Bittersweet

by kaos_sparrow

Summary

Mary Bennett has spent all of his life as someone he isn't.

Notes

Written for queer_fest 2011.
Prompt: any Bennet daughter, one of the Bennet daughters is transgender; he thinks it is horribly unfair that Mr Collins gets to inherit because he has the right body.

See the end of the work for more notes

It's surprisingly easy, this subterfuge. He boasts eternally, and if something is a little..."off", it is merely put down to the general awkwardness they know as Mary. He tries, he really does. He practises and practises and practises, until he is far and away the most technically skilled in the family, but everything always seems to come out slightly wrong. Mary can never put energy or feeling into his songs while wishing to be somewhere else, and he tries to hide that it feels like a betrayal every time he sits down at the piano to play one of those dainty little-girl tunes.

The whole ordeal involving Mr. Collins was really quite unfortunate, he reflects in a rare moment of solitude. He had potential, if not as a husband, than at least as quite a serviceable shield. Mr. Collins was not exactly the most intelligent person he has ever met. Truly, with him in the room, Mary would seem the paragon of normalcy, and that is something he understands the virtues of.

It does not help matters to understand that Mr. Collins stood unknowingly yet directly between
Mary and his proper inheritance.

He may be a bit…verbose, at times, but at least he admits it. And he is in full possession of his mental faculties, thank you oh so very much. One cannot spend any significant quantity of time in the presence of either Lydia or Greek and Roman myths without gathering some knowledge of certain ‘aberrations’. The officers with whom Mary’s younger sisters associate are not exactly the most respectable. Gossip gets around, and really, it’s a bit of a relief. Mary had formerly been frequently visited by moments of unease, of worry over not fitting the mold for a young girl. She (still feminine then, even in her (his) own head) found the whole thing rather ridiculous. After all, she was much more well-read than others of her age. Mary classified dissatisfaction with her place in the world as the logical offspring of her superior knowledge and research.

She absorbs all of Lydia’s scandalous tales of molly houses and nearly gives her(him)self away when George Sand makes wearing men’s clothes look so easy. The Chevalier d’Eon hovers in the back of Mary’s mind.

An enterprising young person in possession of an extensive library can find evidence for very nearly anything, if they look hard enough.

He lives by hiding. Behind a book, behind a name, behind a gown, and most especially behind his joke of a family. He conjures Mary from thin air and fleshes her out howsoever he can. She is a shield behind which he can cower when everything becomes too much; Mary is awkward (can they tell?) and Mary is bookish (Iphis without an Ianthe) and Mary is pretentious (what could give me away?), and Mary is impervious.

Lydia frightened him; he is self-aware enough to admit it, and to know why. Lydia drew attention. Lydia proved what he always believed. One false step could see him hanged, his family investigated, the whole of London abuzz with the tale of the Bennett’s peculiar daughter. And Lydia, in her tiny little joys and disappointments, is proof. Nothing is redeemable. She may not see the glances at the Bennett shame from her coach with her new ring and her new husband, but Mary does. And he learns. He learns never to let down his guard, not even for a second. What is can be taken away, not only for himself but for the entire family.

Jane offered to take him with her once. Elizabeth repeats the offer, although obviously discomforted, or as much so as one can be on the eve of their honeymoon. It will be glorious, he is sure, and the divide between the siblings grows past repair in that moment. Elizabeth Bennet—soon to be Mrs. Darcy—twists her skirts awkwardly in her gloved hands as she waits for her sister’s answer. It is slow in coming, but not out of vacancy or any sort of moralistic musing. He considers it seriously; such an offer is a way out of this Pandora’s Box he finds himself increasingly trapped inside. He could spend the rest of his life as companion to a tired old woman. It is the sort of life he thought he wanted. Food, time to himself, steady pay, and everything else he could possibly wish for. No-one would look twice at the old maid’s companion girl. He could live in peace.

Mary finds, to his rather extant surprise, that such a life is no longer what he wants. It is sedate, and dull, and full of so much sameness that he thinks he may choke at the idea. Mary learns one new thing about himself the day he turned down Elizabeth Darcy’s offer of ease.
He wishes to make a difference, wherever he goes. He does not wish to be in the spotlight. He will not be a carnival trick, sold for a ha’penny. This person called Mary, em ay arr why?, is not a ringleader. That is a spot for others, for the Lizzies of the world, ready and willing to face it head on. Nor is he the clown, subsisting on the emotions of others. He must be self-sufficient. He thinks he may be most like a trapeze artist, waiting high on a platform all his life for his ugly duckling self to be taken away. He will wait until he decides not to, until he realizes what he’s known all along: this is never going to work. He only needs to grab the bar and jump.

He does not think he is afraid.

He gives himself a name; no-one else is going to, and he has always been the sort to take initiative when necessary. He reads and reads and reads, looks up names and their meanings, and he chooses. (Perhaps he should be disappointed that his family swallowed his excuse for needing those volumes so readily, but, well. He holds no illusions about the impression he gives.)

Mary is gone; she never was.

He chooses to be Damien.

End Notes

The various real-world events and people mentioned within were mostly gotten from this, or else from my previous knowledge. Here is a summary of the myth of Iphis and Ianthe. I am not trans, so please tell me if I did anything wrong.

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