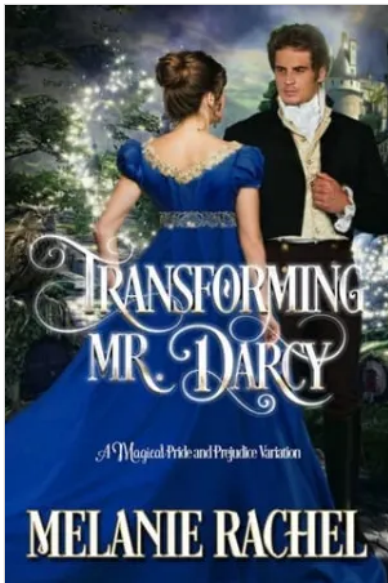




Transforming Mr. Darcy (Darcy and Elizabeth Happily Ever Afters #4)

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Category: Romance

Description: What if Elizabeth Bennet had a fairy godmother?

Elizabeth Bennet is envious of her sister Jane. Not for her beauty or her disposition, but because her fairy godmother is everything that Elizabeths is not.

When Mr. Darcy insults Elizabeth's looks, Mildread Driftwort is incensed to hear her handiwork defamed. Now, instead of nursing the grievance herself, Elizabeth is forced to defend this conceited man who has no idea what he's done.

Fitzwilliam Darcy is scandalized to witness Miss Elizabeth Bennet speaking to herself at a country assembly. After refusing to dance with her, he begins to experience a variety of inexplicable illnesses. He can't sleep, he can't speak, he can't even walk. Then something worse befalls him—he discovers he is falling in love with her.

Despite Elizabeth's warning, Mr. Darcy commits blunder after blunder. Yet as she works to mitigate Mildread's wrath, Elizabeth realizes that Mr. Darcy is not the unmannerly oaf her fairy godmother believes him to be—and though she is certain nothing can come of it, she is falling in love with him.

As magic swirls and the couple faces impending disaster, Elizabeth finds that Mr. Darcy may not be the only one who is transformed.

This is a fluffy, madcap, fairy-tale Pride and Prejudice variation novella of approximately 30,000 words.

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Elizabeth Bennet gazed at her sister Jane with a wistful sort of envy. She was not envious because Jane was kind and intelligent as well as uncommonly beautiful. No, Elizabeth had benefitted from her sister's generous nature too often to bemoan her own shortcomings in comparison to Jane's.

It was her sister's fairy godmother that Elizabeth coveted. If it were a sin to do so, she could only pray that she would be forgiven, for it could not be helped. She had tried.

Priscilla Roseheart hovered near Jane as Sir William conducted introductions between the Bennet ladies and the Netherfield party.

Elizabeth's eyes strayed to Priscilla more than once.

Jane's fairy godmother was a vision, ethereal in a luminous white gown trimmed in shimmery pink ribbons, golden tresses flowing over her shoulders, translucent wings barely seeming to move as they held her aloft.

She even held a delicate silver wand in her hand.

Netherfield's newest tenant, Mr. Bingley, was a perfect match for her perfect sister—Elizabeth could see it in Priscilla's beatific smile. Jane was not paying any attention at all to her fairy godmother. There was no need. Priscilla neither wished for nor required any management on Jane's part.

Mr. Bingley requested Jane's hand for the second set of the evening. The rest of the Netherfield party made their various excuses and dispersed about the assembly hall like so much morning mist.

Her mother immediately began to complain about their behaviour to Mary and Kitty. Mr. Darcy, Mr. Bingley's bachelor friend, took the brunt of Mamma's ire. An unmarried man of property must of course dance with all her daughters. It was unforgivably rude not to.

Lydia skipped away, saying glibly that she was perfectly content to dance with any of the men or boys from Meryton. Kitty trailed after her, and Mary wandered off to find a chair near a lit candle but away from notice, where she might read.

Elizabeth watched Mr. Darcy attempt to melt into the crowd.

He was tall enough that he could never truly disappear.

He was rather handsome, but alas, he seemed to believe himself above them all.

Given the cut and material of his clothing, she supposed he was correct.

Well, if he judged them all solely by wealth and status, it was nothing to her.

He had just turned back in her direction when she felt a sharp prod between her shoulder blades and was forced to step awkwardly forward to maintain her balance. Across the room, Miss Bingley tittered.

"Well!" Mildred Driftwort sputtered. She punctuated each following question with a stab of her sturdy pewter wand. "Did you ever see such proud creatures? And what have they to be so very vain about? There is not a single fairy among them, is there?"

Did men even have fairy godmothers? Papa had not, though he could see theirs. Was Mildred simply appalled by the way Mrs. Hurst and Miss Bingley were observing everyone in the room like creatures at the Royal Menagerie? If that were the case, Elizabeth could hardly blame her for it. Still . . .

“Mildread,” Elizabeth whispered as she tipped her head down.

“You know they cannot see you. I cannot answer your questions, or I shall be carted off to Bedlam.” Or Mamma would.

That was all she needed, Mamma angrily defending Elizabeth’s strange behaviours with a cursory wave and an explanation of the Bennet magic.

So few families still had fairy godmothers that her tales were often passed off by their neighbours as harmless lies meant to puff herself up.

Mr. Bingley and his party, however, were strangers.

There was no telling how they might respond.

Sadly, Mildread was ignoring her. Instead of quieting, she had created a small windstorm with her spotted wings.

They lifted her in the air, beating hard and fast in some fantastical combination of hummingbird and rooster.

She landed directly before Elizabeth, who raised a hand to her hair to keep it in place.

“I believe I shall do something,” Mildread announced.

Elizabeth opened her fan with a snap of her wrist and held it up to hide her mouth.

“Do not, I beg of you. Their poor behaviour will have its own consequences.” She faltered, attempting to dredge up additional platitudes, but came up dry.

Why? She could devise dozens when the need was not so urgent!

To her surprise, Mildread's annoyance subsided. "Very well, if you insist," the fairy said, eyeing her intently.

Elizabeth's relief was sweet. "I do," she replied, just before she was asked to dance.

She attempted not to fret about Mildread all through the first set, and by the second, she had mostly regained her equanimity.

When, due to a lack of men in attendance, she sat during the fourth, she turned her head to see Mr. Bingley approaching Mr. Darcy.

The latter had already danced with the women in his party and had been slowly circling the room between dances ever since in an obvious attempt to avoid additional partners.

She heard Mr. Bingley take Mr. Darcy to task for his unsocial behaviour and smiled as she turned away. She had no desire to hear the other man's response.

Elizabeth's ears pricked when she heard Jane's name, but she was determined not to eavesdrop—Mildread disliked the habit and had made certain Elizabeth never heard anything to her advantage. Unfortunately, this left her unprepared for what came next.

Mildread's yowl of displeasure nearly deafened her.

It was so loud, so shrill, that Elizabeth was certain everyone must have heard it.

But though Priscilla blinked and then sighed with a serene, sweet sort of disappointment and Jane's expression tightened briefly, the other Bennets were either too far away or too much engaged with their company to notice.

Elizabeth had already lifted a hand halfway to her ear before recalling where she was and allowing it to drop.

“Abominable man!” Mildread cried. She turned to Elizabeth, hands on her hips, evaluating her from head to toe.

“Your dress is exquisite and your hair a dream. I have entirely outdone myself. Your beauty may not be the same as your sister’s, but you are far more than tolerable even on your worst day!

” Her eyes flashed and narrowed as the words were nearly thrown from her mouth in Mr. Darcy’s direction.

“Goosecap, saucebox, ungentlemanly oaf! What is he about, telling his Banbury tales?”

Elizabeth sighed. She never need eavesdrop when Mildread was around. She began to speak, only to be cut off.

“He would swallow his spleen if he knew what was good for him.”

Mildread always had been rather hot-tempered, but Elizabeth had never heard the fairy curse—at least, she had not heard Mildread use quite so many curses all strung together.

Yet as unnerving as the fairy’s language had been, Elizabeth knew what followed would be much worse.

For at the end of it all, Mildread raised one steel-coloured brow and fell silent.

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Once again, Bingley had dragged him into society when he had no desire to leave the house, but this was by far the worst event Darcy could lay to Bingley's charge.

To be met upon arrival by the master of ceremonies, a simple-minded bore, was bad enough.

Unsurprisingly, the man had secured Bingley at once for a dance with his eldest daughter, a near-spinster.

However, he had then introduced them all to a short, shrill fishwife masquerading as a gentlewoman, and her five hopeful daughters.

Well, the eldest was very pretty in a country fashion sort of way; Bingley would not suffer for dancing with her .

But to have all five daughters out when the first were not yet married?

By the cut and quality of their gowns, the family could ill afford the expense, and yet there they all were. It stank of desperation.

The second girl had not even been attentive during the introductions. Her eyes kept darting to the side and up, as though she was trying not to stare at her eldest sister. Envious, perhaps? He had seen it more than once.

His eyes found their way back to the second sister where she stood, still near where they had been introduced.

She was pretty, he supposed, but he noted more than one failure of perfect symmetry in her form.

She was shorter than her eldest sister, and a woman so slender should not have such large .

. . well. He forced himself to look up at her face just as her bosom pitched forward and she took a step to keep her feet.

It was as though she had been shoved from behind, but there was no one there.

His brow wrinkled. Was she making some sort of attempt to display her .

. . no. She had not noticed him watching.

Might she be ill? He would not put it past a woman like her mother to insist her ill daughter attend an assembly in the hopes of attracting a wealthy man, even if it meant exposing them all to disease. His indignation rose a notch higher.

Darcy circled the room as the young woman was led off to dance.

He noted that she was preoccupied at first, but still her steps were light and sure.

A good dancer, then—he could give her that much.

She did not have a partner for the fourth, and he began his circle to avoid being pressed into asking her.

Even as he walked, Darcy watched the girl—Miss Elizabeth had been her name— as she tipped her head down.

Was she inspecting her slippers or the floor?

He could not help but watch, intrigued in the same sort of horrified fascination Londoners possessed when rolling past an accident in the street.

The woman snapped open her fan with an admittedly graceful flip of her wrist and held it up before her face.

She was hiding something. He paused, leaning forward to peer at her. Was she speaking?

His heart accelerated in his chest, and he drew suddenly away. She was speaking, behind that fan, and yet there was no one there .

Darcy glanced about. Did no one else notice her behaviour? Was she an eccentric to whom the locals had grown accustomed? What a fine society this was. He must thank Bingley for dragging him into it.

As though the very thought of his friend had summoned him, Bingley appeared at Darcy's side.

"Bingley . . ." Darcy began but hesitated. He could not broach such a topic in public. He would speak to Bingley later.

"Darcy," Bingley replied brightly, nodding amiably at a gentleman wandering past. When they were alone again, he leaned over, a smile still on his lips. "I must have you dance. I hate to see you standing about by yourself in this stupid manner. You had much better dance."

Dance? Was Bingley mad? Was there something in the punch here in this hovel that lured good men to their doom? "I certainly shall not. I have done my duty to your

sisters, and you know it would be a punishment to me to stand up with anyone else in the room.”

“There is one of Miss Bennet’s sisters standing just there,” Bingley said quietly, “who is very pretty, and I dare say very agreeable.” He paused. “She has something of a sparkle about her, do not you think? Do let me ask my partner to introduce you.”

Darcy could not have been more appalled, but he recalled where they were and composed himself enough to say, “She is tolerable, but not handsome enough to tempt me .” Good God, Bingley, she speaks to the air!

His eyes again made their way to Miss Elizabeth Bennet and widened as she winced and then held a hand up to her hair as though to protect it from the wind.

Still, she stood alone. He had no doubt as to why that was.

The real surprise was that she had been asked to dance at all.

A deep pink flush began to suffuse her face. It travelled down her neck to the line of her gown, and, he suspected suddenly, beneath it. Damn . Bingley was correct. She did sparkle. She was almost . . . glowing, in an unsettling sort of way.

Darcy gulped, unnerved. What was the matter with her?

His face heated, as though he was being watched, but everyone seemed to be going about their business. He took out his handkerchief and turned away to wipe his brow.

What was the matter with him ?

Bingley shook his head. “I will never understand your desire to disapprove of every pleasant girl, Darcy, even the uncommonly pretty ones.”

“Bingley . . .” he began warningly.

“Not now,” Bingley said as the strains of “The Nymph” began to play. “But we shall have to talk, Darcy. I mean to make myself well-liked in this neighbourhood, and you are going to help me.”

As Bingley took the hand of Miss Bennet and led her to the dance, Darcy began to devise excuses as to why he must leave Netherfield.

But he would have to convince Bingley to leave as well, for he could not bear to see his friend caught in the Bennets’ trap.

As he turned this over and over, searching for the best way to go about it, he could not help but glance at her , the source of his disquiet.

Unless he was wrong—and he was never wrong—Miss Elizabeth Bennet was watching him with something akin to pity in her dark eyes.

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Elizabeth's splendid gown was hanging in her wardrobe.

Her hair had been taken down and wound into a plait.

She would have been abed an hour past, but for the incensed fairy godmother pacing the length of her chamber.

Mildred's deep violet and Pomona green gown billowed behind her as though it, too, was participating in the fairy's almost deranged agitation.

"I can assure you," Mildred huffed at last, puncturing the air with her heavy wand, "you do not lose much by not suiting his fancy. Disagreeable man! Not handsome enough to dance with!"

This was, nearly verbatim, the tirade Elizabeth's mother had released when the Bennet women arrived home.

At least Mamma had not resorted to cant.

Elizabeth had flushed red to the roots of her hair at Mildred's invective at the assembly, and she was sure it had been noticed by the disagreeable man himself.

Papa had whispered in her ear, "Was Mildred as affronted as your mother?"

Elizabeth had sighed. "More so."

He had chuckled. "Oh dear. I shall have to make myself more available for social

calls while he is in the neighbourhood. This is sure to be excellent sport.”

“Papa,” she had protested in a whisper of her own, “the man is allowed not to find me to his taste. If he is blind as well as conceited, what is it to us? If Mildread works her magic on him, there will be a great deal of talk.”

“Come now, Lizzy,” he had replied with an abundance of good humour. Rather too much for her liking. “Mildread may humble him a bit, but she will not hurt him.” He patted her shoulder. “All will be well.”

Elizabeth watched warily as Mildread strode across the room to the wall, turned, and strode across the room to the other wall. The fairy flapped her wings angrily, knocking several books from a table and onto the floor.

Papa had no idea.

She might have been more irate herself had she not Mildread to take offense for her. Ought she not be allowed the pleasure of nursing the grudge herself? The insult had been to her , after all, even if she had not heard it directly.

Elizabeth smiled, imagining the fun she should have had sharpening her wit on Mr. Darcy.

Instead, she would have to defend him. She felt rather determined to do it, too.

Despite her anger and yes, disappointment at his remarks, she had been on the receiving end of Mildread’s irritation herself in the past. As a result, Elizabeth pitied the man rather than despising him.

He deserved a set-down, but he truly had no idea the power or capricious nature of the enemy he had made.

His remarks had been unkind. Still, it would cause all sorts of difficulties were his hair to suddenly grow six feet in length, or he were to shrink to half his size, or he developed large, pointed ears.

Oh, how she had hated those ears.

Elizabeth shuddered. She had learned her lessons quickly.

But then, she could see Mildread and knew what was happening.

Mr. Darcy was not a Bennet, so he could not.

And he did not strike her as the sort of man who indulged his fancy with tales of magical beings.

Almost everything about him was sombre, from his dark clothing to his sceptical gaze. This was not a man prone to whimsy.

This all presumed, of course, that Mr. Darcy would remain at Netherfield despite his clear dislike for the area and its inhabitants. If he knew what was good for him, Mr. Darcy would quit Netherfield House at once.

Unfortunately, Elizabeth did not credit the man with that much sense.

There was something the matter with his mattress.

Darcy stretched and rolled on his side to avoid the hard spot in the centre of the bed, but it seemed to shift with him.

He flopped back, tossing his arms out wide.

No, there it was again. He shoved a hand beneath his back to feel for whatever it was that was painning him.

He rolled to the other side. Still there. He sat up in the bed and pushed himself to his feet before flipping the mattress up. He felt along the bottom of the bedding, on the frame, but could find nothing. He lowered it and felt along the top. No hard spot.

Something small and light hit the floor.

Had it not been so quiet, he would not have heard it.

Darcy bent to pick it up. It was the shape of a small stone but weighed almost nothing.

He rolled it between his thumb and finger.

It rather had the size, shape, and feel of a dried pea.

Where had such a thing come from? They were nowhere near the kitchens.

He placed it on the small table near the bed.

He lay back in bed again but there was no relief.

His back ached, almost exactly in the centre of his spine.

“Damnation,” he muttered, reaching around to rub at the soreness.

“I will never get any sleep on this ridiculous bed.” He dragged the coverlet and a quilt with him and sat in a chair close to the fire.

Though it was still uncomfortable attempting to slumber sitting up, it was better than the bed.

Darcy sighed. It was nearly dawn. He would simply have to make do.

He remembered the pea the next morning, but it was no longer on the table.

After several days with very little sleep, Darcy could feel the servants' stares and predict their whispers.

He had changed rooms every morning in search of a decent mattress, and he knew full well what he would have thought about a guest who did the same.

Miss Bingley's assurances were growing thin, and she began to act as though he was making a joke at her expense.

Cartwright, his valet, had even offered his own bed, saying that he knew it was very fine and quite restful.

It was a sign of his desperation for rest that he did not quibble over taking Cartwright's bed before agreeing.

Yet the moment Darcy reclined, there was that spot again.

If it were not for the dark bruise Cartwright could see on his back when he helped Darcy dress in the mornings, they might both believe that Darcy was imagining the entire thing.

At least Cartwright could stem the tide of the servants' gossip by relaying that bit of information.

As much as Darcy detested being an object of anyone's conversation, in this case, he understood the necessity.

"Sir?" Cartwright asked in the morning. "It is rather small, but might this be the problem?" He held out a pea. "The maid found it when she made the bed."

It was the same pea as before. Darcy said nothing, simply took the pea and placed it on the bed table. Before he left the room, he glanced back. The little pea was still there.

When he returned for the evening, it had vanished.

It took several cups of coffee each afternoon for him to make his way through the engagements Bingley had agreed to attend, but he was determined to assist his friend.

Bingley was quite taken with the eldest Bennet daughter, though Darcy suspected it would come to nothing as it had several times before.

In the end, he was not certain how much he had assisted Bingley, who spoke and danced and played cards almost exclusively with Miss Bennet.

He had wished to fulfil at least one of Bingley's requests.

His friend had taken him to task for saying what he had about Miss Elizabeth at the assembly.

Though Darcy stood by his original opinion of the woman, it had been impolitic to state it.

He hoped to apologise and perhaps observe her more closely.

He had made the attempt, but it always took him a moment to gather his thoughts, and Miss Elizabeth had simply rushed into any conversational pause with her rapid, endless chatter.

Darcy could not help but note that she was only that way with him.

He made her nervous, and that made him nervous.

She could not fancy herself in love with him after so short an acquaintance, could she?

It was surely only the anxiety produced by being in company with a gentleman from a position in society so superior to her own. Yes, that must be it.

After the third such meeting, where he had heard more than he could bear about the seasons in Meryton, the novel her youngest sisters were reading, and the charms of Oakham Mount, wherever that was, he simply gave up and returned to another sleepless night at Netherfield.

Each morning he placed the pea on the table.

Each night it was gone. Until he felt it in the middle of his back.

The seventh room on the seventh night was the charm.

With a happy moan, Darcy sank into the soft bed and slept deeply through the night.

The following day, Cartwright told everyone that his master had taken ill from the injury to his back but was now on the mend.

This explanation was accepted without much additional comment, for which Darcy

was grateful.

He was not pleased that he had disrupted Bingley's household in such a way, but his friend, as always, would hear nothing about it.

"You have had a difficult time this past week," Bingley said warmly. "I am sorry for it."

Leave it to Bingley to offer apologies for something that had nothing to do with him. He truly was a good friend.

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Darcy hoped that the rest of his stay would be an improvement.

He had been too distracted by fatigue to relay his concerns about the Bennets to his friend, but now he wondered whether he should.

If he had been ill, perhaps he had not given Miss Elizabeth a fair chance.

It would explain a great deal. As he recalled Miss Elizabeth's strange and overly loquacious behaviour, he shivered and then flinched at the sharp pain near his spine.

His back was not entirely healed, but the sleep had been restorative, and his mind felt a great deal clearer.

Yes, he would rest first and wait to determine whether he ought to advise Bingley to return to London.

Elizabeth kept running into Mr. Darcy. Why must the man follow Mr. Bingley into society when he had not the inclination for it?

The first time she allowed him an opportunity to speak with her he had made a terrible hash of it.

Every time he opened his mouth, the poor fellow insulted someone.

It might even be amusing were it not for Mildred's ire.

"I wish to apologise for having offended you, Miss Elizabeth," Mr. Darcy had said in

his serious way, “but I could not have known you would be listening.”

Elizabeth waited, but apparently that was the entirety of his message.

“As it happens, I was not listening,” she had replied. “Unfortunately, others were.” She mimicked Mildred by lifting a single brow. “I am sure it was not improved in the retelling.”

He winced. Good. It was not truly an apology when he was at the same time reproving her. Insulting man.

Mildred had been unimpressed with his show of repentance, and Elizabeth was afraid to allow the man to speak thereafter for fear he would set the fairy off again.

Mildred had sulked for an entire day following the assembly, and a sulking fairy godmother was a trial not even Mamma’s nerves could surpass.

Elizabeth wondered why Mildred remained with the Bennets at all when humans seemed to irritate her so.

Long ago, there had been fairy godmothers enough for any young lady who needed one and not only for finding husbands.

But over time, Mildred told her, humans had become less grateful for magical assistance, greedier and more demanding.

Most fairies had simply given up and gone away.

But the Bennet family had managed to earn the loyalty and dedication of both Priscilla and Mildred.

Elizabeth was not sure why that was, exactly.

Whether the Bennet women had been unusually appreciative (she was not) or simply needed the help more than most (she did not), even they only had two fairy godmothers left, which meant that the girls had to share.

Priscilla had appeared for Jane around her eighteenth birthday, and Mildred about the same age for Elizabeth.

Mary was already eighteen, but because both fairies were spoken for, she would not have a fairy godmother of her own until either Jane or Elizabeth married.

The Bennet sisters had always shared things—their clothing, jewellery, a maid—and this was no different.

When there were five daughters, one learned to make do.

One thing Elizabeth did not mind sharing was secrets—as long as it was with Jane. Not long after the assembly, Elizabeth cornered her eldest sister to discover what she thought about Mr. Bingley. As she had surmised, Jane was very well pleased with him.

“He is just what a young man ought to be,” Jane effused, continuing to list his myriad good qualities—sensible, good-humoured, lively, and though Jane did not say as much, Elizabeth understood that he was kind.

A man who was not would never draw Jane’s approbation in such a way.

Elizabeth listened cheerfully. She was happy Jane had found a man who pleased her—it was not so easy a thing, not even for Jane.

Of course, Jane had Priscilla, but Jane's fairy godmother had not been in evidence since the assembly.

Would that the same could be said for Mildread.

"Jane," she said slowly, "do you think Priscilla brought Mr. Bingley here to you?"

"Perhaps," was the response. "She does not speak to me often about her magic. I know what you do—that the fairies bring together couples they believe are well suited, but that we are all allowed our own choice, in the end. Why do you ask?"

Elizabeth shook her head. "No particular reason. Only that we know so little of Mr. Bingley. He rides a black horse, wears a blue coat, and is charming enough in company."

Jane's brows pinched together. "But?"

"Should we not also judge a man by the friends with whom he elects to spend his time?"

"Do you believe Mr. Darcy to be so very bad, Lizzy?" Jane did not sound convinced.

"I cannot say," Elizabeth replied and shook her head at Jane's silent reprimand.

"I am simply not sure, Jane. He was not at ease at the assembly, that much is certain. However, he was abominably rude to nearly everyone in attendance even before he slighted me, and each time he opens his mouth, I must make the most inane conversation to prevent him from invoking Mildread's further displeasure.

Turnips, Jane. I have resorted to discussing turnips. "

Jane laughed softly. "Every lady from a landed family must be able to discuss turnips, Lizzy. You have only proven how accomplished you are."

Elizabeth smiled and shook her head. She had not really had a moment to turn her mind to Mr. Bingley.

She had been kept busy at first by preventing Mildred from turning the boorish Mr. Darcy into a frog, although a rat, a snake, and a mermaid had also been mentioned.

Given that the ocean was too far away, Mildred had discarded the last rather quickly.

The rest of the week Elizabeth had simply attempted to stay out of the way, but Mildred now appeared to have forgotten, if not forgiven, Mr. Darcy's insult of her best work.

"Well," Jane replied with a smile, "we are all entitled to a poor showing from time to time. Do you not recall your slight of poor Martin Goulding?"

Elizabeth rolled her eyes. "I was sixteen! Mr. Darcy is a man full grown. And in my case, it was an accident!" She had not even considered it a slight, but Jane had made her see that it could certainly be taken as one.

"An accident on your part for having spoken the words, or only because he was close enough to hear them?" Jane pressed.

"Very well," Elizabeth replied with a shrug and a knowing smile. "I shall reserve judgment on Mr. Darcy until we see him again."

"And perhaps allow him to speak freely, should he choose to do so?" her sister asked.

"Very well," Elizabeth acquiesced reluctantly.

“That is all I ask,” Jane replied calmly as she picked up her sewing.

Darcy followed in Miss Elizabeth Bennet’s wake from the moment she arrived at Lucas Lodge, attending to her conversations from a distance so as to hear without being required to participate.

He had no desire to be talked to death. When she turned to shake her head at him and offer a bemused smile, he involuntarily smiled back but did not approach. He merely listened.

The woman was quite different when she spoke with other people.

In her conversation this evening, she demonstrated intellect, insight, and a keen wit.

Miss Bingley was not deficient in wit, but her words were often cutting.

Miss Elizabeth’s teasing was turned upon herself as much as any other, and her jests exuded warmth and affection.

He had been wrong. The way she spoke with him was not due to any desire for a closer acquaintance, nor had she been awed by him. It was clear now that she had been trying to put him off.

The shock of it almost overpowered him. He had been wrong. But he was never wrong.

This Miss Elizabeth was delightful. Prettier than he had allowed at the assembly.

More than pretty, despite the imperfections he had so coldly noted at their first meeting.

Well spoken. Clever. Not that her mother was any less vulgar or her youngest sisters any less improper, but she and her eldest sister were both elegant and well mannered.

How had he been so entirely mistaken? He could only blame his illness.

He had not felt ill, but it was the only explanation.

He reproved himself. It was a coward who took refuge in excuses.

He was a gentleman, and he would admit, to himself at least, that he had been in a foul mood at the assembly and his judgment of Miss Elizabeth had been in error.

He could not doubt his eyes, but he could doubt his interpretation, given the evidence now before him.

It was the gentlemanly thing to admit he had been mistaken.

A feminine voice interrupted his self-congratulation. “I presume you have followed our conversation so intently because you also wish the colonel to throw a ball while the militia is quartered in Meryton, Mr. Darcy?”

Darcy’s thoughts shifted to his young sister Georgiana and how she loved balls.

She was too young to have attended one, of course, but she had watched the guests arrive at their uncle’s home in town more than once.

Their eldest cousin had wed last spring and for days she had spoken of little more than the ball in the bride’s honour.

The memory made his mouth tug up on one side.

“I would not have taken you for a dancing man,” Colonel Forster said, a hint of laughter in his voice.

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“I am not,” Darcy replied stiffly. He danced rather well; his aunt the countess had seen to that.

He enjoyed the exercise for what it was, but his partners generally had other motives.

He had been away from society for two seasons as he both mourned his father and learned to shoulder the burden of his early inheritance.

During the following three, he had been required to dance with an endless parade of women who did not understand that being Mrs. Darcy meant assisting him with those responsibilities.

He was not interested in a woman who desired little more than to be an ornament on his arm.

He expected to wed for money and connections, but he required a woman with intellect, compassion, a genuine sort of charm, and . . . he blinked at Miss Elizabeth.

He took a breath. “A ball makes all ladies energetic. My younger sister . . .” he began, but he did not continue. Could not continue. He swallowed. It was the strangest thing.

Miss Elizabeth grimaced, and both she and the colonel were staring at him, waiting for him to complete his statement.

Miss Lucas came to join them, glancing between Miss Elizabeth and Colonel Forster before turning her gaze to him.

Darcy had wanted to explain Georgiana's love of music and dancing, but nothing came out.

After briefly but effectively spearing him on the end of a pert, quizzical gaze, Miss Elizabeth resumed ignoring him and instead addressed Miss Lucas and then the colonel, some humorous nonsense about protecting the citizens of Meryton from the French.

The colonel laughed, and Darcy was left to himself.

He grimaced and touched his throat. What was the matter with him? He was not garrulous or as effortlessly amiable as Bingley, but he generally had more facility with the English language than this.

He cleared his throat once, twice, but his voice did not return. He made his way to the punch bowl. Perhaps a drink would help.

Bingley met him near the refreshments and handed him a cup. "Are you enjoying yourself?"

Darcy sipped the punch and tried to speak. Nothing. He cleared his throat and made another attempt. Still nothing. He closed his eyes briefly and opened them to find Bingley staring at him.

"My word, Darcy," his friend said quietly, his normally cheerful expression lined with concern, "you do seem ill. Shall I call for the carriage?"

Darcy felt no more ill than he had the last time he had appeared in public, but it was no use. He was sorry to cause Bingley such anxiety, but he could not remain in public this way. He bobbed his head once. Bingley clapped him on the arm and hurried away.

He glanced back where he had left Miss Elizabeth to find her watching him, her head tipped to one side in a gesture of curious unease.

She extracted herself from her conversation and made her way over to him as the younger guests began to roll up a carpet in the back of the room.

He bowed and then lifted the ladle in the punchbowl in lieu of asking whether she was thirsty.

He even gave her another little smile, though it only amounted to a slight upturn of his lips.

She laid a gloved hand over his and shook her head. "Mr. Darcy, are you well?" she murmured, raising her dark eyes to his. She pulled her hand away and strangely, he wished she had not.

He allowed himself to be lost in her gaze for a moment before he frowned and lifted one shoulder. Her eyelids fluttered closed, and she released a small, airy groan. He did his best not to shiver at the sound.

"I am sorry, sir." She appeared distressed.

Why was everyone apologising to him? She could not have possibly had anything to do with his .

. . infirmity. Darcy shook his head at her as Miss Mary Bennet played a jig on the pianoforte and a few sets began to form.

He did not care for dancing at such events as these, preferring conversation as a rule.

But he did wish he might have asked Miss Elizabeth to dance. Doubtless, she would

have enjoyed it.

“I hope you are yourself again soon,” she told him kindly.

As she walked away, he could see the outline of her form through the thin muslin of her gown, silhouetted as it was in the candlelight.

Had his throat not been so dry already, the sight of Miss Elizabeth’s fine figure moving away from him would have done the trick.

“Mildread,” Elizabeth muttered as she nearly fled from Mr. Darcy. Her fairy godmother would be nearby—she always performed her spells in person. Elizabeth escaped through a door into the hall and then a dark, unused parlour. “Mildread .”

“Yes, my dear?” her fairy godmother replied.

“Where are you?” Elizabeth asked.

The darkness lifted enough for Elizabeth to see Mildread sitting in the corner of the room with an embroidery needle and a vast quantity of impossibly thin gold thread. With a quick puff of air, Mildread lit a single candle. It gave off a good deal of light, but the wax did not melt.

“Are you enjoying yourself?” Mildread asked mildly.

“I was until you stopped Mr. Darcy’s mouth,” Elizabeth complained. “You cannot still be angry with him.”

“Of course not. You are the one who has been talking over him all week. I rather thought you would approve.” Mildread regarded Elizabeth with a mild sort of exasperation.

Elizabeth pinched her lips together. There was no pleasing Mildread. After all her blathering this week to prevent Mr. Darcy from falling into error again, her fairy godmother had still cast a spell on him.

“I merely thought to spare you both. Despite your best efforts, he was about to say something unflattering, and then you were going to refuse to dance with him.” Mildread did not look up from her work.

“I was not!” cried Elizabeth. She paused, perplexed.

Would Mr. Darcy have asked her to dance?

He had smiled, but was it for her? It made him very handsome, the smile, and the look he gave her when they stood together at the punchbowl had been .

. . she shivered. He had the most beautiful eyes, and she felt she could see every one of his emotions inside them.

Dare she believe . . . that look had not been disapproving.

“He would not have asked,” she added, uncertain.

Mildread nodded and hummed a little fairy song, the glimmering notes tracing a score in the air before vanishing in a puff of silver.

“This is very pretty,” Elizabeth said, coming a little closer. She examined the intricate scrolling design, which glowed brightly in the candlelight. “I have never been able to do this sort of detail work as well as you and Mamma.” Even Jane could not match Mamma’s needlework.

“Your Mamma loves beautiful things. She was willing to work at them. Perhaps you

only need practice,” Mildread replied, glancing up and catching Elizabeth’s eye.

Mamma was endlessly patient with her fine embroidery, but she did not extend that kind of forbearance to her daughters.

Elizabeth placed a hand lightly on the fairy’s arm.

“Please, Mildread? Mr. Darcy does not know how he sounds, I am sure. He is the eldest son of a wealthy family. He has probably never been gainsaid in his life.” Before Mildread had come to stay, Elizabeth would not have requested leniency for such a man.

She would say he had reaped what he had sown.

Instead, she felt a kinship with him. Elizabeth well remembered the shock she had been given when her fairy godmother arrived.

It had not taken long to fall afoul of Mildread’s notions of polite behaviour.

She had been far more judgmental and prone to eavesdropping at eighteen than she was now, and Mildread had found her wanting.

Her fairy godmother’s punishments had humiliated her even though she knew why she had been so afflicted.

How much worse it would be for Mr. Darcy!

“His friends will fear for him,” was all she said. She feared for him.

“Why should you care?” the fairy inquired gravely, her grey eyes soft and round.

“What is Mr. Darcy to you, other than the man who insulted my handiwork and who

now follows you about the same as a dog who wishes to be fed?"

Elizabeth blushed. Mr. Darcy might be haughty, but he was a gentleman. He ought not be compared to a dog. "He is nothing to me," she insisted.

Mildread lifted an eyebrow.

"It is only that I would not wish for him to be made ill on my behalf. I would not even wish that on Miss Bingley or Mrs. Hurst."

"So in your estimation, he is superior to Miss Bingley or Mrs. Hurst?" the fairy asked lightly.

The Netherfield ladies were every bit as proud and supercilious as Mr. Darcy. Perhaps even more, since the women yet retained their powers of speech. Yet Elizabeth believed she had caught a glimpse of gentleness in him tonight that Mr. Bingley's sisters lacked.

Still the fairy continued her work, the needle dipping steadily in and out of the cloth. "What about Mr. Hurst?"

Elizabeth sighed. "Mr. Hurst is rarely conscious, so I cannot say."

Mildread wrinkled her little nose, but Elizabeth spied the hints of a smile. "True enough."

"If Mr. Darcy is thought to be ill, Mr. Bingley will be occupied and unavailable to court Jane," Elizabeth blurted out.

This had only just occurred to her, but it was true.

Mr. Bingley would soon depart Lucas Lodge with Mr. Darcy; she was sure of it.

He was not a man who would send his ill friend off alone.

Jane had been greatly anticipating spending the evening in Mr. Bingley's company.

Elizabeth was disappointed for her, that was all.

Mildread sniffed. "Where is Priscilla?"

Elizabeth might have heard a bit of disdain in the question, but she did not dwell on it. "I cannot say," she told Mildread, who grunted in a most un-fairy-like manner.

"Because once Priscilla has introduced them, she need not do anything more," Mildread grumbled. "Well, I shall tend to Jane's happiness in her absence, then. Will that do?"

Elizabeth wanted to decline, but she did not wish to offend Mildread. That could be—would be—disastrous for them all.

Elizabeth had not agreed, but Mildread did not seem to notice. She shooed Elizabeth back out to the party, where Jane was standing with Mamma.

"What does he mean, coming out when he is ill?" Mamma complained loudly. "Now Mr. Bingley has escorted him back to Netherfield and will miss the entire evening!"

The evening was more than half gone, but Elizabeth would not debate Mamma when her mother was already querulous. There was no point.

"Mamma," Jane remonstrated, "we are all very concerned for Mr. Darcy. Sometimes these things happen very suddenly. He surely would not have come out had he felt

ill.”

“I would put nothing past such a man,” Mamma replied with a huff. “Mark my words, Jane, he means to keep Mr. Bingley away from you. And then what will we do?”

Jane’s cheeks coloured. “Mamma, please.”

“Mildread is in the parlour, Mamma,” Elizabeth said softly. “She is working on the most cunning scrolled design. Perhaps you might care to see it?”

“Mildread is here?” Her mother’s expression cleared, and Elizabeth relaxed. Mamma truly did love pretty things, and she often came up with her own ideas from viewing the fairy’s work and asking about it.

Mamma sighed dramatically. “Well, I suppose I shall, now that Jane will not need me.” She patted Jane’s arm and made for the hallway.

“Thank you, Lizzy,” Jane said quietly, her cheeks still a rosy pink. “I am disappointed, of course, but Mr. Bingley would not be a man worth knowing were he to abandon his ill friend for a party.”

Elizabeth smiled. She did not care for Miss Bingley or Mrs. Hurst, but she believed they would ask Jane to visit them, and soon. Mr. Bingley would see to it. “Come, shall we comfort Sir William on the loss of his most illustrious guests?”

Jane smiled and took her arm. As they strolled across the room, Elizabeth cast a glance over at her younger sisters, who were dancing. She might have enjoyed a dance with Mr. Darcy.

But Mildread was wrong. He would not have asked.

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It was the oddest thing. Darcy had lost his voice, and now his legs buckled as wildly as a newborn colt's under his weight. It was just as well, for when he tried to walk, there was a terrific pain in his feet, as though he was walking barefoot over shards of glass.

Nothing else ailed him. He did not have a cold—there was no cough or sneezing. He did not, thank the Lord, have a fever or anything that might indicate influenza. No bright red rash, no soreness in his throat when he swallowed, no aches or pains. Not even his back offered any further complaint.

Whatever this was, it was enough to keep him confined to his room, and that was a trial difficult to endure.

Darcy had come to Netherfield to visit with Bingley, to enjoy some sport and help him become established in the neighbourhood.

The very evening he arrived, he had been nearly sleepless for a week and then, after a brief respite, here he was, ill again, from a malady that made even less sense.

Darcy passed the days reading the few books he had brought along and his letters.

He wrote to his cousin Richard and his sister Georgiana but did not mention the uncertain state of his health.

There was nothing either of them could do.

He would not have Georgiana made anxious over him, and he would not put it past

Richard to find a horse and ride to Hertfordshire without warning.

It was embarrassing enough to be confined to his rooms in a home not his own.

He did not wish to inflict Richard on the Bingleys, too.

Bingley visited after breakfast. He had planned to dine with the officers tonight but mentioned that he had written to Colonel Forster to decline the invitation.

He had also written to Darcy's physician in town, but Darcy took comfort in the fact that Ingersoll would never be able to decipher Bingley's hand.

One benefit of Darcy's unexpected illness was that it offered him time to reflect upon his behaviour since arriving.

He found he could not be pleased with it.

He had slighted Miss Elizabeth when she had done nothing to deserve such treatment, and he recollected, with some chagrin, that his apology had not been a good one.

Miss Elizabeth's manners were not those of the fashionable world, but while many of his acquaintances in London were more polished, none were as genuine.

Despite her inability to allow him to speak, he had watched her carefully at Lucas Lodge.

His conclusion was that Miss Elizabeth was naturally inclined to cheerfulness and sought to use her happy disposition to put those around her at their ease.

She was clever, but she was also kind. In his experience, this was a rare combination of attributes.

He had not truly minded Miss Bingley's company before their journey to the countryside.

She was educated, and had a discerning eye and a sharp sense of humour that he appreciated.

Unfortunately, in sharing a house with her, he had noted that she often wielded her humour as if it were a sword—heavily, and without understanding that it could cut both ways.

When compared, there was a distinct difference between the two women, and Darcy wanted a wife whose disposition was similar to Miss Elizabeth's rather than Miss Bingley's.

Unfortunately, when they first arrived, Miss Bingley had successfully engaged him in a few caustic exchanges about Meryton and its inhabitants.

That had been not only ungentlemanly but unwise, for it had encouraged her to expect more than he was willing to give.

Miss Bingley had quickly forgiven him for what she perceived as his ill manners the first week of his stay and now sent her maid to speak with Cartwright each day.

This was a politeness that might be offered by any hostess to a guest who was in poor health were there not something almost possessive in the tone of the messages that made him uncomfortable.

Why would any woman wish to attach herself to a man whose health was suspect? He did not wish to dwell on it.

“Miss Bingley asks if they might see you for tea this afternoon, sir,” Cartwright said

as he entered with everything required for Darcy's morning ablutions. "She hopes you will indulge her."

Darcy opened his mouth and attempted to speak. The only sound he managed was akin to a strangled badger. It was an improvement—at least now he was able to make some sort of sound. He sighed.

"Very well, sir, I shall let the maid know," the valet said smoothly.

When he was alone again, Darcy held on to the bedpost and carefully pulled himself to his feet.

His legs were weak but held firm, and there was no longer any pain.

This evidence of progress gratified him, and he tottered stiffly to a chair near the fire.

He cleared his throat and managed to produce a human "ahem."

Sitting up in a proper chair before a crackling blaze in the hearth put him in an excellent mood, especially when he was able to take refreshments while he read.

After the meal and the hot tea, Darcy practiced reading a few lines of his book aloud.

Although his voice was harsh and broken, he was at last able to speak.

"Miss Bennet has been taken ill as well, sir," Cartwright offered when he came in to prepare Darcy for the evening. He seemed pleased to see Darcy out of bed. "Mr. Bingley has called for the apothecary."

"Miss Bennet?" Darcy asked, ignoring Cartwright's obvious surprise that his voice had returned. He stood carefully as his man placed a basin of warm water on a small

table nearby. The valet watched him placidly, but Darcy detected a small smile on Cartwright's face. "I did not know she had come."

"She rode over and was caught in the rain," the valet informed him.

Darcy frowned. Why would Miss Bennet ride when the weather was so changeable? Why had Miss Bingley invited her at all? While Miss Bennet was a sweet girl, he had not thought that Miss Bingley cared much for her. Bingley, though . . . Ah.

Miss Bingley had invited Miss Bennet because she believed Bingley would be out of the house, dining with the officers.

She wished to dissuade Miss Bennet from pursuing her brother or her brother from pursuing Miss Bennet.

Despite comprehending Miss Bingley's concerns, Darcy could not avoid chuckling as he washed his face and hands.

Mrs. Bennet had outmanoeuvred his hostess.

Well, Miss Bingley ought not be scheming to work around her brother.

She was justly served, now, with yet another ill guest for whom to care.

He frowned when he considered Miss Bennet. "It is not serious, I hope?"

"It does not appear to be," Cartwright said, holding out the towel he had draped over his arm.

"Good, good. I may join the others downstairs tomorrow," Darcy said. "At least there shall only be one patient instead of two." He coughed. It still felt as though there was

something caught in his throat.

“Might I suggest one more day above stairs, sir?” Cartwright asked without meeting Darcy’s gaze. “You are still recovering, and Miss Bingley’s enthusiasm may be a bit wearing.”

He did not laugh, but it was a near thing. “You may be right, Cartwright. I can always invite Bingley to spend the afternoon here with me.” He anticipated being of some use to Bingley at last, even if it was only to distract him from Miss Bennet’s condition.

With this last bout of extraordinary illness behind him, Darcy was greatly anticipating a bit of sport. He could hardly wait.

“Bingley,” Darcy greeted his friend the next morning.

Bingley blinked and then smiled warmly. “Darcy,” he said with a relieved shake of his head. “It does me good to hear your voice, man.”

“I must agree,” Darcy replied with a grin. “Cartwright thought I ought to hold out another day to be certain I am recovered, and I thought it a grand notion.”

His friend laughed. “Indeed. You and I shall be quite comfortable here while my sisters complain about Miss Elizabeth.”

That brought Darcy up short. “Miss Elizabeth?”

“Oh, of course. You were not at breakfast,” Bingley said with another easy laugh.

He drew up a chair. “Miss Bennet sent a note to Longbourn early this morning, and before we had finished our breakfast, Miss Elizabeth arrived to tend her.” His gaze

was soft.

“I am very glad Miss Bennet has such a devoted sister. Do you know, she walked here? Nearly three miles, just to be of use to Miss Bennet.”

“It rained overnight. She must have been all over mud.”

“Caroline made the same observation,” Bingley scoffed, and Darcy winced.

He had not meant to insult Miss Elizabeth. Rather, he had been approving her dedication and pleasantly engaged in imagining how she must have appeared—muddy hems, cheeks flushed, fine dark eyes brightened by the exercise. “Forgive me, Bingley,” he said. “I did not intend to offend.”

His friend tipped his head slightly to one side and looked him up and down. “Are you sure you are recovered? You are rather flushed.”

“I am well.” Darcy cleared his throat again, though this had more to do with his embarrassment than any lingering ailment.

“Good. I will not hesitate to say that you had us all quite concerned.”

“I am sorry for that.”

“You are my friend, Darcy. Please do not mention it.”

Darcy knew Bingley meant that quite literally. He did not want to be thanked for the things he did. His friendship had always been sincere and generous.

They talked, read, played chess and cards, and otherwise enjoyed their afternoon. Cartwright reported around four that Miss Elizabeth was to stay to nurse her sister

and that servants had been sent to fetch them both clothing from Longbourn.

“I expect she shall come down for dinner, though she may not remain after,” the valet reported when questioned by the master of the house.

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Bingley looked thoughtful. "I really cannot leave her at the mercy of my sisters," he said ruefully. "Caroline has nary a good thing to say about Miss Elizabeth, and I should not like her to feel unwelcome."

Darcy stood. "I shall dress and come down to dine with you, though I will retire directly after, if I may. You will explain to your sister that I am still recovering and am not yet well enough for a long evening?"

"Thank you," Bingley said with a grin. "I appreciate the reinforcements." He paused. "You will be kind to Miss Elizabeth?"

The question shocked Darcy. "Of course. Why would I not?"

Bingley frowned. "Well, you have not been on the best of terms with her, you know. You insulted her, then snubbed her and Colonel Forster at Lucas Lodge. Of course, we know you were taken ill, but . . ."

"I will be polite, Bingley." He glanced up to see Bingley glaring at him. "And kind."

Elizabeth was in no mood to put up with the false manners of Caroline Bingley and Louisa Hurst. They had been telling humorous stories all afternoon, but the moment they heard Mr. Darcy was to come down to dinner, they had abandoned Jane without a single glance or polite farewell.

Miss Bingley had seated her next to Mr. Hurst, who quickly determined she preferred simple dishes to an elaborate ragout and therefore had nothing more to say. She had better company in Jane's room even when her sister was asleep.

Mr. Darcy was across the table and down one position, next to Miss Bingley, of course.

Elizabeth wished she could speak with him.

Miss Bingley had complained this afternoon that Mr. Darcy had been injured and unable to rest the first week he was in residence, and then was taken ill again at Lucas Lodge.

He had been in his chambers all week. She had blamed the rustic environs.

Mr. Darcy, she assured her guests, was normally a rather hale and hearty young man.

Elizabeth forgave Mr. Darcy everything when she heard about his troubles, for not only was she sure Mildred was at the root of them, Miss Bingley had been dreadfully indiscreet with his private matters.

When Mr. Darcy lifted his head halfway through the second remove and offered her a brief smile, she struggled not to react with surprise. What in the world did he mean by that? After a moment, she nodded.

Every time she forgot, he reminded her how handsome he was. No wonder Miss Bingley was smitten. Well, they would make a compatible couple, both believing themselves above their company. Miss Bingley was welcome to him.

Elizabeth glanced briefly at Mr. Hurst who was shovelling his food into his mouth, stopping only to tuck a napkin over his cravat to protect his jacket from the sauce dripping from his spoon.

As he flipped out the corners of the napkin so that it covered his ample girth, she pressed her lips together and turned back to the table.

Mr. Darcy was watching her, and if she was not mistaken, was also holding in a laugh.

His eyes were a dark blue in the candlelight, but she detected a twinkle there.

Well. That was unexpected. Interesting, too. She would not have thought him to have much of a sense of the absurd.

“How does your sister fare, Miss Elizabeth?” Mr. Bingley inquired.

“Oh, she is well, Charles,” Miss Bingley replied before Elizabeth could answer. “Louisa and I were with her all afternoon.”

Yes. Telling their amusing stories long after they ought to have left Jane to her rest. But Jane was too polite to sleep while her new friends were expending such an effort to amuse her.

“She is resting, Mr. Bingley, thank you. I believe it is the best remedy for her now.”

“Excellent. It did wonders for my friend here,” Mr. Bingley said with a grin and a nod towards Mr. Darcy. “I am sure your sister will soon be well again, in no small measure because of your care for her, Miss Elizabeth.”

Elizabeth thanked him. What a delightful man he was.

Jane had continued to meet Mr. Bingley in the neighbourhood on the few occasions he could be convinced to leave his friend at home, and she was increasingly happy with him.

Priscilla had done a marvelous job. If they did wed, perhaps one day Jane would introduce her to a friend of Mr. Bingley’s who might find her a tolerably suitable

prospect—it did not seem Mildread was likely to do so, focused as she was on punishing Mr. Darcy.

She nearly laughed at herself, then. My goodness, she was beginning to echo Mamma, convinced that Jane would marry Mr. Bingley because he had spoken amiably to her a few times and danced with her once.

Yet Jane had never shown this much interest in a man before, and Mr. Bingley had made it a point to ask after her.

Elizabeth supposed she wished it to be true.

Priscilla must have guided Mr. Bingley here, for when had there ever been such an eligible man in the neighbourhood, and one so well suited to Jane in every way?

No, she had reason to hope, and hope she would.

“Miss Elizabeth,” Mr. Darcy said, making an effort to speak clearly enough to be heard. Her heart went out to him. “I understand that your family has been at Longbourn for many generations.”

A smile curled her lips. He was offering her an opportunity to inform Miss Bingley of her heritage.

Perhaps he was more teasing than she had believed.

Or perhaps he wished to hear her admit that they had not long been gentry.

She would disabuse him of that notion. “The land where Longbourn sits has been in Bennet hands since before the Normans arrived. Those in residence at the time were, shall we say, amenable to their visitors from abroad and were allowed to keep their

property.”

“I had no idea the history of the estate went back so far,” Mr. Bingley said admiringly.

“What a shame, then, that it is entailed away from your family,” Miss Bingley added, nearly before her brother had finished his thought.

Elizabeth shook her head. “Longbourn, or any estate, really, is not truly owned by the family who lives on it. We are merely stewards of the property, Miss Bingley.”

Mr. Darcy nodded in agreement.

Miss Bingley lifted an incredulous eyebrow. “You compare yourself to a steward, Miss Eliza? How . . . interesting.”

Mrs. Hurst tittered and lifted a spoonful of soup to her mouth.

Elizabeth nodded thoughtfully. “I do think it is difficult for those who have never been landowners to understand, Miss Bingley. It is a different way of life, but those of us fortunate enough to have grown up on an estate are aware of our duty to it.”

She pretended not to see Miss Bingley’s nostrils flare, but she could not help but see Mr. Darcy’s intense gaze upon her. There was just enough warmth in it to convey his approbation.

“It is about continuity, you see,” she added.

“The land will be here long after we are gone. It is the obligation and privilege of the gentry to pass it on intact, even improved, if possible, to the next generation.” Her father had maintained the estate rather than improved it, but he met all his obligations

without complaint.

Elizabeth met Miss Bingley's eye with what she hoped was an innocent gaze.

"My grandfather passed away after an accident in London, but the three Bennet men who inherited Longbourn before him all lived into their nineties. While no one can predict the future, it is reasonable to assume that my father will be in charge of the estate for many years to come. You need not be anxious for us."

Mr. Bingley's face was alight with mirth. Mr. Darcy returned his attention to his food, but when Mrs. Hurst leaned over to say something quietly to her sister, he shot Elizabeth a look that told her he had found the exchange entertaining.

They finished the meal with less pointed conversation. When it was time for the women to separate from the men, Elizabeth begged to be excused, as she wished to return to her sister. Miss Bingley nodded imperiously, and Elizabeth retired.

She was joined in the hall by Mr. Darcy, who explained in a raspy voice that he was only recently recovered and was attempting to be prudent by cutting his evening short.

"I hope that you are feeling better," she said.

"I am, thank you," he replied quietly.

"Mr. Darcy," she asked him abruptly as they reached the stairs, "do you believe in fairy godmothers?"

He chuckled. "No. I am afraid they are merely the stuff of legend. There is no magic in this world, Miss Elizabeth, but what we conjure for ourselves."

An eminently sensible response. If only it was also a correct one.

“Do you believe in fairy godmothers?” He coughed a little and reached into his pocket for a handkerchief. “Forgive me.”

“Not at all,” Elizabeth reassured him. She meant that she forgave him, but he took it as an answer to his question. Just as well. There was no way she could answer it and remain both truthful and in Mr. Darcy’s good books.

“I for one am glad of it,” Mr. Darcy continued. “For I should rather choose a wife myself than have one magically foisted upon me. I do not believe that would be desirable, for either party.”

“Are you a romantic, Mr. Darcy?” Elizabeth inquired, raising her eyebrows.

He grinned wryly. “Does that surprise you?”

“I must admit that it does. Most gentlemen are not, and those who are do not confess it.”

“I trust you with my secret,” he assured her with only a gentle tease in the words. They arrived at her door, and he bowed. “I do hope you find your sister in better health tonight. Good evening, Miss Elizabeth.”

What a confusing gentleman!

She entered Jane’s room. Her sister was sleeping soundly, but she was still too warm.

Mildread and Priscilla were working on their embroidery. They lit a candle so she could see.

“Mildread,” Elizabeth said haltingly, “I would be glad for Mamma to see Jane. She will be anxious if she does not. Would you be able to keep her from saying anything to Mr. Bingley or . . .”

“Or Mr. Darcy?” Mildread inquired coolly. “I am sure she has nothing to say that he should not hear.”

Elizabeth dipped a cool rag in the water and placed it on Jane’s forehead.

She knew the fairies would not allow Jane to become seriously ill, but it seemed to suit them to have Jane at Netherfield just now.

Mamma would be nervous, though, and despite the likelihood of her mother making a scene, Elizabeth would not feel right leaving her at home to fret.

Once she saw that Jane was not in any real danger, Mamma would return to Longbourn and happily await their return.

Perhaps she could get Mamma in and out of the house without an audience.

Were not the men meant to go out in the morning?

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M rs. Bennet had come to Netherfield.

Darcy almost wished he had not recovered the use of his legs.

She was here, evidently, at Miss Elizabeth's request, and had appeared shortly after breakfast with her youngest two daughters.

He suspected the younger sisters had not been invited, as Miss Elizabeth's countenance had paled and her jaw tightened when she saw them.

With some quick polite nothings, she had hurried her chattering relations upstairs and out of sight.

Would that he could have taken the escape she had provided for them, but Bingley insisted upon waiting for word of Miss Bennet.

Bingley's inconvenient devotion was growing tiresome.

Why not wait until Mrs. Bennet was back in her carriage, trundling off to Longbourn, and then send a maid to inquire?

Miss Elizabeth would certainly be able to inform them of any changes.

When she had followed her mother downstairs and saw them waiting, he could have sworn her left eye twitched. Vulgar and ridiculous in turn, Mrs. Bennet reprimanded Miss Elizabeth at every attempt to rein her in, yet Miss Elizabeth retained her dignity.

“Do not,” the older woman said at last, “run on in the wild manner that you are suffered to do at home.”

His eyes rolled almost involuntarily, and he moved to the window to hide his ire.

There was a small gasp behind him, but a little impoliteness was better than the set-down he wished to deliver, and he was perilously close to offering it.

Mrs. Bennet’s treatment of Miss Elizabeth greatly offended him.

He wished to defend her, but it was not his place, and Miss Elizabeth would not thank him for it.

Mrs. Bennet’s rudeness to him was nothing.

He had managed such nattering matrons before.

Miss Bingley and Mrs. Hurst were no more than irritating woodpeckers in comparison.

But the hurt in Miss Elizabeth’s eyes at her mother’s dismissal made him angry.

Bingley, bless him, stepped in to direct the conversation elsewhere. His friend was stalwart in his attempts to rescue the situation, while his sisters only snickered cruelly.

Shortly after he had turned his back on them all, there was the swishing sound of muslin and Mrs. Bennet’s blather grew distant. He stood facing the window as he attempted to cool his temper.

“Oh, Mr. Darcy,” Miss Bingley cried, all sympathy, “what a trial for you. For all of

us.” She droned on, but Darcy heard only the incessant drumming of a woodpecker.

Eventually, Miss Bingley stopped speaking. Mrs. Hurst assented to whatever her sister had said.

“I shall wait for your brother in his study,” he said to them.

Their sympathy ought to have been with Miss Elizabeth, but he knew it never would be.

Such an intelligent, bright woman to be anchored by a ridiculous mother.

It was a travesty. He was not amused, nor would he share in their bitter triumph.

It was not long after he had found a chair near the fire that Miss Elizabeth found him there.

“My apologies for interrupting your solitude,” she said quietly as she slipped inside the room.

“But I feel I must warn you.” She glanced around.

“I have never been in this room before. It is larger than I imagined.”

Darcy stood immediately, alarmed and disappointed. “Madam, you should not be here.”

Miss Elizabeth returned her gaze to him and shook her head.

“I am not intending to compromise you or ruin my own reputation, sir. I will remain but a few moments. No one will see me.” Miss Elizabeth worried her bottom lip for a

moment before saying, “When you cut my mother just now, you made my godmother very angry. I wish you had not done it.”

He frowned and began an apology—anything to remove her from the room. “You have my . . . your godmother?” He had seen only Mrs. Bennet and her daughters.

Miss Elizabeth squeezed her eyes shut and nodded. She released a small, exasperated grunt, as though she was not pleased to be speaking of it. Darcy rather wished she would not. Whatever she was about to say, he suspected he would not like it.

With a resigned expression, Miss Elizabeth continued.

“I know you do not believe, but . . . the Bennets have always had fairy godmothers, Mr. Darcy. Mine is not the same as most fairies you read about in stories. She is neither all good nor all mischief. She is protective and compassionate, but she is also vain and can be petty. She is very similar to my mother, in fact. Forward, quick to anger, sometimes irrational.”

Darcy pulled a face.

“There!” Miss Elizabeth said in a tone of exasperation. “That very expression. And you rolled your eyes, too.” Her gaze was reproachful.

“I did not care for the way your mother was speaking to you, Miss Elizabeth,” he told her bluntly. He had been taking her side when no one else would, even if he had done so silently. No good deed went unpunished, apparently. What strange story was she spinning?

“Oh,” Miss Elizabeth said. Her mouth dropped open a bit in surprise. “You truly wished to defend me? You do not even know me.”

“Which is why I did not speak, Miss Elizabeth. I would not make your situation worse.”

Miss Elizabeth’s blush deepened. “I . . . I do thank you, but I still wish you had not done it. My godmother has already made you ill. I do not wish for it to go any farther. You must watch your tongue and school your expressions, Mr. Darcy.” Her eyes implored him to agree.

He could not allow those fathomless eyes to lure him into their depths. “You expect me to believe that you have a fairy godmother, Miss Elizabeth?” he asked brusquely, pushing aside the swell of affection he felt when she showed herself concerned for his welfare. “It is nonsense.”

She shook her head unhappily. “You have already felt the consequences of her offense, Mr. Darcy. I am only attempting to save you from more of them.”

“What do you mean?” Darcy was perplexed. Was she truly laying the blame for his recent illnesses on some sort of magical creature with a score to settle?

“Please, I cannot reason with her.” She cocked her head. “I hear someone coming.” She looked around and began to move towards a door Darcy thought must open to the library. “I beg you,” Miss Elizabeth said, placing her hand on his arm, “be excruciatingly polite for the rest of your stay.”

“You cannot be serious . . .”

But she was gone, stealing out as silently as she had entered. No sooner had she disappeared than Bingley strode in from the main hall.

Darcy had thought before that Miss Elizabeth was peculiar. Strangely, he did not think so now. Miss Elizabeth lived with a scornful mother and shameful sisters. She

was in her right mind, but somehow also believed she had a fairy godmother.

How extraordinary.

She could not have expected him to believe her. Absolute balderdash. Even had such creatures as fairy godmothers existed, why would the Bennets have one? The Bennets, of all families?

No, as kind and lovely as Miss Elizabeth was, there was also something decidedly odd about her. Although, inventing a woman who cared for her—it was something his sister might do.

No. Miss Elizabeth was not at all like Georgiana. He would dismiss the entire conversation from his mind.

Bingley was speaking, and Darcy was determined to listen.

“Shall we perhaps ride out to the ruins tomorrow if the weather is fine, Darcy? I am told there is good sport to be had in that area.”

This Darcy understood. This was why he had come.

“Yes,” he said emphatically. “I shall look forward to it.” When his eyes strayed to the door he was sure Miss Elizabeth had passed through, he frowned.

The door was no longer there.

“I waited until Mildread was with Priscilla to speak to Mr. Darcy,” Elizabeth moaned to Jane, who was finally able to sit up and take some broth. Priscilla appeared. She did not say anything, but simply sat near the window. “He would not listen.”

“Lizzy,” Jane said with a soft sigh, “you cannot have believed that he would. It is too far from his experience.”

“We had established a truce, I thought,” Elizabeth replied pensively.

She plucked at the bedclothes until Jane raised the bowl for her to take.

“A somewhat friendly acquaintance, even.” He had wanted to speak in her defence.

She was only attempting to do the same for him.

“I had hoped he would do as I asked, even if he did not believe me. Is it so very much to request he be polite? Mildread has something very dreadful planned for him, I am afraid.”

“Perhaps you ought to let Mildread alone,” Jane observed mildly. “Do you not think she knows what she is about?”

Priscilla nodded sagely from the window seat before staring blankly out of doors.

“That is what I fear the most,” Elizabeth responded.

Jane gave her a shrewd look before dabbing a handkerchief against her reddened nose. “Why is that, Lizzy?”

“What do you mean?” Elizabeth inquired, setting the bowl down on the tray for the maid.

“What if Mildread were to do this dreadful thing you are concerned about to someone else? Timothy Lucas, for example?”

Elizabeth frowned. “She has done so, on more than one occasion.”

“Mm,” Jane assented. “Yet you did not protest his treatment.”

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“But he . . .” Elizabeth stopped. Timothy had been a terrible tease and rather conceited.

Why, no one could say, for he was not his father’s heir nor was he particularly gifted with superior looks or any unusual intelligence.

Although Elizabeth knew she was dazzling on her first night out after Mildread’s arrival—the fairy had made sure of it—Timothy Lucas had flatly refused to stand up with her at her coming out because she was not as beautiful as Jane.

His boorishness had quickly dashed his pretensions.

Not only had Jane flatly refused his hand and told him he was never to ask again, all the women in attendance that night had determined that none of them would dance with him, either.

Even today, some five years later, if a woman turned Timothy down for a dance, the neighbourhood did not require that the lady sit out.

That was nothing to Mildread’s anger, though.

Timothy had disappeared for a few days following the assembly, and Elizabeth was certain, from something the fairy said, that Mildread had turned him into a frog.

Within a week he was home, but for a few days after his return, he was unable to speak.

At the next three assemblies, she gave him, literally, two left feet.

Another time, she had chosen two locks of his hair and made it so that they could not be tamed—they curled straight up from his crown like horns.

And once, she had apparently given him dreams for a week that kept him weary all day long.

She had not tortured the man in some time, but she had never truly forgiven him.

He might keep it to himself, but Timothy Lucas certainly believed the Bennets had a fairy godmother.

Elizabeth still felt the man had earned every bit of his trouble. Mr. Darcy had not. She pursed her lips as she tried to reason her way through the contradiction.

“You have a tendre for Mr. Darcy,” Jane told her. If she was the tiniest bit smug, Elizabeth knew it was only because her elder sister was pleased.

“I do not ,” Elizabeth protested. The very notion!

Mr. Darcy’s insult had been spoken to Mr. Bingley, not the entire room.

Only Mildread had even heard, though she had repeated it to Mamma, and now everyone knew.

Elizabeth was irritated, but not only with Mr. Darcy.

She suspected that Mr. Darcy was stubborn and would not be forced to dance.

They had that in common. She did not care to be forced into things either, even if she

wanted to do them.

It was a perverseness in her character, she supposed.

She frowned. A little sympathy for the man was not evidence of her favour.

Even were it so, he certainly was not enamored of her, particularly after their last encounter.

Besides, his position in society was far higher than her own.

Even if he wished to, he could not offer for her.

It would be the height of foolishness to give her heart to such a man.

But once Jane had planted the words in her head, they were not so easily banished.

“Why could I not have had Priscilla for my fairy godmother, Jane?” Elizabeth rested her forehead on the bedclothes. She spoke too quietly for the distracted fairy to hear.

“We are given the fairy we need, you know that,” Jane said.

She bent down to whisper in Elizabeth’s ear, “Truthfully, I have always envied you Mildread. Priscilla means well, poor thing, but she is hard of hearing and refuses to admit it—it causes ever so many problems. At least Mildread is trying to protect you. And I do not think Mildread has ever made you ill from too much fairy dust.”

Elizabeth stared, and Jane just nodded her head once, very slowly.

“I thought it was being caught in the rain that made you ill,” Elizabeth whispered.

“Lizzy, really,” Jane scolded quietly, still aware of Priscilla’s proximity. “Who has ever been made ill by a few raindrops?”

Elizabeth glanced over at Priscilla, who was, even now, blowing more of the golden dust from her flattened palm into the air. Most of it caught the draft from the window and wafted towards the bed. It did not affect her, but Jane sneezed several times.

“Why have you not said anything?”

Jane shook her head. “I cannot bear to hurt her feelings. She does not mean to make me ill. And it is not so bad, really, only I am always so sleepy.”

“Oh Jane,” Elizabeth said with a moan, “we really are the most ridiculous girls.”

Jane stroked Elizabeth’s hair. “Speak for yourself, dearest,” she said archly. “At least Mr. Bingley is not offending Priscilla to the point of retaliation.”

Elizabeth could only laugh. It was better than crying.

“I do not know what you mean.” Mildred sniffed, then held her embroidery closer to the light. “I only do what is right and necessary.”

“That is true,” Elizabeth said in a placating tone. “Still . . .”

“Still nothing,” the fairy replied. “Your Mr. Darcy is an insufferable man, and he will have his answer. Your poor mother was distraught.”

Mamma had not been distraught. She had been offended. Mr. Darcy was terribly good at that. “He is not my Mr. Darcy, and he was affronted on my behalf.”

Mildred chuckled. “If he is not your Mr. Darcy, was it his place to be affronted for

you?”

“No, of course not. Still . . .”

“Elizabeth,” Mildread inquired calmly, “why are you defending his behaviour?”

“I am not,” she insisted, frustrated. “It is only that he is not so very bad. Is he?”

“As you are well aware, he cannot open his mouth without saying something unseemly.”

“But I have spoken with him. He will be polite, Mildread, truly he will.”

This was met with a disdainful wheeze. “Did he say as much?”

“Well, no, but . . .”

Mildread hummed a little tune. “I believe what he said was that he did not believe in fairy godmothers.” The needle went in and out, creating a border, then impossibly small figures. “We are, in his words, nothing more than nonsense. Is that not the information he relayed to you?”

The panic began to swell inside her. “He does not know. How could he? You have told us often enough that once we are no longer Bennets, even we will not be able to see you anymore.”

Mildread shrugged. “Once you leave a family, you leave your fairies, too. If you are very fortunate, your new family will have their own.” Her hands dropped into her lap while she considered. “He said he does not believe in fairies.”

“Then how can you hold him to account for it?”

“Is it not enough that he has been rude? He rolled his eyes at your mother.” Mildread began to hum again.

“For me, Mildread. He was upset for me.” She worried her bottom lip. “What will you do to him?” Elizabeth asked, a coldness stealing over her despite Mildread’s soothing song.

The needle flashed as it dipped in and out of the sumptuous cloth.

Elizabeth drew near. She admired Mildread’s handiwork even more than she had at Lucas Lodge.

The gown was a brilliant blue, and the gold embroidery told an abbreviated history of the fairies.

The song’s notes showered them with sparkling silver dust as they faded away, and an echo of the story rose from the golden thread of the gown to cavort around them.

Elizabeth took a deep breath and smelled springtime.

She saw herself strolling between ancient trees and into a meadow where sweet peas, daffodils, rhododendrons, and bluebells grew intertwined in a riot of colour.

Someone was waiting for her there. Someone tall.

With dark hair and a sweet, small smile.

He held out his hands in welcome. She stepped forward, but as the music faded, so did he.

“You will not send Mr. Darcy away, will you?” she asked quietly.

Mildread studied her. "He is pompous, arrogant, and odious. Why do you continue to defend him when he cannot open his mouth without giving offense?"

"I do not know," Elizabeth pleaded. Truly, she did not. "For some reason, I think he is not as bad as he appears. He was kind to me at dinner," she said weakly. "Promise you will not make him disappear."

"Very well," said Mildread reluctantly, her eyes still on Elizabeth. "I promise I shall not make him disappear."

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Elizabeth spent the day worrying alternately about Jane and Mr. Darcy.

By the late afternoon, her sister was on the mend, and her focus turned from the two fairy godmothers with her in Jane's room to Mr. Darcy's precarious position with them.

Well, with one in particular. He and Mr. Bingley had left the house early to hunt, and she was relieved to have him well out of Mildred's way.

Just as Mr. Darcy's current occupation occurred to her, Mildred began to make the most alarming sounds of disapproval. She clucked. She grunted. She hmphed. When she pinched the bridge of her nose, Elizabeth hung her head. Something was coming. The signs were unmistakable.

"He is trying to 'talk sense' into Mr. Bingley about Jane," Mildred explained while Jane slept.

"Certainly, he can have nothing to say against Jane," Elizabeth replied, aghast. "How could he? He hardly knows her!"

"He is not insulting your sister," Mildred replied. "He believes her a gentlewoman in every way, so I suppose he is not entirely stupid." She sniffed. "He is, however, unimpressed by the rest of your family and your situation."

Elizabeth glanced away. That was a different matter.

"He believes Mr. Bingley should return to London to think on what he should prefer

to do.”

Well. There it was, then. Mr. Bingley would go to London, and his sisters and friend would try to keep him there.

Jane could always visit Aunt and Uncle Gardiner, but to what end?

They were well off, but their home was near Cheapside—in a respectable, wealthy neighbourhood to be sure, but one that was nothing to the more fashionable addresses in town.

Between their children and the business, the Gardiners would not be available to escort Jane to any parties or balls where she might see Mr. Bingley.

Even if they had the time, they did not have those sorts of connections.

While the men of the ton relied upon her uncle for their commerce, they did not invite him to their homes.

No, they lived in very different circles than the Darcy and Bingley families. For that matter, so did the Bennets.

Elizabeth had never really expected anything to come of her strange interest in deciphering Mr. Darcy’s character.

He was handsome and clever but also haughty and proud.

It was a foolish inclination from beginning to end.

She had thought herself more sensible, and she was determined to laugh herself out of it. No, there was no future there.

But she did have hope for Jane.

“We shall see, I suppose, how much influence his sisters and friend shall have,” Priscilla ventured to say from her seat near the window. She withdrew a little fairy dust, and Mildread shook her head. “You have overdone it, dear. Jane must return to Longbourn sometime.”

Priscilla nodded, returning the fairy dust to its silken bag, tightening the cords to secure it.

“Jane would be terribly unhappy if Mr. Bingley went away.” Elizabeth stood to stretch her back. She was sore from so many hours sitting in the sickroom.

“Would Jane truly want a man who does not know his own mind?” Mildread was distressingly unconcerned.

“Mr. Bingley relies on Mr. Darcy’s opinion because he is not entirely on his feet in society yet,” Priscilla added.

Elizabeth grasped the opportunity. “According to his sisters, Mr. Bingley was suddenly very popular last season because he had emerged from mourning but a few months earlier, just after he came into his inheritance. He is new to his position, that is all.”

“Mr. Darcy was not much older than Mr. Bingley when his father died,” Priscilla supplied from her perch near the window, where she was drawing shimmering pictures on the glass with her breath. “And he had much more to take on than Mr. Bingley.”

Elizabeth craned her neck to watch as a horse-drawn sleigh burst from the sketch on the windowpanes to circle above them. It dipped and swerved its way through lush,

dense woods.

“Mr. Darcy was brought up to carry on with the family fortune—property, tenants, investments.” A strong stone house rose above a tree-covered hill, making the sleigh appear tiny in comparison.

“He has a great deal of responsibility, and he was very young when it fell to him. He does have a sister, but she lives most of the year in London for her education. He shares her guardianship with a cousin who is in the army and often away.” Priscilla tipped her head to one side and met Elizabeth’s eye. “It must be a rather lonely life.”

Elizabeth’s heart ached a little to think of Mr. Darcy being alone with so much weighing on him, but there was nothing in the world that could excuse him should he interfere with Jane and Mr. Bingley.

Should the couple themselves decide they did not suit, that was one thing, but if Mr. Darcy stooped to some disguise to separate the two, it would be unforgivable.

“Are you trying to make me feel sorry for him?” Elizabeth asked dryly.

Mildread sighed. “I believe it is your job to work on Jane and Mr. Bingley, Priscilla, and mine to see to Elizabeth.”

“And so it is, Mildread,” Priscilla said mildly. “I wish you luck.” Her eyes twinkled as she said it, and Elizabeth shuddered.

Yes, something was coming. Even Priscilla knew it.

Darcy lifted a forkful of partridge to his mouth and tried not to stare at Miss Elizabeth. It had become his routine whenever they were in the same room. He normally prided himself on his discipline, but without even trying, Miss Elizabeth

was ruining all his vaunted self-control.

The meat was sharp, gamey, and made worse by the mealy texture.

He coughed a bit, then swallowed and reached for his wine to wash the rancid taste from his tongue.

As he recovered, he noticed that Miss Elizabeth was pushing her food around on her plate to make it appear as though she was eating it.

Everyone else appeared to be enjoying their meal.

Miss Bingley and Mrs. Hurst first inquired about the ruins where the men had been hunting.

Once he mentioned it was more picturesque than good grounds for hunting, Mrs. Hurst opined that they all might visit as it was not so very far off.

When the suggestion was met with tepid replies, she and her sister continued an extensive conversation mentioning several of their friends from town, behaving as though Miss Elizabeth was either an imposition or not present at all.

It would bother Darcy more if Miss Elizabeth had given any sign of noticing.

Hurst was only too happy to consume her share in the meal as well as his own.

It was more than that, though. Miss Elizabeth startled when Bingley spoke gently to her.

She gasped quietly when the footmen reached from behind to fill her glass.

Even her colour was off. He hoped she was not sickening.

She had spent nearly all of her few days here closed up in her sister's room, and Cartwright had mentioned she had stayed up quite late seeing to her sister's comfort.

It was admirable, and what Darcy had come to expect of her.

Despite the odd encounter in Bingley's study, she had clearly not come to put herself in his way.

Still, such devotion might be unhealthy, for if she had not contracted Miss Bennet's illness herself, then the lack of fresh air, exercise, and rest might have made her unwell.

This was not right. He should not be anxious for Miss Elizabeth's health. She was not his relation, nor did he have any claim on her.

He snuck another glance and found that she was watching him surreptitiously, with an expression both wary and mournful. He could not look away.

Suddenly, he felt a bit warm. More than a bit, as if a summer sun was beating down on him. He took another sip of his wine and tried not to recall a similar feeling at the assembly.

As the end of dinner approached, Darcy's attention wandered away from Miss Elizabeth and fixed on his aching head. A small tickle began in his nose, and all over his body, his skin began to itch. It was torture not to be able to scratch at it.

This was too much. Was he ill again ? Or still?

That settled it. He would leave Netherfield with Bingley and remain in London even

were his friend to return.

Town might be generally considered less healthful than the country, but Hertfordshire was proving an exception to the prevailing wisdom.

Removing to town would also serve to separate him from Miss Elizabeth.

She was possessed of everything he wished for in a wife: wit, compassion, integrity, beauty.

Everything but wealthy and well connected.

He was in danger with her. If he returned to London, he would not have to examine why his reasonable objections to a marriage between Bingley and Miss Bennet did not apply to Miss Elizabeth. Because they did apply. He was simply beginning not to care.

Darcy touched his napkin to the corner of his mouth. He had to care.

His parents had been happy with one another, this he knew, but their marriage had not been about love.

In his father's final days, the older man had grown introspective.

"Your mother and I were very fond of one another," he had said to Darcy.

"She had a title, I had a fortune, and together we improved the position of the family in society. Find yourself a woman you can admire and respect, Fitzwilliam, and you will be better off. Be careful, though, not to look for her where you should not."

Hertfordshire was a place he should not look. Against his sadly weakened will,

Darcy's eyes moved again to Miss Elizabeth. This time, she was staring directly back at him. Could she see his intentions to leave her behind? Her eyes were not admiring, but afraid. It made him shudder to see it.

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There was something wispy and white in his cuff.

He dropped his hand beneath the table and plucked out a small plume, allowing it to drift to the floor.

He would have to speak to Cartwright about the state of his clothing.

It was unlike his valet to miss something so obvious.

Darcy's irritation was soon superseded by a scratchy feeling on the back of his neck, beneath his cravat.

He stretched his neck a bit but found no relief.

What next? He tossed a rueful glance at Bingley and then addressed Miss Bingley. "I thank you for the excellent meal." It probably had been good—everyone else had eaten. Other than Miss Elizabeth, at any rate. He stood. "I find I must retire."

"Of course," Bingley replied, all affability as he rose, though his gaze was assessing. "Please do not wait on Hurst and me."

"Thank you," Darcy replied. His voice, which had not entirely recovered its normal pitch, came out a little brighter, a little brasher than it ought. "I bid you good night." This time it was worse.

Darcy swallowed and shook his head. This was growing very tiresome.

Elizabeth stared at Mr. Darcy with a rapidly growing sense of horror. Her breath came a little faster and her head swam when she spied the downy feather that was protruding from his shirt sleeve. He hid his arm under the table, his eyes narrowing as he glared at it.

Mildread was behind this. What she was about, Elizabeth did not know. But whatever it was would happen right here, at dinner, in front of two of the worst gossips Elizabeth had ever met.

He stood graciously and begged to be excused, but his words came out in a . . . was that a honk?

Mr. Bingley stood to bid his friend a good night, his expression of alarm quickly masked.

Mr. Darcy spoke again. The trumpeting sound was muted but distinctive.

He stepped around the table but stopped to honk again.

It was more of a cough-honk, and it was right in her face.

Mrs. Hurst laughed aloud, but Elizabeth could not have cared any less—there was panic in that honk. She watched the door close behind him.

No. No. No.

After Mr. Darcy had been gone for less than a minute, Elizabeth offered Miss Bingley a weak smile and stood. “I would return to my sister if you will excuse me.”

Miss Bingley waved her away with the back of one elegant hand, but Elizabeth did not stop to feel the slight.

She burst into the hall, which was strangely devoid of servants, though she could hear them coming up the stairs from the kitchen.

There was a broken line of white feathers trailing away from the dining room.

Swiftly, she scooped them up as she followed the path to a small dark hall off to the left of the family stairs.

“Mr. Darcy,” she hissed. “Are you here? Mr. Darcy!”

“Miss Elizabeth?” It emerged so much like a honk that Elizabeth was surprised she understood her name. She stepped into the alcove, grabbed a candle from the wall sconce, and held it up.

Before her stood Mr. Darcy. As the meagre light fell upon him Elizabeth saw that his right arm was not an arm at all, but a wing, covered in snowy white feathers.

“I could not go back to my room in this state,” he said, raising the wing. His eyes implored her to help him. “What is happening to me?”

“I do not know,” she responded honestly, reaching out to take his human hand. “But I will help you if I can.” She would not step away from Mr. Darcy when he was in such a state, but she wished that she could. Instead, she could only watch helplessly as his head jerked back roughly.

Mr. Darcy’s lips began to stretch.

Elizabeth was frozen in shock, and the candle slipped from her hand. The flame was out before it hit the floor. Mr. Darcy’s exclamations of surprise and panic escaped in hoarse, muffled trumpet blasts and she clapped her now-free hand over his mouth.

It took less than a second for Mr. Darcy's lips to flatten and elongate.

A dab of orange in the middle spread until Elizabeth was pinching closed an orange beak bordered with black.

A knob rose from it at the same time white feathers began to cover Mr. Darcy's head and face.

His fine clothing was absorbed into the snowy white feathers except for the area around his eyes which turned as black as his tailcoat.

Something tickled her palm where she held Mr. Darcy's hand, and she looked down. More feathers. Mr. Darcy grunted, the sound strangled, and the beak slipped from her hand as he began to shrink.

It was in every way horrible. Elizabeth buried her face in her hands, but after a moment, she straightened. "Courage, Elizabeth," she said and lifted her hands away.

A male swan with a long, elegant neck was running back and forth at her feet, flapping his wings in agitation.

"Mildread," Elizabeth whispered, her stomach roiling. She bent down towards the bird. "Shh," she begged him urgently. "Please, be quiet."

Her fairy godmother appeared near the stairs. She crossed her arms over her chest and laughed. "I think he makes an uncommonly handsome swan. It should satisfy even Mr. Darcy's pride. Swans are royal creatures, you know."

The swan hissed.

"Oh," Elizabeth said, bending to check his feet before her hand touched her forehead.

“He is not registered. The crown could claim him. How could you?”

“It should protect him from anyone but the crown,” Mildread pointed out. “Surely they are not going to send a royal shepherd to Hertfordshire for one swan.”

“Someone could capture him and take him to London! What are we going to do with him?” Elizabeth asked, panicked. “We cannot allow anyone to see him in this way. You must change him back.”

“Not I,” Mildread said, shaking her head. “Once the spell is released, it must be completed.”

“How long will he be a swan?”

“Forever,” the fairy said, twirling the pewter wand in her fingers.

The swan stilled for a moment before it began to flap its wings menacingly.

“What?” Elizabeth cried. “No, that cannot be!”

“Of course it can.”

Elizabeth leaned forward, resigned. “You said the spell could be completed. Tell me what I must do to release Mr. Darcy from this,” she whispered, waving at the swan, “this madness!”

Mildread clucked at her. “Why would you wish it? Mr. Darcy is nothing to you.”

“He is a fellow human, Mildread,” Elizabeth pleaded. “He deserves to live his life the way it was intended.”

“Hmph.” Mildread’s lips twisted one way, then the other. “There are several ways to complete this spell. One takes a week. Another a hundred years.”

Elizabeth refused to believe that Mr. Darcy would be a swan for a hundred years. “How are we going to keep this a secret for a week?” Elizabeth’s mind was racing. Where could they possibly hide? What would happen when Mr. Darcy was missed?

“I suppose you shall have to keep him safely out of sight.”

She gazed down at the swan. “This is a nightmare.”

Mr. Darcy honked. She took it as agreement.

“What was that?” someone asked out in the main hall. One of the footmen, perhaps.

Oh no. “Shh,” she begged Mr. Darcy. He flapped his wings impatiently.

“You were worried he would be an obstacle to Jane and Mr. Bingley, and so he would have been,” Mildread reminded her.

Elizabeth was unable to contain her distress but attempted to keep it under regulation. “You promised you would not make him disappear!”

This was met by another swan hiss.

“I have not.” Mildread threw out her arms with a dramatic flourish. “I have transformed him!” She winked at Elizabeth. “Now it is your turn.”

“What?” This made no sense. Why a swan of all things? Elizabeth wanted to shake the fairy, but it was never wise to anger her.

Voices drifted down the hall. Miss Bingley was asking her brother to check on Mr. Darcy.

“Caroline.” Mr. Bingley was annoyed, the first time Elizabeth had ever heard him lose his temper, even a little. “Darcy is entitled to his privacy. If he requires anything, Cartwright will request it.”

The Bingley party seemed to be approaching the stairway. She could not allow them to see her here when she should be upstairs with Jane.

“Mr. Bingley, sir,” said a member of the staff, “I am sorry to disturb you, but I thought I heard something down the hall just here.”

Elizabeth gasped. They would see her, standing alone in the dark. No, not alone. With a swan. An uncommonly large and handsome swan, but a swan nonetheless.

“There is a door to the outside down this hall and to the left, dear,” Mildread informed her, a hint of laughter lingering in her words.

Several heavy footsteps approached.

Elizabeth pulled a face at her fairy godmother before she hauled Mr. Darcy up into her arms—gads, he must weigh more than two stone—and staggered from the house.

“Are we there yet?” Elizabeth asked plaintively.

Mildread had guided her nearly a mile from the house out to the ruins of what appeared to be a castle. Elizabeth had carried the swan—Mr. Darcy—at least half the distance before she was unable to continue and set him down. Fortunately, he seemed willing to follow them on his own.

The fairy turned where she was hovering just above the ground. “Patience, my dear.”

Elizabeth was tired and cross. “I am trying, Mildread,” she replied.

Mildread clucked and turned back to survey the rubble.

“This will do,” she said cheerfully. She lifted her wand, made two circles with it, and directed the end towards the ruins.

Elizabeth blinked as the remnants of stone rose from the ground and reassembled themselves into a tall, wide castle. It shimmered in the moonlight.

“Shall we go inside?” Mildread asked smugly.

“How?” Elizabeth asked. “There is no . . .” Her voice trailed off as a drawbridge dropped from the entrance and hit the ground with a heavy thump. She tipped her head to evaluate it. “Why is there a drawbridge when there is no moat?”

“Enough of your complaints,” Mildread scolded. “There is a lake instead. You are welcome.”

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It was a pretty lake, truthfully. Mr. Darcy waddled in its direction, and she followed him, too weary and bewildered to do anything else.

“You cannot leave him like this,” Elizabeth protested as he waded into the water. “He has a sister.”

“The spell can be amended,” Mildread admitted. “But it cannot be entirely undone.”

“I was upset,” Elizabeth said, “but I would not wish this on him. Will you amend the spell? For me?”

“How much are you willing to do to restore him?”

Elizabeth gazed across the lake at the swan. He was elegant and graceful. Beautiful, really. Mr. Darcy was all of those things as well. Behind his haughtiness was kindness, of a sort. She shut her eyes and shook her head. “What must I do, Mildread? Simply tell me.”

The fairy smiled. “You must share his burden.”

“What does that mean, exactly?”

“He can spend his days as a man if you promise not to speak.”

Elizabeth’s brows pinched together. “You will take my voice?”

“No,” Mildread responded as though speaking to a child. “You will promise not to

use it.”

“To what end?”

Mildread growled. “Stop talking and listen .”

Elizabeth did.

The fairy tapped the end of her wand against her chin as she pondered.

“You may not speak unless I grant permission. Otherwise, you must listen to him. If you speak, the amended spell will revert to the original, and he will be a swan forever.” She pursed her lips before adding. “You must also make him a shirt.”

Elizabeth almost asked why, but Mildread glared at her, so she fell silent.

“A shirt made of . . . wild roses.” Mildread sounded quite pleased with herself.

“They grow abundantly here by the lake. At the end of one week, you will make sure the swan wears the shirt of wild roses at sunrise, and Mr. Darcy’s transformation will be complete.

He will be a man again, both day and night. ”

She wanted to ask again for an explanation, but Mildread would not tell her. She enjoyed being mysterious. Better just to pose practical questions. “But how will I know how to weave it?”

“I will instruct you.”

“This sounds nearly impossible, Mildread. How will I convince him if I cannot

peak?”

“Be patient and listen, Elizabeth.” She lifted her wand and pointed it at the swan, who began to swim in their direction. “For tonight, he ought to sleep inside. He will be confused when he awakes.”

Darcy’s hands were cold. He groped for his blanket but could not find it. He sat up slowly, rubbing his eyes against the grey sunlight of a late autumn dawn that streamed in through the window.

But it was not his window.

“Cartwright?” he called. His voice echoed off the walls.

As his vision cleared, Darcy realised he was sitting atop the bedclothes on a huge canopy bed.

There were bedcurtains, but they had not been drawn.

He was still in his clothes from dinner, though his cravat was a tangled mess.

He unwound it and dropped the offending cloth on the bed before pushing himself to his feet.

There was little in the way of decoration in this stone room.

A rug on the floor, two chairs near the fire with a table between, the bed, and another small table.

There was nothing on the walls. No closet, no shelves, no wardrobe or dresser.

No looking glass. He walked to the single window and pulled the sash up. It did not budge.

His heart raced as he gave one last, mighty tug.

There was no movement at all. He turned quickly and surveyed the room again.

How had he come here? He cast his mind back to the night before.

He did not recall retiring. He had excused himself from the table and intended to go upstairs to his chambers, but he could not remember ever having arrived.

He strode directly to the door, turned the knob, and pushed. It swung open easily, and relieved, he stepped into the hall.

“Hello?” Darcy called, his voice echoing down the hall. The walls were bare here, too. It was all grey stone, similar to the castles he had toured in Scotland as a boy, but smaller and somehow . . . artificial, as he would expect a child’s toy castle to appear.

The door opposite his own was open, and he stepped across the floor to peer inside.

This room had no furniture at all, only a lonely figure sitting on a pillow near a small fire. The woman’s head was bent to her task, lustrous brown curls spilling over her shoulders. Suddenly, she looked up.

He swallowed. He would know those eyes anywhere.

He had never dared to think about her hair being let down. His breath came a little faster.

She was in the gown she had worn last night. He would prefer to see her in a ball

gown, all clinging silk and daringly exposed skin.

Next to her was a pile of long-stemmed flowers in bud, which she was working into . . . something. There was a sound outside the window behind her. Darcy glanced up to see an owl perched on a branch, staring in at them with yellow eyes.

He rubbed his forehead. Now he understood. He was ill again, and this was some sort of fever dream. If he could not have Miss Elizabeth in reality, his mind had determined he would speak with her in his nightly imaginings. He ought to be embarrassed, but he could not regret it.

“Elizabeth,” he said warmly. “What are you making?”

She blinked at him before staring at his . . . neck?

He would normally be embarrassed that he was not properly dressed, but now he just smiled. He had used her Christian name, too, but there was no harm done. He wondered why she was perplexed—was not this play his to create?

Darcy wanted to lift a hand to trace the small wrinkle in her forehead, but surely if he touched her, she would vanish. That often happened, in dreams.

She did not answer, only shook her head and bent back to her work.

“Are these wild roses?” he asked, crouching down beside her. He touched one of the stalks, but the bite of a thorn made him yank his hand back. He had never felt pain in a dream before.

Miss Elizabeth tipped her head and glared at him for a moment.

She slapped his hand away. It was not sewing.

Rather, she was carefully twisting the stems together in such a way as to avoid being pricked.

Around and around she twisted the stems so that the small head of each rose touched the other.

It was painstaking work. Forgetting his concern about touching her, he held her hand gently in his own and turned her palm up so he could see.

The mind could conjure every sort of wild fantasy—why not roses without thorns?

But her fingers showed evidence of the thorns' bite through the fingers of her gloves. He winced in sympathy.

“Oh, Elizabeth,” he said softly. “Why are you doing this?”

Her cheeks pinked at the contact before she frowned and poked him in the chest with a finger. He shook his head.

“I do not understand.”

Her shoulders slumped as she lifted an injured hand to her throat, much as he had done the week before. He had coughed in her face at dinner. It had been an accident, but he remembered it quite clearly. Could he have passed on his illness so quickly?

“This is my fault,” he said, almost to himself as she nodded at him. “But that does not explain your illness, your hands. Nor why we are here. I ought to have dreamt up something better for you.”

Elizabeth rolled her eyes and picked up another stem.

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Mr. Darcy had eventually wandered away, still believing himself in a dream. Last night Elizabeth had called this a nightmare, and so it was.

Mildread appeared in the room near dusk to check on her work. "You are making good progress, Elizabeth. You should have the shirt completed within the week."

Elizabeth could only gaze balefully at the fairy, who chuckled. "It was your choice, you know. He might simply have remained a swan. Easier for us both."

No. That was impossible. No one, not even Mr. Darcy, who dared to question Jane's suitability, would suffer such a fate could she prevent it. If for no other reason, Mr. Darcy had a younger sister in his charge! She opened her mouth, but of course she could not give voice to her indignation.

"I know this is difficult, Elizabeth," Mildread said quietly. "But it will be for the best. You will see."

For the best of what? Elizabeth sighed. She had made the deal with Mildread.

If she did not wish Mr. Darcy's transformation to be permanent, she need only spend a week creating this shirt with wild roses before slipping the finished garment over Mr. Darcy's handsome swan head.

Mildread wanted it to fit his human form, and for the first time, she wished Mr. Darcy was not quite so tall.

A week. She hoped Priscilla would explain so that Jane was not anxious for her.

“No one will realise you are gone,” Mildread assured her.

“Please,” she said dismissively in response to Elizabeth’s raised brow, “you are not so difficult to read as you believe. Mr. Bingley and his family will forget he invited Mr. Darcy to visit Netherfield, and everyone will forget you ever arrived to tend your sister. When you return, if you return, they will believe you have been there all along.”

If? Surely Mildread did not mean to keep them under this spell forever. Elizabeth shook her head slowly. She did not understand why all of this was necessary.

“Soon Jane will be well enough to leave her room, and then Priscilla will see to her courtship with Mr. Bingley. Without his friend’s interference, I do not believe it will be long.”

Elizabeth smiled a little. This was why. It was for Jane’s happiness. There was nothing she would not do for Jane. Well, she would not leave Mr. Darcy a swan forever, not even for Jane. Her sister would not like it.

Mildread peeked outside. “It is nearly dark, so I must tell you one last thing. Each day, in the final quarter of an hour before Mr. Darcy becomes a swan for the night, you two will be able to converse. It begins now.”

Elizabeth’s mouth dropped open. “A quarter of an hour?”

“A little less, now,” Mildread warned.

Elizabeth sprang to her feet. “Where is he?”

The fairy shrugged. “I am sure I do not know.”

Something close to a growl erupted from Elizabeth's throat, but she did not have time to dawdle. "Mr. Darcy!" she called, springing for the door but stumbling on stiff legs. She righted herself and dashed into the hall.

She checked his room first, where she found him sitting up from a deep sleep. At first, she was upset with him. How could he sleep the day away when all night he would be a swan? But then it occurred to her—he did not remember being a swan.

"Elizabeth," he said happily. "You have come."

"I have only a few minutes to speak with you, sir."

His smile became a pout, and she was momentarily distracted by the boyish expression. "Will you not call me Fitzwilliam?" he asked.

"No, I will not. Eventually, you are going to realise that this is not a dream and that you ought to call me Miss Elizabeth."

He smiled. "It is my dream," he teased. "I might do anything I wish." He stood and stepped quite close to her.

"Mr. Darcy," she said, not only scandalised but very aware of the time.

"Even this . . ." he continued, pulling her into his arms.

Oh. Elizabeth was also now very aware of him .

His shirt was thin enough that she could feel the warmth of his broad chest under the smarting palms of her hands.

Strong arms wrapped around her back and held her close.

She took a breath and closed her eyes. Even after being a swan, he smelled good.

Citrus and . . . she tipped her face up in expectation.

His lips pressed hard against her own, his long fingers tangled themselves in her hair. It was awkward and shocking, and it felt so good . Her arms rose as if to entwine themselves around his neck . . . but time was running out. She shoved him away instead.

He frowned.

“I must speak to you, Mr. Darcy. I do not have much time.”

“I will hear anything you wish to say, my dear.” He reached for her hand, but she stepped away.

Elizabeth growled. “I am not your dear. My fairy godmother has put us under a spell. I must complete a shirt made of wild roses to transform you back, or you will remain a swan forever.”

“Wild roses?”

“Would you prefer stinging nettles? I know I would not.”

Mr. Darcy shook his head but did not respond.

“You must not fly off,” Elizabeth continued, “or someone might find you and take you away. We have only a week to break this spell.”

“A swan?” He blinked. “A spell?” He shook his head, bemused. “I finally have you alone, and all I can do is invent more obstacles.”

“You kissed me,” Elizabeth answered him accusingly.

“Yes, but then we stopped,” he said incredulously. “To discuss your fairy godmother and a spell. What sort of a cruel dream is this?”

“Just listen,” she begged, placing a finger against his lips. He grasped it lightly and gave it another kiss.

“Stop that,” she said, attempting to ignore the frisson of heat his touch generated. “I must make this shirt, Mr. Darcy, or you will remain a swan forever. Or a hundred years.” She stopped to think. “Mildread was not very clear on that, but in any case, you must promise me not to leave.”

“Elizabeth,” Mr. Darcy said in a low voice as he closed the space between them. She could feel his breath in her hair. “I will not leave. I adore you.” He trailed a finger lightly down her neck.

She gasped. He could not mean it. Oh, he was so .

. . and he made her feel so . . . She dragged herself back to reality.

It did not matter now. He must listen! She stepped back, raised her hand, and slapped him as hard as she could.

Her palm burned. “Oh!” she cried, holding her hand to her chest. “That hurt!”

“Yes,” Mr. Darcy said carefully, raising a hand to his cheek. “It did.” He stared at her. “Miss Elizabeth . . .” he began to say.

His sentence stopped abruptly. All Elizabeth could see were white feathers.

Her time was up.

When next he woke, Darcy was not only cold but wet.

He felt dirt beneath the palms of his hands and the scent of damp loam tickled his nose.

He forced his eyelids open and found himself staring at a tuft of brown grass.

He pushed himself up into a seated position, the grass shrinking in size as he did.

He had been lying under a tree on the bank of a small lake, its water murky in the new light of the day.

“Why am I sleeping out of doors?” he asked aloud.

Moreover, why did he feel he had done this before? He was the master of Pemberley. He had not slept out of doors since he was a boy, and never at this time of year. “Is anyone there?” he called.

When Miss Elizabeth Bennet emerged from behind the trees holding scissors in one hand and a pile of wild roses tied together with a rag in the other, he ought to have been surprised. Strangely, he was not.

“Miss Elizabeth?” he asked quietly, his teeth beginning to chatter. It must be a dream. Still, he knew, somehow, that he must call her by her correct name.

An owl hooted from a branch behind her before flying silently but hastily upwards and away.

Miss Elizabeth said nothing but did set down her scissors and the bundle to walk

behind a tree and produce a blanket which she shook out and draped around him.

The blanket carried a faint scent of jasmine.

He buried his nose in it and took a deep breath while she motioned to the structure behind her.

It was a castle. He had not carried her away to Scotland, had he? He felt so strange; anything might be possible. A memory started to drift back to him. A bedchamber. A fire. His cheeks warmed. A kiss.

“Yes,” he said, though she had not spoken. “I would prefer to go inside.” He reached for her bundle of flowers. “May I carry that for you?”

She smiled a little and shook her head, but he had already grasped the ends of the rag. He held it up to identify the flowers. “Wild roses?” he asked, pulling his thumb away from where he had nearly impaled it on a thorn. A pile of roses.

She did not speak, but one gloved hand touched her throat. Again, something played at the edge of his memory.

“Have you contracted my illness, Miss Elizabeth?” he asked quietly.

“I could not speak for nearly a week after you saw me at Lucas Lodge. If I have inflicted it upon you, I must heartily beg your forgiveness. I would never knowingly cause you harm.” He reached for the abandoned scissors.

“If you require more roses, I will cut them for you.”

He felt a shiver run down his spine when her fine eyes met his own. She had never gazed at him in this way before, with gratitude, yes, but also tenderness. He had felt a

longing for her for some time. Did she feel the same?

When she bent to take the bundle, Darcy tucked the blanket around himself more tightly and took it from her, pleased when she willingly relinquished it. They set off for the castle, which shimmered a little in the light. It almost . . . wavered, like a reflection in a lake.

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If this was some illusion of the mind, Darcy determined he would simply enjoy the time he was able to spend with Miss Elizabeth, away from everyone else who might interfere.

His own life and obligations felt increasingly distant, but for some odd reason, he did not mind it.

The anxiety that always accompanied the responsibilities he had inherited did not weigh quite so heavily when he was in her presence.

“You are making something with these. For me?” he asked, trying to grasp the memory.

Miss Elizabeth’s smile was blinding, and she nodded enthusiastically.

“There is a reason I woke out of doors,” he told her.

Again, the smile and the nod. He wished to see it again but could not think of anything else to say until they had returned indoors.

He entered her chambers, if the empty room could be called such a thing.

There was nothing but a pillow, a stack of blankets, and a basket near the fire.

“Where is your bed, Miss Elizabeth?” he inquired, dismayed.

She shrugged and moved to the basket, whereupon she withdrew from the basket an

intricately constructed shirt, a little more than halfway finished. It was far too large for her.

He pointed at himself. "That is what you are making for me?"

She nodded, though her expression was uneasy.

"Are you frightened, Miss Elizabeth?" As his conversation partner could not help him along, he must resort to direct address. "Is there something I might do to allay your fears?"

She paused for a moment with her head down before she nodded a third time. Darcy heard the smallest of sniffles and reached over to tip Miss Elizabeth's face up to his inspection. Two small tears were making their way down her cheeks.

"What must I do to stop your tears?" he asked quietly, reaching into his rumpled coat for a handkerchief and holding it out. "Please, I cannot bear them."

She blinked at his words, shocked, no doubt, by their intimacy. She took his handkerchief and dabbed at her cheeks. Two more tears were already falling from her eyes, but no others followed. She held up the shirt slightly and pointed at him.

It was almost as if he was being asked to wear the shirt in penitence for the sin of insulting Miss Elizabeth, like a hair shirt.

He would have smiled at the strange wanderings of his mind had these events the feeling of a dream.

But while he did feel peculiar, it did not have the quality of a dream, not anymore.

"You wish me to wear it?" He reached for it.

She shook her head and waved at the roses, then indicated the missing sleeves.

“You wish me to wear it when it is finished?”

She sighed happily and indicated that she did. She was so beautiful, even with the fingers of her gloves snagged and torn.

If she wanted him to wear the shirt, he would do it.

He swallowed. Gads, he had no self-control around this woman. He shifted the bundle of roses to hide the evidence of his ardour. He took a deep breath to bring himself back under good regulation. Eventually, he was able to place the bundle down next to the basket.

Still she gazed at him with innocent, trusting eyes. Was he imagining it, or were they also admiring him?

“I shall wear it, Miss Elizabeth,” he told her. “I trust that you would not request I do such a thing without cause.”

The smile this time was smaller but somehow more intense. There had been relief in the smiles she gave him as they walked up from the lake, but this was something different.

“Must you work here?” he asked abruptly as she began to make herself comfortable on her little pillow. “Why do you not come to work in my chamber?”

Her eyes widened, but he shook his head. “I seem to recall it is rather more comfortable than this, madam. Stone floors are nearly impossible to warm, and there are no rugs here.”

Miss Elizabeth turned her head to the window. The owl he had seen out by the lake was at the window. And had it been on that branch before? Odd. Abruptly, it hooted loudly and flew away just as it had at the lake.

Miss Elizabeth began to stand then, and Darcy offered his assistance. She thanked him with a pert curtsy. He again carried the bundle, and she took up her basket in the crook of an arm.

His chamber was much warmer than her own had been. As he settled her in a comfortable chair near the fire, he noted a new rug on the floor and curtains on the window. He was certain those had not been there before, but he was grateful for them. Miss Elizabeth would not be cold in this room.

“Would it be all right if I sat with you while you work?” he asked nervously. “I could read to you.” He glanced around. Were there any books here?

She tipped her head to one side and grinned at him. She must wonder the same thing and was teasing him.

“Do you not think your fairy godmother could find one for us?” he teased back.

Her smile disappeared and Darcy’s heart sank. “What is the matter?” He frantically searched through his words until he realised. She thought him unaffected by their situation. He did not understand it, truthfully, but when faced with the evidence, he could no longer deny its implications.

“Miss Elizabeth,” he said at last. “I awoke on the ground near a lake, and I suspect it was not for the first time. We are currently in a castle, though there seems to be no one else with us—no staff, no relatives, no chaperones—and you are making a shirt of wild roses which I must wear when it is complete. Is this not the situation?”

She pulled such a face that he almost laughed, but this was serious. He, Fitzwilliam Darcy, was about to make the most outlandish statement—and he believed every word of it.

“I believe in your fairy godmother, Miss Elizabeth.” He caught her gaze and held it. “More importantly, I believe in you .”

There was a great flapping from just outside the window, but Darcy did not move his eyes from Miss Elizabeth.

The sheer delight that radiated from her was a welcome reward for such an admission.

He would never confess he believed in fairies before anyone else, fearful they might send him to some remote country retreat where he could not embarrass the family with his madness—but in the deepest part of his heart he knew Elizabeth was his, and he knew that she was telling him the truth.

She had found a way to break whatever curse had been set upon him, and she was herself suffering to do it.

It came upon him then, like a great clap of thunder. He would marry her.

How had she ever thought Mr. Darcy taciturn? He had spoken all day without cessation, for evidently, he had a great deal to say. Elizabeth now knew nearly as much about the Darcy family as she did her own.

She knew his great-uncle was a judge despite being a wild sort of boy.

She knew his great-great-grandmother had badgered her Darcy husband into making the estate and the surrounding communities as independent as possible.

They had near a hundred beehives tended by several dedicated beekeepers, which negated the need to buy sugar.

The coppices were carefully managed so there was no reason to touch the trees in the park.

They even produced their own silk, which was why there was a small community of highly skilled Flemish and French silk weavers employed near Kympton.

He wondered if her father had ever taken her fishing and whether she might enjoy learning, for there were many trout in the river at Pemberley.

His mother had enjoyed the pastime, he told her quietly.

When he concluded his speech about his estate, he began to weave humorous stories about his boyhood exploits.

There had been epic wars fought with toy soldiers, pirate ships, tree climbing, and foot races, learning to ride and discovering the joy in the freedom it gave him to travel to the far ends of his father's lands.

He had been much in the company of his cousin Richard Fitzwilliam, who was two years older, and the steward's son, George Wickham, who was a year younger.

Eventually, he explained that while Richard and he had remained very close, George Wickham had become a man of whom he could not approve.

At the end of the summer just past, Mr. Wickham had returned to Mr. Darcy's notice in the most awful way—he had attempted to seduce Mr. Darcy's much younger sister Georgiana, no doubt for her substantial fortune.

Poor girl, to be tricked into believing a man truly loved her only to discover he had never loved her at all.

A man she had known as a small girl, too! It was such a betrayal.

Elizabeth was appalled. She was not so far removed from her tender years that she could not comprehend how deeply such perfidy would wound, and she hoped that she would meet Miss Darcy one day so that she might offer the girl her friendship.

It begged the question, of course, why Mr. Darcy would be so forthcoming about his family's private matters.

Her heart swelled with pride and happiness when she considered the trust in her he must have, to tell her these things.

Perhaps it meant . . . but no. It could not.

In his right mind, he would never admit to believing in Mildred, nor would he make overtures to her.

The difference in their stations . . . it only showed him to be under Mildred's influence.

The day passed in this way until the light in the window began to fade, and Elizabeth waited eagerly to have her voice return to her.

He was still talking when the moment came. "Mr. Darcy," she said. She could not speak with much strength—it was beginning to wear on her, all the hours of silence. For days, Mr. Darcy had believed himself in a dream, but today he seemed to be waking up at last, and she could only whisper!

“Mr. Darcy,” she said again, but he had his back to her as he added another log to the fire. It made her heart melt a little more, even when he was exasperating her. He was so attentive to her comfort.

“Sir?” Now she wished he would a bit more attentive to her words. Her time was draining away.

Mr. Darcy straightened and turned in her direction, still attempting to entertain her with a funny story about how he and Mr. Bingley had become lost while hunting.

They had never been near the ruins at all.

She would normally await the conclusion of this tale, but there was not enough time to remain polite.

She stepped up on the seat of the chair next to him, took his face in her hands, and kissed him. Right on the lips. Her desperation dissipated at the touch of her lips on his. It felt almost as good as when he had kissed her.

Then Mr. Darcy encircled her with his arms—grabbed her, really, so quick was the motion—and deepened the kiss.

When Elizabeth last visited her aunt and uncle in London, they had taken her to see the fireworks. The loud “pop” and then the brilliant colours illuminating the dark sky—she was not only hearing and seeing them now, she was experiencing them. She lost herself in the sensation.

A hooting came from out of doors at the window, and Elizabeth’s mind cleared. “Oh, Mr. Darcy!” she gasped. “No, you must listen. I do not have much time. Do you recall what happens now?”

Mr. Darcy's flush had travelled down his bare neck. Elizabeth had grown used to it, seeing him without a cravat. He had removed it that first day and never bothered to don it again.

"Elizabeth," he groaned, placing his head on her shoulder.

"No, Mr. Darcy," she begged. "The sun is going down. Do you recall what happens now—to you?"

His head shot up. "You are speaking," he said wonderingly before his face paled. "Which means that . . ."

"Yes," Elizabeth said in a rush. "Which means that you will shortly transform into a swan. You must try to remember who you are even when that happens, sir. I need you to remember what we must do in three days, and I have been so fearful that you will not. You can fly no farther than the boundaries of the lake, or you will be beyond my reach when the time comes. Do you understand?"

He closed his eyes, impressing those thoughts into his mind. "I will try, Elizabeth. For you."

She released a relieved breath. "For yourself as well, sir—and your sister and cousin."

He touched her cheek gently. "We have not much time," he said.

"I know," she said, sadness dripping from the words.

"Please, you must know I would not have regaled you with tales of my family and myself if I did not desire to share every part of my life with you. Elizabeth, before we are parted again, I must know that when all this is over you will consent to marry

me.”

“I cannot accept,” she said unhappily, cupping his cheek. “You know I cannot.”

“Whyever not?” he asked harshly, drawing back.

Elizabeth despised herself for the pain in his eyes.

She wanted to say yes—oh, how she wished to accept his offer!

But she would not wish for him to engage his honour only to resent being coerced by whatever spell he had been under.

“You said yourself that you would not wish to have a wife foisted upon you by magic. It would not be right for me to consent. Not while we remain under Mildread’s spell.

” Marriage to a man she loved but who resented her—the misery of both husband and wife would be acute.

“When it is over and you are yourself again—ask me then, if you still desire it.”

“I will always desire it,” he growled. “I will always desire you . My wishes and affections will not change.” He pressed his lips to her hand and tried to speak again, but feathers erupted from his hands, then his arms. The wings formed, the beak extended from his lips, and his words were twisted into a muffled trumpet blare.

Elizabeth witnessed it all with a mixture of chagrin and hope. Would he still want her when all of this was through?

Elizabeth sighed. They ought to have walked out before he changed, for she hated

carrying him. He was heavy, and he beat his wings against her in protest at being handled in such a way.

She beckoned him to follow her but did not speak. He would be more comfortable at the lake. Swans did not mind the cold.

The swan honked and turned his head to one side, then the other as though he was considering her request. Then he waddled out the door, but he did not follow her. Instead, he waited to take his place next to her, and together, they headed to the stairs.

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He was a swan again. Tonight was Darcy's final one in this form, and for the first time, he felt fully aware of himself inside the bird. It was remarkable. His movement through the water was graceful, and his wings were wide, powerful.

This wakefulness had been slowly increasing since Miss Elizabeth had urged him to concentrate on remembering.

He lowered his head into the water, tipping his body at an outrageous angle to nibble at the stems and leaves beneath the surface.

He would certainly enjoy a proper dinner once this was over.

At least he could eat something—poor Miss Elizabeth had not been able to eat or drink at all.

To finish her work in time, she did not sleep, either.

Her fairy godmother had made it unnecessary for her, she had said, but it still concerned him. How she must long to rest!

Miss Elizabeth had used her brief respite near the end of each day wisely, speaking to him of what they must do to break this .

. . spell, she called it. He had considered it a curse, but could it be when it had brought them together?

Each day, he reminded her that he would be renewing his offer.

Each day she smiled at him and demurred.

His heart flared inside his feathered breast. She loved him. She must, or she would have had no scruple in telling him to desist. They had only to get through this night and all would be well.

Darcy's happy anticipation gave him a kind of agitated energy.

He never swam far from Miss Elizabeth, who had seated herself near the water this evening, determined not to miss the moment they were awaiting, when she could slip the shirt over his head and they would both be released.

Only when they were free would she accept the proposal he was determined to make.

Miss Elizabeth, who was very pretty by daylight, was nearly ethereal in the moonlight, its diffused glow softly illuminating both a shapely silhouette beneath a rumpled, well-worn gown and her long, dark hair, which had been for several days tied back with a single ribbon.

No duchess could be more delightfully attired. No woman could be more achingly beautiful.

It was far from a curse, this predicament of theirs. It had allowed him to spend so much time alone with Miss Elizabeth, enough to know that he would be unable to leave her behind. Even were he to return to London, she would always be with him.

The owl that followed her everywhere hooted. Perhaps his senses as a swan were more attuned, but it sounded approving.

He did wish Miss Elizabeth might have been allowed to speak more, but her silence had forced him to speak.

No, that was not true. He had wanted to speak to her of his most personal matters.

He felt able to unburden himself to Miss Elizabeth.

He had explained his insult during the few moments she had to converse with him—he had seen her acting oddly and was put off by it.

Though she had rolled her eyes, she had not been upset with him .

“Mildread!” she had cried, whirling to face the owl. “I told you this would happen. It is almost as though you do these things on purpose!”

He wished for more time to speak, but the brief minutes of speech she was given each day were enough to demonstrate anew her wit and spirit.

She had something more as well—courage. She handled herself well, even confidently, despite their circumstances.

It boded well for their life together, though he could reasonably hope to never again be placed in a situation that required quite so much bravery.

He began another circle. He cut back at the halfway mark so he could keep his eye on Miss Elizabeth and caught her shaking out her hands before once again taking up the stems.

She had been required to make many sacrifices over the past week.

Darcy had been allowed to help a little, but mostly he entertained her while she worked.

Never had he put forward more effort to distract someone, but it was very little

compared to what had been required of her.

She had remained anxious, but she was concerned for him rather than herself.

It had been obvious, though she attempted to hide it.

She ought not fear for his safety—the very notion was painful to him.

Darcy was determined that in their future he would protect her as assiduously as she was protecting him.

Then a pleasing idea occurred to him—they might share each other's burdens. They might protect one another. Miss Elizabeth was strong, so much stronger than him in the ways that truly mattered. It would be an honour to be protected by her—to be loved by her.

Darcy had never dared hope for so much. A wife who cherished neither his position nor his fortune but him. One who would, if required, do battle for him as he would for her. As Miss Elizabeth had done all week. As she was preparing to do now.

He would have smiled had he lips. But having wings was not terrible and he had always enjoyed swimming, so burying his face in the water as he searched for food was rather enjoyable. He had been so strict and proper for so long, it was a relief to shed the pretence, even briefly.

It was incredible how Miss Elizabeth had transformed him. She had him seeing the best parts of a terrible situation. No one who knew him would recognize the man he was now.

Well, of course they would not. For he was not a man at all, was he? But even from the viewpoint of a swan, it was cheering to see the world as Miss Elizabeth did. He

could not reproach himself for it.

He watched Miss Elizabeth on the shore, working feverishly to complete the final lines of the garment, a blanket tucked around her shoulders.

He swam across the lake as she shivered, in part to work off the frustration that he could do nothing to warm her.

Just as he reached the far edge of the small lake, she at last rose to stretch and waved at him.

When she saw she had his attention, she held up the shirt.

The sleeves were completed and the hem of it fell to her knees.

It was done, and just in time—the grey sky was brightening, streaks of weak light reaching out to touch the treetops, signaling the impending dawn.

The owl, as it had before, lifted from its perch and flew away with great haste. He moved to the far side of the lake in its wake, fearing some threat.

But his attention was drawn back to Miss Elizabeth when a shower of light began to flicker and then rain over them both, as though they were in the tail of a comet—it glimmered off the surface of the water and lit up the air.

It was time.

His wings unfurled, propelling him out of the water and into flight.

He remained low over the lake's surface and aimed for the place he had last seen Miss Elizabeth.

At the final moment, the sparks faded to reveal her holding out the shirt so that he could dive right through.

He concentrated, pushed hard, felt the sting of the shirt against his back . . .

There was a scream. An impact. Two bodies tumbled down while the shirt, the shirt, was yanked away. He spread his wings and turned back in a wide arc.

The sun lit up the lake as he watched the shirt float down onto the grass. He landed nearby, waddled over, and tried to nudge it over his head, but even as he succeeded, he knew.

It was too late.

He walked through the shirt, just to be sure, but any magic it might have possessed was gone.

Miss Elizabeth was flat on her back, but she turned onto her stomach hurriedly, desperate to see behind her. Darcy met her anguished gaze.

Her lips moved, and he heard her “No,” as clearly as though she had actually spoken.

Their intruder rose from the ground, dusting herself off. “You Bennets do always seem to be underfoot,” she said sneeringly. “Whatever are you doing on Netherfield’s lands so early in the morning, Miss Elizabeth? All alone? And without an invitation?”

Mildread was back. Her scorn rang out in a string of cant. “Trust this nipcheese, bracket-faced, bird-witted . . .”

Elizabeth’s head swam as she stared at Mr. Darcy. Still a swan. After all that work and hope. All the pain. Still a swan . Something very close to despair dampened her

spirits.

For the first time in their acquaintance, Mildread appeared abashed. “Push her in the lake, Elizabeth,” the fairy cried. “She deserves it, wandering in to ruin everything despite being told over and over to stay away!”

Elizabeth sat up slowly, numbly.

“No one could have done more,” Mildread said softly.

“But what of Mr. Darcy?” Elizabeth asked, holding back her tears. What did she care that she could speak when Mr. Darcy could not?

Miss Bingley straightened. “What of Mr. Darcy?” she asked harshly, her head swinging from one side to another in search of him. Her slightly pointed nose lifted in disdain. “He is certainly nothing to one such as you.”

All was lost, and Elizabeth could not care whether Miss Bingley believed her mad. “Mildread,” she sobbed.

Mr. Darcy waddled over to her and pressed himself into her side. She threw her arms around him and wept unabated.

“Miss Elizabeth, are you hard of hearing?” Miss Bingley asked impatiently. “Whatever are you doing here?” A smirk stretched her lips. “That is, besides speaking to an owl and making love to a swan?”

“How did she . . .?” Elizabeth asked in gasps between sobs.

Miss Bingley shook her head, unable to comprehend that she was being ignored.

“There were no authentic castle ruins nearby, so I was forced to use the folly,” Mildread said contritely.

“Miss Bingley wanted to learn the way to the folly so she might convince Mr. Darcy to walk here with her. She came early to avoid being questioned by her brother and sister. All week she has been seeking him.” The fairy shrugged.

“The spell apparently had a hole or two.”

“Oh, Mildread,” Elizabeth moaned, but there was no sense in indulging her grief further. What was done was done. She removed a handkerchief and dried her eyes.

“Where did you get that?” Miss Bingley cried and lunged forward. Elizabeth instinctively pulled away. Only then did she realise that she was holding one of Mr. Darcy’s handkerchiefs, for his initials were sewn into one corner.

Miss Bingley had the advantage, as she had been standing while Elizabeth was still seated. She shoved Elizabeth’s shoulders back and pinned her to the ground as she reached with one long arm for the cloth clutched tightly in Elizabeth’s hand.

Mr. Darcy hissed and spat as his large wings beat the air. He flew up into Miss Bingley, knocking her backward, then propelled himself at her again in a flurry of feathers as Miss Bingley scrambled away.

“Call him off, Miss Eliza!” she screeched, but Elizabeth did not. She raised herself into a seated position, then stood.

“Miss Bingley,” she said brokenly as she shook out her skirt, “go home.”

The woman gave her a look that was no less than incredulous. “You do not have any standing on Netherfield land, Miss Eliza.”

Mr. Darcy flapped his wings, and Miss Bingley took another step back. Still she would not yield. “It is not for you to tell me what to do or where to go.” She wiggled her shoulders. “Mr. Darcy enjoys watching the sun rise at Pemberley. I expect him here any moment so that we may watch it together.”

The words wounded her. “The sun,” Elizabeth said woodenly as she rose to her feet, “is already risen. Were he coming, he would be here.”

Mr. Darcy waddled back to Elizabeth and stood beside her. After a moment, he leaned against her legs.

She bent to gently stroke his feathers. Mr. Darcy preened, and she laughed a little, knowing he must wish to cheer her. He honked.

“You must remove yourself this instant, Miss Eliza,” Miss Bingley insisted. “You are not welcome here.”

“There is a way to bring Mr. Darcy back, Elizabeth,” Mildread said hesitatingly.

“What is that?” Elizabeth asked eagerly.

Miss Bingley put her hands on her hips, irritated. “I said . . .”

Mr. Darcy honked twice and extended his wings as he waddled between her and the other woman. Elizabeth blinked. Miss Bingley’s hands were changing, narrowing until her fingers were thin, tapered, and not quite human.

As they watched, equal parts fascinated and horrified, Miss Bingley’s eyes rounded, her body was covered in a fine greyish-brown hair, and she shrank. And shrank.

And shrank.

Before them, in the grass, was a common house mouse. It stood on its back paws and continued to squeak at them.

The hooting behind them quickly drowned out the squeaks. In a rustling of wings and a blur of brown feathers, the owl shot past, dipping to the earth and then rising, a small mouse clutched in its talons.

Elizabeth's mouth had dropped open, but she shut it and swallowed.

"Mildread will take her back to Netherfield," she assured the swan, who simply cocked his head to one side.

"She will not hurt her." Miss Bingley could not have known what she was doing when she blundered into the middle of their spell.

She dropped to her knees and held the swan close. "Mildread says there is another way," she whispered. "Please do not give up hope. We will break this spell, Mr. Darcy. We will."

Mr. Darcy made a sawing sound, like a snore. He made it several times before Mildread dropped back down before, still in her owl form. "I daresay Miss Bingley will cause no other problems."

The snoring continued.

Mildread giggled.

"What?" Elizabeth asked.

The fairy smiled. "That is the sound of a swan's mating song, my dear."

What good was a flirtation when Mr. Darcy would be a swan forever? She struggled not to give way to her tears again.

“How did she even remember that Mr. Darcy was staying with them?” Elizabeth asked. “You said . . .”

“I also said the magic was not as strong as it should be—and, unfortunately, Miss Bingley’s delusions of grandeur were stronger. She has been nosing around for days, but until now she had not wandered so near the lake.”

Elizabeth nodded. What she truly wanted to know had nothing to do with Miss Caroline Bingley. “You said there was another way to restore Mr. Darcy to himself?”

“There is,” Mildread said slowly. “But you will not like it.”

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Miss Elizabeth was speaking to the owl again.

Darcy flapped his wings and then folded them in as he lowered himself into the water. Swimming helped him think.

He had never really considered what might happen if the spell was not broken.

Miss Elizabeth's certainty had been contagious.

She had done everything she could to fulfil the requirements of her fairy godmother, no matter how eccentric.

To have it come crashing down around them through the interference of Miss Bingley, a grasping schemer if there ever was one—it was too much.

He would never forgive the woman for her meddling.

Not that it mattered now.

He glanced back at his heart's desire. Miss Elizabeth was alone, though the owl was now perched on a branch just above her. Miss Elizabeth held out her hand, and an apple appeared. That was odd. There were no apple trees here. It was as though she had plucked one from the air.

Miss Elizabeth stared at the apple. "I just take a bite?"

"One bite is all it takes," he heard a voice respond. He craned his long neck to see

who might be speaking.

It was the owl. The owl had never spoken before. It had only hooted.

Had Miss Elizabeth been speaking with Mildread all this time? The same fairy who had trapped them in this nasty spell? She could not be trusted! Miss Elizabeth should certainly not eat anything the fairy gave her—he had to stop her.

“Then what happens?” Miss Elizabeth asked.

“Then he will be free, and you will sleep.”

No! Elizabeth! Blast this damned honking. He had to make her understand.

“One hundred years?” Miss Elizabeth asked, straightening her shoulders.

There was a pause. “Yes,” the owl said.

Darcy spread his wings out wide.

Miss Elizabeth took a breath. “Mr. Darcy will be himself again? He will be able to return home?”

“Yes.”

“Will he remember me?” Miss Elizabeth asked, and Darcy hissed.

How could she think I would forget her?

The answer was curt. “No.”

Miss Elizabeth blinked, and Darcy was sure he saw something wet in her lashes. “Perhaps that is for the best.”

It was not for the best, and it was not true. His mind might not remember, but his heart was another matter.

“Elizabeth!” he screamed, but there was nothing but a trumpet call. He flapped his wings and lifted himself into the air as she raised the apple to her lips.

He flew.

She opened her mouth.

He trumpeted as loudly as he could, causing her to turn in his direction. Miss Elizabeth’s lips were less than an inch from the fruit.

He stretched his long neck out as far as it could reach and stabbed at the apple as his momentum took him past.

The apple fell from her hand and rolled a few feet away as she cried out, but he had succeeded. When she picked it up, she stared at it for a second before shouting at him, “You must not! Mr. Darcy !”

But it was too late for that. He had managed to peck at the fruit. It was no more than a tiny morsel, but he was sure it still counted as a bite. If it killed him, at least she would be warned.

He swallowed.

The effects were immediate. He could feel his thoughts drifting, becoming harder to control. He was so tired. He circled back towards Miss Elizabeth. If he was to die

now, at least he would not die alone.

As he glided in for a landing, the darkness overpowered him. There was a brief sensation of falling, and then nothing.

Elizabeth raced towards the swan as his head and wings drooped. Mildread called out a warning, but she paid no heed. He was a few feet away when she jumped to break his fall, wrapping her arms around him and pulling him close.

Suddenly Elizabeth was grasping something much heavier than she had intended and, for the second time in the past half an hour, found herself falling to the earth.

This time, it was under the much larger and much heavier body of Mr. Darcy.

They ploughed a little furrow in the ground as they skidded to a halt—or rather, she did, as she was underneath him.

She could feel the dirt in her hair, and it was a miracle her dress was not ripped to shreds, though the damp soil of the bank had made its way down her back.

“Oof,” she said involuntarily as they came to rest. At least she had been able to protect his head, though she was sure to be bruised from the attempt.

“You said he would change back if I ate the apple! You said nothing about him!” It was difficult to get the words out, but her anger fuelled her strength.

Only it was not Mildread she was angry with, but herself.

And Mr. Darcy, too. Proud, stubborn, protective .

. . “You should not have done it,” she whispered in his ear.

It took some doing, but she managed to wriggle out from beneath him. Mr. Darcy's face was turned to one side, his arms flung out in the attitude of wings, his legs askew. Elizabeth ran the back of one hand gently down his cheek.

"The oaf seems to have done the right thing, in the end," Mildread said, not in the least concerned. She held out her wand, and Mr. Darcy's limp form floated to a long bench made from the roots of a tree that only now had sprouted from the earth. He was laid gently down on his back.

"You could not have done that before I had to dig my way out?" Elizabeth asked indignantly.

"You did not ask for my help," Mildread reminded her.

Mr. Darcy's long arms dangled over the edges of his bed, and Elizabeth arranged them across his stomach. She sat on the edge of the bench and kissed his hands almost reverently. "What were you thinking?" she scolded him. "Your sister, sir! Your estate!"

"Do you love him, Elizabeth?" Mildread asked quietly.

"Does it matter now?" Elizabeth said, her throat tight and her heart pounding in her ears. She rested her head on his chest.

"It always matters, dear."

What could it hurt to say it? He would be asleep for a hundred years. She would be gone long before he woke. He would find another with whom to make a life. She never would.

She had known her answer to his question the moment he had asked it, but never had

she known herself so completely in love as now, when she knew all such sentiments were in vain.

“I do, Mildread.”

“You did not answer his proposal.”

“I wanted to be sure. I wanted him to be sure.”

“Of what?”

“That it was true love and not a spell.”

“Well,” Mildread said thoughtfully, “that is an interesting phrase, ‘true love.’”

“Why?”

“Because that is the only thing that can save Mr. Darcy, and I am sure Miss Bingley could not manage it.”

Elizabeth squinted at the fairy. “What are you saying?”

Mildread rolled her eyes. “I suppose you require a demonstration?” She snapped her fingers.

Miss Bingley appeared, a little the worse for wear.

Her perfect coiffure was askew, and her gown had a great rent at the hem.

The moment she spied Mr. Darcy, however, she let out a scream and threw herself at his prone form.

Elizabeth grabbed at the woman's arms. "Leave him be!"

Mildread shook her head, and Elizabeth found herself ten feet away and forced to watch as Miss Bingley peppered Mr. Darcy's face with kisses. He never responded. Elizabeth saw with rising panic that he barely even breathed.

Miss Bingley stood and began to stalk towards them, but Mildread snapped her fingers, and as quickly as the woman had been summoned, so was she dismissed.

Elizabeth dipped Mr. Darcy's handkerchief into the clear, cool water of the lake and began to carefully remove any evidence of Miss Bingley's determined ardour.

"I know you must be very angry with me for allowing her to assault you in such a way," she told him.

"But you shall simply have to wake if you wish to scold me."

Mr. Darcy remained motionless.

She sniffed. "I cannot bear to see him so still, Mildread."

"True love, Elizabeth. Is that what you feel for Mr. Darcy?"

A tear escaped her, trailing down her face and splashing against Mr. Darcy's lips. "Yes," she said, the word choked from her in her grief. "But what good does it do either of us now?"

"Kiss him."

"What?" Elizabeth asked with surprise.

Mildread's sigh ended in a little grunt. " Kiss him, you foolish girl. It is not as if you have not done so already."

What harm would it do? One kiss to remember for the rest of her life. One kiss for him to carry through the rest of his.

One final kiss to say goodbye.

She lovingly pushed a lock of dark hair from his forehead and stroked his bearded cheek. Then she took his face gently in her hands and leaned in to touch his lips with hers. She lingered, tasting the salt of her own tears and shedding a few more.

"I love you, Mr. Darcy," she said when she pulled away at last, the futility of words spoken too late coiling in her chest and waiting to strike. "I would have said yes."

She threw her arms around him, laid her head on his chest, and surrendered to her grief.

Darcy came back to himself slowly. First, he acknowledged that he had all his limbs and that they ached, as though a carriage had run him down.

This led him to the conclusion that he was a man and that he was alive.

Then he heard Elizabeth speak. He would know her voice anywhere, even when it was pinched and broken as it was now.

"I love you, Mr. Darcy," Elizabeth said in an impossibly tender lament. "I would have said yes."

There was weeping, and a warm weight pressing against his chest. After a moment of rest, he raised a hand to touch it. Something soft curled around his fingers, and the

scent of jasmine wafted over him.

She loved him. She wanted to be his wife . His heart soared. She must have heard the change in its beat, for the weight lifted, and soon Elizabeth was gazing down at him.

It was an effort, but he smiled for her. “You are being impatient, my love,” he told her. “A man does like to ask first.”

She laughed. Then she cried. Then she laughed again and kissed him.

The white lights of the comet swirled around them, and he could feel his vitality returning. “One more,” he whispered to her, “and I shall have enough strength to plead my case.”

“Insufferable man,” she scolded him merrily, “how you do vex me.” She leaned in to give him the sweetest kiss he thought he might ever receive.

“Insufferable,” he agreed, when they at last parted. Elizabeth helped him to sit up and swing his legs over the side of the bench. “But handsome, no?”

Her ruby lips twitched. “Very handsome,” she said with a nod. “Even as a swan.”

He chuckled. “Marry me, you impertinent minx.”

“Is that your plea?” she asked pertly. “A lady likes to be sure.”

He huffed, but he could not convince anyone he was displeased. “Yes, you maddening woman,” he growled, “this is my plea and my offer.” He grinned. “Are you listening?”

She smiled brightly in reply and nodded.

He took her hands. "Dearest, loveliest Elizabeth, now that we are free"—he glanced over Elizabeth's head at the owl, who was silent, before returning his gaze to her—"I must tell you that I ardently admire and love you. My affections and wishes are unchanged." He could not resist adding, "If you recall, I told you they would be."

She slapped playfully at his chest, but he caught her hand and held it to his lips. When he turned it over to place a kiss in her palm, he was relieved to see that her fingers no longer bore any sign of the thorns. "Now, at long last, Miss Elizabeth Bennet," he said, "will you marry me?"

"You only had to ask," she teased. "And yes."

There was a crackling in the air. "I thought you would never agree," someone said, and huffed. "You truly are the most obtuse, stubborn girl I have ever known."

"Who is that?" he asked, for he wished to be certain. "I thought I heard her before. Is that Mildread?"

"You can hear her?" Elizabeth asked, surprised. "Are you able to see her?"

He shook his head. "Only the owl." He bowed, addressing the bird with his typical formality. "It is a . . . pleasure to make your acquaintance, madam."

"Mildread, it is unfair, you know it is," Elizabeth said. "Why should Mr. Darcy be required to suffer for my stubbornness?"

"Mr. Darcy had lessons to learn as well," Mildread said airily. "I said you must learn to share your burdens and so you have. Elizabeth, you needed to learn how to listen. He needed to learn how to speak."

Darcy grimaced. "But in the end, I said nothing of consequence."

“That is not entirely true. Were not your hopes in every word?”

Darcy could only nod.

“And it was your choice to eat the apple,” the owl—Mildread—said approvingly. “By making it, you spoke volumes.” She addressed Elizabeth. “He was more concerned for you than for himself. In making the choice to take on your burden, he freed you both. He has proven himself worthy of you.”

“I could have told you that he was,” Elizabeth said.

“But you did not . You had not yet convinced yourself that his love was true.”

Elizabeth leaned into his embrace, and he was perfectly happy to hold her. “I only wanted to know how he felt when the magic was withdrawn,” she said. “Now I do.”

“I do not approve of this . . . test you have set us, Mildread,” Darcy said, shaking his head at the foolishness of admonishing the air. “However, I must thank you for the result.”

Mildread was smug. “You were going to leave even though you were already half in love with Elizabeth. Elizabeth was going to pretend to hate you so that she did not have to feel you did not care for her.”

“I was not!” cried Elizabeth, but for his part, Darcy could not deny it, and his guilt flared. Would he really have caused her pain when he removed to town?

“Do you two have any idea how difficult it was going to be to contrive enough coincidences for you to meet again—and who would believe it? In Kent! At Pemberley! It would have taken near a year to get you to this point without some sort of dramatic event to force you to work together. I will be frank, dearies. I am not

patient enough for such a ridiculous courtship. I have Mary to think of!”

Miss Elizabeth sputtered, readying another argument, so Darcy leaned over to kiss her on the forehead. Two dark eyes gazed lovingly up at him. “Is it worth a quarrel, my love?”

She blinked. “No, I suppose not.”

“Oh, I like him very well indeed!” Mildread crooned. “He will be good for you, my saucy miss.”

“Please,” Elizabeth whispered in his ear. “Make me a Darcy as soon as may be. I do not wish to be a Bennet any longer than absolutely necessary.”

There was a huff. “Well, Mr. Darcy, she is all yours now, the ungrateful goose.” There was a puff of smoke and a shower of stars, and Elizabeth’s fairy godmother was gone.

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Just as Mildread had promised, they were able to slip back into Netherfield as though they had never left.

Their clothing was restored, and Mr. Darcy appeared clean-shaven.

Elizabeth's fatigue was passed off as a result of caring for Jane, who had been stranded at Netherfield by her mother's refusal to send the carriage and Mr. Bingley's reluctance to send her home.

Elizabeth did feel guilty about being given credit for what she had not done.

Still, as Jane was entirely well and had joined the party in the sitting room for tea and after dinner several times, she did not dwell on it.

That evening, she had the pleasure of seeing how well pleased Jane and Mr. Bingley were with one another. If Miss Bingley recalled their meetings near the lake, she did not mention them. What she did mention was a plan to rid the entire property of its cats.

"But Caroline," Mrs. Hurst murmured, "they are needed to keep down the population of mice."

"Just so," Miss Bingley replied.

Elizabeth slept late the following morning, and Mr. Darcy ate several helpings of each dish at every meal despite Bingley's delighted teasing that he was outeating Mr. Hurst. Once she was rested, Elizabeth ate more than her wont as well.

By the time she and Jane climbed into the carriage to travel home two days later, both she and her betrothed were entirely recovered.

“You and Mr. Darcy appear to be getting on very well,” Jane remarked as they turned on to the Meryton road.

“He will be visiting Papa tomorrow,” Elizabeth said with a smile.

Jane’s congratulations were effusive. “It all happened so easily,” she remarked at the end of it all. “I only wish Priscilla were as efficient.”

A month later, Elizabeth and Mr. Darcy were wed along with Jane and Mr. Bingley in the Longbourn chapel.

Mr. Darcy’s sister and his cousin travelled from London to witness the ceremony, which Elizabeth felt a great honour.

The wedding breakfast was well attended by many people who wished them well.

Even Miss Bingley pretended to be pleased.

One person not celebrating with them was the distant cousin who was Mr. Bennet’s heir.

He had invited himself for a visit but changed his mind when he discovered Elizabeth was betrothed to Mr. Darcy.

His reason was clearly stated. His patroness, who was revealed to be one of Mr. Darcy’s aunts, did not look on the match with a friendly eye.

Mildread had taken great offense. Elizabeth quite agreed.

Their relationship was repaired as they commiserated over meddling, self-important human relatives.

They were completely restored to felicity when Mildread revealed that the beautiful fairy dress she had been sewing had always been meant to be Elizabeth's wedding gown.

"How did you know we would be married?" Elizabeth had asked the morning of the wedding. "For he slighted me, and I only pitied him."

The fairy was incredulous. "Do not you know? I brought him here for you, Elizabeth."

Elizabeth was surprised. "I thought Priscilla brought Mr. Bingley for Jane, and that Mr. Darcy just happened to be one of the party."

Mildread rolled her eyes. "I knew that you would resist it. He was perfect for you, all fire and stubbornness. Mr. Bingley being perfect for your sister was just Priscilla's good fortune.

She prefers not to do too much, you know, and with Jane, she did not have to.

I shall allow her Kitty next. Mary will have need of me. "

Elizabeth wrinkled her nose. "But he was so rude at first."

"Yes. I was quite vexed at him for that. Made my job much more difficult." Mildread tapped a curl with her wand, and it moved into place.

"But I knew if I appeared angry enough, you would feel sorry for him rather than despise him. That I could work with. And then!" Mildread began to warm to the conversation.

“Then you both made a mash of it all. You needed to learn to patiently listen to him despite his penchant for speaking poorly, and he needed to practice gathering his thoughts carefully before speaking. He is charming once he is comfortable. You simply required private time together to work through it all. I gave you that time.”

Private time? She had been genuinely anxious for Mr. Darcy’s welfare. Something occurred to her. If Mildread had been pushing them together all this time . . . “Would you really have left Mr. Darcy asleep for a hundred years?”

Mildread pulled a face. “Of course not. He would only have slept overnight. But the two of you are so mulish! You required the kind of drama normally only found in Shakespeare’s tragedies to bring you together. It is simply who you are.”

Elizabeth’s cheeks warmed. “I might have done with something less theatrical,” she mumbled.

“You are a vision, my dear,” Mildread said, ignoring her.

She handed Elizabeth a bouquet of wild roses, the deep red complemented by the bold blue of her gown.

“Mr. Darcy wanted you to have these.” She took Elizabeth’s hand and twirled her about, causing the story of the fairies to rise from the skirt and dance around them.

“You are my favourite Bennet of all, you know. You always have been.” She winked. “I think we are very much alike.”

Elizabeth was determined not to forgo Mildread’s good opinion now, so close to losing her for good, so she smothered the reply that sprang to mind and instead answered the fairy with an affectionate and heartfelt embrace.

When they stepped inside, Mr. Bennet returned from handing Jane to Mr. Bingley

and took his place to escort her. Elizabeth paused a moment to glance at all the people she loved and intended to love.

At last, Elizabeth's eyes lit upon her Mr. Darcy, who waited for her near the altar, and everyone else faded away.

His dark blue eyes caught hers and held them.

He offered her everything in that look—his whole heart.

His whole soul. And she hoped that he could see in hers that everything she was, everything she would ever be—they were all his, too.

“I know I have been hard on you,” Mildread whispered as she took Elizabeth's free arm to escort her along with her father, “but that is only because I wanted you to have your happily-ever-after as soon as possible.”

“Thank you,” Elizabeth whispered back, and, with her gaze still held by her beloved's, took her first step to meet it.