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*Pride and Prejudice* Fanfiction: A First Meeting

 She walked through daylight and streaming sunshine, feeling the warmth on her skin and wondering if this feeling would ever go away, hoping against hope that it wouldn’t. She felt such an unblemished array of pure joy, aligning it with gleaming rays broken up between the green leaves, the yellow outline of their shapes highlighted on the forest floor amid the shadows—a beautiful burst of green and yellow canceling the duller browns and grays of the earth. This was a rare day in autumn, when summer’s freshness came out for one brilliant, shining day, one brief moment, before the coolness of winter’s touch began to spread across the countryside. Elizabeth held her book close to her as she wandered along her favorite forest path and headed for her reading spot. This place was one of the few she could take comfort in and find peace from the business and noise of Longbourn—away from her mother’s fussiness about their dress, Kitty and Lydia’s childish antics throughout the house, Mary’s obstinate piano playing, even from the company of her beloved father and sister. She loved them all dearly but could never quite have that sort of serenity which she always craved.

 At last, having reached her lovely little nook, she settled down to read. This small, cozy copse she found one day as a child, running around with the Lydia in the woods and hiding from their mother, and unintentionally playing a cruel joke on her, who went home and complained about her nerves until they returned. She had not even bothered to enter the forest just beyond their home, and implored her husband to go in her stead, to no avail. Even from a young age, he trusted little Lizzy to not get lost with their youngest, and to be sensible enough to come back home for supper. She and Lydia ran as far and as fast as they could into the woods, not caring when the mud covered their boots and splashed onto their small dresses even up to their waists, and Lydia being so small it got all over her face. They pushed through wild bushes and low-hanging branches, laughing when one of them inevitably tripped on a large root or among slick leaves, still wet from the rain the day before, all the while reveling in the coolness of the shade on that hot spring day. Elizabeth, careful indeed, made sure to watch the floor and always keeping tiny Lydia within her sights, so as to catch her up before a particularly large root could make her fall hard and injure her. Eventually, they stopped when they came to a stream and laughingly played in the shallow, muddy water. If they heard a frog croak, they would get real quiet (but shush each other too loudly) and, creeping so, so slowly, until nothing could be heard except the babble of the water and the occasional *rib-bit* of the frog and their movements were so minuscule they felt like statues, they would pounce! And then fall over each other almost shrieking with laughter as they chased it away.

 Eventually, Elizabeth decided it was time to go home, as Lydia had quite tired herself out. She felt pride when little Lydia began to tug at her dress and ask her to carry her—she only trusted Mrs. Hill to do that. So, Elizabeth, little as she herself was, bent down to pick Lydia up (who was half Elizabeth’s height) and carry her. As she walked along, however, she found that her legs grew heavier and her breathing more ragged and, afraid that she would fall if she continued any longer, she walked to a group of small trees and laid Lydia down in the midst of them. The babyish young Lydia fell immediately to sleep, and Elizabeth too felt so relaxed in this tiny copse. Looking around, she realized that the trees formed a circle with only a small entrance, only viewed from the front, which was how she was able to see it—that, and her diminutive height, for these trees were fairly short. They were covered in a thick, green, hanging moss, and the ones to her back—opposite the opening—curved up and over to form a sort of shelter above she and her sister. Light still found its way through cracks in the moss and among the leaves and branches so she could still see, and the rain of the day before made the green seem brighter, fresher; the brown of the bark was darker and richer for it; and the floor of this little other worldly oasis was a beautiful, soft green grass, a few inches tall but not enough to be tickly. It was close enough to the stream they had found that Elizabeth was positive she could find her way back, and that, she was determined to do.

 After a while, she awoke Lydia and together they trudged back to the big house, ready for a full tongue lashing but knowing full well that by morning Mrs. Bennet will have forgotten her troubles of that day and moved on to the next.

 Throughout the years, Elizabeth did go back to that sanctuary, and always she found it comfortable, inviting, and relaxing. It was hers, and no one knew of it, beyond Jane, who herself did not know its precise location—Jane was too nice to risk dirtying her hem for she knew that Elizabeth could sometimes overtax the housemaids as she was always getting mud and dirt and grass-stains all over her beautiful dresses. Besides, Jane found comfort within her family; silly as they were, she enjoyed the bustle and could always escape from it through her needlework. Lydia, on the other hand, was too little on that day to remember where to find it, and though she and Elizabeth did occasionally go play in the stream after that, they never stayed out as long as they had that one day, and Lydia never cared to explore once the stream was discovered.

 Elizabeth closed her book as she remembered the day she found this perfect hiding place, finding she could not concentrate. The air was almost too fresh, so she laid on her back, closing her eyes and breathing in the deep, earthy scents around her, feeling the sunshine like droplets on her hands and face, broken up by the grassy roof. Small puffs of wind breezed through her hair, the flyaways sometimes tickling her nose. She gradually fell asleep.

 A light mist caused her to open her eyes. She wiped the wetness from them and groggily sat up, realizing that the rain had started to seep into the grass and even into her dress. She felt a little cold and regretted not having brought a pelisse, having thought that the day would be warm enough. The sky had darkened with the threat of more rain, and in her still sleep state, she thought it later than it was. Elizabeth shot up, grabbed her book, and set off as quickly as she could through the forest, protecting the pages as much as she could from the lightly falling rain, though it did not get much heavier than when she awoke, and the cover of the trees saved her from much of it.

As she cleared the trees, it stopped raining for a short time, and the sun came out once more that day, a last salute. Shielding her eyes, she looked out and realized that she had overshot the distance and had come out much farther from her house than she intended, likely from the rain and from the disorienting nap. Setting off down the countryside toward Longbourn, she kept her head down and her feet steady as the sun hid behind the clouds and left little enough light to see by.

 Soon, however, she heard, or rather felt, a thudding coming from closer to her. Looking up, she stopped short. As if in answer, a tall man on a grey palfrey slowed and stopped before her. He seemed almost as surprised as she in encountering another person among this wilderness (and right before a storm too.) She, embarrassed by her appearance—haggard in hurrying through the woods and the field, hair unkempt from her nap, and slightly wet and shivering from the quickly-gathering coolness—tried to shake it off and bowed quickly to this strange man. He was wearing the clothes of a gentleman, though his too was streaked with the beginnings of a rain, and his hasty ride left him quite breathless and tired, though she saw none of it. In her eyes (and in the growing darkness) he seemed dark and refined, quite intimidating. He continued to stare at her as though she were a vision, and he trying to gather his senses enough to make her vanish. After a few moments of silence, he realized that he had not returned her curtsy, so he quickly and curtly nodded his head. Both were indeed ashamed of their rough appearances and after another awkward silence out of which neither knew what to say, he nodded his head again and hurried away.

Elizabeth remained rooted to the spot and watched as he rode off. She noted that he was heading toward Netherfield and wondered if he were the new resident. She was so bewildered by the encounter and so angry at both herself and him for not even attempting to amend the situation into a more proper one. Why had she not said a word? Why did this stranger affect her so much? She could not think of an answer nor could she understand why it bothered her so decidedly. Pondering all of this, unable to shake the strange meeting from her head, she remembered that she needed to rush home quickly. Already she could hear thunder in the distance and would not have appreciated getting caught in a downpour. Practically running home, she reached Longbourn in just enough time for her to miss the rains and avoid getting drenched. After changing clothes in order to prevent mildew settling into her favorite informal dress, she reflected on the day’s events while towel-drying her hair. She had decided not to tell her family about the man—if Netherfield was let, her mother would hear of it soon enough. What had started out as a perfect, temperate morning in her secret little haven turned into a chilly, rainy afternoon and evening. And running into the gentleman had thrown her spirits into a frenzy, though she could not figure out why she was so disheveled by it. Even so, she could not help feeling that her day *had* been interesting, if even more so from this chance meeting.