No Man Is An Island

by Ralkana

Summary

Friendship, fraternity, and pre-wedding jitters the night before two of England's most eligible bachelors happily give up their eligibility.

In his darkened bedchamber, Fitzwilliam Darcy rolled over with a frustrated sigh.

Sleep eluded him yet again. It seemed that he had not had a full night's sleep since his earliest days here at Netherfield, when his thoughts -- and his dreams -- had first been invaded by a lovely, laughing temptress who vexed and teased him until his mind felt as scattered as leaves upon the forest floor.

He smiled in the dark. "My Elizabeth..."

Tomorrow, she would take his name and be his. Finally, finally, his. His wife. He would not be forced to bow and say good-night at the end of the evening and feel the press of her delicate fingers in his, the dissatisfaction of his lips on her gloved flesh. They would no longer be reduced to stealing hurried kisses whenever they were benevolently granted a moment alone together.

Tomorrow, she would be in his arms, in his bed. This bed.

With a muttered oath, he threw back the counterpane. These thoughts would not aid his sleep.

He slipped into his dressing gown, fastening it securely as he stepped into his slippers and moved toward the door. This would be the last of his late night trips to Netherfield's sadly deficient library.
Darcy stopped that thought before it could progress into visions of the late nights his future would bring. He hoped that somewhere among Bingley's few volumes there was a very thorough treatise on Greek mathematics.

He warily eyed the shadows as he moved through Netherfield's halls. He would not be surprised if a half-clad Caroline Bingley sprang out of the dark and threw herself into his arms in desperation.

His overactive and panicked imagination jumped from the horror of that scenario to the multitude of catastrophes he had envisaged during his sleepless hours.

He was so close to the fulfillment of all of his dreams, and he could not stop thinking of all the ways his joy could be ripped from him.

In the shadowy gloom, he saw a cataclysmic snowstorm, a tempestuous gale that washed out roads and bridges and flooded the whole of the kingdom, a giant earth-shaking tremor that shuddered the church to pieces. He saw her father succumb to apoplexy and her mother succumb to nerves. He saw his Aunt Catherine force a kicking, screaming Anne to the altar. He saw Elizabeth's sisters band together in a laughing ring of scornful femininity to keep him from reaching her. He saw Wickham and Caroline and that detestable Collins join forces to drag his beloved away from him and out of the church.

Worst of all, he saw his beautiful bride turn to him in that sacred space with flashing eyes and a mocking smile, and instead of her vows, he heard her say, "You, sir, are a proud, selfish, arrogant fool! And you are **still** the last man in the world whom I could ever be prevailed on to marry!"

Darcy jerked to a stop, clenching his fists. With a deep breath, he worked to slow his pounding heart. Perhaps it would be he who would succumb to an attack of nerves.

"She loves me," he murmured, unaware of the plaintive sound of the words in the still of the night. "And I am not that man anymore."

He was worthy of her. She would not have accepted him if she did not believe so, and he would do everything in his power for the rest of their lives to be the man that she deserved and to make her happy. He only hoped his best efforts would be enough.

With surprise, he noted that there was light shining under the door of Bingley's study, several steps away. A solitary trip to the library no longer held any appeal. He did not want to be alone with his thoughts. Perhaps a glass of brandy with his friend would help. He moved to the door and knocked softly.

"Bingley?"

"Darcy!" Surprise and relief were more than evident in Bingley's muffled voice. "Come in, come in!"

Darcy entered the study to find Bingley standing at the window, glass of brandy in hand. He, too, was in his dressing gown, his hair tousled, a lack of sleep clear upon his countenance.

"Good evening," Darcy said evenly, doing his best to seem as though this was a normal encounter and not one taking place on the wrong side of midnight.

His host mumbled a reply and gestured to a chair by the fire as he quickly crossed to the decanter.

"I could not sleep," Bingley burst out, his voice swift and full of nerves as he poured. He handed Darcy the glass, nearly sloshing brandy onto his friend and the furniture in the process. "I keep
imagining everything going horribly wrong."

Darcy smiled cheerlessly as his own fears found voice in his friend's words. Seating himself, he took a bracing sip of brandy, welcoming the warmth.

"Bingley -- " he began, but his friend could not be silent.

"What if her father falls ill? What if the parson falls ill? What if she falls ill?"

"No one will -- "

"What if the church burns down?"

"Bingley -- "

"My God, man, what if she changes her mind?" His panicked eyes found Darcy's.

"Calm yourself, Bingley. Miss Bennet is not going to change her mind."

Bingley took a deep breath and dropped into the chair besides Darcy. "Yes. Of course." He rubbed a hand over his face, and another deep breath gusted from him in a sigh. "I wish that I possessed half of your composure, Darcy."

Guilt stabbed at Darcy, heating his cheeks. He locked eyes with his friend.

"I could not sleep either," he said quietly. It was the closest he could bring himself to an admission of premarital nerves.

Bingley understood in an instant. His eyes widened, and his rueful smile was filled with gratitude.

Bingley relaxed back into his chair, and they sat in silence, sipping brandy, each trying to calm his own racing thoughts.

"Well, Darcy," Bingley said eventually. "Tomorrow we shall be brothers."

Darcy studied the man beside him. Their friendship, he knew, was considered at best an oddity in most of London's drawing rooms. His family was ancient, a seemingly permanent fixture at the center of the first circles, and Bingley was the son of a tradesman. Bingley was fair, affable, and gregarious, Darcy dark, quiet, and reserved. Bingley was happiest in a ballroom, surrounded by chattering people, known and unknown, and those were circumstances designed to drive Darcy to madness. There seemed to be little common ground, if any at all, to nurture a close friendship, and yet, he could not imagine his life without the man.

He still did not know how he would have managed in the terrible months after his father's death without Bingley's steadfast support and unwavering optimism, and he would be forever grateful that his own misguided, officious interference had not led to his friend's endless misery or the severance of ties between them.

His thoughts flew, as they often did, to Pemberley. In the family burial plot, next to his mother's final resting place, there was a small, completely unexceptional stone. It was the grave of James Edward Darcy, his only sibling other than Georgiana to survive to baptism and beyond. James had died at the age of one year, four months, and seventeen days, five months before Darcy's fourth birthday.

Darcy did not remember his brother. He had hazy images of a sickly infant, in swaddling clothes or a baptismal gown, but he was not certain if they were memories or simply the yearnings of a
lonely boy. His parents had never mentioned James, and Darcy had only learned of his brief life through some completely forbidden exploration as a child.

He had often wondered, as boy and man, how different his life would have been with a brother, especially one so close in age. Would it have made his life easier or more difficult? Surely, it would have been better for Georgiana, especially if James had shared their mother's lively disposition rather than their father's serious one, as Darcy did.

As a child, he had watched his Fitzwilliam cousins as they ran and shouted and wrestled, and though he had always joined them, he was not one of them. They had always returned home to tussle and play in their own riotous nursery, and he had retreated to his quiet, solitary one.

Darcy realized that the fierce longing that had first been kindled in him at the discovery of James' grave had never truly abated. He wanted a brother.

He pulled himself out of his thoughts and saw that Bingley was studying him, curiosity clear in his tired eyes.

_I have a brother_, he marveled. _I have had one for years!_

"I believe I will like that, Bingley," he answered sincerely. "I believe I will like that very much."

Bingley's answering smile was filled with satisfaction, and they sat quietly together, their thoughts full of the morning to come.

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