Reflections & Responsibilities

by Ralkana

Summary

After his father's death, Pemberley's heir becomes its master.

The halls of the great house were dark and silent, mired in the somber gloom of a house in deep mourning. The newest master of Pemberley paced them with the angry stalk of a large cat caged against his will.

Not yet three and twenty, Fitzwilliam Darcy was slim and exceedingly tall, his stature erect, his bearing noble, and in his figure there were signs of the powerful man he would in time become. His handsome features were now stark and forbidding, and his dark curls stood in disarray as he unthinkingly raked a hand through them once more.

The servants he passed were subdued as they acknowledged him. He was grim and silent as he returned their salutations.

His step faltered as he neared Georgiana's rooms. He hoped his dearly cherished sister, who had been inconsolable in her grief, finally slept.

His cousin Richard now shared in her guardianship, but she was Darcy's sister. It was his responsibility to see to her protection and to her happiness, to see that she grew up well, a credit to herself and to him and the family name.

He laid a hand on her door, longing to go to her, uncertain if he wished to offer comfort or to receive it. How was he ever to know what to do for her? How was he to know what she needed?

He swallowed harshly and turned away to resume his restless pacing.
Night fell, the lamps were lit, and still he walked.

He stopped outside his father's study. The painful realization dawned that it was now his study.

With reluctance, he pushed open the door, his step heavy as he entered and crossed to stand where he had stood so often in his youth, before the large desk. Breathing deeply, he closed his eyes as he took in the familiar scents of paper and leather and Father.

His knees were weak with an excess of emotion as he stumbled away from the desk. He moved to pour himself a brandy, struggling to control his breathing.

The decanter clinked against the glass as he poured with an unsteady hand, and if he poured himself more than was usual, it was perhaps an accident. The brandy was smooth, warming him as it went down, but it did nothing to dispel the storm that raged within him.

Glass in hand, he returned to the desk, circling it to seat himself and survey what it held.

His father's pen sat next to a favorite book of poetry. He diverted his gaze, only to have it drawn to a half-finished letter, the writing strong and even and so well-known to him that his dry eyes burned.

A ledger lay open, showing him a detailed list of household staff. Their numbers were legion, and despair washed over him. He recalled his father's last words to him, in a trembling voice made high and reedy by illness and pain.

You are the master of Pemberley now, William. The family name and all it encompasses are in your hands.

From his earliest days, he had been made aware of his duties and obligations as Pemberley's heir. As a serious boy -- and later, as a solemn young man -- he had taken on the learning of those duties and obligations with an earnest sense of resolution and dignity.

It had always been done, however, with the belief that he would have sufficient time to learn everything that was necessary, time to accustom himself to the role. He had been certain that he would have time to take for himself before he was required to assume the heavy mantle of his responsibilities.

Pemberley was vast and sprawling, a prodigiously complex estate that required constant and diligent maintenance. The beautiful home that had always filled him with such pride now brought him nothing but doubt and dread.

Raising a hand to his aching head, he thought of the servants, of the maids and the footmen and the stable boys. The names of all the farmers and each tenant ran through his mind in an endless litany. Each one had a family, large or small. So many faces and names, so many griefs and joys, and all were known to him.

They were in his hands now. Their happiness, their livelihoods, their very lives depended solely on him.

He longed for someone -- anyone -- to take the reins, to advise him, to tell him precisely what to do, that they might not all suffer from his mismanagement.

There was no one. No one but him.

Pemberley would not wait until he felt he was ready.
"God give me strength," he pleaded, his impassioned voice echoing through the still room.

Picking up his pen, he began his work.

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