A shaft of afternoon sunlight filtered through the curtains and fell upon the figure of Fitzwilliam Darcy as he paced the length of his library, hands clasped behind his back, head bowed in deep thought. Now and then a ripple of indignation passed across his otherwise impassive face—the only visible sign of the anger that stirred his blood. As he paced, Darcy recalled the letter that Elizabeth had shared with him earlier that day, and the tears she had, despite her bravest endeavors, shed over its contents. Not since her youngest sister's unfortunate elopement with George Wickham had Darcy seen his wife so distressed, and the knowledge that Lydia and her husband had yet again entangled the family in scandal filled Darcy with such venomous rage that it was fortunate for Wickham that Darcy’s strict sense of morality forbade him challenging the scoundrel to a dawn appointment. Indeed, given that Darcy had not run him through following his attempted seduction of Georgiana, such a challenge delivered on behalf of his least favorite sister-
in-law would have been regarded as little more than an idle threat. Though Darcy’s intervention in Lydia and Wickham’s flight had ultimately offered the means of reuniting him with Elizabeth following his first poorly-executed suit of her hand, he had taken those steps to rescue the remnants of Lydia’s reputation at great personal cost to himself—not the least of which being that he did so in the knowledge that marriage to Elizabeth would forever associate him with the man who had done his utmost to destroy one of the most reputable families in all of England. Only months after their marriage, Wickham had, not surprisingly, grown tired of his wife’s demands and affections; Lydia might be foolish, but she had at least, if her word could be trusted, loved Wickham honestly—or as honestly as anyone for whom the only prerequisite for awakening her romantic sensibilities was the possession of a handsome face and regimentals. Well did Darcy recall his endeavors to plead with her to accept his offer of assistance in returning her swiftly and safely to Longbourn, a conversation that he had abandoned with the distinct impression that he had been arguing with an anthropomorphized mule rather than a girl of sixteen. His only remaining course of action—to discharge Wickham’s debts and settle a large enough sum on Lydia to entice him—now transpired to have been a fruitless investment. With Wickham’s mercenary tendencies, Darcy had assumed—incorrectly, as it turned out—that however much Wickham’s affection for Lydia had been fabricated, and however far he might stray from his marital vows, he would never altogether sever ties with his wife, for to do so would result in more pecuniary hardship. Now, however, he had apparently done just that, for Lydia was with child, and the seed had not issued from Wickham’s loins, so he claimed. That Wickham had not lain with his wife in several months could be believed, and Darcy and Elizabeth had hardly expressed surprise at Lydia’s own indiscretion, even if they disapproved of her seeking comfort in the company of another officer—or several, it would seem, as Lydia had no knowledge as to the child’s paternity. Upon learning of Lydia’s condition, Wickham had hurled a torrent of abuse, both in language and in action, at his wife; the law might presume that he had sired the child, but he would make no such presumption. That so many men could forsake their vows and yet turn in supposed righteous indignation on their wives for deciding to seek their pleasures elsewhere was, Darcy reflected, an all-too familiar example of the duplicitousness of his sex. Yet at present, he had a far more immediate difficulty to remedy; Lydia would soon be approaching her confinement, and the combined difficulties of a lack of money and having to seek refuge from Wickham’s wrath had prompted her to write to Elizabeth for her assistance. Darcy well knew, though Elizabeth had never confessed as much, that she had occasionally responded to Lydia’s appeals for aid from her own purse, and while Darcy believed that such continued indulgence would only encourage further imprudence, he would never outright forbid it, knowing as he did that Elizabeth had, however unfairly, heaped blame upon herself for Lydia’s entanglement with Wickham.

A tap at the door roused Darcy from his thoughts. “Elizabeth,” he murmured as the door opened and closed softly behind him. Still with his back to the room as he gazed through the window at the sun beginning to slip over the ridge, he heard his wife cross to the sofa and seat herself before addressing him.

“You are angry,” she said at last.

“You can hardly expect me to be otherwise,” replied Darcy. “After all we have done—all I have done—to secure your sister’s name from further disgrace—she has sullied her reputation beyond all hope, Elizabeth.”

“And I suppose there is no hope of you reconsidering your decision upon the matter?” she inquired.

Clenching his fists so tightly that his signet ring cut into his flesh, Darcy turned to face his wife. “Consider allowing Lydia to seek sanctuary at Pemberley during her confinement? Allow George Wickham’s cast-off wife to birth her bastard child beneath this roof? Elizabeth, you cannot be serious!” Had the situation not been so utterly distasteful, Darcy might have laughed at the absurdity. Elizabeth’s chin rose in indignation at his words, and her eyes flashed, at which Darcy labored to suppress an inappropriate ripple of arousal. Much as he disliked arguing with his wife, Darcy admired this aspect of her character—even derived a certain furious satisfaction from
having wed such a worthy sparring partner. Elizabeth did not cower in fear or contrition when she evoked his anger; with a tongue as sharp as a saber, she stood her ground and prepared to do battle.

“You speak of my sister, Darcy,” she declared.

“Forgive me, Elizabeth, but you know as well as I that Lydia’s conduct ought be met with nothing but ridicule.”

“You can hardly be surprised at her asking this of us,” argued Elizabeth.

“That Lydia would dare make such a request, no; that you would even entertain the notion of granting it to her, or appealing to me on her behalf, does, I confess, puzzle me exceedingly. Consider, Elizabeth! Think of our reputation; think of Pemberley!”

Elizabeth sighed. “I disapprove of my sister’s conduct as much as you do—“

“And yet in opening our home to her,” Darcy interrupted, “you risk conveying the impression to society that you condone, or are at least willing to turn a blind eye to it.”

“If we do not take it upon ourselves to intervene, we sacrifice what little control we have over the circumstances. Either Jane or I must bear the burden of Lydia’s poor judgment; so it has always been.”

“If you will insist on involving yourself in the matter, would not Jane be better suited to it?”

In spite of the somber mood, Elizabeth could not suppress the hint of a smile. “With her disposition, Jane would be more disposed than I to show compassion toward Lydia, it is true, and yet Jane and Bingley live but thirty miles from Pemberley. Gossip will abound—must abound, under such circumstances. If Jane’s and Bingley’s discretion can be relied upon, Lydia’s cannot.”

“And you think it likely that were she to remain with us, I might instill the fear of God in your sister? I would remind you, Elizabeth, that my failure to overcome her obstinacy is in part the reason why we have the misfortune to even be holding this conversation.” Feeling his temper beginning to rise again, Darcy turned from his wife and recommenced pacing the room.

“Elizabeth, you know well, better than anyone, perhaps, my utter abhorrence of George Wickham; you know too that despite my feelings, I have endeavored, as your husband, to suppress those sentiments with regard to your sister. Wickham I shall never accept, but for your sake, I have always welcomed Lydia.”

“You have allowed her to be received at Pemberley,” replied Elizabeth coolly. “To say that you have welcomed her goes too far, I think.”

“Perhaps,” Darcy conceded. “Nonetheless, I have always extended every civility toward her. Elizabeth, you know I would never willingly refuse anything you ask of me, but this—it is more than I can endure.” The tears in Elizabeth’s eyes as she received his words pierced Darcy’s heart, for he knew that she cried not from a sense of injury at his anger, but rather out of shame and pity for her sister’s situation.

Her words when she spoke offered confirmation of this. “She is my sister, Fitzwilliam, and the child in her womb, lawfully conceived or not, is of my blood. Would you have me forsake her in her time of need? Think; were you in my place, what course of action would you take?” Under ordinary circumstances, mention of Georgiana might have softened Darcy’s defenses; in his present frame of mind, however, Elizabeth’s subtle allusion to his sister’s near-entanglement with Wickham and what it might have cost her only served to fuel his righteous indignation.

“My sister would never have done such irreparable damage to her own and her family’s reputation,” he growled.

“Only because she had a fierce protector in her brother,” returned Elizabeth. “Lydia has no such protection.”

“And you would thrust upon me the responsibility of protecting your sister?”

“I would remind you,” said Elizabeth, “that you took it upon yourself to take her under your protection well before any legal or sentimental attachment to either myself or my family would have demanded such an obligation of you.” Darcy scowled and turned from her. She was appealing to his conscience and his honor; at present, Darcy had no desire to be reasoned with. He desired to remain unchallenged in his authority.

When he spoke, the softness of his tone heralded the strengthening rather than the abating of his
anger and his wavering resolve to keep it in check. “Elizabeth, I have made my feelings on this matter perfectly clear. If you will insist upon taking such a ruinous course of action, you will not only disregard my wishes, but succeed in rendering futile all of my endeavors to spare you or your family from disrepute. Would you have such dishonor brought upon the name I have given you as well as your own?” And without another word, he turned his back and strode from the library.

Instinctively Darcy’s footsteps carried him to the stables where, at a mere signal, a groom had his horse saddled. Hercules put his head upon one side and pronounced a greeting in a low whinny, his dark eyes regarding Darcy with almost human understanding. For several moments, Darcy stood and stroked Hercules’s ears, admiring the glossy sheen of the setting sun upon his black coat before springing into the saddle and urging the animal into a gallop. Superior horseman that he was, Darcy considered for a moment whether he should be riding so heedlessly in his present state of mind, but as it had done since his boyhood, the exhilaration of being upon horseback allowed him, if only for a short time, to cast the weight of his responsibility to Pemberley and to his family from his shoulders. A man well-accustomed to carrying the burdens of those who depended upon him, Darcy’s release came in entrusting himself to the strong muscle and sinew of the animal who willingly and silently bore the weight of Darcy’s own burdens. As he rode, Darcy reflected upon his conversation with Elizabeth, chiding himself for having spoken so harshly to her when he alone appreciated the sense of responsibility that Elizabeth felt. That Lydia had not enough sense to feel any guilt or shame over her continual lack of propriety was well made up for by that which Elizabeth—and even Jane—felt on their sister’s behalf. Darcy too shared in their anxiety, and to a greater degree, for he alone had known the true nature of Wickham’s character when first Wickham had introduced himself into Hertfordshire society. However much Darcy had done the Bennet family a tremendous service in discovering Lydia and arranging matters so discreetly, but for his abominable pride such a service might never have been rendered a necessity. That he had kept silent largely to shield his own sister’s reputation did little to assuage Darcy’s guilt, for the recollection of it only caused him to reproach himself for his negligence in seeing to her guardianship.

Upon such reflections, Darcy could not fault Elizabeth for desiring to render Lydia any assistance that it might lie within her or Darcy’s power to offer, though he questioned the propriety of her hospitality. Some service, he knew, must be performed toward providing for Lydia’s confinement, and he alone must be its agent. He could not—would not—admit her into his home, but as he had ridden out, an idea had begun to form in his mind until his thoughts turned to Wickham, who had, for the third time, caught Darcy within the crosshairs of the innumerable entanglements of his life. Lydia had been complicit in her own downfall, it was true, and had he the opportunity, Darcy determined to see that she was brought to some recognition of the distress she had brought upon her family, however futile his attempt might prove. Yet Darcy could not help but cast the largest portion of blame at Wickham’s feet.

In his mounting indignation, Darcy unconsciously channeled his emotions through a tug upon the reins as he flexed his fingers in an overpowering desire to feel them locked around Wickham’s ungrateful throat. Never one to balk at a command from his master, Hercules interpreted the signal as one for swiftness and obediently quickened his pace. Customarily attentive both to himself and to his horse, had Darcy not permitted his mind to wander, he would undoubtedly have seen the dart of movement on the path in front of him before he felt Hercules start beneath him, causing him to lose his seat. He experienced a sudden, violent jolt, a brief feeling of weightlessness, and then all sensation instantly became lost in oblivion.

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Elizabeth stood at the drawing-room window, watching apprehensively as Pemberley’s grounds became shrouded in the mist of darkness. Several hours had elapsed since Darcy had departed in high dudgeon, and Elizabeth harbored both a sense of guilt at having inflicted such anxiety upon him and a strange sense of foreboding at his absence. Watching through the windows, she had seen him jogging in the direction of the stables, which act alone did not alarm her. Knowing Darcy’s fondness for horses, Elizabeth had grown accustomed to him seeking solace in solitary
rides when he was desirous of clearing his mind. Yet he never ventured far and rarely remained away above an hour. Distracted though he was, he was an excellent horseman, Elizabeth reminded herself.

Turning from the window, Elizabeth spied Georgiana at the drawing-room door, fixing her with a scrutinizing gaze.

“Georgiana,” she murmured. “I did not hear you enter.”

“Forgive me for not revealing my presence,” replied Georgiana. After studying Elizabeth’s countenance for several moments longer, Georgiana crossed the room to stand beside her.

“Something has upset you,” she observed.

“Do not concern yourself,” said Elizabeth. “Darcy and I have had words; that is all.” Georgiana frowned. “I hope he has not said anything to grieve you terribly, Lizzie. If he did, I am sure he spoke only in anger.”

Elizabeth smiled. “His temper he cannot vouch for, I am well aware; he and I often exchange heated words. It is in both of our natures to speak strongly and with conviction, sometimes, I confess, at the expense of the other’s feelings, but,” she added, “I love him far too well to bear him a grudge for long.” Hesitating, Elizabeth glanced down at her hands folded at her waist; since her marriage to Darcy, so thick had the bond between Georgiana and herself grown that Elizabeth might ordinarily have unburdened herself to Georgiana in sisterly confidence. Yet as the disagreement concerned not only her own family’s reputation, but Wickham, she deemed it prudent not to speak of it. Lifting her head, she only said quietly, “Do not alarm yourself, sister. All shall soon be put to rights.”

At that moment, a servant appeared to announce the arrival of Colonel Fitzwilliam. Elizabeth had always enjoyed his company and had readily grown accustomed to his frequent presence at Pemberley when free from military responsibilities. Darcy too had witnessed the brotherly affection Fitzwilliam exhibited toward Elizabeth with great delight, for the colonel often made up for Darcy’s lack of liveliness in spirit that he sometimes feared would stifle Elizabeth.

Now, Fitzwilliam entered the drawing-room with a cheerful smile, approaching first Georgiana and embracing her before kissing Elizabeth’s hand in greeting.

“I am sorry you have missed Darcy,” said Elizabeth.

“It does not signify,” replied the colonel. “I had no urgent motive in calling; I only sought an evening of quiet diversion with my cousin.”

“I hope Darcy shall return soon,” answered Elizabeth.

Detecting a note of anxiety, however well-disguised, in her tone, Fitzwilliam stepped closer to examine her face.

“Lizzie,” he said, resting a hand upon her arm, “what has happened? Where is Darcy?”

“I am not certain,” she replied. “He left several hours since, upon Hercules. He was rather distressed, and I confess, I am growing concerned.”

“You have quarreled?” Fitzwilliam ventured to inquire. Elizabeth nodded. “Pray, Lizzie, what has upset you?”

Elizabeth hesitated, casting a glance in Georgiana’s direction. Though she knew Darcy’s sister to be far less of a shrinking violet than Darcy supposed, Elizabeth had considerable misgivings about speaking openly of Wickham under the current circumstances. Seeming to sense her sister-in-law’s dilemma, and perhaps in deference to her brother’s privacy, Georgiana discreetly removed herself from the room, and no sooner had she gone than Elizabeth began to pour out the whole of the story to the colonel.

“I would not be so concerned,” she concluded, endeavoring to suppress her tears, “but that without his usual presence of mind, he might have met with some accident.” Fitzwilliam considered this; he knew Darcy to be a fine rider, diligent of his own safety as well as that of his mount, but, having spent much of his boyhood with his cousin, Fitzwilliam also knew him to have occasion to act recklessly when enraged. So tightly did Darcy rein in his temper that on the rare occasion he unleashed it in its full force, he was often thought to be as much a danger to himself as to those unfortunate enough to be caught within the path of his fury.

Straightening his shoulders, the colonel declared, “I shall go in search of him. If nothing else, I can
endeavor to talk him round to a rational way of thinking—no easy task, I assure you, where Wickham is concerned.”

“I thank you,” murmured Elizabeth. Knowing her not to be one to give way to delicate sensibilities, Colonel Fitzwilliam recognized her acceptance of his offer as an admission of her anxiety.

Gently he pressed her hand between both of his own. “Fear not, Lizzie,” he assured her. “All will be well.”

Once Fitzwilliam had left, Elizabeth dropped into a chair beside the fireplace and rested her head upon her hand. Given sufficient time to reflect upon all that had transpired, she could not truly fault Darcy for his indignation; indeed, she had rather expected it of him. She had not, however, imagined that he would level upon her the accusation of rendering futile all he had done for her family. Though he had, Elizabeth knew, spoken out of anger, the insult had stung nonetheless, and in the aftermath of their argument, there still remained the difficulty of what was to be done respecting Lydia’s situation. However much Darcy abhorred the notion of bringing Lydia to Pemberley, Elizabeth could not believe him so heartless as to render her no assistance what so ever. That he would inevitably do whatever lay within his power and the bounds of propriety was due not merely to his familial obligation to Elizabeth by virtue of their marriage, but to his own sense of moral obligation. His Pride, Elizabeth knew, would not permit him to stand by and do nothing when he possessed the means to resolve a difficulty presented to him.

“Lizzie?” Startled from her reflections, Elizabeth glanced up when she felt Georgiana’s hand upon her arm. “Forgive me, Lizzie, but you appear deeply troubled, and I only wondered if there is anything I can do for you. It pains me to see you so distressed.” Elizabeth hesitated; much as she would have wished to unburden her heart to Georgiana, she had no desire to cause her sister-in-law any pain by mentioning Wickham. Fortunately, Georgiana alleviated her concern. “I could not help overhearing part of what passed between you and my cousin—that the disagreement between you and Darcy chiefly concerned your sister.”

Resigned to the inevitable, Elizabeth nodded. “I am afraid that neither Wickham nor Lydia has honored the sanctity of their marriage vows,” she said simply.

“I am grieved, though I confess, not surprised, to hear it,” murmured Georgiana. “I mean no disrespect toward your sister, Lizzie; Wickham cannot, given his nature, have been an attentive husband.”

Elizabeth offered a grim smile. “You may say what you wish, Georgiana. Lydia’s general lack of discretion is hardly a secret.”

In spite of herself, Georgiana let out a nervous giggle that quickly, and alarmingly, turned into a shriek.

“Dear god, Lizzie!” she exclaimed, hurrying to the window. “Come! Quickly!” With a terrible sense of dread flooding her heart, Elizabeth rushed to Georgiana’s side; so confused was the sight that met her eyes that she could not at first comprehend its meaning. Colonel Fitzwilliam had ridden, apparently in great haste judging by his disheveled appearance, back up to the house at the front of a small knot of men whom Elizabeth recognized as several of their tenants. One man led a riderless Hercules, and as Fitzwilliam leapt from his own horse and tossed the reins to a nearby groom, he rushed to the aid of the remaining two men who supported between them—

“Darcy!” cried Elizabeth, her hands flying to her breast as if in anticipation that her heart might burst. As realization struck with the force of a thunderbolt, she began to tremble and only dimly acknowledged Georgiana’s arm about her waist.

“Come, Lizzie. Sit.” Panic-stricken, Elizabeth broke from her sister-in-law’s hold and ran to Colonel Fitzwilliam as he entered the room.

“Pray, what has happened!” she demanded, while Georgiana, ashen-faced but dry-eyed, hurried away to restore order amongst the servants and issue any instructions in a show of command that the family was unaccustomed to seeing in her.

“I cannot say with certainty, Lizzie. An accident—but I cannot imagine what might have befallen him; Darcy is such a skilled horseman, and Hercules a superb mount.”

“Have you questioned him? What does he say happened?” asked Elizabeth, knowing, and yet
fearing the colonel’s answer.

“Alas, Lizzie, I discovered him insensible. I could not ascertain the extent of his injuries. I have dispatched one of the servants to fetch the physician.”

“I must see to him,” said Elizabeth. Fitzwilliam made a gesture as if to place a restraining hand upon her arm, but drew back when he recognized the flash of determination in her eyes.

“Elizabeth,” he said gently, “I do not think—“

“I shall be with my husband,” she declared, sweeping past him to the door.

In the hall, she spied Georgiana in conference with Mrs Reynolds. “The men who brought Darcy here; see to them, please, Mrs Reynolds, and tell them we are deeply grateful.”

“They are in the kitchen now, mam, taking some refreshment,” the housekeeper assured her.

“Very well, then.” With barely a nod, Elizabeth spun on her heel and sped up the stairs into the room into which Darcy had been carried, Georgiana following close behind. Darcy lay motionless upon the bed, the candle-light flickering across his face lending a waxen, death-like pallor to his skin. Fearing that if she stood on the spot for too long, her legs might fail her, Elizabeth moved instantly to his side. Calling for water and a clean cloth, she began gingerly to bathe his temples while Georgiana looked on, her expression a mix of tenderness and anxiety.

“I cannot imagine what could have caused such a mishap,” said the Colonel, gazing in disbelief upon his cousin’s still form.

“The fault is mine,” murmured Elizabeth, addressing her words more to her husband’s unconscious ears than to the room at large. “Had I not given you such cause for distress, this surely would not have happened. Dear husband, pray forgive me.” Overcome, she let the cloth with which she had been bathing Darcy’s brow drop back into the bowl of water and covered her face with her hands; then, mastering herself, she bent over her husband’s pillow and pressed her lips to each of his closed eyes in turn. As she retrieved the cloth, Georgiana, who had taken her place beside Elizabeth, suddenly clutched her hand. When Elizabeth looked upon Darcy, his eyes appeared to have opened. He seemed unable to speak, but his gaze, having traveled listlessly round the room, finally settled upon her, and she did not believe it a trick of the light that she saw in their depths a flicker of recognition before his head sank upon the pillow and unconsciousness claimed him again.

After what seemed an interminable wait, the physician arrived to give his opinion of Darcy’s condition, which he declared to be critical, but not altogether hopeless. His pulse, though slow, was not alarmingly weak. To what extent his brain might have been injured in the fall could be ascertained only when and if he regained full consciousness. That he had awakened, if briefly, was promising, but he must be kept still, for risk of bleeding remained a concern. So long as he passed the night without incident, there was reason to hope he would make a full recovery. Thankfully, he had not sustained any other injuries as far as the doctor could judge, save the severe bruising that had naturally resulted from the fall. At present, they must be grateful that his neck had not been broken. After issuing instructions that Darcy should be closely attended during the night and given wine with tincture of opium should he wake and complain of any discomfort, the doctor left with assurances that he would call again in the morning.

Anxious for his cousin’s comfort, and yet feeling himself wholly inadequate to perform any office that might aid in bringing it about, Colonel Fitzwilliam betook himself to the library, instructing Elizabeth and Georgiana to call him should they have need of him. Georgiana went to the door to speak quietly with him before he descended, and Elizabeth, thinking herself alone, fell to her knees beside the bed and buried her head in the quilt to stifle her sobs. She started, then, when she felt Georgiana’s hands upon her shoulders.

“Dearest Lizzie,” whispered Georgiana, her voice quavering, “take heart. You must not give way to fear.”

“Oh, Georgiana,” cried Elizabeth, rising and embracing her sister-in-law, “if anything were to happen to him, I should not be able to bear it.” Not one to give way to hysteria, Elizabeth’s mounting anxiety was distressing to witness; both women, indeed, were reeling from the unaccustomed shock of witnessing Darcy—strong, reliable, invincible Darcy—in a condition of such utter helplessness.
Wishing to find some means of breaking the painful silence, Georgiana broached the subject of which they had been speaking in the moments before the colonel had returned with intelligence of Darcy’s accident. “Lizzie,” she murmured, “forgive me for mentioning it at such a moment, but I know you must still be anxious for your sister; pray, if I can be of any assistance, you have only to ask.”

Elizabeth offered the ghost of a smile in return. “You are most kind,” she replied, “but think now only of your own brother; I confess, Lydia is the least of my concerns at present.”

“Am I to suppose that her difficulty formed the subject of your quarrel with my brother?”

“Yes,” answered Elizabeth. “I wish to heaven I had not spoken of it, for I know that it grieved as much as it angered Darcy. Wickham has, not surprisingly, if duplicitously, cast Lydia off in apparent righteous indignation at her infidelity, his own misconduct being entirely beside the point, of course. She has, from what I have gathered, been in Meryton with my Aunt Philips. My father refuses to receive her at Longbourn, naturally, but she is now becoming heavy with child and in rather dire straits financially…”

“And she wishes to be received at Pemberley for the duration of her confinement?” concluded Georgiana.

Elizabeth nodded. “If such a measure was questionable before, it is unthinkable now.”

“I need not inquire of my brother’s opinion of the matter. I know him far too well to think he can have been anything but displeased, at the very least.”

“To describe his response as displeasure would do him a kindness,” replied Elizabeth. “I cannot say his revulsion at Lydia’s situation surprises me, but I must confess that I had hoped he might be willing to show more compassion for my own feelings upon the matter. He cannot be entirely unsympathetic to my wish to render my sister some assistance; I know this, and had I but given him time to consider—” Elizabeth’s voice faltered.

Georgiana reached out and rested a hand upon her arm. “You know better than anyone, Lizzie, that my brother’s disposition cannot be called even-tempered. He possesses the capacity for compassion, I will allow, and I have you to thank for my having seen more of that side of his nature than I had before been used to do. His pride, it is true, often appears as want of feeling, but he is a fair-minded man. I am sure he could not forsake anyone whose trials it lay within his power to alleviate, particularly anyone so dear to you as a sister.” Her eyes welling with sudden tears, Georgiana pressed Elizabeth’s hand between both of her own. “You are dearer to him than all things, Lizzie. He should not—he should not wish you to heap blame upon yourself for his accident.” Allowing her gaze to linger again on her brother’s face, Georgiana began to weep in earnest, and Elizabeth drew the girl to her breast.

“We shall conquer this,” she murmured, pressing a kiss to Georgiana’s brow. “We shall.” Thus she stood for several moments, stroking Georgiana’s bent head and whispering words of comfort, when a sound in the room caused the women to break apart. Turning to the bed, they saw, in mingled hope and agitation, Darcy endeavoring to raise himself to a sitting posture, an incoherent murmur issuing from his throat that pained Elizabeth to hear. Cognizant of the doctor’s warning, Georgiana stepped quickly to his side and rested a hand upon his shoulder.

“Calm yourself, Brother,” she whispered, gently forcing him back upon his pillows. “Lie still.” Darcy opened his lips to speak, produced only the same incoherent sound, frowned, and made another futile endeavor to form words. Across the bed, Georgiana and Elizabeth exchanged a concerned look; whether this loss of speech was temporary, or if it heralded some graver, lingering malady, they had not the knowledge to discern, but in the belief that Darcy might yet comprehend what was spoken around him, neither woman voiced her fear.

Returning her attention to her brother, Georgiana knelt at the bedside and took one of his hands in hers. “Do you know me?” she questioned him gently. He did not respond, but Georgiana interpreted the soft pressure he bestowed upon her fingers as confirmation that he did indeed recognized her. “Have you any pain?” she inquired. Wincing with the effort, Darcy nodded. “Lizzie, the wine,” directed Georgiana. “Quickly,” she added, for already Darcy seemed sinking again into unconsciousness.

“Fitzwilliam,” murmured Elizabeth, approaching with the wine and laudanum the doctor had
prescribed. Darcy’s eyes flickered toward her, and he groped for her hand, nearly knocking the glass from her grasp. Slipping an arm beneath his shoulders, Georgiana supported him while Elizabeth administered the opiates, after which he fell back again. Thinking he had sunk again into a swoon, Elizabeth was surprised to suddenly feel his hand upon her cheek, causing her to blink rapidly against the tears gathering in her eyes. In a comfortingly familiar gesture, Darcy traced his thumb across the curve of her cheek to brush away her tears. As if feeling herself intruding upon their privacy, Georgiana stepped away from the bed and moved toward the door.

“I think I shall go down and see whether my cousin requires anything.” Elizabeth only nodded in acknowledgement of the announcement. Alone with Darcy, she dropped onto the bed and nestled against his side, gingerly resting her head upon his shoulder.

“I have been so worried,” she whispered. “Had I known what misfortune would befall us, I should never have burdened you with Lydia’s trouble. Pray forgive me, Fitzwilliam.” Darcy again raised his hand to Elizabeth’s cheek, caressing it with the tips of his fingers. As he did, his lips began to move, though Elizabeth could not make out the words he endeavored to form. Bending her head so that her ear hovered just above his mouth, she at last managed to discern the words, if not to comprehend their meaning. “Lizzie, pray, I—you must—never meant—“ and all at once, seemingly exhausted by the effort, his hand dropped back to his side, and his head sank upon the pillow as he slid into sleep.

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When Darcy first awoke to full consciousness, he did not immediately recollect the events of the previous day, though he did think it odd that the sunlight peeking through the curtains seemed somewhat higher and brighter than when he customarily arose. Then too, the light seemed to render a rather painful assault upon his eyes. Elizabeth lay curled beside him, fast asleep, her cheek cradled upon her hand. Odd, he thought, that she seemed to have fallen asleep atop the bed-covers, and fully clothed. As he turned his head, Darcy experienced a stab of pain that caused him to utter a curse as much in surprise as in discomfort. Only then did he begin to recall, if dimly, the events of the day before, though nothing beyond his decision to take a solitary ride presented itself to his memory. Elizabeth, no doubt having sensed his movement and heard his exclamation of pain, stirred and opened her eyes. Realizing that his own eyes were open and regarding her with some apprehension, she made as if to fling her arms about his neck, but, apparently thinking better of it, settled instead for touching her lips to his brow.

“I am relieved to find you awake,” she murmured, resting her cheek against his. “We have all been so worried. How do you feel?”

“As if I have been thrown from a horse,” replied Darcy, offering a weak attempt at a smile. “Do not jest, Fitzwilliam,” Elizabeth scolded. “You cannot know how I feared for you.”

With tremendous effort, Darcy managed to slip an arm around his wife’s shoulders and draw her to his chest. “Dearest Lizzie,” he murmured. “Pray forgive me for alarming you.”

Elizabeth caressed his cheek with the back of her hand. “I too must offer you an apology; I ought to have considered more carefully how best to broach the subject of Lydia’s predicament with you.”

“I do not think,” said Darcy, wincing and pressing a hand to his forehead, “that the present moment is the most convenient time for revisiting the conversation.” At this, Elizabeth could not suppress a smile.

“I am glad,” said she, taking his hand in hers, “that your fall seems to have dislodged a hitherto suppressed sense of humor.”

“Shall you always take such delight in teasing me?” grumbled Darcy.

“It is my chief source of amusement,” replied Elizabeth. “But tell me,” she said, turning serious again, “have you any recollection of what caused your mishap?”

“None at all, I confess,” he replied, “save my own recklessness; a small animal, I suppose, or something I could not have easily avoided at such a pace. I hope,” he added, his gaze lowering like that of a penitent child, “that Hercules did not fall prey to my heedless actions.” When he made to rise with the intention of dressing and paying a visit to the stables, Elizabeth placed a restraining hand upon his shoulder, for which he was reluctantly grateful, for the sudden
movement elicited an attack of dizziness that might have rendered endeavoring to forsake his bed a hazardous undertaking.

“Calm yourself, my love,” said Elizabeth gently. “Hercules is uninjured. Colonel Fitzwilliam saw to it that he was properly attended. Indeed, we are deeply indebted to him for arriving at Pemberley when he did, for without his assistance I know not when we might have discovered you.”

“I suppose there is no question of my going to the stables to make my own inspection?” he ventured to ask.

“Not until the doctor has declared you sufficiently recovered, I am afraid,” replied Elizabeth. “And not until you can promise me never again to take such a risk with your life.”

“If you did not demand it of me, my own sense of manly honor would have done so; to have broken my neck in a fox hunt would at least have been a more suitably tragic exit for a gentleman of my station in life.” Noticing Elizabeth’s frown, he raised her hand to his cheek and held it there.

“I shall always do my best never to cause you needless anxiety, my Lizzie.” he murmured.

“I must go and inform your sister and the colonel that you are out of danger,” said Elizabeth, making to rise from the bed. Squinting against the light filtering in through the curtains, Darcy observed the lines of weariness etched upon her face.

“Elizabeth,” he said, reaching yet again for her hand, “you must rest. I should not wish you to make yourself ill on my account.” Desirous to reassure him, Elizabeth leaned back upon the bed and wrapped her arms around him; when she rested her head upon his chest, her eyes, heavy yet with the night’s fatigue, fluttered closed. Feeling himself likewise beginning to fade, with his remaining strength Darcy drew her closer before drifting into a peaceful sleep.

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Elizabeth stood at the bottom of the staircase, endeavoring, with all of the dignity she could muster, to suppress a laugh; yet if her countenance remained neutral, she knew, from the all-too familiar scowl etched upon Darcy’s features, that her eyes betrayed her humor. After several days confined to his bed under the doctor’s orders, Darcy had begun to protest so vehemently that Elizabeth sought to find a compromise, lest he attempt to effect his own escape by some dangerous means and risk further injury to himself. Indeed, in his present condition, descending the long, sweeping staircase unaided was not likely to end favorably. Yet stiff and sore from his fall and somewhat unsteady, Darcy had discovered, to his great annoyance, that until he could stand and walk about with a sufficient demonstration of coordination to satisfy the doctor, independent movement was to be kept at a minimum. Once the diplopia had subsided, he had endeavored, under his wife’s watchful eye, to leave his room, only to discover that intermittent doses of laudanum, while easing his headaches, impaired his mobility most inconveniently. Missing his usual clarity of mind, he had that morning, in a show of masculine fortitude, determined to dispense with the prescribed pain relief and suffer silently and sensibly. Solicitous of her husband’s health, and yet knowing that he should obtain no adequate rest if he were not comfortable, Elizabeth had at last suggested to him that if he could not yet leave the house, his library might at least provide a change of scenery. Darcy had agreed to the suggestion with alacrity, until, that is, he had learned the whole of her plan. Now Elizabeth stood with arms folded, supervising the progress of the two footmen who carried Darcy down the stairs. This seemingly helpless position did little to diminish his powerful frame, nor his equally robust protests.

“I really cannot see why such precaution is necessary. I do not require assistance.”

“Mistress’s orders, sir,” replied James, casting Elizabeth a wink over Darcy’s head.

“I must say,” added Thomas with a grin, “Master’s in fine form today. I’ve not heard ‘im complainin’ with such vigor since before his accident. A good sign, I think.”

“Your impertinence shall not be tolerated,” growled Darcy, fully aware that he could make little more than idle threats in his present position, and feeling all the more ill-tempered as a result of it.

“Am I deemed fit enough to walk upon level ground, at least?” he demanded when they had reached the bottom step.

“Has the fire in the library been seen to?” asked Elizabeth of the footmen, pointedly ignoring her husband.
Yes, Missis,” replied Thomas.

“Very well.” Elizabeth gestured in the direction of the library, signaling that they should bear Darcy thither. His indignation notwithstanding, he could not help admiring, with a degree of pleasure he prayed went unobserved by James and Thomas, the elegant yet imperious flick of the wrist that Elizabeth had perfected since assuming her post as Pemberley’s mistress for effectively issuing orders.

Once settled comfortably (in body, if not in frame of mind) upon the sofa, and having dismissed both footmen, Darcy turned to Elizabeth and stood slowly, the better to glare at her from his impressive height. “Was that really necessary, Elizabeth?” he demanded.

“It was a wise precaution, I think,” she replied, meeting his gaze.

“I cannot, I know, entirely enjoy my usual degree of independence at present, but I would prefer it if any decisions regarding my need for attendance be left to me.”

Elizabeth arched a brow. “I did not think it likely that you could swallow sufficient pride to ask for it.”

Knowing himself incapable of arguing the point, he only responded, “I shall promise to do so, if you wish it; are you satisfied?”

“I am,” Elizabeth assured him. “You, however, are quite apparently not.”

“I dislike being made to appear helpless,” Darcy said simply.

“Of this, I am well aware, but I was speaking of another matter entirely,” returned Elizabeth.

Before Darcy could inquire as to her meaning, she drew near to him and placed her hands upon his shoulders, gently but firmly easing him back down upon the sofa.

“Elizabeth, I—“ He fell silent when he felt her hands between his legs, her fingertips leaving trails of heat in their wake. “Elizabeth,” he gasped, “What on earth—”

Pausing in her ministrations, Elizabeth leaned back upon her heels and gazed up at him, her eyes alight with mischief. “I am seeing to your needs, husband,” she replied, one corner of her mouth turning upwards in a coy smile. When Darcy made to protest, she raised herself and leaned over him, covering her mouth with his and very pointedly biting down on his lower lip. Darcy understood that he need not expend his energy in arguing; indeed, as Elizabeth returned to her task with nimble fingers and tantalizing tongue, any attempt to oppose her would have been futile as all of the blood had left his brain, rendering him incapable of coherent speech. As he gave in to the wash of sensations that flooded his body, Darcy only had a moment to consider whether they ought to have taken the precaution of securing the door against inadvertent intrusion before he was driven nearly to the edge of consciousness, and all rational thought ceased. As he found his release, his head fell back against the cushions, and he let forth a long, shuddering moan that he prayed would not be heard beyond the confines of the library. He knew not for how long he lay in drowsy contentment until he felt Elizabeth’s hand upon his cheek, coaxing him back to full consciousness.

“I fear that might have been unwise,” she murmured, regarding him with concern.

Smiling, Darcy wound an arm around her waist and pulled her down onto the sofa beside him, sighing as she nestled against his chest. “On the contrary,” he replied, kissing the top of her head, “I must allow that you take prodigiously good care of me, my Lizzie.” After several minutes elapsed in comfortable silence, Elizabeth raised her head to look at her husband. Sensing her discomfort, Darcy reached for her hand.

“There is something on your mind,” said he quietly.

Elizabeth nodded. “I wondered whether or not to speak of it. I—“ she hesitated.

“You wish to speak of Lydia,” Darcy concluded. “I thought you might.” Releasing his wife’s hand, he got carefully to his feet and, as was his custom, began to pace until his head began to throb. Thereupon he leaned against the edge of his desk, crossing one long leg over the other in an attitude of effected composure. “I have given the matter a great deal of consideration these last few days, because—let us speak plainly—there has been little else for me to do. You know, Elizabeth—surely you must see that we cannot receive Lydia at Pemberley in her present condition. It would be unthinkable.” When Elizabeth opened her lips to speak, he raised a hand to silence her.

“I have, however, devised a solution that I believe might be a suitable alternative, if you will
permit me to explain.” Brows slightly raised in curiosity, Elizabeth nodded. “You are aware, of course, that my family still has connections in France.” Again, Elizabeth nodded. “We have not been in regular correspondence, of course, but I have not long since received intelligence that they have managed thus far to weather Napoleon’s storm tolerably well.”

“Fitzwilliam,” began Elizabeth, but Darcy again silenced her with a wave of his hand.

“Given the relative calm on the Continent at present, if I can arrange safe passage to France for Lydia, I believe I can enlist my relations to aid me in seeking out a secluded place where she might remain and receive all necessary attention, and they might even be able to find a family to take the child in. I do not imagine that Lydia would have any desire to care for it herself, though of course,” he added, “she might well surprise us all with a hitherto unimagined show of maternal affection.”

“I confess I had not considered the point,” replied Elizabeth. “You are right, though, I suppose, but how is Lydia to travel? With whom? I do not suppose it possible I might—”

Darcy shook his head, effectively answering the question Elizabeth had yet to finish. “I know you must see the necessity of it, Lizzie,” he said gently, “but consider; your absence from Pemberley is sure to be remarked upon, and our aim is to avoid gossip.”

“But she cannot travel unaccompanied, surely,” protested Elizabeth.

“Naturally,” agreed Darcy. “It occurred to me that we might reasonably hire a woman from among the villagers; perhaps you could consult Mrs Reynolds. I imagine she must have regular intelligence of anyone seeking employment in the surrounding area.”

Elizabeth rested her chin in her hands, considering the proposal; then nodded. “It seems the best solution,” she agreed at last. “But are you quite certain you wish to further entangle your family in the affair?”

“You need not concern yourself, Lizzie. My relatives can be trusted. They appreciate the value of discretion,” Darcy assured her.

“I would not have supposed less of anyone connected with the Darcy name,” replied Elizabeth. “That is not what concerns me. It is only that—I thought, after your words to me when first we spoke of the subject—“ her voice faltered, and she lowered her eyes. Recalling precisely what he had said that day—the accusation he had heedlessly tossed at her regarding the threat to the respectability of his name—Darcy crossed to the sofa and, ignoring the soreness in his limbs, dropped to his knees before his wife. Taking both of her hands in his, he said gently, “I ought never to have said such a thing to you, Lizzie. It was wrong of me. There is no woman in England more worthy than you of bearing the Darcy name. Contrary to what I believed when first I sought your hand, I have not bestowed my name upon you. You have taken it and claimed it as your own. You have taught me what it truly means to bear it with honor—a lesson I could have learned from no one else.”

“Oh, Fitzwilliam.” Eyes glistening with tears, Elizabeth withdrew her hands from her husband’s and reached up to gently cradle his face. “You are a good man,” she whispered, meeting his gaze. “And you have made me a better one, Elizabeth,” he replied, leaning in to lay his lips on hers.

---Three months later---

Elizabeth paced her sitting-room in an agony of anticipation, glancing frequently at the clock as if willing its hands to reveal the time she might expect to see her husband. Darcy had set off several days earlier, intending to meet the ship that had carried Lydia home from France. Having arranged everything, he felt honor-bound to see the matter through to its conclusion, which naturally involved seeing Lydia safely upon English soil again. All had gone according to plan with the utmost discretion; after employing a cousin of one of the Pemberley housemaids whom Elizabeth had learned had been seeking work, Darcy had written to his relations and arranged passage for Lydia and her companion. The child had been born, a suitably respectable adoption had been arranged, and after sufficient time to recover her strength, Lydia had returned to England, no more chastened by the experience than she had been when she left. Elizabeth knew not, nor had she decided to ask, what measures Darcy had taken to facilitate something resembling a reconciliation between Wickham and his wife, though she thought it likely that money had changed hands, yet
Now Darcy had traveled to meet Lydia and see her safely on her way home to Newcastle, insisting that none but himself could undertake to perform such an errand. Knowing the sentiment to be a foolish one, Elizabeth yet harbored a feeling of anxiety for her husband’s safety, as the journey had been the longest he had taken upon horseback since his accident. Having received an express from him to assure her that all was well and to advise her of the expected time of his return to Pemberley, Elizabeth had awaited his homecoming with mounting anticipation. After occupying herself alternately reading, writing letters, and pacing, Elizabeth at last gave way to her anxiety, took up her shawl, and left the house, stationing herself near the gates to wait, watch, and listen for the first intelligence of Darcy’s return. She knew not for how long she stood in wait; only when she began to shiver as the sun set did she realize that considerable time must have elapsed. Finally, as she began to think of returning to the house, she heard the canter of hoof-beats in the distance and, certain that it heralded her husband’s return, she scanned the road beyond for the first glimpse of him. When Darcy drew near, he caught sight of Elizabeth before she spied him and, thinking some mishap had brought her out to stand in wait for his return, urged Hercules onward with a touch of his spurred heel. Barely had his boots touched the ground before he surprisingly, but not unpleasantly, found his arms full of his wife as she greeted him with an exuberant embrace. A groom having approached to take Hercules’s reins, Darcy was free to return the greeting, but he checked himself and gazed anxiously into Elizabeth’s face.

“What has happened, Lizzie? What is wrong?”

“Nothing in the world!” she exclaimed, tightening her hold upon him. “I am just so relieved—and so glad—that you are safely at home.”

“As am I,” he replied. Elizabeth took in his travel-weary appearance—his rumpled clothes and the dust of the road upon his boots—and thought he looked none the less handsome for it. Feeling her eyes upon him, Darcy combed his fingers through his wind-swept hair. “I must not present a very pleasing figure at present,” he observed.

“Quite the contrary,” returned Elizabeth, smiling and taking his hand. “But the journey has fatigue you.”

Darcy stood looking down upon Elizabeth, tracing his thumb across the back of her hand before bringing it to his lips. “I have missed you, Lizzie,” he murmured, drawing her arm through his and making his way with her up to the house.

Once in their bed-chamber, Darcy flung himself upon the bed, too weary even to remove his boots. Through a haze of fatigue, he felt Elizabeth’s hands, warm and soft against his calves, easing off one boot, then the other, before gently kneading her fingers into his tired, aching muscles. As he slid into a doze, he relished his wife’s touch as she made tender but nimble work of relieving him of his outermost garments, untying his neck-cloth and slipping his waistcoat from his shoulders. When he felt the heat of her palm through the linen of his shirt, a groan rumbled deep in his chest, and he reached out an arm to pull her down beside him. Still lying upon his back, he drew her to his chest and buried his face in her hair, inhaling the bewitching elixir of her fragrance. He might have been content to lie with her in his arms until his exhaustion carried him off to sleep, but when Elizabeth shifted her position, the better to reach the portion of his anatomy that was yet sufficiently awake to respond to her ministrations, his hands immediately went to work loosening her gown. When the remaining layers of clothing that lay between them and the consummation of their desire were removed, Darcy reached out to cradle Elizabeth’s breasts in his hands, his pulse throbbing in time to the beat of her heart against the tips of his fingers. He smiled as he slid his palms down her sides, caressing her hips and thighs before coming to rest in the soft tangle of curls between her legs. Elizabeth arched her back as he slid a finger inside her, urgently beckoning him to take her. With his free hand, Darcy brushed the pad of his thumb across the curve of her lips before lowering his head to claim her mouth with his own. Yet even as he raised his other hand to frame her face, Elizabeth ruthlessly abandoned all pretense of prolonging the anticipation of their coupling. Wrapping her legs around his waist, she pivoted her hips forward in a clear directive. With his gaze locked upon his wife’s, Darcy braced himself on his elbows and thrust into her, crying out as their bodies were tossed on wave upon wave of exquisite pleasure.
Not surprisingly, their passion reached its climax as suddenly as it had begun; as Darcy caught
Elizabeth’s face between his hands and again claimed her mouth, her body convulsed in one long,
delicious tremor, and she went limp beneath him. Equally spent, Darcy sighed deeply and let his
head fall between her breasts.
“I am glad you are come home,” whispered Elizabeth, combing her fingers back through the
waves of hair that clung, damp with perspiration, to his brow. Darcy only just possessed the
remaining strength to mumble his concurrence. Rolling to his side, he draped one arm across his
wife as he tumbled into sleep.
He knew not for how long he slumbered, but when he returned to consciousness and lifted his
head, darkness had crept into the room. Elizabeth sat curled in Darcy’s favorite armchair, a book
open in her lap which she appeared to have been neglecting, for her gaze was at present intently
studying her husband.
“Elizabeth,” he murmured, voice yet husky with sleep, “you ought to have awakened me.”
Smiling, Elizabeth laid aside her book and stood, crossing to the bed and bending to kiss him. “I
had not the heart to disturb your rest,” she replied. As Darcy reached for his wife’s hand, a
discrete tap sounded at the door. Unfit to hold an audience with any of the servants in his current
state of undress, he glanced questioningly at Elizabeth.
“I took the liberty of having a bath drawn for you,” she explained. “It will be ready.”
Having grown accustom to the connubial bliss that the master and mistress of Pemberley enjoyed,
the household staff knew when their ministrations were not required, and Darcy’s valet had
become particularly adept at fulfilling the duties of his post while maintaining the utmost respect
for his master’s privacy, particularly when that privacy entailed allowing the master’s wife to
perform those offices that generally fell to a manservant. So it was that Darcy, clad only in his
dressing-gown, held no qualm when he arose from his wife’s embrace and, instead of taking his
leave of her, tugged upon her hand to bid her accompany him to his dressing-room, knowing that
none of the servants would dare venture into the vicinity unless either Darcy or Elizabeth rang.

As cognizant of the staff’s discretion as was her husband, Elizabeth allowed herself the
unmitigated pleasure of gazing upon Darcy as he stood before her, wearing precisely nothing. Her
own drapery consisted only of the folds of hair that tumbled over her shoulders and breasts. Hands
on hips, weight resting upon one foot, Darcy let his eyes slide over Elizabeth’s form, and she felt
the heat of a blush creeping over her skin.
“I wonder, Lizzie,” murmured Darcy, a slow smile tugging at the corners of his mouth, “that I can
still give you cause to blush. It becomes you.” At this, the pinkness tinging her cheeks spread its
way down her neck and over her shoulders.
“The bath—the water must not grow cold,” she whispered.
Stepping closer, Darcy enfolded her in his arms and bent to trail his lips along the curve of her
shoulder. “I have no intention of letting it,” he replied. With one arm about Elizabeth’s waist, he
stepped into the bath and, turning to face her, placed his hands upon her hips to lift her in beside
him. With simultaneous sighs of pleasure, they slid together into the water, arms and legs
intertwined. Elizabeth yet retained a lingering glow from the heat of their lovemaking, and Darcy
slid his hands reverently over the slope of her breast and the curve of her hip; man of few words
that he was, he allowed his touch to trace the signature of his love into her very skin. Reclining in
the water, he tenderly pulled her onto his lap and entwined his fingers in her hair, allowing it to
flow in fragrant waves over his hands. Though unschooled in the mysteries of the lady’s toilet, he
luxuriated in the sensation of combing her tresses through his fingers as he massaged her head and
temples. Elizabeth gave a contented sigh, resting her head against Darcy’s chest and marveling at
how the seemingly mundane act of having her hair washed could elicit such a sensation of bliss
when in her husband’s hands. Yet never one to be outdone, she eventually wiggled free of his
hold and repositioned herself to face him. Slipping her arms around him, she began her own
exploration of his body. In a moment of uncharacteristic surrender, due in part to the fatigue of his
journey, Darcy allowed Elizabeth to press her fingers into his shoulders and back, easing away the
tautness in his muscles as she cleansed the dust of the road from his skin. Despite the increasingly
innovative ways in which they were learning to pleasure one another—and such ways were many
in number—he had never allowed himself the luxury of bathing with his wife, and he wondered now why the notion had never before struck him as an admirable one. Leaning against her, he rested his head between her breasts and allowed himself to nestle in the warm cocoon of her embrace.

“I fear I owe you an apology,” murmured Elizabeth, bending to press a kiss to his brow. “I neglected to adequately express my gratitude for your again having taken such prodigious care of my sister.”

Darcy laughed—a low, warm chuckle that emanated from deep in his belly as he considered the carnal embrace with which his wife had greeted him upon his return. “I think,” he replied, reaching up to touch her cheek, “that I consider myself to have been most appropriately thanked.”

The End

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