Sword-Play: a Pride and Prejudice Fic

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Summary

A secretive Lizzie, a disgruntled Darcy, and an angry letter from Lady Catherine. What is afoot at Pemberley?

Notes

this is a revision of a story I posted just over a year ago. The basic plot is the same, but I’ve added a bit more character development here and there. Enjoy. As always, typos are mine.
Elizabeth stood at the drawing-room window, a smile playing at her lips as she watched flecks of afternoon sunlight glistening on the fresh blanket of snow that covered the grounds of Pemberley. Any moment now she expected to hear the approach of a carriage; Jane and Bingley would arrive that day, and Elizabeth's smile broadened at the prospect of the quiet Christmas holiday the two couples would spend together. Despite her mother's invitations to spend Christmas at Longbourn and her affection for her father, Elizabeth wished for a more subdued version of the festivities. She found coping with her mother's bouts of nervousness compounded by her awe of her esteemed son-in-law a trial to bear in the best of times, but in her present condition, she deemed it hazardous to her health.

The previous winter, only days before Christmas, Elizabeth had, following a difficult and dangerous confinement, given birth to a daughter who had lived no more than a few hours. Elizabeth had recovered physically more quickly than anyone might have anticipated, but for months, her grief had been inconsolable. Now, as the anniversary of their loss tempered the joy of the season, Darcy was anxious that nothing disturb Elizabeth's tranquility. She had kept her own counsel and borne her own grief, not wishing to burden him more than necessary, and he, with his naturally stoic disposition, could offer little beyond tender embraces and the whispered prayers spoken only in the silence of his own heart. Until the previous month, Elizabeth had found the comfort of another woman's companionship in Georgiana, but Georgiana's marriage to an acquaintance of Colonel Fitzwilliam, though celebrated with much joy by the family, had brought with it her removal from Pemberley. Elizabeth had wondered how she would bear the festivities of the Christmas holiday until Darcy had brought forth the suggestion of spending it simply with Jane and Bingley at home. He had borne the loss of the child with his usual reserve, though Elizabeth knew how deep ran his grief, even if he little spoke of it.

Lady Catherine had extended an invitation—more like a summons—to spend Christmas at Rosings, since Elizabeth's recovery had prevented the family paying their yearly visit at Easter, but Darcy had, with his usual diplomacy, declined the request. Elizabeth had not dared ask what form of payment—or punishment—they would be expected to return for this merciful reprieve. Colonel Fitzwilliam had unfortunately been unable to avoid his aunt's summons, and it was a pity, for Darcy would have been cheered by his cousin's company.

So absorbed was Elizabeth in her thoughts that she started at the touch of her husband's hand at the small of her back.

"Oh, you startled me!" she gasped, turning round to look up into his face.
He smiled down at her. "My apologies, dearest." Elizabeth allowed him to draw her into an embrace. "Bingley and your sister will be arriving shortly?" he inquired.
"Yes," replied Elizabeth. "I am glad of it, for your sake as much as for my own. I know there is no one's society you prefer to Bingley's."
"Excepting the present company," said her husband. "But Elizabeth, are you quite sure you feel equal to it? Your spirits have only just begun to recover from…" his voice trailed off, and he lowered his eyes.

Taking Darcy's hand in hers, she said gently, "I feel perfectly equal to it. I have been longing for Jane's visit. I am sure it shall do me good. In fact, just at the moment, I feel quite my usual self again."
Darcy raised her hand to his lips. "God be thanked for it," he murmured.
"And for dear Lady Catherine's kind reprieve," added Elizabeth with a smile.
Darcy's eyes darkened. "I would not go so far as to call it kind," he said stiffly. "She is most seriously displeased. I made our excuses quite profusely, but my insistence that under the present circumstances, we wished to spend the holiday quietly at Pemberley did little to appease her. I am afraid she accuses you of keeping me from my duty to my family."
"I am sorry for it," said Elizabeth.
"I am afraid it cannot be helped. When once my aunt has made known her displeasure, there is little anyone can do to alter her mind." At the look of disappointment in her husband's eyes, Elizabeth fought hard to dismiss the fear that he had begun to take Lady Catherine's view of the situation. In such moments, Darcy's words to her in his first proposal of marriage haunted
Elizabeth: 'Any alliance between us must be regarded as a highly reprehensible connection.'
Changing the subject, she asked, "What, pray, did you have to promise to receive a reprieve, even if a reluctant one?"
"Merely the promise of a more extended visit at Easter," replied he gravely, but unable to disguise the twinkle in his eye. "Come now, Elizabeth. You ought to have more respect for my relations. Lady Catherine is—well—not altogether disagreeable."
"Only because she dotes on you," laughed Elizabeth.
"Not quite so much as she used to, I am afraid. I rather think her favor now rests on my dear cousin."
"At any rate," said Elizabeth, "we shall enjoy ourselves with Jane and Bingley."
"Ah, yes, and while we are on the subject of enjoyment, I wonder if you might allow me to avail myself of an opportunity, while it lies within my reach." Before Elizabeth could reply, Darcy bent his head and kissed her. A step in the hall interrupted the pleasant interlude that followed, and the pair drew apart just as Mrs. Reynolds entered.
"Excuse me, madam," she murmured. "I only wished to know if you still desired to delay supper until Mr. and Mrs. Bingley have arrived."
"If you please, Yes, Mrs. Reynolds," replied Elizabeth, offering the housekeeper a smile.
"Thank you, madam. I am sorry to have disturbed you."
"Poor woman," laughed Elizabeth once Mrs. Reynolds' footsteps had died away. "We really ought to be more discrete, I suppose."
"Perhaps," replied her husband. "But she is a worldly enough woman. She does not offend easily."
"True, but even so, I—Fitzwilliam, what on earth are you doing?" exclaimed Elizabeth as Darcy drew her close again and lowered his lips upon hers.
"Making excellent use of my time," said he coolly. "You know I detest idleness."

"Lizzie! Dear, dear Lizzie!" exclaimed Jane, rushing forward to embrace her sister. "How are you?"
"I am quite well," replied Elizabeth, returning her sister's embrace with equal fervor.
"So I can see," said Jane, pulling back to examine Elizabeth's countenance. "I must confess your last few letters worried me somewhat, but I am relieved to find you looking so refreshed."
"Indeed, you look quite as lovely as ever I have seen you, sister," said another voice, and Bingley entered. He pressed Elizabeth's hand warmly between his own. "It does me good to see you so revived."
"We are so glad you have come," said Elizabeth. "But you will want some refreshment after your journey. Mrs. Reynolds has seen to the preparation of your rooms. Do come and warm yourselves."

While Darcy left to give directions to the groom and stable-lads respecting the horses, Elizabeth accompanied Jane upstairs to her chamber, eager for a few minutes of private conversation with her sister.
"Dearest Lizzie, it is so good to see you again," said Jane. "You truly do look well."
"I have been in better spirits," replied Elizabeth quietly, while one of the maids moved about the room, unpacking Jane's belongings.
"And how is Georgiana? Have you had any news from her recently?"
"Yes, I had a letter from her only last week. She is quite happy."
"You must miss her dreadfully though," observed Jane.
"I must confess I do, and I know Darcy feels her loss keenly, though he little shows it. Captain Rivers is an admirable man, and Heaven knows Georgiana deserves a husband who loves her rather than her fortune. Darcy and I could not be more pleased for her, but her presence at Pemberley is most certainly missed."

The servant politely approached Jane. "Will that be all, mam?"
"Yes, thank you," said Jane. The maid looked to Elizabeth for confirmation.
"That will be all, Rachel. Thank you. You may go." Rachel curtsied and withdrew.
"Lizzie," said Jane, taking her sister's hand, "do tell me; are you really quite well? You look remarkably so."
"I believe I am as well as can be expected. Somewhat fatigued of late, but nothing out of the ordinary."
"When did you last consult a doctor?" inquired Jane.
"Several days ago; I have been assured all is as it should be," Elizabeth replied. The sisters exchanged a long, knowing look.
"I do hope so, Lizzie," Jane said softly. "Indeed, I hesitate to ask, but if I did not know any better, I would suspect you to be…" A tap at the door interrupted her words, and Rachel appeared a second time.
"Pardon me, Mrs. Bingley, but Mrs. Reynolds has sent me to ask if your accommodations are sufficient and if you require anything further?"
Jane smiled at the girl. "Thank you, Rachel. Please tell her I am quite comfortable." With another curtsy, Rachel withdrew.
"You must excuse Mrs. Reynolds," said Elizabeth. "Rachel has only just come to us. You know Mrs. Reynolds runs such a strict staff, and speaking of strict, I suppose we should go down and discover where our husbands have got to."
"Lizzie," Jane said tentatively. "About my question—forgive me, but…" For answer, Elizabeth patted Jane's hand, and the sisters exchanged another look of silent understanding before making their way downstairs.

The gentlemen, it transpired, were in the fencing room. Darcy glanced up as Jane and Elizabeth entered; in a corner, stretched beneath the window, lay Darcy's favorite hunting dog, Apollo. Catching sight of Elizabeth, the animal stretched and immediately trotted over to her, at which his master rewarded him with a smile. Apollo had, in part through an inherent sense of loyalty in his nature and in part through his ability to comprehend even the most silent of Darcy's directives, devoted himself to Elizabeth both during and after her confinement. When Elizabeth had felt most hopeless, or during times when Darcy was from home, the dog's kind, brown eyes spoke to her volumes of understanding that he would have voiced had he possessed the gift of speech. Elizabeth bent and stroked his soft, golden fur before turning her attention back to the men.
"Really, Darcy!" exclaimed Bingley. "I have rarely seen such abominable footwork! You are quite out of practice. Although," he added with a glance and a wink in Elizabeth's direction, "I suppose your recreational hours have of late been more charmingly spent."
"I will not have you speaking so in front of my wife, Bingley," replied his friend in a tone of feigned disapprobation, for he was visibly smiling.
"Well, I suppose we ought to sheathe our swords, now there are ladies present," said Bingley. "Oh, not on our account, please," protested Elizabeth. "I do enjoy vigorous sword-play. In fact," she added, looking directly at her husband, "I should like to become proficient in the sport myself."
"Lizzie!" exclaimed Jane, with mingled astonishment and amusement. Bingley chuckled, and Darcy, unable to decide how best to respond, merely frowned.
"Your remark seems… somewhat lacking in propriety," he at last said.
"I meant no offense," returned Elizabeth unabashedly. "I am quite in earnest. I would dearly love a lesson in fencing."
"Capital! Capital!" laughed Bingley. "You know, I think you would make a splendid swordsman, sister."
"Bingley," said Darcy. "I must insist…"
"On my behaving more like a gentleman?" Bingley finished, his eyes alight with amusement. "However do you manage him, I wonder?" inquired Darcy of Jane.
Jane smiled. "You must forgive my husband. He rarely meets with such ready wit as our dear Lizzie possesses. I am certainly no match for him. I beg you would indulge him."
The entrance of the butler interrupted the banter. "I beg your pardon, sir, but this letter has just come for you."
"Ah, thank you, Gregson." As Darcy broke the seal, his brow furrowed. "Is anything the matter?" asked Elizabeth. Quickly Darcy folded and pocketed the letter. "Nothing terribly urgent; only some business I must attend to. Gregson, would you be so kind as to see that the fire in the library is tended to? I shall be there directly."
"Very good, sir," replied the butler as he withdrew.
"If you ladies will excuse me," Darcy said to Jane and Elizabeth. "I shall not be long, I expect. Bingley, perhaps you would join me?"
"I can entertain myself admirably in your absence, Darcy," replied his friend. "Do attend to your business."
"I would appreciate your company," said Darcy. "I require a word."

In the library, Bingley strolled between the shelves while Darcy sat writing at his desk, his eyes flashing with indignation with each stroke of his pen.
"Well, Darcy, let us come to the point; I hardly expect you called me in to consult my opinion of your penmanship. I suppose you wish to reprimand me about my indelicate choice of language in front of Lizzie just now," said Bingley.

Laying his pen aside, Darcy rose to his feet and moved to the window. "On the contrary, I feel I must thank you. It does me good to see my wife looking so lively again. She has altered me in many ways, but I still fear on occasion that my comparative reserve might quench her spirit." Bingley knew that, however frank Darcy's conversation with Elizabeth might be, to speak so openly of his feelings remained a daunting task. Bingley's open, engaging temperament put Darcy at his ease, however, and permitted him to speak more freely in front of his friend than he might have done with any other gentleman, or even his wife.
"Darcy, may I ask what was contained in the letter you received that has upset you? Is there—is there anything I can do?" If Bingley was more in the habit of consulting Darcy's opinion, he well knew that, aside from Colonel Fitzwilliam, Darcy valued Bingley's opinions for their earnest sincerity.

Clenching his fists, Darcy turned back to his desk and picked up the offending letter. "This has just arrived from Lady Catherine; she has enclosed another letter within, addressed to—to Elizabeth."
"To Elizabeth?" Bingley repeated incredulously.

For answer, Darcy thrust the letter into his friend's hand. "Read it for yourself, Bingley, though I warn you, the language is insufferable; my aunt has not only accused Elizabeth of keeping me from the responsibilities I owe to my family, but reminds her, in a most unforgiving manner, of the circumstances that have prevented us paying our respects at Rosings." Silently Bingley perused the letter's contents; his usually calm, unflappable temper flared at the sight of expressions like 'disgrace to the Darcy name' and 'incapable of breeding'.
"Darcy, I—this is utterly disgraceful. I have never been fond of your aunt, but I never believed her capable of such insulting language."

Darcy's jaw tensed, and he turned and strode to a cabinet across the room, pouring himself a measure of brandy with a shaking hand. "Bingley, this cannot—I will not allow…" With a roar of frustration, he slammed his glass down on a table, spilling much of its contents.
"What do you intend to do?" asked Bingley.
"I have written to Lady Catherine and informed her that, henceforth, all communication between her and my family shall cease. My judgment—and my previous experience with the consequences of composing a letter in a fit of anger—compel me to refrain from sending it until the morrow, but I do not expect that my sentiments will have changed. My aunt has insulted my wife in a manner that is unforgiveable."

Bingley nodded his agreement. "But Darcy, what shall you tell…"
"Bingley, do not breathe a word of this to Elizabeth. You know she will only wish to take matters into her own hands."
"Forgive me, Darcy, but should she not have the right to do so? She has proven herself capable of standing her ground against Lady Catherine before."
"This is an entirely different matter. I am not questioning her ability to stand up to my aunt, but I cannot bear to see her suffer any further. She must not know of this, Bingley. Do I make myself clear?"

"Of course, Darcy. You can rely upon my silence."

"Good."

As the bell calling them to supper sounded, Darcy reached out and clasped his friend's hand.

"Your visit has cheered us both, Bingley."

"I am glad of it," Bingley replied. "I know you have suffered this last year." A low fire burned in the grate, and Bingley could just discern the glisten of tears in his friend's dark, usually enigmatic eyes.

"Yes, but I count myself supremely blessed. I have never been so terribly afraid as I was in those hours, when I thought all was lost," Darcy said quietly. "If I could have stood before God in that moment and traded my life for hers, I swear to you truthfully, I would have done so."

Bingley nodded. "You can be sure, Jane and I will do all we can during our stay to keep Lizzie's spirits up."

"Yes, and speaking of which, come. We have neglected the ladies long enough."

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When Elizabeth entered the breakfast room the following morning, Gregson approached with the intelligence that Darcy had departed early to attend to some business with his tenants.

"Did he inform you when he would return?" inquired Elizabeth.

"He said he should not be gone above two hours, mam," replied the butler.

"Very good. Where will I find Mr. and Mrs. Bingley?"

"Mrs. Bingley is in her room, I believe, mam. She had some letters to attend to. Mr. Bingley is out on the grounds."

"Thank you, Gregson."

"Will you be requiring anything further?"

"That will be all, just at present."

As Gregson exited the room, Elizabeth went to the sideboard and poured herself a cup of tea before moving to the window to survey the prospect beyond. She wondered if she would ever tire of such a vista. Apollo, who had been resting in a patch of sunlight, rose and came to her. Elizabeth smiled and stroked his silky ears as she gazed out at the grounds. Chilly though it was, she believed she might just venture outside for a bit of exercise. She felt suddenly stronger than she remembered feeling in quite some time. As if sensing her decision, Apollo tilted his head up to gaze at Elizabeth; his deep, steady brown eyes, so much like his master's, scrutinized her intently, and he lifted a paw and rested it upon her arm for a moment.

"Yes, old boy," said Elizabeth, tapping his nose with her fingertip. "You may accompany me." The dog wagged his tail vigorously and licked Elizabeth's hand.

Outside, Elizabeth bowed her head against the chilly wind and set off with Apollo trotting protectively at her side. A light dusting of snow covered the grounds, and the icicle-laden trees seemed spun with silver. Elizabeth knew not which path she desired to take, but Apollo struck out toward the bridge leading to the lake. The lake was one of the few spots on the estate to which Darcy retreated when he sought solitude. Even in his absence, Elizabeth hesitated to intrude upon its sanctity, but her husband was much in her thoughts, and if he could not be with her at the present moment, she could seek comfort in his favorite sanctuary. Desiring to stop and regain her breath, Elizabeth leaned against the railing of the bridge and gazed down at the still, frozen water beneath her.

"How like Darcy," she reflected. Now cool and indifferent; now warm and engaging. Elizabeth never regretted her decision to wed him, nor, she believed in her heart, did he. Yet since their loss, a coolness had crept into their marriage—something barely detectable, like the hint of autumn in a summer breeze. Elizabeth knew that beneath the grief and pain lay the rational truth that Darcy neither resented nor held her responsible for the loss as some husbands might have done. She knew too, however, that he had so longed for a child and that for a man of few words such as
himself, the weight of his grief lay heavy upon his heart. She hoped soon to be able to lift his spirits, and after confiding in Jane the previous day, she knew it was only a matter of time before Darcy discovered her secret, so she would do well to divulge it sooner rather than later. As Elizabeth rested her cheek upon her hand and gazed out at the lake, Apollo suddenly jumped to his feet and began wagging his tail in greeting at someone approaching. Hearing the sound of her name, Elizabeth turned and saw Bingley making his way across the bridge toward her.  
"There you are, Lizzie! I have been searching the grounds for you these last twenty minutes."
"Has anything happened?" asked Elizabeth.
"Nothing in the world. Only, well…"
"Darcy gave you instructions that I should not be left unattended."
"He said nothing of the sort. He knows you far too well to think you would submit to such a directive, and in any case, you are not unattended," replied Bingley, bending to scratch Apollo behind the ears.
Elizabeth drew her cloak more tightly around herself and looked up into Bingley's face. "Then what brought you in search of me?"
"I came of my own accord. Your sister is still rather occupied in penning a long letter to your Aunt Gardener, I believe; she and Darcy have a talent for such things that still surpasses my understanding."
Elizabeth laughed. "Indeed."
"I must say, Lizzie, you are looking quite well. The fresh air agrees with you, chilly though it is. Darcy will be pleased to find you so lively."
"I know he has been concerned about me. Nothing I say can convince him that I am quite myself, in spirits as well as in body, though the former has, I confess, been difficult to achieve. I only wish…" she let her words trail off and lowered her eyes.
"What is it, Lizzie?" Bingley inquired gently. "It grieves me to see you unhappy. You are quite as dear to me as either of my own sisters—dearer, perhaps, I might venture to say." His lips twitched ever so slightly with the admission.
Elizabeth sighed. As much as she would have wished to confess her concerns about Darcy, she well knew that Darcy confided in Bingley more so than anyone else, and she had no wish to raise a subject that might ask Bingley to betray his friend's confidence. "It is only my emotions getting the better of me, I suppose. I must not allow it to happen."
Bingley smiled down at Elizabeth. "Well, I think I have hit upon a means of cheering you, sister. Come. I have something to show you, but you must promise not to tell Darcy."

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"I am not certain this is wise," said Elizabeth, smiling in spite of her apprehension as Bingley strolled around the fencing room. "Darcy would never approve, you know."
Bingley chuckled. "And that, dearest Lizzie, is precisely why we shall both swear not to tell him. Now, let me just see…" After studying several blades, he selected one and brought it to Elizabeth.
"Test the weight of this one, though I wonder if it might not be wiser to start you off with something a bit smaller in size."
"Such as a butter knife, perhaps?" laughed Elizabeth, gingerly balancing the weapon in her hands.
"Now," said Bingley, clapping his hands together. "In fencing, much depends on one's position. There is typically much movement and maneuvering…" He paused as Elizabeth covered her mouth to smother a laugh.
"Yes?"
"I—nothing. I only wondered if my skill in other… forms of recreation might be at all transferable here."
"Ahem, yes," he continued, eyes twinkling. "If you will insist on not taking me seriously, how shall you ever learn?"
Elizabeth bowed her head in mock deference. "Forgive my rudeness. My language hardly befits what one would expect of the mistress of Pemberley in the presence of a gentleman."
"Quite so," came Darcy's voice from the direction of the doorway. Startled, Elizabeth spun round, and it was this sudden movement that she at first attributed to the wave of dizzying sickness that
and it was this sudden movement that she at first attributed to the wave of dizzying sickness that swept over her. Bingley, being closest, instantly stepped forward, offering her the support of his arm, but as she struggled to clear her vision, she sensed rather than saw Darcy move to her side. Wordlessly he drew an arm around her, supporting her against him as he guided her from the room. He would not, Elizabeth knew, have dared attempt to carry her, but he ignored her protests that she could manage and kept his arm entwined about her waist until he had seen her settled in a chair in the nearest sitting-room. As her vision cleared, Elizabeth saw one of the footmen at the door, having likely heard the commotion; Bingley had disappeared, presumably in search of Jane. "Ah, James. Mrs. Darcy is unwell. Please send for the doctor at once."
"Yes, sir, right away."
"No," exclaimed Elizabeth. Darcy's jaw tightened. "Elizabeth, I must insist upon this. James, now, if you please."
"Fitzwilliam, no," Elizabeth repeated, meeting her husband's eyes with her own defiant stare. "I am quite all right."
"Elizabeth, you look unwell."
"I require no medical attention. James," she said, turning to the footman who still stood awaiting orders, "There is no cause for alarm. You may go about your duties." James hesitated, his gaze swiveling between master and mistress.
"Elizabeth, I…"
"There is no need to alarm the household unnecessarily," Elizabeth insisted.
Darcy scrutinized his wife's face for a long moment; then, releasing the breath he had been holding, he turned back to the footman. "Very well, James. Off you go. Do as your mistress says."
"Yes, sir."
Once James had left, Darcy began pacing the length of the room. "Elizabeth, I must speak. This recklessness must not continue."
Elizabeth arched a brow. "If you mean that rather amusing diversion with Bingley in the fencing room, you can hardly expect me, of all people, to be concerned about being too familiar."
"You know perfectly well that is not my concern, though were I any other man, I would deem it my duty to put a stop to such behavior. Most husbands would consider such a display of conduct unbecoming in a wife, particularly in the presence of her sister's husband, but that is quite beside the point."
"Pray come to the point, then," Elizabeth said coolly.
"You cannot be so careless regarding your health, Elizabeth. I urge you to think of your situation." Elizabeth glared at her husband. "If recent months have been any indication, I do not think I can ever forget my 'situation'—as you so delicately put it."
Darcy lowered his eyes. "Elizabeth," he said, more gently, "you know I speak only out of concern."
"I fully comprehend the nature of your concern," replied Elizabeth. Jane's appearance abruptly put an end to their argument.
"Lizzie," she exclaimed, hurrying into the room. "I heard some of the servants say you have been taken ill. What is the matter?"
"I am quite well, Jane," Elizabeth assured her sister. "I suddenly felt a bit faint just now. It has passed."
"You are quite certain?" inquired Jane. The sisters shared a meaningful look.
"You have no need for concern," said Elizabeth. "I shall be all right, though I do feel rather tired, just at present. I think I shall retire to my room for a little while." When Darcy offered her his arm to help her to her feet, she gently put it from her. "I do not require assistance. However…" she cast another look at Jane, who nodded and followed her from the room.
"Lizzie," Jane whispered, "I think it unfair to leave Darcy in ignorance any longer. I understand your reservations, but he is as visibly agitated as I have ever seen him."
Elizabeth bowed her head in thought, her hands folded. "I shall tell him. Tonight, I think. I dislike concealing anything from him, but I must have some time to compose myself."
Jane nodded. "I shall look in on you in an hour or two."
After Elizabeth had departed for her room, Jane reentered the sitting-room to find Darcy standing
just where they had left him, arms folded, eyes downcast in contemplation. Hearing her approach, he raised his head and looked directly at her.
"You appear worried," Jane observed.
"I cannot pretend otherwise," he answered. "Elizabeth has been greatly improved of late. I was beginning to hope that, well…" Jane looked questioningly up at him; he sighed. "It is of no consequence."
Hesitantly Jane reached out and laid a hand on his arm. "I do think Lizzie will be all right. She has a strong constitution and a resilient spirit."
"You will forgive me for speaking so boldly, for though she is my wife, I have no wish to betray any sisterly confidence between you, but I feel as though she is withholding something from me. As I say, I have no wish to intrude upon your confidence, but…"
Jane considered her answer carefully. "If I truly believed Lizzie to be in any real danger, and if keeping her confidence put her in graver danger, I should not hesitate in revealing all to you. Please believe that."
Darcy smiled. "If I could not believe you, earnest as you are, I would have little faith left in humanity."

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Late that evening, Elizabeth stood before her dressing-table, surveying her reflection in the glass. Despite her protestations to the contrary, she had felt rather tired and had spent much of the morning and afternoon resting. Following supper and an evening of quiet conversation with her sister while Bingley and Darcy engaged in a game of chess, she had felt much restored, and as she studied herself, she noted that her color appeared, at least in the candle-light, to have returned. Now she stood, tapping one fingertip against her lips in thought before pulling her favorite, light blue dressing-gown—one she knew Darcy favored—more tightly around herself. She gave her hair one final brush, took up her candle, and moved quietly to the door and stepped out into the corridor. As she approached her husband's room, she detected a sliver of light beneath the door and, taking a deep breath, she tapped softly.
"Enter," came Darcy's voice from within. Elizabeth opened the door and stepped inside; Darcy sat ensconced in an armchair, still fully clothed, a letter in his hand. Apollo lay sprawled at his master's feet, legs and tail twitching as he dreamed.
"Elizabeth." Darcy lowered the letter and looked up at her, brows raised in surprise, but not displeasure. "I… did not expect you this evening."
"I was unable to sleep," said Elizabeth.
A slow, tentative smile played across her husband's face. "I see." Elizabeth crossed the room and set her candle down on the table beside Darcy's chair before seating herself on the bed. Apollo stirred and crossed to her, resting his head in her lap.
"I wanted to…"
"No," Darcy interrupted, raising a hand to silence her. "I fear I am the one who owes you an apology. I spoke harshly to you this morning; it was wrong of me. It is just that…” he swallowed. "I am truly concerned for you, Elizabeth."
"I spoke unfairly to you as well," murmured Elizabeth. "I accused you of being less concerned for my life than with…” She hesitated, her eyes downcast—"than with the material importance of producing an heir."
"You did me an injustice," Darcy said quietly.
"I did. Can you forgive me?" Darcy raked a hand through his hair and began to pace the room. Apollo lifted his head from Elizabeth's lap and fixed his eyes upon his master.
"I must know," said Darcy at last, "what might have caused you to have such an idea. The thought that I might have said or done anything to convey such a sentiment to you gives me great pain."
Elizabeth considered her words carefully. "It was not you, precisely. It was Lady Catherine. I have been thinking over her displeasure about… recent events. I know it upsets you to be on ill terms with her."
"I do not believe any of my family has had the privilege of being on any other such terms with
"I do not believe any of my family has had the privilege of being on any other such terms with Lady Catherine," said Darcy, offering a grim smile.

"Yes, well, I only meant…" Elizabeth hesitated. "I could not help wondering—yesterday—you seemed so displeased. I began to wonder whether Lady Catherine's anger had not reminded you just how little I have brought into this marriage."

At her words, Darcy scowled. "You have brought yourself, Elizabeth. When have I ever required anything more of you?"

"It was wrong of me," murmured Elizabeth.

Turning on his heel, Darcy resumed his pacing, failing to notice in his agitation the letter he still held; it fell from his hand, and he bent quickly to retrieve it, though not before Elizabeth had glimpsed the first few words of its contents.

"Fitzwilliam," she said sharply.

Sighing, Darcy closed his eyes and rubbed his forehead, thinking; finally he raised his head.

"Forgive me, Elizabeth. I did not wish this to come to your attention."

"A letter addressed to me, and you did not wish it to come to my attention?" exclaimed Elizabeth, leaping to her feet in her indignation.

"Elizabeth, please, allow me to speak. The letter that came for me yesterday—it was from Lady Catherine. In it she enclosed a second letter addressed to you, which she instructed me to ensure you read. Why she thought I would have done so is, I confess, beyond my power to comprehend, but I suppose she believed if it had come directly into your hands, you might have ignored it." "I might well have," said Elizabeth. "But what could she possibly have had to say to me that she deemed it urgent enough to condescend to write to me?" Darcy hesitated. "Very well, then," said Elizabeth, holding out her hand for the letter.

"Elizabeth, I do not think—" Darcy began before he released a sigh of resignation. "You have every right to read it, of course, but allow me to caution you—"

"As it is from Lady Catherine, I hardly expect a sonnet extolling my many virtues as mistress of Pemberley." As she read, her blood burned with the indignity of it; so great was her anger that she processed only fragments of the contents: 'My nephew's degrading attachment… destroyed his family's reputation irreparably… can sink no lower… inability to breed… threat to the future of Pemberley and the Darcy name.'

Raising her head, Elizabeth looked at her husband, who stood watching her apprehensively. "I still cannot believe you have the misfortune to be connected by blood to such an odious creature as that woman!" she cried, tearing the letter to shreds and hurling them onto the fire.

"Were I not certain that my mother would rise from her grave to haunt me, I would sever all ties with Lady Catherine," said Darcy. "But do you comprehend now why I did not wish you to see the letter? I confess, my own sense of duty and responsibility for you kept me from sharing it with you; you have suffered so terribly. I could not endure the thought of causing you greater pain, or of reopening a wound that has only just begun to heal. Elizabeth, you know my heart better than anyone; you know I could never resent or blame you for… what happened. If I never spoke of it to you openly, it was only because I did not wish my own grief to cause you to feel the loss more keenly." As he spoke, the anguish in his voice made Elizabeth's heart quiver.

"It was a terrible loss, for both of us," she whispered.

"It was, but believe me when I tell you, Elizabeth, that if I had lost you as well, I—I could never have borne it." His eyes shone with emotion in the candle-light, and he raised a hand to shield his face.

Her own eyes filling with tears, Elizabeth rose and went to him, wrapping her arms tightly around him. "I never truly doubted it," she whispered. "But, let us speak plainly; I know my duty."

"Duty be damned," growled Darcy, pulling her closer. "Ensuring your happiness is my duty."

Elizabeth drew her arms up around his neck. "And you do it admirably, Mr. Darcy, as you do all things."

Sighing, Darcy rested his cheek against the top of Elizabeth's head, pressing her tightly to his heart. "You are quite certain you are feeling well?" he inquired.

"Just at the moment, I am perfectly contented," answered Elizabeth.

"Bingley tells me you and Apollo were out on the grounds this morning," said Darcy, pulling
back to examine his wife's face. "I trust you did not overexert yourself?" Elizabeth's eyes sparkled with amusement. "Forgive me," he added. "I am well aware you are no delicate flower, but even so, I cannot help being concerned."

"The exercise did me no harm, I assure you."

"And you," said Darcy, glancing down at the dog who had now wedged his nose between the pair. "Did you do as I bid you and look after your mistress?" Apollo nuzzled his hand in answer. "Good boy," said Darcy, rewarding the animal with a scratch behind the ears. "Now, off with you. Such kisses as are required here can, I think, be amply supplied by me." As if he understood, Apollo wagged his tail and trotted to the door, slipping out as Darcy cracked it open for him.

Striding back to Elizabeth, Darcy again drew her into his embrace, laying his lips upon hers in a kiss that shot heat to the very tips of her toes. She responded by parting her lips for him and pressing herself between his legs, moving against him in a dizzying rhythm that caused him to tighten his hold on her to keep himself upright. The motion of her body against his propelled him backward so that he collapsed into his chair, pulling her down onto his lap as he did. Gently Elizabeth slid from his lap, repositioning herself so that she knelt between his legs, and her hands immediately discovered evidence of the urgency of his desire. His body tensed beneath her as she bent her head to her task, hands and mouth moving in time to his rapid breathing.

"Elizabeth," he groaned, his fingers entangled in her hair. Elizabeth knew he wished to find his release while joined with her, but she knew not how much longer he could contain himself. Likewise sensing his own impending release, Darcy roughly took hold of her shoulders, holding tightly to her as he slid down onto the floor beside her.

"Elizabeth," he said again, trailing his lips over the hollow of her throat. His voice trembled with longing. She questioned for the briefest moment whether, given the symptoms she had exhibited earlier that day, what she was about to do was wise; but her doubt fled as she felt Darcy's hands pulling back the fabric of her dressing-gown to lay his mouth on her breast. As he laid her on her back, her loosened dressing-gown fell away to reveal a wispy, lace nightdress beneath.

"Mistress of Pemberley or not, you are far too formally attired at present, madam," said Darcy with a teasing glint in his eye. After relieving her of the garment, he turned his attention to his own clothing, carelessly tossing each article over his shoulder. Lowering himself beside her, he nudged her legs apart, his breathing quickening. Every kiss he pressed to Elizabeth's skin felt to her like a whispered renewal of his love for her. As he wound his fingers through her hair, she slid her hands down his thighs; when she began to caress him intimately again, he reached down and tugged gently upon her hands, raising them to his shoulders, and she arched her back and clasped her arms around him as their bodies joined.

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The following morning, Elizabeth awoke slowly, not on the hearth-rug beside the fireplace where she dimly recalled drifting off to sleep, but in bed, nestled in the warm cocoon of Darcy's embrace. She felt his deep, peaceful breathing beside her, and with no desire to stir from her comfortable position, she drew the quilt more tightly around her shoulders and snuggled against his chest, watching flecks of sunlight filter in through a chink in the curtain. After their conversation the previous evening, she and Darcy still had much to discuss, and she was just pondering where she might begin when she felt movement beside her and turned to find her husband's eyes upon her. He greeted her with a sleepy smile and drew her closer, kissing the top of her head before disentangling himself and stretching luxuriantly.

"I trust you slept well?" asked Elizabeth.

"Quite well," replied her husband. "I believe I should thank you."

Elizabeth smiled. "I am feeling rather well-rested myself."

"Good."

"Imagine my surprise at finding myself in a far more comfortable bed than the one upon which I seem to have fallen asleep," she said, trailing her fingertip along the line of Darcy's jaw.

"Someone must have seen fit to ensure your comfort," he replied.

"It was clearly a very attentive gentleman. I must remember to thank him."
"I am certain we can arrange adequate payment," said Darcy, his eyes twinkling. With a contented sigh, Elizabeth rested her head against his shoulder. "I must pay a call on several of the tenants this morning," he said. "If you are feeling well enough, I would be glad of your company."

"Of course. I have been meaning to go myself. Rachel tells me her mother is still unwell; I must pay her a visit and see whether there is anything at all we can do for her."

"I hope you have given Rachel leave to remain at home if her mother requires her. She need not worry about her position here." Elizabeth nodded. "Good. Well, we shall set off directly after breakfast, if that is suitable."

"Of course." As Darcy threw back the bedclothes and made to rise, Elizabeth rested a hand on his arm.

"Fitzwilliam?" he paused. "Before we join Jane and Bingley at breakfast, there is something I must tell you."

"What is the matter?" he asked, his eyes filled with concern.

The corners of Elizabeth's mouth twitched. "How shall I put it?" She tapped her fingertips together, thinking. "Ah, yes. Do you remember the other day, in the fencing room, Bingley remarking that you had been, well, applying your swordsmanship in other areas?"

Darcy frowned. "I am not likely to forget it. Bingley must really learn to hold his tongue. Had there been other ladies present…"

Elizabeth waved a hand to silence him. "Never mind that now. It is not the impropriety of the remark that concerns me; rather that he was, shall we say… not altogether wrong."

Darcy's brows drew together in slight irritation. "Elizabeth, if there is a point, pray come to it, or I shall begin to lose my patience." For answer, Elizabeth took his hand in hers and rested it on the almost indiscernible swell beneath her nightdress. For a long moment, Darcy stared down at his hand where it rested, mouth slightly open as he considered; then slowly, he raised his eyes to meet his wife's. "Elizabeth, you cannot mean—you are not—are you?"

"I am," she said softly.

"You are quite certain?" asked Darcy.

"As certain as I can be."

"We must seek medical advice. You cannot be sure until…"

"Hush, Fitzwilliam," Elizabeth murmured, squeezing his hand, which still rested upon her waist. "I have done so. Several days ago. Forgive me for keeping it from you, but I wished to be certain. I did not—I did not wish to disappoint you." Darcy remained silent. "I hoped you would be pleased," said Elizabeth, a slight tremor in her voice. Darcy continued gazing down in rapture at the place where his hand rested. Finally he withdrew his hand, his eyes moistening, and encircled her in his arms, burying his face in her hair to conceal his emotion. "You are pleased, then?" asked Elizabeth. "It is rather unexpected, I know."

"Of course I am pleased. How could you think otherwise?" Disentangling himself, he looked down at his wife. "I must confess I had begun to harbor my suspicions of late, but I thought perhaps it was my own wishful thinking. In any case, I knew not what your feelings might be."

Elizabeth smiled up at him. "I was unsure at first, but I feel supremely blessed."

"But Elizabeth…" Darcy faltered, the fear in his eyes speaking the question he hesitated to voice. "We cannot know," Elizabeth said softly. "We can only hope."

Tenderly Darcy raised her hand to his lips. "And hope we shall."

---Six Months Later---

Elizabeth stood at the window in her chamber, enjoying the lush greenery and clear sky before her; summer had arrived on the estate, and Pemberley's gardens were in full bloom. Elizabeth's window offered her a full view of the courtyard below where she sometimes enjoyed taking her morning exercise or sitting with a book. She had just returned from a walk while Darcy attended to some business with his steward. A light tap at the door roused her.

"Yes?"

Rachel entered the room, a letter in her hand. "This letter arrived for you earlier, mam, while you were out." Elizabeth recognized her mother's penmanship and was secretly glad she had not been
disturbed during her walk.
"Thank you, Rachel," she said, taking the letter and setting it on her dressing-table. "Do you know if my husband has concluded his business?"
"I believe the master is in the nursery, mam," replied Rachel.
"Has Miss Waters left for her day out, then?"
"Yes, mam."
"Dear me," said Elizabeth, though she was smiling. "I must really make certain all is well then."
"I am sure the children are being well-tended to," said Rachel.
Elizabeth laughed. "It is not the children I worry about."

In the nursery, Elizabeth paused at the door and surveyed the scene before her. Darcy stood at the window, his back to her, the tops of two tiny heads just visible above his shoulders.
"How are you getting on?" inquired Elizabeth, stepping up to his side. Darcy turned, a broad smile on his face, cradling an infant in each arm.
"We are doing tolerably well," he replied. Catching sight of his mother, little William extended his plump, dimpled fingers toward her; tenderly Elizabeth lifted him, while Anne nestled closer into her father's chest.
"What sort of nonsense have you been filling the children's heads with this morning?"
"I was merely lecturing them on the importance of sound diplomacy in family matters," said Darcy.
"I take that to mean you have dealt with Lady Catherine's most recent correspondence?"
"I have." Lady Catherine's letter of congratulations upon the birth of the twins had arrived several weeks late, and had been addressed to Darcy; Elizabeth's name had never been mentioned. Both suspected that her begrudging acknowledgement of the birth had been only an attempt to secure herself an invitation to visit, if only to have an excuse to voice her opinion on all manner of points relating to her superior knowledge of handling infants.
"And how, pray tell, did you employ the Darcy diplomacy?"
"I simply made it clear to her in no uncertain terms that if she wishes ever again in future to be received at Pemberley, she will offer you an appropriately humble apology."
Elizabeth arched a brow. "You surely did not include the words 'humble' and 'Lady Catherine' within the same sentence."
"I ask too much, perhaps," agreed Darcy. "I would sooner expect to see Wickham receive a knighthood. I confess, though, that were it not for my respect for my mother's memory, I would disassociate myself entirely with Lady Catherine."
Elizabeth laid a hand on his arm. "I should not wish that," she said gently. "Odious as she is, she is one of your nearest relations. I cannot be the cause of any further rifts between you."
"She insulted you, Elizabeth," said Darcy, his eyes flashing. "She may disapprove of you; I cannot change her mind or her character, but I have given you my name and my love and regard, and that ought to be sufficient for her. She may be my mother's sister, but she will not insult my family. Pemberley is my home, and if she wishes to be received here, she will pay you the respect due you as the woman I have chosen to be my wife and," he added, pressing his daughter to his heart, "the mother of my children."
"I must admit though," said Elizabeth, cuddling William close, "that I did rather exceed expectations concerning my wifely duty."
Still cradling Anne in one arm, with the other Darcy drew Elizabeth and their son to his chest.
"Duty be damned," he said, swallowing the laughter that bubbled on her tongue with his kiss.

The End

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