It seemed as Elizabeth slipped through the concealed little door that Mr. Darcy had not moved since she last saw him, though it had been nearly a day. He was still sitting at the table, his pen scratching out a letter it was anyone's guess whether or not he would be able to send. Jane had been in, she knew, with oil for the lantern, but there was no plate; again he was not eating. She set the basket on the table in front of him, startling him out of his reverie, and put the cutlery she had been carrying down with a clatter to further the point.

"I am sorry to report that there is no news from Rosings," she said. "We must believe that Colonel Fitzwilliam is entirely cut off in Scotland, I think."

He gave her a curt nod, but made her no reply.

"Food is very scarce," she said, placing a loaf of bread in front of him, and removing the others that served only as camouflage. The apple succeeded them, and then a coup of an orange. To see him ignore it entirely was much more infuriating than it had ought to be, even more so when she realized he had not noticed her torn gown or the disarrangement of her hair.

"Perhaps you assume that one of the servants has found your hiding place," she said, sharply. "I am happy to tell you that the purveyor of your information and the smuggler of your weaponry. You may now be pleased or displeased as you choose."

He looked up at her at last, and folded his letter. "I must thank you."

"No, that will not do," she said. "I did not give you leave to choose apathy. You must either feign one extreme or the other. I will give you some little time to make your decision; I am aware that
such emotions are very foreign to you." With an effort of will she returned her tone to civility. "I had quite a struggle over this orange," she said, making a game of it. "My French, you know, is not very polished. It really verges on Italian. At any rate the man selling them seemed very insulted. I was accused of all sorts of calumnies, besides the initial crime of being an Englishwoman purchasing a fruit; it had only just come to blows when my kind protector Mr. Wickham arrived. It will not surprise you to learn that his French has become very good indeed."

As expected, this produced a reaction. Mr. Darcy's expression was pure rage, untempered even by disgust. "I suppose he took great pains to give you the courtesy of liberty in your own town."

"And asked for liberties of his own besides," Elizabeth said, lightly. "I never knew I was such an actor. He thinks me half in love with him already. He would think me all in love, but it would not suit his vanity to have a penniless girl of one-and-twenty in marriage when he believes he might have her younger sister without the inconvenience."

In the long silence this occasioned, she tried to imagine saying it even to her father before the occupation. She could only imagine her blushes.

"The Spanish call this guerra de guerrillas," Mr. Darcy said finally, lifting the musket out of the basket. "Though no doubt your unorthodox education has led you to know that already. It is no subject for the well-bred lady--"

"The well-bred lady!" Elizabeth cried. "Had your sister such an education, I would not be carrying you weapons in breadbaskets now!"

Even as the words were spoken she wished them returned. Mr. Darcy strode rapidly away from the table, pacing across the narrow space available to him with all the energy of an active man in a desperate situation. He seemed unable, now in motion, to come to a halt. "Indeed," he said. She regretted herself even more fiercely than before; his voice was clearly straining against some strong emotion. "I cannot argue with your thesis, Miss Bennet. Had she studied war as you, or had she your knowledge of the world, she would be here with me," he said, gesturing around at the tiny room, the half-hooded lantern, the meager plate. "Weaving bandages, perhaps, to help your cause. I am sorry to have put you in her place. Indeed I am most sincerely sorry. It is no place for anyone, let alone a girl whose opinion of me is as poor as yours has ever been. But God! Do not mention--"

Here he stopped, and Elizabeth rushed to apologize, sick at heart. "I am sure she is well," she added. "Even in Meryton we heard that her caretaker was a dragon in defense of her charge. I am sure she has fled. It was cruel of me to mention her name until you could be as sure as I."

Mr. Darcy at first made only a nod, coming to a halt in front of the table. After a length he looked up and smiled at her. "I can never be as sure as you until I have your disposition," he said. The old joke with Jane sounded very different in his speech. "You must have the surety for both of us."

"That is an endeavor I can undertake," she said. "I am already sure of so many things it can hardly be of any import to me to add one or another." She lifted the basket, to cover a momentary confusion, and went on, "I am convinced, you know, that no woman has ever had as poor opinion of a gentleman as you think I do of you."

"Do not trifle with me," Mr. Darcy said stiffly. "I am grateful for your kindness. The whole country is grateful for your information. I do not need your pity."

"Indeed I do not pity you," Elizabeth said. "I will not pretend, you know, now that we are not in a parlor and playing games with the pianoforte -- I will not pretend that I understand your character, or that I would always have chosen your company. But as my father would say, they both seem to
be disappointingly sound."

She sat back in the chair, reaching for her scissors to cut open the lining of the basket, and Mr. Darcy passed her the first letter. La guerra de guerillas. Her mother's home a little hospital. Lydia only a little battlefield, contested but defended. Herself as a little general, with her orders before her, slipping one by one into the lining of her best sewing basket.

"Well, I will not be a little general, at any rate," she said, out loud, for the amusement of her silent company. "That rank is taken. This war must simply accept its promotion."

"Are you our general?" Mr. Darcy said, smiling. "Then I suppose I am a colonel, like my cousin."

"Indeed you are," Elizabeth said. "But don't fear. I am a much fairer mistress than Wellington; and I pay prodigiously well. Admit you are impressed by the fruit."

"Extremely," Mr. Darcy said, bowing over the table, and she could not help but smile back.

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