caroline who easily carry on in their brother's stead.

Throughout the meal, he feels like Elizabeth is watching him acutely. Her perceives her gaze on him, studying him as he eats or offers paltry commentary. Yet whenever he manages to sneak a glance of his own, she's neither looking in his direction nor does she seem particularly interested in his presence. He could be a tapestry on the wall for all the attention she gives him.

Darcy spends the last few moments of breakfast silently brooding. It irks him more than he can express that Elizabeth is ignoring him. They're soulmates! And yet she sits across from him and won't even meet his eyes. Shows no reaction to the few words he manages to say. Is he not worthy enough to garner her attention and approval?

Fine, he concedes to himself. As the last of the plates are cleared from the table, he resolves to make a point of seeking opportunities to speak with her throughout the day.
**Chapter 10**

Chapter Notes

I actually meant to write this chapter earlier, but real life kinda came out of left field with a sick baby who needed extra snuggling. Luckily I had the chapter outlined beforehand so once he felt better, I could sit down and get to it :)

I've been trying to do one POV for each chapter, so I've once again ended this chapter sooner than I would've liked. I already started working on the next chapter (1000 words in so far) and it'll probably be pretty short - hopefully I can post it this week *fingers crossed*

At first Caroline thought Jane Bennet's unfortunate illness was all the more unfortunate because of how it would interfere with her plans. Now, upon a full night's rest to ponder the matter more closely, she sees it for the opportunity it is.

Her advantage in managing all the pieces in this game - for she refuses to see it as anything other than a game - is that she has intimate knowledge of each piece. She can move Charles, Louisa, and Darcy around as necessary without much effort. Though Louisa is obviously the most difficult to manage, mostly because she is usually aware of being managed, she still acquiesces to her sister's suggestions more often than not.

The new pieces, namely all the Bennets but more particularly Jane and Elizabeth, she hasn't quite figured out. But unlike the others, she has taken the time to try. And while Caroline's understanding of the Bennet sisters is rudimentary at best, it is leaps and bounds beyond what the others in her party could claim. For all that Charles professes to love Jane Bennet, he has taken little opportunity to do more than stare at the poor girl or, when she's not present, profess his undying love for her. It's a juvenile reaction at best, but she's hardly surprised at her brother's behavior.

At least he's making an attempt, however blundering it may be, she muses to herself over breakfast. She watches Darcy's sulking, more pronounced than usual, and his stalwart refusal to meet Elizabeth's eyes. Honestly, it's like he's not even trying. As though the whole world were made for Fitzwilliam Darcy's pleasure, and all things he desires will just fall into his lap without the least exertion on his part.

It must be nice to live one's life with that type of assurance, she thinks with a certain degree of acid. Never mind that some of us need to work for it.

Caroline by no means dislikes Mr. Darcy. On the contrary, there was much about him she admires. Even qualities beyond his beautiful estate and his deep pocket book. She's under no illusions that she loves the man. That would be silly and childish, the type of fantasy the weak-minded indulge in. No, it's not love. It's a means to an end.

With Darcy making no overtures for his own cause, it's really far too easy for Caroline to take over. After breakfast, she provides scant little time for Darcy to make good on whatever plans of courtship he might have. She does her best to monopolize Elizabeth's time. Which is, of course, incredibly easy given that she has already laid the foundation for it. She and Charles are the only
truly friendly faces Elizabeth knows at Netherfield. Louisa is not *unfriendly*, but she is not welcoming by default. And Darcy... well, he's done himself no favors in this regard.

It's easy to suggest ways for her and Miss Bennet to pass the time. She starts by offering a walk around the grounds. Elizabeth immediately perks up at the prospect, but hesitates. Caroline can already hear the excuses about Jane and wanting to return to her, so she presses a little and takes advantage of propriety.

"Come Miss Elizabeth, I insist. As hostess it is my duty to entertain you, but as your friend it is my pleasure."

With such an overture, Elizabeth can hardly refuse.

It's a tricky matter, playing the friend. One most appear considerate. It took hardly a day knowing the girl to learn of her love the outdoors. She'd no doubt walk from Netherfield to Longbourn and back if given the choice. But her health, though not as dire as her sister's, won't allow it at the moment. And what her cold does allow Caroline suggests against, urging her to stay near the house should Jane need her.

Within an hour she's agitated, annoyed at the limitations that tease more than soothe her desire to do something. Her frustration brews until she sighs and claims she's too tired to continue. On the way back, they come across Charles and Darcy, no doubt on their way to join them.

Caroline apologetically as they approach and says, "Our apologies, gentleman, but we were just on our way back in."

"Oh, that's such a shame-"

"Are you sure you couldn't be persuaded to take another turn about the grounds?" There's a fire in Darcy's eyes as he makes his request. A gritty determination that Caroline has so rarely seen but can't help appreciate. If only it were turned toward her.

"I'm sorry to disappoint you, Mr. Darcy," Elizabeth says, sounding anything but disappointed. In fact, she seems to have perked up a bit. "I am not feeling up to further exertion at the moment. I've quite exhausted myself."

It's not completely untrue. She does appear more tired than their walk should warrant, but it's her patience that has been exhausted more than anything else.

"The exercise and fresh air will no doubt do you some good." Darcy gestures towards the treeline and adds, "There's a path-"

"Unfortunately," Elizabeth interrupts, "I was not exaggerating when I said I was not up to it."

Darcy is at a total loss. If her own experience amounts to anything, he's a man that is not often interrupted and would not take to it kindly. He gapes at her, at a loss for words.

"Of course of course," Charles hastily cuts in, giving Darcy a curious look. He steps forward and offers his arm to Elizabeth, who accepts it with a small smile. "Perhaps we could get you some tea and let you rest in the drawing room."

The two make their way up the main stairs into the house, chatting about Jane's condition as well as Elizabeth's. Darcy stares after them at a loss. There's a defeated look about him, shoulders hunched and arms slack at his sides.
"If you were interested in joining us, you should've set out with us."

Darcy starts before blushing at his reaction. "I had business to attend to."

"You needn't make excuses," she laughs and walks past him into the house. Though she's normally disinclined to let Darcy sulk on his own, for it only makes his mood worse, she has the distinct feeling that his foul mood could only benefit her.

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Caroline, not one to let go of any advantage, continues to hound Elizabeth all day. After a brief disappearance to spend time with her sister, she wrangles Miss Bennet into playing piano.

She picks the pieces for the younger woman, choosing between boring church hymns and more difficult concertos. Elizabeth yawns several times but remains the picture of politeness when asked to play another by an overenthusiastic Charles. Her playing is tolerable but no where near proficient. She plays like a girl who was forced to learn but takes no particular delight in the act itself.

Darcy, for his part, sits in a corner and pretends to read. The perpetual frown on his face is the only thing that gives him away.

When Caroline can tell she can take no more piano, she suggests they read together. Charles' face falls but ever the diplomatic host, he settles himself into his favorite chair. Elizabeth gets up to peruse the scant collection they have (for none of the Bingleys are avid readers, prompting no necessity to have a large selection available to them). Caroline, knowing better than to allow her free reign, quickly finds a book that she knows to be unappealing to any young woman with half a thought in her head.

Elizabeth's eyes, alight when Caroline first went to find a book, dim considerably when they land on the title. It was a popular work a few years back, an unrealistic romance about a rich duke and a lovesick young duchess. Its appeal is primarily in young girls who want nothing more than to fall madly in love and find a husband. Or in older woman, unhappy in their own marriages, who seek to live vicariously through the hackneyed portrayal of love over all. The characters are nothing more than cliches and the plot is, at best, lacking.

(And if Caroline should take some small amount of pleasure in her obvious dislike for the book, well, no one need know.)

The three of them take turns reading passages aloud. It falls completely on Caroline to sound amused when its her turn, for Charles really can't be bothered. This isn't something Caroline could have normally talked him into doing, not if any other diversion were available. But apparently allowances will be made for entertaining his soulmate's dearest sister.

For a while, Elizabeth at least tries to enjoy the exercise. As it goes on and on, her dislike for the characters becomes more evident. She can barely suppress her disdain during lines that are particularly harsh or dim-witted, and she passes the book on to Caroline so quickly, as though fearful the idiocy might wear off on her.

Mr. Darcy looks on, no longer feigning interest in his own book, but unwilling to contribute to the reading.

It's not until the end of a chapter when Charles makes a display of fidgeting and then yawning widely that Elizabeth suggests they perhaps put the book away. Charles has never looked so
relieved in his life, nodding excessively in agreement.

Caroline merely smiles demurely as she says, "Of course. We can save the rest for another time, perhaps. I wouldn't want to keep Miss Elizabeth from her sister - I know you are most likely quite eager to attend to her."

"I am, thank you." There's just a hint of warmth in her eyes, a light that hadn't made an appearance all day, before it disappears behind a cloud of skepticism. "Gentlemen, if you'll excuse me."

Although Darcy looks like he's about to speak, Charles cuts him off. "You'll send Jane my most ardent hopes that she is feeling better, will you not?"

"That I shall." Again that spark before it disappears. "And I shall report back to you how she is feeling during dinner."

"What a lovely girl!" Charles declares. Given that he has said as much about every young lady he has met, it's hardly a solid recommendation in her favor, but Caroline bites back her scolding. She's far too pleased with how things have progressed so far to be truly annoyed with her brother.

Really, the whole day gives the appearance of indulging Elizabeth's hobbies while doing no more than irk her more and more. She has paid special attention over their time together, made note of when she's at her best. And though by no means the beauty her sister is, as with anyone, there are circumstances that bring out her positive attributes. Her eyes in particular can be quite handsome, but only when in high spirits.

All that Caroline need do is continue to make sure Elizabeth is not in high spirits for the duration of her stay at Netherfield.
Chapter 11

Chapter Notes

As I said, this chapter was almost done when I posted the previous one, so I finished it up to post :) Don't get used to it lol - I'll be back on the biweekly update schedule after this.

For those of you who've commented saying how awful Caroline is, perfect! That's exactly what I was going for. For those of you saying Darcy should try harder, couldn't agree more... he just needs to get over the idea that Elizabeth will be all over him just because he's Fitzwilliam Darcy of Pemberly. For those of you who think Elizabeth shouldn't be letting Caroline push her around, give the poor girl a break, she's sicker than she's letting on ;/ Also she's on to Caroline, don't worry.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Darcy's already in a sour mood, and the arrival of Mr. Hurst does nothing to lift his spirits.

His earlier resolution to find a way to speak to Elizabeth has been thwarted at every turn. He was too late to join her and Caroline for their walk about the grounds. He had nothing to contribute while they played piano. And he certainly was not going to indulge their ridiculous reading of some senseless romance. Dinner is his next hope, but it's hard to rally one's spirits when listening to an imbecile like Mr. Hurst.

The man in question turns up shortly after Elizabeth left to check on her sister. As soon as he enters the room, an endless tirade begins. He complains about the weather and his ride and the business that detained him and the terrible food at the inn that morning. Each comes in such rapid succession that Charles has no time to express his sympathies out before the next grievance is out. Louisa, with years of experience dealing with the man, waits patiently for him to reach the end (or rather, until he runs out of breath and has to stop for a drink from the decanter), and then consoles him with talk of dinner and a promise of cards.

It's all he can do to bite his tongue as he scowls out the window.

("We've all been subjected to the poor weather, but you were the idiot who put off travel until the worst of it.")

He blocks out the whining and idle chatter, lets his mind consider the day. As discreetly as he could, he stole glances at Elizabeth. He wants to better understand this woman who is apparently his soulmate, but what he sees he's not terribly sure he cares for. The whole time she's been at Netherfield, she's looked bored and her expression has been distant. She seems like she's putting on a show of affability, but even so she can't summon up the energy necessary to look entertained.

It agitates him to think that Elizabeth is so dull. Even that would perhaps be bearable, for anyone could be improved by reading and the right company, if she were at least handsome. He can't find her anything but common looking. Her features are quite ordinary, together making a face that is not displeasing to behold but one that doesn't stay fixed in one's mind. None of her features have any faults, necessarily. Her lips are a bit small and her skin too tan, but those are minor grievances. It's rather that nothing stands out. There's no one, singular feature to act as a
He will admit that on rare occasion, her eyes will light up and render her whole countenance quite pretty. But he's only seen it once or twice, and usually when speaking of her sister. And of course there was that moment outside when she interrupted him. He could've sworn he'd seen—Well, *something*.

And if he were to put a finger on what bothers him most, he'd have to say it's her friendship with Caroline. Alone there might still be a chance that Elizabeth has something interesting to say, but the two women together are the epitome of what Darcy dislikes about the Ton. Conversation of no substance. Activities done for the sake of saying one did them instead of actual enjoyment. Worse, Elizabeth happily follows Caroline's lead.

Darcy may have forgiven Caroline (or rather, he's decided to stop holding it against Bingley that he despises his sister and will not be publicly rude to her), but it's an extremely vexing thought that his soulmate would be friends with her. It's so off-putting that he feels a little ill. What does it say of her judgement of character that she would have one such as Caroline Bingley as an intimate?

(He ignores, of course, that he was taken in by Caroline's charm at first. That he would still be on good terms with her if it weren't for her *indiscretion*.)

And then he considers what he knows of the Bennets. They are not a wealthy family, from what he can tell. They have an estate, but he thinks he remembers Sir Lucas saying it was entailed away from the daughters. Their clothing and hair styles show there is care put into their appearance, and the money to allow them to do so. Nonetheless they lack the same splendor of young ladies with more sizable dowries. Yet it would be unfair of him to hold that against Elizabeth. He always assumed his would be the more affluent in any match he made. Perhaps he expected his future wife to have more, but it's hardly more than a trifling detail.

Jane is a local beauty. Certainly polite and refined as any man could wish for. The two younger ones were a menace to the men at the ball, hounding them each in turn for a dance. Darcy and Bingley managed to escape only by grace of not being as *fun* as the younger gentleman in attendance (or so one of the girls had so loudly declared as she pushed her way through the crowd in search of another partner). Not ideal behavior in future younger sisters. Alone it would be meaningless and easily overlooked, corrected even, but he finds himself surrounded by an increasing number of unappealing circumstances.

When he imagined what his future soulmate might be like, he'd hoped for so much more.

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Which needless to say means to them starting dinner earlier than planned. Mr. Hurst, manners be damned, insists upon at least sitting at the table to wait for Miss Bennet to arrive. It takes a combined front of both Charles and Darcy to stop him from ordering the servants to bring in the meal before she got the chance to come downstairs.

The only hope of maintaining the peace is Caroline and Louisa's efforts to distract them all with conversation.

"How was your business with Mr. W-?" Caroline asks politely. They all know she doesn't give a fig about him or his family, but it's certainly better than hearing another moment of his whining about dinner.

"Hmm? Oh, what a pompous ass!"
Bingley laughs awkwardly while Louisa glares at her husband. Normally such an outburst would warrant some sort of reproach, but given that it's just family she doesn't bother. Even his own presence isn't enough inducement, probably because he's heard for worse over the course of their acquaintance.

And this, in part, is why he's so baffled with Louisa. She is a respectable, intelligent woman who had to saddle herself with such a buffoon for the sake of societal pressure. To not appear a spinster, as though that's anything to object to. He'd certainly rather his own sister remain unwed if the only alternative is to subject herself to such a situation.

If only Louisa had a soulmate. The more he's thought on it, the more firm he is in her conclusion that she's one of the rare few without one. There's nothing to stop her from marrying any man that suited her. Unless of course he weren't wealthy enough, but he doubts any man like that would tempt Louisa. So no, it's more likely she has none. It would also explain her general boredom whenever the topic is brought up. Though she does seem interested in Charles' quest for his soulmate, but he suspects that has everything to do with concern for her brother than the topic in general.

Caught up as he is in his musing, he loses the thread of the conversation. It's only when he feels eyes on him that he realizes someone's asked his opinion.

"I'm sorry?"

Caroline smiles graciously at him while Mr. Hurst harumphs in annoyance. "I was wondering what you thought of his daughters?"

"Oh." He tries to recall his last few encounters with Mr. W- and his family. He's a decent man, but Darcy's last visit involved him aggressively throwing his daughters at him. "I can't say I'm too fond of them."

Charles is, as always, quick to defend them. "None of them? Darcy, you're being too severe! They're such lovely girls!"

"One of them is albeit rather handsome, though perhaps a little mousy and her taste is rather unrefined." He nearly shudders at the memory of her bright pink bonnet and matching parasol. "And dear god, the sheer amount of lace she'd employed in her ensemble - surely Georgiana did not possess so much if one were to put all her outfits together."

"The younger ones are something of a menace, I hear," Louisa adds helpfully. "Though the the one sister I would also say is pretty. The brunette. Or least she has the potential to be, should she spend the time to clean herself up."

Darcy knew just the one she meant. The youngest one could easily be regarded as pretty, if only she were to sit still long enough for her hair to be done properly. It was easily ignored when she was younger, but now it was no longer charming. "I doubt she's up to the effort of trying. Never mind that her appearance is wanting, she's lacking the necessary charms and skills a lady ought to possess in order to be accomplished."

"She plays the piano tolerably well," Bingley points out. "All of the sisters do."

"As does half of England," Caroline drawls. "I'm inclined to agree with Mr. Darcy, but a young lady these days needs far more in her repertoire than 'playing piano tolerably well' if she wants to claim to be accomplished."
He instantly regrets his words. The idea of siding with Caroline on any issue makes him want to take the opposite stance out of spite. But it would be disingenuous, given that it is his opinion. Instead of arguing for the sake of arguing, he keeps his mouth carefully shut and leaves it to Caroline and Louisa to discuss the list of qualifications needed to be a truly accomplished woman these days.

"Surely you have more to say on the matter, Mr. Darcy. Would you want your sister to be such a girl, with no talents to her name?" Caroline prods him when he continues to remain silent.

"Of course not," he nearly snaps. As aggravated as he is, there's nothing to be gained from open hostility, so he reels it in.

"Nor surely would you want your future bride to be such a woman."

The fact that it isn't a question but a simple statement of fact irks him more than anything else. He's about to say as much, to tell Caroline to stop being so damn presumptuous, when there's a creak at the door.

The men quickly stand and make a short bow to acknowledge Elizabeth's entrance. Darcy perks up a little at the prospect of seeing her again, an effect that's compounded when their eyes meet. A spark passes between them, some silent communication. He's not seen her eyes so vibrant or alive since meeting her, and it stirs something inside him.

All his earlier melancholy disappears and a spark of hope lights up within him.

Chapter End Notes

Oh man Darcy. You *just* made a mistake of having Elizabeth overhear you, and it doesn't occur to you that it just happened again? You're not doing yourself any favors here, bud.
Chapter 12

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Lizzie wakes up in the morning to a pounding head and achy joints. Perhaps Jane was right and she shouldn't have pushed herself so hard yesterday, but the idea of staying cooped up (even with Jane for company) was insufferable. And though she would never admit it, her curiosity about Mr. Darcy may have influenced the decision.

Thoughts of the prior day have her wincing as the maid helps her get dressed and coiffed. Spending so much time with Caroline was aggravating in ways she can't quite pin down. The woman is an obvious sycophant and Jane's enemy, but there's nothing overtly rude in her demeanor. In fact, all Lizzie can really accuse her of at this point is being too keen on making friends with herself and Jane.

But still, the morning and afternoon were tiring. The walk especially was disappointing, wearing her out without even the added benefit of seeing more of the beautiful grounds. The rest of the day didn't prove any better. Caroline seemed to be trying quite hard to indulge what she knew of Elizabeth's interests, but sadly fell short of the mark each time. She spent a day in the vicinity of enjoyment without ever actually attaining it.

Worse, Lizzie started to sympathize with her mother's complaints about her nerves.

Fighting Caroline's suggestions wasn't worth the effort - all her energy was focused on staying awake and not sniffling too much - but she'd eventually gone upstairs with the intention of retiring to bed early. Only Jane's cajoling had gotten her to risk going downstairs to join the others for dinner.

A turn of events which was enlightening to say the least. The door was ever so slightly ajar as she approached the dining room and sadly Mr. Darcy's voice, deep as it was, carried quite well.

Well, she sighs to herself, to be perfectly fair, Louisa and Caroline seemed equally disapproving of our family. Though they've had the decency not to act upon those prejudices, unlike Mr. Darcy.

Given her experiences with the man to date, she's beginning to think his dislike of her is mutual.

She skips breakfast downstairs in favor of spending it with Jane. Her poor sister is not much better, and Lizzie feels slightly ashamed of herself for thinking only of her own headache.

Taking her sister's hand in hers, she pats it gently. "Mama will stop by today to check on us."

"I would very much like that." Jane gives a weak smile. "Perhaps we can go home."

"I highly doubt that." A rough edge sneaks in but she does her best to quash it. "Mama will want you here, with Mr. Bingley, as long as possible. And I do think you really are much too ill to travel right now."

"I'm not that ill-"

"You most certainly are," she teases as she moves some sweat damp strands of hair from her sister's forehead. "If Mr. Bingley doesn't mind the imposition, and I dare say he does not, you should stay put until you're feeling well enough to go home."
The slight coloring on Jane's cheeks shows how pleased she is to hear about Mr. Bingley, but Elizabeth does her the favor of not commenting on it.

"I'm sorry you're suffering in this, too. I know are more ill than you let on and I know that you dislike Caroline's company."

"I don't dislike Caroline's company. I distrust it," Elizabeth corrects with a sigh. "It's Mr. Darcy's that I'm finding more troublesome to manage."

"Oh Lizzie," Jane scolds her, though she leaves the rest unsaid. "Do promise me you'll try to enjoy yourself while you're here. And if you cannot, then perhaps you should accompany mama home--"

"Jane, Jane, Jane. As though I would leave you here alone. I will endure, you need only concern yourself with feeling better."

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Endure is perhaps an optimistic way of phrasing it. The rest of the stay passes at a glacial pace. There are Mr. Bingley's and Caroline's well-meaning attempts to entertain her, Louisa's nagging on how to care for Jane and best provide for her comfort, and Mr. Hurst's insistence on playing cards as often as possible.

There is also, of course, the enigmatic Mr. Darcy. Mr. Darcy, who looks upon her family with a furrowed brow as Mrs. Bennet and the younger sisters arrive to check on Jane. Who can barely manage a coherent sentence when she tries to speak with him. Because as much as she would like to ignore him, his name emblazoned so boldly on her wrist means she must give him some small amount of consideration.

She honestly cannot make heads or tails of him. He's so proud and almost snide at times, clearly dislikes her family, and yet there's nothing openly hostile about the way he treats her.

_Certainly not in person_, she muses. _He's more than comfortable with disapparaging my looks and my family when he believes me out of earshot. He has enough grace not to do so in front of me, so I suppose that is a small mark to his credit._

Aside from that, she notices that he has a tendency to state his opinion as a matter of fact instead of a personal inclination. More remarkably, he seems to not be aware of it, possibly because Bingley is so ready to go along with it. Even Louisa and Caroline often defer to him as the expert, regardless of the topic. Elizabeth observes this several times over the course of her stay at Netherfield until she can no longer contain herself.

Without meaning to, she finds herself rising to the occasion and challenging his views. She provides contradicting examples or an alternative viewpoint, defending the merits of both stances without claiming a side for herself. The first time she does so, the entire room seems taken aback (except for Mr. Hurst, who may not be aware that a conversation is happening outside of the game of cards he's orchestrated), no one more so than Darcy.

As the days pass, though, he becomes better at defending himself. Their discussions (perhaps more aptly described as 'arguments') become more heated as he grows confidence and as she recovers her strength. She almost _enjoys_ it, to the point where she will purposely pick a contrary position just to see Darcy flustered in bewilderment as he tries to counter ridiculous statements.

If pressed, Elizabeth might even admit that she enjoys it.

(Though she is sure Darcy does not. He grows red right to the tips of his ears when he feels he's...
losing, especially if he cannot convince her to admit defeat in the wake of some very solid pieces of
evidence. She can't quite parse the way he looks at her in those moments, but it does appear a mix
of awe and distaste.)

On the day that Jane is finally deemed well enough to travel, Elizabeth breathes a sigh of relief.
She can go home at last and free herself from the restrictive air of Netherfield. It is not as though
the entire stay has been without enjoyment, but it has done little to answer her questions regarding
Mr. Darcy.

His presence has started to grow on her, but mostly because she enjoys antagonizing him. But
that's hardly the type of foundation for a marriage, much less for soulmates. And she is sure,
despite everything else she could overcome, that a man who cannot respect her family or show
them their due deference as her kin, is not a man she could ever be prevailed upon to care for.

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As the days pass, Elizabeth begins to call into question the very idea of not only soulmates, but
enemies as well.

She sees Jane and Bingley smile at each other, and she's inclined to believe in the notion of a
soulmate. Someone who fits seamlessly into one's life like a missing puzzle piece. The two are so
happy together that it's obvious that they are made for each other, and although her sister's joy is
her own, it makes her anxious.

Elizabeth has never been one to do as she's told. Or at least, not to enjoy it. She can only get away
with so much open defiance when it comes to her parents' wishes, but there are been numerous
occasions where she been quite open with her disdain for some of their choices regarding her and
her sisters. And the idea that someone or something out there has picked out another person for
her to bind not simply her life but her soul to... Well, she finds it unsettling.

Easier to focus on are the enemies that may be living at Netherfield. Caroline is very clearly meant
to be Jane's, yet she is nothing but friendly to them. She seeks out their company and drops hints
about how best to manage her brother. His likes and dislikes (though unsurprisingly, the former
outweigh the latter), his past, his friends and acquaintances in London. All of it helping to flesh
out the character of Mr. Bingley. And though Elizabeth is wary, she cannot pinpoint a single
misstep in Caroline's behavior towards them.

Mr. Darcy further confuses her. She highly doubts he's the love of her life, to be sure, but that
doesn't seem to make him her enemy either. They've settled into a type of banter that is a touch
unconventional but not what necessarily inimical. Really, it falls short of what could be considered
hateful. If they are rivals or enemies, it is almost disappointing how little they affect each other.

She comes to think that all the talk is blown out of proportion. Yes, on the scale of kings and
queens and great lords, perhaps the term enemy really means something. Where murder plots and
other conspiracies might lurk around every corner, it doesn't seem outrageous. But on the more
mundane sphere that Elizabeth occupies, perhaps the difference between a stranger and a rival is
more subtle.

There is no grand scheme where Caroline tries to throw Jane's life into disarray or where Mr. Darcy
wants to ruin Elizabeth's reputation. They simply might have differing goals that in some minor
way go against the goals of their 'enemies.'

Two added complications arrive within the same week, throwing all of Elizabeth's musings into
chaos.
One Mr. Collins and one Mr. Wickham.

Chapter End Notes

Apologies for the late update. Aside from RL demanding my attention, I've been putting off this chapter. What I'd initially planned on writing seemed kinda boring, so I avoided working on it. Even once I forced myself to sit down and work on it, it was such a drag. So I re-structured it a bit to do the necessary exposition stuff I wanted and to set up for a more interesting chapter next time.
Chapter 13

Chapter Notes

Apologies for the lateness of this update. I've been distracted by other projects, busy with real life, and oscillating between how ridiculous to make Mr. Collins. I've decided with *very* ridiculous (which is really just Mr. Collins, isn't it?). I also wondered how quickly to push his side of things relative to the Darcy, Bingley and Wickham stuff. (And I toyed with the idea of doing a Wickham POV, but I'll put that off for the moment.) Now that I've gotten all that squared away, I can actually try to get back to my biweekly update schedule :)

Any interest the Bennet household may hold in Mr. Bingley - and at the moment, it centered around enduring Mrs. Bennet's complaints of, "Why hasn't he proposed yet?" - disappears the moment their father announces he's received a letter and they are to receive a visitor.

"Mr. Collins?" Lydia asks, face screwed up in distaste. "My, even his name sounds dreadfully boring."

"Lydia," Jane scolds, "he can hardly help his name."

"Yes, dear," interjects Mrs. Bennet. "If you're to dislike the man for anything, let it be that he'll be casting us all out of the house before your father's bones are cold in his grave."

Mr. Bennet coughs to interrupt them and tells them to prepare themselves for the intrusion both this evening at their dinner table, as well as for a fortnight in their home. All of Lydia and Mrs. Bennet's gossiping, however, could not have prepared them for the man himself.

A short, balding man in plain attire descends a carriage. The moment his feet hit the gravel, he is bowing profusely and shaking Mr. Bennet's hands, platitudes and compliments pouring forth non-stop. Mrs. Bennet, normally so pleased to hear someone speak so well of not only her home but her daughters, is torn between accepting the praise and scowling at him for his impending role in her future homelessness.

A matter which the man himself brings up once they are seated for dinner.

"As you are all I'm sure aware, this lovely estate is entailed to me-"

"You wouldn't say?"

Mr. Collins continues on as if he didn't hear Mrs. Bennet's outburst. "-and I would be deeply remiss in my duties as both a clergyman and your cousin, if I did not try to assuage the stress you no doubt feel in regards to the rather morbid thought of your dear father's death."

Jane's mouth drops open and Lizzie starts. Mrs. Bennet has, for once in her life, been rendered speechless. Mr. Bennet, for his part, looks merely amused.

Unaware of the effect he's had on those before him, he continues on. "Which is of course to say that I came here with every intention of marrying one of my fine cousins, as it seems the best solution to the problem."
"Oh Lord, he's actually saying it out loud."

Lizzie kicks Lydia's foot under the table, though she finds herself equally baffled at the impropriety. She shares a look with Jane and then one with Kitty, who merely looks confused and perhaps a bit nervous at the vagueness of 'one of my cousins.'

"Well," Mrs. Bennet says when she's finally recovered her voice, "I'm sure we can work something out."

The Bennet sisters spend the better part of the week avoiding Mr. Collins. It's to little avail, since the man is adept at being unremarkable in every way until he appears quite suddenly before them as they walk through the garden. Each of the sisters endures his company, the empty words with which he communicates everything while saying nothing. Even banding together and trying to monopolize the conversation does nothing to dissuade him from jabbering on about the great Catherine de Bourgh, his esteemed patroness, and the lovely parsonage under his care, etc. etc.

The sisters wake up early and rush through breakfast to set out on a walk to Meryton, reveling in their escape. Which is when, curiously enough, they run into three separate parties who all happen to converge upon them.

As they near the town itself, they are intercepted first by none other than Mr. Collins, escorted by both Lucas daughters. He begins with lamentations that he missed them setting out and is quite glad they did not wait for him, and how fortunate it was he found Miss Charlotte and Maria Lucas on his way because he is quite sure he would've gotten lost otherwise.

Thankfully, Kitty spies Denny with a group of soldiers outside the inn and nudges Lydia. Lydia, seeing total salvation in the form of officers (a dream come true, surely), starts waving and shouting enthusiastically for their attention. The three young men, quite fine looking in their regimentals, come over to greet the young ladies and Mr. Collins.

Elizabeth barely has time to process the fact that one is introduced as George Wickham before Mr. Bingley and Mr. Darcy arrive on horseback.

The flurry of activity leaves most parties flustered, though seem to be in more turmoil than Lizzie. She's reeling from the emotional onslaught - the embarrassment, the confusion, the curiosity and intrigue - that ensues from this pandemonium, though she also is aware that Jane is no doubt in a nearly equal state of distress. All of the Bennets, save for Jane herself, have been too distracted to tease her about Mr. Bingley, but his arrival re-sparks the interest in their sisters' eyes and tints the edges of Jane's cheeks red.

The men all vie for attention in their own way. Mr. Collins with his bows, Mr. Bingley with his cheerful nature, Mr. Wickham with smiles for all who look his way (and even for those who do not), and Mr. Darcy who wins by benefit of kicking his horse and disappearing at a canter back the way he came. (And poor Mr. Bingley, at a loss, bids them good-bye as he follows after his friend.)

Those remaining stare after them even once they've disappeared from sight, all surprised by the abrupt and somewhat rude departure.

"Well, dear cousins," and Mr. Collins nearly oozes delight at having effectively halved the number of rivals as he works to eliminate the rest, "Shall we continue our walk? I believe your dear mother said you set out to visit your aunt-"

"Oh, yes!" Lydia cries and takes Denny's hand in hers. "You three must join us! My aunt is a great admirer of soldiers, almost as much as I, and would very much enjoy your company."
"As would we all," Elizabeth adds before Mr. Collins can protest.

"Who are we to turn down the request of such lovely ladies." Despite herself, Lizzie finds herself blushing at Wickham's words and gladly accepts the arm he offers. Elbows linked, she leads the way to their aunt's home.

---

If Darcy's first impression was wholly poor, Wickham's is wholly good. His easy laughs and clear delight in not only Elizabeth's company but also that of her sisters does well to recommend him. He is the type of man she could not easily forget, so well mannered but also not bound by the stiffness of propriety instilled in those like Caroline Bingley and Fitzwilliam Darcy.

But of course the names on her wrist make it impossible for her to view him as a mere diversion, a new friend in the making. No, she listens and chats with him, all the while doing her best to discern if this man is enemy or friend. In contrast to Darcy, though, the choice appears obvious.

"You know Darcy well?" he asks over a cup of tea.

Elizabeth frowns slightly and shakes her head. "Not well. He and his friend are recently new to the area, we have but seen them a few times."

"And? Is he everything such a wealthy young man in his prime ought to be?"

Even with the confidence instilled in her by their conversation thus far, she decides to tread carefully. He might not be well-esteemed here, but Wickham obviously knows the man and she doesn't want to offend him with her ill opinion. "He has not been as ubiquitously well received as Mr. Bingley has."

Wickham chortles and nearly spills his tea. "Not as ubiquitously well received! Honestly, that's the most politic way of saying the man's an insufferable ass and you lot have already figured him out."

She colors at the language, only having heard her father refer to people in such a way. But she recovers quickly and laughs quietly with him. "We have noticed that, for all his wealth and upbringing, in some respects he is lacking."

"We were friends you know, as children." That illicits a surprised gasp before he continues. "You wouldn't have thought so, from the coldness of our meeting earlier. But we haven't spoken in some time."

Now that he mentions it, Darcy seemed more put off than usual. His face had gone quite red and he looked unable to speak. She had been herself far too flustered to pay it much mind at the time, but in consideration of Wickham's words it seems worthy of further scrutiny.

"And why is that?"

"His father doted upon me as a child, even if I was just the groundskeeper's son. The two of us were practically raised together. The late Mr. Darcy, god rest him, had it in his mind for me to join the church. It had been my fondest desire when I was a boy, and because of his love for me he was willing to purchase me such a living. Upon his death, I was to receive such a sum to do just that. And Darcy, jealous of me as he'd always been since we were only knee high, denied it."

Elizabeth frowns, unable to put such malevolent actions to anyone of her acquaintance, not even one Mr. Darcy. Not that it's out of the question - his behavior has not been the most kind, and she
supposes in an extreme version of it he might very well take such actions - but because it seems too
easy. Too easy to believe that the mystery is solved, that her before her sits her soulmate, identity
revealed upon their first meeting. That the rival has been Mr. Darcy all along, more wicked than
she'd initially thought but wicked nonetheless.

If she's honest with herself, she's somewhat disappointed, though she's not completely sure why.

"Oh," is all she manages.

Wickham surreptitiously looks around and, once convinced no one is looking their way, puts his
left wrist on the table and pulls back the sleeve of his jacket to reveal the skin hidden beneath.
And in a neat, familiar script reads the name Fitzwilliam Darcy.

So, it's true then. All of it must be true...

"I had no idea he was capable of such actions," she confesses. Her insides feel numb, the news not
quite sinking in. "I thought him rather proud, but not-"

"A complete monster?" Wickham gives a lopsided grin that doesn't reach his eyes. "The man's an
ass and doesn't deserve half of what he's got, but there's not much to be done about it now. And
I've got a good life, a good position with the regiment. I can hardly complain."

Elizabeth's temper flares in indignation for him. "If he's been so terrible to you, I do believe you
do have some right to complain about the treatment."

He shrugs as he covers his wrist back up. "As I said, nothing to be done about it. I'm not one to
live in the past, especially when the future seems so much brighter."

Again she blushes, captivated by the intensity of his gaze it locks upon her.

The future does indeed seem, if not brighter, then at least clearer.
wow it's been a while... i do feel bad about not updating lately, but in all honesty i've had RL to worry about and i've not been having a lot of fun writing this story lately (at least not in comparison to other projects i'm working on). even so, i forced myself to sit down and write it and here we all.

thank you to everyone who's still reading and has taken the time to give me feedback. i appreciate it - even if it's criticism, because it helps me figure out what i can do better. to those worrying about how closely i plan on sticking to canon, more and more divergences are coming up. i'm toying around with ideas about mr. collins (which will probably be at least a little close to canon) and lydia/wickham (unsure how to approach some parts of this, but it will likely be a pairing), but besides that things will be moving away from what you've read in canon

When they arrive home, they are greeted by Mr. Bennet who seems quite amused to see Mr. Collins and the Lucas sisters in tow.

"Did we have an enjoyable trip into town, girls?"

Lydia stombs off, muttering about how someone's inopportune arrival scared off the officers. Mr. Bennet raises an eyebrow at the elder sisters in question.

"She's overreacting," Elizabeth scoffs as she removes her gloves.

"Hmm, she is wont to do that."

Jane, as usual, is more sympathetic. "It was a rather eventful trip, Lydia is likely just a little... put out."

"Eventful was it?" Mr. Bennet muses. "Was there anything in particular besides Mr. Collins following you into town that I ought to know about? Not that Lydia couldn't make a mountain out of that mole hill, I'm sure."

“We did happen to run into Mr. Bingley,” Jane says, though her focus is intently on undoing her bonnet. Even still, her cheeks color slightly. “Though there’s no need to mention it to Mama, nothing of consequence happened.”

Mr. Bennet seems inclined to argue otherwise, whether or not he knows the specifics he’s not one to let a chance to rile up his wife go by, when Lizzie steps in on her sister’s behalf. “She’s right, Papa. Mr. Bingley and Mr. Darcy merely added perhaps twenty words between them. No, most of our time was spent getting to know one of the new officers. A man by the name of Mr. Wickham.”

She looks pointedly at her father as she announces the name, watching as his face changes from light amusement to wide-eyed shock. “A Mr. Wickham, did you say?”

Jane looks between the two of them with a furrowed brow. “Yes. He just arrived in Meryton and accompanied us to our aunt’s house. Why, Papa, do you know him?”
Mr. Bennet tears his eyes away from Lizzie and gives his eldest daughter a wink and smile. “Can’t say that I do, though if you’ve met one officer I daresay you’ve met them all. Though I’m sure you girls will keep me informed if there’s anything of particular interest about this young man or another, right?” And though he keeps his gaze fixed on Jane, Lizzie reads the implication there.

“Of course, Papa. Should any of your daughters take ‘particular interest’ in this soldier or any other, you shall be the first to know.” Mollified, he nods as Lizzie links her arm through Jane’s and pulls her out to the garden.

“Lizzie, what on earth was that about? And shouldn’t we be in the drawing room-”

“Perhaps we should, but I very much need to speak with you first and I cannot do it with Mama or Lydia or god forbid Mr. Collins overhearing.” She leads her sister to a secluded part of the yard, out of sight from the main windows but within earshot should they be called back to the house.

“Should I be worried?” Jane asks as she follows Elizabeth’s lead and takes a seat in the shade of a large oak.

“I should hope not, but we shall see.” Bracing herself, she reaches down to undo the ties on her sleeves, pulling the fabric away enough that should she turn her hands the names inscribed on the inside of each wrist would be visible. Jane tracks the movement and her breath catches when she realizes what her sister is about to do. One at a time, Elizabeth reveals the names.

Jane gasps in shock. Her eyes dart to Lizzie’s in a silent request for permission, then she reaches out to trace the letters.

“I’m sorry for not showing you years ago. It was abominably unfair of me, considering the spectacle of your sixteenth birthday, but I suppose I thought showing you would make it all real. And then both men happened to appear and it was real whether I wanted it to be or not.”

“Yes,” Jane agrees offhandedly, still staring at the two names. “I remember when we were girls and played at meeting our soulmates, but it is quite a difference between play and reality.”

As the minutes draw out without further conversation, Elizabeth begins to feel ill at ease. She’d expected more excitement or chatter from her sister, though knowing Jane the latter never seemed likely. Even so, she feels something needs to be said. “You’re not angry with me? For keeping them from you?”

“What?” Jane finally looks up to catch her sister’s eyes. “No, of course not, Lizzie. I understand. If our positions were reversed, I don’t think I would’ve been inclined to talk about Bingley or his sister. You should never feel upset for your want of privacy.” Then, as though realizing what she’s just said, she tilts her head in question. “Why are you telling me now? Is something the matter?”

Elizabeth grimaces and starts to re-do her sleeves. The task keeps her preoccupied for a moment so she can collect her thoughts. “Well, I’m not sure. It all seems so cut and dry, really. Mr. Darcy has been rather rude. Not terribly so, but enough that I question being able to tolerate him for the rest of the season let alone my whole life. And Mr. Wickham was jovial and open from the moment we met. It’d be foolish not to see the obvious way the one comes out more favorably than the other.”

“I don’t think Mr. Darcy will prove much of an enemy to you, if that’s what you’re worried about. Just as I don’t think Caroline is truly one to me either. Perhaps our ties to them are less than they would’ve hoped, and perhaps they would rather us be someone else, but I can’t imagine either of
them being so severe on us that they would block our paths to happiness.”

“Just make the ride a little bumpier?” Elizabeth says with a half-smile pulling at her lips. “I admit, I thought much the same.” At least about Mr. Darcy, she amends to herself. Caroline is another matter, one she doesn’t want to yet bring up to her sister for fear of making her sister ill at ease without reason. No, she’ll continue to keep an eye on the Bingley sisters - both of them - and make sure they do nothing to hurt her beloved sister.

But her expression turns sour when she thinks about Mr. Darcy, to whom she’s been trying to give the benefit of the doubt to. Mr. Darcy, who clearly cannot tolerate her family or her social standing or her very home. Every part of her life that is dear to her is something he finds, at least to some degree scornful. Yet she merely thought him stuck up. Until meeting Wickham, she would have never thought him so cold and cruel as he may very well be.

“Lizzie,” Jane warns, a warm hand encircling her own. “What aren’t you telling me? There must be more to this if you’re so agitated and couldn’t wait to talk about it until this evening.”

“When I was speaking with Mr. Wickham, he told me how he knew Mr. Darcy from their shared childhood. He… Well, he told me some disturbing things regarding Mr. Darcy’s behavior towards him.” She explains everything Wickham told her, including the part where he showed her Darcy’s name on his wrist, identical in every way to her own.

“Lizzie!” Jane interrupts. “Was that not very brazen of him? You’re a virtual stranger to him and he still went against propriety to show you his wrist? How are you so calm and blasé about the whole thing?”

“Do you not think it lends credence to his story?” she retorts earnestly. “Darcy’s name on his wrist confirms him as his enemy. And perhaps he does not feel me to be a stranger, despite having only just met. Perhaps my name is hidden on his other wrist and knowing so he felt at ease with me and saw no shame in it.”

Jane’s face becomes pinched as she listens to her sister’s argument. When she finds words, she speaks evenly and in a restrained manner that Lizzie’s always admired in her sister. “I dare to hope that my name is on Mr. Bingley’s wrist as his is on mine, but he has not shown it to me. I, for one, do not take it as a sign that it is not there but rather as a sign that he respects discretion and propriety and my own reputation and feelings enough to wait until we have established a connection first. If he had shown me either of his wrists, even to confirm that we are soulmates, I don’t know if I could find it in myself to trust him so readily as you seem to want to trust Mr. Wickham.”

Then, very carefully, she adds, “I think it is also quite telling that he did not show you his other wrist. Why would he be so ready to denounce an enemy to you if you were his soulmate, but not be willing to explain why he trusts you?”

It feels like a slap to the face to hear her sister say such things. Her sister, who’s never said a cross word about anyone (even when Kitty spilled ink all over her favorite dress or when Mary cut a few locks of her hair as a child), is now quite clearly taking a side in the Wickham matter. And though, logically, Elizabeth sees the truth to her arguments, it stings. She’d connected so immediately with Wickham, felt an easy bond with him that she could see blossoming into something more.

And yet… She knows very well what to think of a man who so readily shows strangers either of the names on his wrists. It’s manipulative at its worst and shows a flagrant disregard to society at its best. Two things she should be suspicious of, yet she allowed herself to fall into it. Is still allowing it, since she’s not ready to give up on her first impressions of them.
She wants it so badly to be Wickham instead of Darcy. Wants to believe that his appearance of goodness is not a front and Darcy’s show of pride doesn’t hide something deeper. Though why she wants it she can hardly say.

“You wanted to talk about all this for a reason, Lizzie,” her sister soothes as she watches the display of emotions flit across her face. “Perhaps for me to be the voice of reason? To tell you to hold back your heart and your assumptions until you have more information, because I would hate to see you fall prey to any man whom you could not love. So please, dear sister, keep an open mind and don’t let either persuade you to believe them to be things that they are not.”

She blinks away tears she hadn’t noticed before and nods. She clasps her sister’s hands between her own. “You’re right, of course. I will do my best to give both men a chance to prove who they really are. I promise.”
Chapter 15

Chapter Notes

So again, apologies for the very *very* delayed update. I'm in general struggling with this fic, wondering where exactly I want to go, and despite brainstorming with some people it's eluded me for a bit. I hope to be back on track with (somewhat) regular updates now, but no promises. Thank you again for your kind words and patience as I try to figure things out.

I have a *general* idea of what I'd like to do from here on out. That being said, suggestions are always welcome.

Elizabeth is not one to sulk, but she would be hard pressed to deny that’s what’s she’s doing now. She’s done the best to put the whole notion of soulmates (and particularly, the two men at her disposal to fill said role) out of her mind. Easier said than done, given that all their mother can talk about is Mr. Bennet and that their father gives her a knowing look whenever they cross paths in the house.

Jane of course does her best to be sympathetic and offer what support she can, but Elizabeth has taken to avoiding her sister as well. She knows Jane means well - bless her heart, of course she does - but Lizzie is simply not ready to listen to the things she has to say. The notion that Wickham might be manipulating her (to what end she can’t even begin to speculate) is about as distasteful as the idea that her soulmate is as stuck up of a man as Darcy appears to be.

Lying a grassy hill on the Longbourn grounds, Lizzie watches a pair of birds dart through the air before disappearing towards the treeline. “Maybe I’ll just choose neither of them and live my life as a spinster,” she muses to no one. “It’d surely be less complicated.”

But thoughts of staying unmarried are now paired with the possibilities offered by the opposite. She first pictures herself in a nondescript hall, over elegant and needlessly lavish. There’s a dress to go with the hall, over elegant and needlessly lavous. There’s a dress. It’s not unappealing, except that something about it somehow feels lonely.

Rolling onto her stomach, she sighs into the grass. “I don’t want a husband.”

Then don’t have one.

It’s an easy enough answer, and one that she may very well choose.

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No matter how much Lizzie would like more time to ponder her situation (or at the very least, to avoid pondering it), life does not cooperate with such requests. They receive their invitation to a ball at Netherfield and it quickly becomes the only topic of conversation among the Bennet family. Even when Lizzie makes efforts to talk about something, nay anything else, it’s easily redirected back to the ball.
What shall we have for dinner tonight?

Surely nothing as splendid as what Mr. Bingley will serve!

Anyone care to walk to town?

Oh, do pick up some new ribbons for your sister! We want her to look her best for Mr. Bingley.

I think I’ll go read a book.

You were at Netherfield for a spell, what types of books does Mr. Bingley have?

It’s easier to simply keep her mouth shut and let her mother and sisters dominate the discussion. Dull as it may be, it’s less frustrating than having her words twisted to suit their current interests.

- - - -

They line up outside to wait for the carriage, Lydia and Kitty giggling together about which officers they wish to dance with first and Mary stoically enduring it. Jane and Elizabeth silently offer each other support, knowing that the other’s soulmate (mysterious identity or not) will be there. When the carriage comes into view, their mother turns around and points a finger at each of them in turn.

“Now, Mr. Collins will want to dance with each of you and I daresay you’ll all be agreeable dance partners, will you not?”

Lydia in particular looks aghast. “Mama! Why on Earth should we want to dance with that old toad?”

“He’s not that old,” Mary points out but is promptly ignored.

“Lydia, my girl! Do I need to spell it out? He means to marry one of you! And unless one of you girls is hiding a name on your wrists as illustrious as Mr. Bingley’s, one of you will have to try and catch his fancy and save the rest of us from poverty!”

Kitty self-consciously holds her wrists tight and her lips even tighter. Mary looks indifferent while Lydia scowls more broadly, knowing full well her wrists will remain empty for another year yet. Which is both unfortunate and fortunate. Unfortunate that she has no shield from her mother’s current threat, and fortunate because Lizzie suspects the whole town will know the names of her soulmates before noon on her sixteenth birthday.

Before anyone can comment further, the carriage arrives at their doorstep and none other than Mr. Collins himself appears on the threshold of their home. “May I just say, fair cousins, that you all look particularly fine this evening! I would love to have the chance to dance with each of you-”

“Oh, never mind that right now, Mr. Collins.” Mrs. Bennet starts shuffling into the carriage. “If we’re late, there’ll be no dancing with anyone. Come on now, come along!”

- - - -

The Bennet sisters, by some unspoken agreement, all immediately scatter as soon as they arrive. Apparently if Mr. Collins wishes to dance with them, he’ll have to put in the effort of finding them first.

Elizabeth and Jane veer off to the side. She has the suspicion that her older sister has it in her head
to stay by her side all evening. The prospect of Jane’s company is by no means an unpleasant one… excepting the fact that it feels like she’s attempting to play chaperone. While Jane has taken no stance on whether it is Darcy or Wickham who is her soulmate, she has made it clear that she does not want Elizabeth taking a stance either.

A wise position to take, especially when she spies Mr. Darcy across the room. Her blood runs cold at the sight of him, and she pointedly looks away.

Then she scolds herself roundly for having not taking her promise to Jane more seriously.

*I promised to give them both a chance to show their true worth. And she’s right, naturally. But I don’t have the temperament my dear, sweet Jane does. If Mr. Darcy says something I find intolerable, I won’t be able to hold my tongue.*

After a moment’s thought, she adds, *Though I suppose of Mr. Wickham were to do the same, I wouldn’t either.*

They find Charlotte moments before Bingley finds them.

“Miss Bennet! How lovely you look this evening! I’m quite relieved you so well recovered. Would you do me the pleasure of the next dance?”

Jane smiles shyly and hesitantly looks to her sister. She must read the gentle encouragement Elizabeth’s doing her best to radiate, because instead of making excuses she gladly accepts his offer. Bingley looks giddy as he disappears back into the crowd, making the rounds as host, and Jane turns a concerned look her way.

“Enjoy your dance. I’ll be sure not to throw myself at too many men while you’re gone.” She hooks her arm through Charlotte’s and pats her arm. “Charlotte will do perfectly fine at keeping me out of trouble.”

“She won’t,” Charlotte chirps. “But I’ll be sure to scold her the whole time.”

It’s not until they’re alone - or at least relatively alone, within the anonymity one can only find at a ball such as this - as Jane goes off to dance that Charlotte eyes Lizzie warily.

“What men might you be in danger of throwing yourself at? I fear I’m terribly behind on the gossip if I’ve missed out on a beau of yours.”

“Indeed.” She looks about the room, dragging Charlotte in her wake as she scours the crowd for the men in question. “There are numerous men vying for my affection, I don’t know what they’ll do when I confess that I have no intention of marrying any of them and would rather wile away my days as an old maid with none but you to comfort me.”

“Lizzie,” her friend scolds. “You shouldn’t joke. I know you don’t much care for the necessity of marriage, but don’t become so cynical you pass up on an opportunity to see your future secured for you.”

This is a conversation they’ve had before, well worn territory that illustrates each time how very different in temperament the two friends are. Lizzie knows she could only ever hate a man she was forced to marry and would always choose a life of simple pleasures and freedom over the prospect of vast estates tied to a wealthy fool. Charlotte, of course, has always been more pragmatic and adaptable.

But instead of teasing each other (or worse, falling into a debate about the matter with no hopes of
changing the other’s opinion), they’re interrupted.

“Miss Bennet.”

Lizzie credits herself with doing a fair job of keeping her expression neutral as she inclines her head. “Mr. Darcy.”

“Could I perhaps trouble you to dance with me during the next set?”

Her initial reaction is to decline, but sadly her promise to Jane rings loudly in her ears. *Be impartial. Give the man a chance to step over his own feet before casting him aside. For heaven’s sake, he’s likely to do no more than further annoy me and put me in Wickham’s camp. Honestly there’s no reason to put this off - dance with him, find out if he’s as disagreeable as you presume him to be, then move on without doubt or regret.*

“Of course,” she says with fake cheer, “I’d be delighted.”

He startles slightly at her response, but bows and takes his leave without another word.

“Well, feel free to throw yourself at him. You could do far worse than Mr. Darcy.”

“Charlotte!”

“You’d be a fool to cast aside a man of such worth because of such a frivolous notion as-”

“Love? Mutual admiration and respect? A desire to be mistress of my own life and affairs?”

Charlotte sighs but doesn’t counter. “I hope there never comes a day that proves I’m right about this.”

“At least you’re not the type to gloat should it happen anyway.”

All too soon, Darcy comes to claim her hand to dance. Even more troubling is the fact that she has yet to find Mr. Wickham anywhere, despite other officers being present. The first few measures are slow and tedious. Darcy is obviously a practiced dancer, yet he’s so rigid in his movements it appears as if he’s not having any fun at all.

*That makes two of us,* Elizabeth thinks while suppressing a yawn.

“We must talk, Mr. Darcy. While I do enjoy a dance as much as the next person, I don’t know if I can survive the ordeal without a little bit of conversation.”

“Oh.” He falters slightly on his current step but regains his balance without too much difficulty. “How have you been since your stay at Netherfield? I do hope your sister has adequately recovered from her illness?”

“She has indeed.” She nods towards where Bingley and her sister are currently engaged in the dance. “I should of course thank Mr. Bingley again for being such a gracious host. His sisters as well. Quite accommodating.”

Darcy, who turned to look over at the other dancing couple, looks back at her with a dark expression. The fact that he would so poorly react to Bingley and Jane together makes her blood boil. A desire to annoy the man rises up, to see more of his discomfort and revel in the fact that there’s nothing he can do about it.
“I understand you and Mr. Wickham were childhood friends. Pity he appears not to be in attendance tonight. It seems a missed opportunity for you two to reconnect.”

There’s nearly a collision as Darcy stops altogether and another man just barely avoids running into him. He’s unable to move as seamlessly back into the dance as he was moments ago. “It’s hardly an opportunity I’d relish. Wickham and I did not part on good terms.”

“Hmmm he did say something to that effect, but I could hardly believe it. The things he had to say… Surely a man such as yourself wouldn’t- Oh!”

To her surprise, Darcy has walked right out of the dance and stalks towards the door. She has the impression she’s meant to follow, but it takes a few moments for her mind to catch up with her body. By then she’s already ducking through the crowd, sparing a silent prayer of gratitude that they were near the end of the line of dancers and unlikely to be noticed or missed.

Not three steps outside the doorway does she find Darcy standing and glaring at a footman. The poor man wilts under his gaze before retreating and leaving them alone in the small room adjoining the ballroom.

“Mr. Darcy?” she asks nervously. For all of his talk of propriety, she finds this whole situation truly bizarre. Enough so that she has half a mind to retreat and let him stew in his foul mood. Curiosity, however, keeps her firmly rooted to her spot.

“I apologize, this is very irregular, but…” He clearly is at a loss for words, working around the boundaries society has cast around them. In that moment, for whatever reason, she decides to be merciful and give him an opening.

“Wickham showed me his wrist. I saw your name there.”

Darcy, to his credit, betrays little at the admission. His eyes go wide and his hands clench but otherwise he remains impassive. “Of course he did, the damn scoundrel.”

“Language, Mr. Darcy.”

The man barely looks chastised, waving dismissively at her. “Wickham is a scoundrel, and it’s a pity more people don’t know it. Though I do apologize for the colorful wording.”

“Is his name on your wrist?”

He reflexively reaches to his right wrist, which only serves to make Elizabeth deeply curious about the contents of his left. “This isn’t… This is hardly an appropriate matter for discussion.” It’s a weak deflection at best, but Elizabeth allows it.

“I can’t imagine what that might be like,” she says slowly, keeping her voice level and calm as though talking to a spooked horse. “To grow up with a friend, knowing some day you were to be the other’s enemy. It must have been quite a shock on your sixteenth birthday to find his name there.”

Pity is not something Elizabeth ever thought she’d have for Mr. Darcy, but she allows herself to feel it now. The idea of waking up one day and finding Charlotte’s name on her wrist makes her
insides twist uncomfortably. She’s not sure she can forgive all of Darcy’s actions when it comes to Wickham, but surely she should be more understanding of the delicate position he was in.

Though perhaps, and this is going out on a limb, Darcy has not considered the delicate position others were in.

“It must however have been easy for you to distinguish between your soulmate and your enemy.” Darcy looks at her, frowning in confusion. She doesn’t want to go too far, but she also doesn’t want to not go far enough. As delicately as she can, she hazards a little farther. “For example, if a young woman were to have two men’s names on their wrists, it would be impossible for her to tell who was who upon first acquaintance. It might in fact take several, and even then it could prove difficult.”

The very second he catches her drift, his expression goes slack. He curses under his breath and turns away. “Yes, I suppose you’re right.”

Suddenly he whirls around and for the first time, she truly sees passion behind his countenance. “I would beg of anyone in that position not to be too hasty. Some are able to perform well to strangers, while others flounder and don’t always leave the best first impression.”

It seems that for once they’re on the same page. Or as close as they’ve been since they first met. And though they’ve left the dance floor, they continue to dance around each other now. Always careful, precise steps as they try to make their thoughts known without trespassing upon propriety.

It’s exhausting.

Luckily (or unluckily, as the case may be), they are interrupted by Kitty and Lydia. They give Darcy a cursory bow before pulling at Elizabeth’s sleeves and leading her away.

“Mr. Collins is insistent upon dancing with us, and I am insistent that you go first.” Once in the room, Lydia beckons their cousin over. “Elder sisters should dutifully suffer for the sake of the younger ones.”

“Hopefully it’s a fast dance and he trips or stubs his toe,” Kitty adds as he makes his way over.

Elizabeth barely listens, instead looking back to Darcy. Somehow things seem to have just gotten infinitely more complicated.
short little update to (partially) deal with the Mr. Collins business before going back to our regularly scheduled nonsense :)  

as a reminder, i’m on tumblr and do occasionally write short darcy x elizabeth ficlets. you guys can always request one if you're looking for a quick p&p fix ;)

The fallout from the ball is not nearly so great as Elizabeth would’ve expected.  

With the weight of her hidden names now at least partially shared, she expects things to be different. And yet they are remarkably the same. Her mother still goes on and on about how many dances Jane and Bingley shared, the food and extravagant gowns of Miss Bingley and Mrs. Hurst, and the likelihood that Mr. Bingley will soon propose.  

(“Would you like a spring or an autumn wedding, my dear?”)  

“But Mama, what if she wants it in the summer or winter?”  

“In the summer? In the winter? Good gracious, Lizzie, what are you thinking? Summer is much too hot for the type of dress I have in mind for our dear Jane. She’ll sweat and ruin the fine lace. And winter’s right out. Far too cold for a wedding and she’ll want to be settled into Netherfield before the snows come.”  

“Yes, of course, Mama. How silly of me for suggesting otherwise.”)  

But though it feels as though much has changed, everything is the same. She still wakes up in the morning and gets dressed as usual. There’s the same chatter during breakfast (with of course the addition of Mr. Collin’s inane comments), the same morning activities. All of it’s so ordinary that Lizzie finds herself longing for the thrill of her conversation with Darcy. 

Or the thrill of having such a conversation with Wickham.  

At Netherfield, in that secluded little corner and in that moment with Darcy, she’d felt a confidence about her predicament. A type of surety that ran bone deep and that has now dried up. It’s unnerving to have felt it and now to be back where she was before. Because despite how Darcy was acting and how easily it would be able to interpret that as him being her soulmate, she still can’t be sure.  

Did she imagine the look of understanding? And what if he did understand what she was implying, but he’s as nefarious as Wickham attests? Never mind the dark look he’d sent Jane’s way when he saw her and Bingley so happily dancing. Whatever else he might say or do, she could never forgive a man who meant Jane ill will.  

It’d be so easy if it were Wickham. Everything would be straightforward and everyone would have exactly the amount of goodness they initially appeared to have. But life is certainly not that simple and Elizabeth’s not sure she would enjoy it if it were. Besides all that, she’s not even sure she’d want it to be Wickham.
She finds her mind drifting back to the ball. The connection she’d felt with Darcy…

“Cousin Elizabeth?”

She startles slightly at the interruption and flushes, as though Mr. Collins could possibly have known the direction her thoughts had wandered. “Ah, Mr. Collins. You took me quite by surprise.” She closes her book, not even bothering to note the page. What does it matter if she hadn’t truly been reading it anyway?

“I apologize, of course. But I know how much long ladies enjoy the company of others, and thought I’d offer to join you.”

“Ah yes. What my reading lacked was a conversation partner.”

Mr. Collins either ignores or doesn’t understand the jab and takes a seat next to her. Her sisters were clearly paying more attention, because both Mary and Lydia have disappeared. More’s the pity that there’s no one else to divide his attention and help save her from being the sole object of his attention.

“I am always happy to provide an opportunity for you to converse, dear cousin.” He takes a seat next to her and angles the chair to face her. With a sigh, she does the same. The man clearly came here with something on his mind, so she may as well get it over with.

“Any particular topic you would like to discuss this afternoon, Mr. Collins?”

“Why yes, indeed. You have no doubt been wondering as to the true nature of my visit here to Longbourn.”

“I was not.”

Mr. Collins briefly looks taken aback. Slowly an unctuous smile forms on his face. “Then surely you must have already known! How clever you are, dearest Elizabeth! I of course came not with the nefarious intent of looking upon my future home, but rather with the hopes of finding a wife from amongst you and your fair sisters. Your mother was quite confident that your sister Jane would soon be engaged, so I cast my eyes elsewhere and thought I should offer my proposal to you.”

For once in her life Elizabeth is rendered speechless. “Oh.”

Never able to properly read his audience, he continues. “My patroness, Lady Catherine de Bourgh, has gone on about the necessity of a clergyman not only being wed, but not having any family discord to take his mind away from his responsibilities and duties to his flock. You can of course see the wisdom of that, surely?”

“I suppose, but-”

“And she also suggested that the easiest way to mend the disagreements of my late father and your most honorable one would be for me to marry one of his daughters. You, Elizabeth, are quite intelligent and kind, and it seemed you would make a wonderful choice—”

“Mr. Collins!” Elizabeth angrily interrupts. “Are you not supposed to wait for my answer?” She doesn’t wait for him to answer, knowing full well that she would only have to interrupt him again if she let him start again. “In addition to the multitude of other concerns I have with this proposal as a whole - and I assure you, there are many things to be concerned about - there is first and foremost the matter of our soulmates.”
Mr. Collins stares at her blankly for a moment, and she wonders what on earth she ever did to land herself in such a ridiculous position with such a ridiculous man. “On our wrists?” She holds hers up. “You are not my intended husband, and I am surely not your intended wife. Pretending otherwise would only serve to make us both miserable.”

“Oh.” For the first time, the man actually appears flustered. Then he regains his usual confidence. “You needn’t worry about depriving me of the opportunity to wed my soulmate.” And because it’s apparently Elizabeth’s luck this week, he proceeds to pull up both of his sleeves to reveal his wrists. She watches in surprised horror, unable to turn away as he shows her…

Two completely bare wrists.

She’s of course heard of the possibility of such a thing, but she’d never thought it was real or that she’d actually see it. Despite herself, she leans forward to take a better look, belatedly realizing that Mr. Collins is still speaking.

“As you can see, I have no soulmate or enemy to speak of. I’ve found it quite in keeping with a clergyman to make no enemies of his fellow man. And of course that I should not put anyone before God. I’ve always seen marriage as a means of companionship, which I believe is quite important to us all. And it would of course set an example for those in my flock on how to conduct oneself in—”

“My wrists aren’t empty,” she blurts out. She self-consciously rubs at them, by no means willing to show him.

Although Mr. Wickham and Mr. Collins might find it acceptable to show virtual strangers something so private, Elizabeth certainly does not. And of course, even if she were so inclined, Mr. Collins has met both men in question. It could only end in disaster for him to know. Even if he didn’t make a spectacle of himself in front of them, he would make all manner of condescending remarks about her inability to tell the difference between own soulmate and enemy.

“Your wrists are not empty,” he repeats slowly. “And have you met your soulmate? Because there’s always the chance—”

“I have.” Even if it were a lie, she would’ve said it anyway. The prospect of marrying Mr. Collins (or any man, really, who she felt no affection for) feels like a noose, and she would do anything to loosen it.

“I would never want to stand between the love and devotion of two soulmates,” he says hesitantly. “Are you quite sure that he will make an offer of marriage—”

“Yes.” Whether it be Wickham or Darcy, she’s quite sure they will propose. Just as she’s sure either man would be a better option than Mr. Collins.

“Oh dear.” He sighs and fidgets uncomfortably in his seat. “I believe I’ve rather made quite a fool of myself for your benefit, then.”

He has, but she’s not so cruel as to mention it. “Think nothing of it. You were quite… noble in your intentions.” She winces, not quite believing her own words, but Mr. Collins nods solemnly along. “Perhaps you would benefit from a moment of privacy to recollect your thoughts. A walk around the grounds might help…?”

“Yes, I daresay you’re right.” He pats her hand and she tries not to pull it away or flinch. She’s more or less made her escape, but the possibility of being reeled back in troubles her. “I appreciate
your candor with me. You would indeed have made me a most pleasing wife. Alas, it seems the fates have intervened and it is not meant to be.”

“Indeed.” She jumps to her feet and motions towards the door. “Your walk, Mr. Collins?”

“Ah, yes!”

Elizabeth has no idea what happens between there and the door, but she’s sure to see him out and watch until he disappears around the bend in the road.

“Well, I’ve narrowly escaped one false husband,” she muses to herself. “Now all I have to do is escape another and I’ll be well off.”
Chapter 17

Chapter Notes

another chapter :) yep that's right, i'm still here updating
next chapter will be darcy's pov. keep in mind that i'm still playing around with how i
want parts of the story to go. i'm open to suggestions/feedback particularly regarding
wickham and caroline.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

“Guess what I heard,” Lydia asks with delight as she bursts into Jane’s room.

Elizabeth and Jane share a look, wondering if they should bother indulging their younger sister. Jane gives a slight shake of her head and Elizabeth’s inclined to agree. They haven’t even had breakfast yet, it’s far too early for Lydia’s games.

Kitty, however, never was very good at ignoring their youngest sister. “What? What did you hear?”

“Mr. Collins is engaged,” she singsongs, dancing around her sisters and bouncing on her heels.

A startled gasp escapes from both Kitty and Jane. Elizabeth does her best not to blush. She desperately hopes Lydia - or anyone else, for that matter - knows nothing about Mr. Collins’ proposal to her not a day earlier. Surely if there are rumors, they couldn’t be about her.

“Mr. Collins is engaged?” Jane repeats. “Our cousin?”

“Yes, of course! It’s not as if we know any other Mr. Collinsses.” Lydia finishes her dance with a final spin and then lands on the bed next to where Elizabeth is helping Kitty with her hair.

“They’re packing up Mr. Collins’ things right now. Apparently he went for a walk and ran into Charlotte Lucas. They must have talked for a good while, because hours later they appeared at Lucas Lodge with Mr. Collins asking Sir Lucas for permission to marry Charlotte.”

Lydia leans in. “Can you imagine? Charlotte Lucas is to be married before Jane? It’s wholly unfair. Though at least Jane will have a far better husband, even if Mr. Bingley never works up the nerve to propose and she has to settle for someone else.”

Although Jane seems rather unaffected by the declaration - mostly likely because she’s far more tolerant of the nonsense Lydia says and because she has no reason to care much for Mr. Collins’ impending nuptials with anyone (he didn’t propose to her, after all) - but Lizzie is furious.

“Lydia!” Elizabeth hisses. In her anger, she jerks Kitty’s hair a little too hard.

“Ow!” Kitty interrupts, pulling out of Elizabeth’s grasp.

“I’m so sorry, Kitty. I didn’t mean to pull so hard.” She rubs her sister’s scalp by way of apology. “Where did you hear all this?”

“Well I heard the ruckus from them moving his things, and then I overheard some of the maids
talking. I’m sure you could go pay your dear friend Charlotte a visit and find out all the saucy
details to fill in the blanks for the rest of us.”

Kitty has the foresight to duck out of the way and save her hair from another pulling, barely
dodging out of the way as Lizzie reaches over to try and swat that smug smile right off of Lydia’s
face. Lydia is, of course, unfazed and nimbly rolls away and off the bed. Laughing, she hops back
out of the room to finish getting dressed. Kitty gives up on Lizzie’s help and scampers off after
her.

“Well,” Jane says to fill the silence. “That is quite the surprise. I am of course happy for Charlotte
and Mr. Collins, though I daresay I shall miss having her around.”

Her gaze unfocused, Elizabeth can’t help but wonder what Charlotte’s life will be like married to
such a foolish man. And what her own will be like, knowing her friend is miles and miles away in
another county enduring such nonsense alone. “Aye, we all shall.”

“Lizzie…”

Elizabeth blinks away the vision before her eyes and turns to her sister.

“I know you’re not one to easily understand the needs of others when it comes to love and marriage
and later security in life, but please don’t judge Charlotte too harshly.”

“I wouldn’t-”

“You would,” Jane says gently. She comes and sits next to Elizabeth on the bed, taking her hands
and sighing softly. “I’m not normally one to agree with Lydia, but she has a point. You should
visit Charlotte. I think hearing the news from her will help you better understand why she did what
you would never do.”

After a moment’s consideration, Lizzie laughs. Leaning forward to kiss Jane on the cheek, she
looks around before confiding, “I much prefer the idea when you present it than Lydia does.”

“So do I. But that won’t save you from her pestering once she finds out you took her advice and went
to Lucas Lodge,” Jane teases.

“Alas, I fear you are all too right about that.”

The knowledge of Lydia’s later pestering does nothing to dissuade Lizzie from making the walk to
Lucas Lodge as soon as breakfast is finished. She’s let in and received by an overjoyed Mrs. Lucas
and a Maria smiling more widely than Elizabeth can ever remember seeing. Despite everything
else she might feel about the situation, their enthusiasm is heartwarming.

“Lizzie!” Charlotte greets her warmly. The other two women take their leave and the young
women take a seat in the parlor. “I know this is rather unexpected…”

“Indeed.” She reaches over and places a hand on Charlotte’s knee. “You are my friend, and
though I may find myself… surprised by your recent engagement, if you are happy, I am happy.”

“Thank you.” Then a wry smile comes over her face, eyes crinkling as she says, “Though I do
believe you are here for the news of how such an engagement came to be. I can’t imagine your
mother or sisters giving you any peace until you find out.”

Elizabeth scoffs. “They never give me any peace as it is. It won’t matter much either way.”
“Good, because most of what happened is not for their ears.” Intrigued, Lizzie raises an eyebrow and waits for more. “I was going to call on you yesterday, but clearly that never happened. Mr. Collins was… let’s not say distressed, but pensive, when I encountered him on my way to Longbourn.

“We talked, and he disparaged of ever finding a wife. He went on and on… and on about all his admirable qualities, but how they mean nothing because he has no soulmate and because so many have their hearts set on marrying their own soulmate, it leaves him, understandably, with very few options.”

They eye each other carefully, both talking around what propriety will not let them say outright. Not even amongst friends. Saying that her future husband has no soulmate, though, is already farther than she should have gone. No one would ever say such a thing. Unless…

“So he told you about earlier… when he-?”

“Proposed to you? Yes. It led us to talking about the nature of soulmates. I should say no more on the topic, merely that he showed me his blank wrists… and after I showed him my own wrists, such as they are, he proposed.”

Elizabeth considers that carefully. Her eyes flicker down to Charlotte’s wrists and there’s a question on the tip of her tongue. “Charlotte, do-?”

“I would very much like to answer your question, Lizzie. But keep in mind, it would only be fair for you to answer mine. Mr. Collins seems quite certain that you are expecting a proposal from your soulmate soon.” There’s something hopeful in her tone as she trails off, waiting for Lizzie to fill in the blanks.

Although society deems it inappropriate, she can’t help but see it as a fair trade. Especially if Charlotte might offer some insight on the matter.

“I may have exaggerated on that end, but I have met my soulmate. I simply don’t know who it is. My enemy and soulmate entered my life so close together, I can’t begin to tell which is which. Or rather, I could, but…”

“But you don’t want to be wrong for fear of ending up with a man you’ll grow to hate,” Charlotte finishes for her. “You need not say the names, if you don’t wish to. Given everything else, it almost seems… superfluous to do so.” It shouldn’t matter - she’d more or less committed to saying their names out loud - but Elizabeth colors slightly at the implication that Charlotte knows the men in question. “I don’t want to be too specific for my own situation, but… But I only have one name, and it is clear that no marriage shall ever come of it.”

Her voice is both sad and resigned, making curiosity roil inside of Elizabeth, but she pushes it away. They’ve shared enough, and should Charlotte want to tell her more, then she will gladly listen. But otherwise, it is not her place to push.

“Now I’m no longer sure if congratulations or apologies are in order-”

“Never apologies,” Charlotte dismisses easily. “And I accept your congratulations. I suppose you can tell your mother and sisters whatever you want about my great seduction of Mr. Collins.”

The conversation abruptly loses its sour edge, and Elizabeth bursts into a fit of laughter. “Oh, then I cannot wait to tell them how you cornered him in a field, stole his hat and refused to give it back until he promised to marry you.”
“I thought perhaps you’d make me the manly one, proposing to him,” Charlotte whispers archly. “I do like the sound of that, taking charge of my own future instead of being at the mercy of men and their fickle nature.”

“You did take charge, though, by showing him. Mr. Collins is a silly man, but there are certainly sillier men. Or at least, there are much worse men. Mr. Collins may in fact be the silliest man in all of England. I’ve met too few Frenchmen to be able to say with confidence that he has all of Europe beat, and one can never tell with Americans.”

Giggling continues as they try to outdo each other with ridiculous proposal ideas. As soon as hot air balloons entered the discussion, Elizabeth concedes that Charlotte is clearly the better storyteller between the two.

“Now that we’ve settled the story of Mr. Collins’ proposal, shall we discuss the problem of your soulmate?”

“Ah yes. Them.”

“I assume you have no idea which is which?”

“I…” She hesitates. “There are moments when I think I do, but then the next moment I’m unsure again or think quite the opposite. It’s easiest to say I’m unsure. Jane - yes, I told Jane, don’t look so scandalized - thinks I should keep an open mind about it and continue to get to know them better.”

“Jane was always the sensible one.”

Elizabeth playfully swats at her friend. “Yes yes, take her side.”

“Gladly,” Charlotte says while swatting back. “Since her side is looking out for your best interest, I’ll be in good company.”

Perhaps she should have seen it as a warning of what was to come, but Elizabeth brushes it off and changes the topic to Charlotte’s wedding plans. But after that, her sister and best friend contrive in every way possible to get her alone with George Wickham and Fitzwilliam Darcy. Somehow the two find time to conspire with each other, and then after that all Elizabeth seems to do is run into the two men wherever they go.

Their plan seems to be to divide and conquer.

Charlotte is in charge of Wickham. Whenever she needs to go to Meryton to make arrangements for the wedding and her move, she invites Lizzie along. Strangely, Wickham always seems to be there when that happens. Between his open smiles and easy conversation, it’s hard not to feel at least a little enamoured with the man. If nothing else, he’s handsome and talking to him never angers or upsets her.

It’s only when she’s alone, wondering at the games he might be playing, that Elizabeth wants to completely dismiss him as a possibility.

_I suppose if we were to marry, as long as we’re in the same room together, we’d never have any problems. I’d never have a free moment to wonder if he’s scheming at something._

Every opportunity Jane has to spend time with Bingley, she somehow finds a way to include both Darcy and Elizabeth in the event as well. To his credit, the man is clearly putting in an effort to be kind and courteous not only to her but her family as a whole. If anything, it’s her own uncertainty
and their earlier bad start that clouds everything else. Makes her second guess every interaction
they have, trying to read into it more than perhaps she should. Because either Darcy is the
pompous, prideful man she thought him to be, or he isn’t.

But she can never clearly make out his character. They’ll have a perfectly good conversation
followed by an argument. Granted, the arguments are not exactly heated, but it worries her to think
that her life should she marry Darcy would be nothing but one continued debate. Her parents
squabble all the time, and she doesn’t think she can endure such a life with her own soulmate.

(Of course the poor girl doesn’t realize that there’s a world of difference between her parents’
interactions and how she and Darcy are. That she thrives on debate. That her rapid heartbeat
afterwards isn’t from anger at Darcy for challenging her, but rather from excitement at being
challenged at all.)

She’s so worked up most of the time that they’re together, she’s never more convinced that this is
not the man for her.

It’s only hours later, after she’s gone on and on about the encounter with Jane, ranted to her poor,
sympathetic sister, that she reluctantly admits that there were some good parts. Away from Darcy,
when her blood isn’t pounding in her ears, it’s easier to admit that for all his faults, he seems a good
man.

And when they’re alone again and she’s ranted about the topic to poor Jane’s sympathetic ear for
hours, Jane easily dismisses her concerns.

_I suppose if I were to marry Darcy, we’d merely have to spend all our time apart. Then I could
always hold him in high esteem and not get into a meaningless argument over the true meaning of
the word ‘accomplished.’_

She falls backward onto the bed with a huff. Staring up at her sister, she tries not to sound too
childish. “The names are supposed to make it easier. Why can’t this be easier?”

“You’ve never liked easy, Lizzie.” Jane runs her fingers through her sister’s hair, pushing stray
strands behind her ears. “You’d be bored of a soulmate who didn’t challenge you, even from the
very moment you met. And they’ve both done that, so I suppose that’s a plus.”

“Yes. One insults me and my family repeatedly. The other is untoward enough to show me his
wrist. But admittedly, that’s _all_ either of them has done.”

There are of course Wickham’s claims against Darcy. Darcy has offered no rebuttal, merely
acknowledged that they knew each other as children and are enemies. But Elizabeth can’t decide if
she should take Wickham’s story at face value, or to assume there’s more to it that Darcy refuses to
disclose.

“If only we could put them both together,” she sighs, rolling over to lay her head in Jane’s lap.
“Take the ease of manners and conversation from Wickham that Darcy clearly lacks, combine it
with Darcy’s more refined wit and and his schooling, perhaps there’d be one solidly good man
between them.”

“Indeed.” Elizabeth doesn’t much care for Jane’s knowing looks in moments like that.

Maybe she’ll just be contrary and marry neither of them. Settle down as a governess for Jane and
Bingley’s many many children, or perhaps stay with Charlotte as a nanny for a time. Either option
seems better than choosing between them.
Chapter End Notes

sorry, but i'm going to remain vague and mysterious about the name on charlotte's wrist :P

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!