The Rich Are Always Respectable

by AMarguerite

Summary

For the Temeraire Exchange. Tharkay inherits and is forced to become respectable, with mixed results. Featuring more Jane Austen characters than you can shake a parasol at, because the prompt included a request for a ball, and what's a ball without a horde of Bennets in attendance?

Notes

Captain Bennet is indeed a Thing, according to Twitter. Captain Crawford is not, but I have a head canon that in the Temeraire universe, after the events of Mansfield Park, she inherited her uncle's dragon.

To Tharkay, ‘home’ had never connoted geographic stability-- merely the various places to set down his belongings, and to let his eagle ruin chairs. Even when 'home' had expanded somewhat, from the mental image of a dusty tent with a captive eagle to a series of tents erected on, around, or nearby Temeraire, what made a place ‘home’ had relied more on living creatures than any single place.

It had surprised him, rather, when after alighting from Gherni onto the gravel sweep of his father’s estate, the butler had come up and exclaimed, “Welcome home, Your Lordship!”
Tharkay stared at the Stately Home the legal courts of Britain had spent many years insisting was not his own.

There were enough windows to send Pitt into a tizzy of taxation, and wide enough grounds to erect multiple pavilions for all his more draconic acquaintances. And, too, he realized, looking away from the house and at the terrified domestics lined up to greet him, there were people. People whose job it was to respect him. This was, perhaps, the most bewildering aspect of all that had befallen him since the battle of Waterloo, Temeraire’s victory, the public recognition of all Temeraire’s crew, and Tharkay’s own, rather surprising elevation to the peerage.

Tharkay recalled some response was required of him (and, any road, Gherni was now butting at his shoulder, chirping for her meal).

“I thank you,” said Tharkay, eventually. “Your name sir?”

“Button, my lord.”

“Mr. Button, a pleasure. Will you make the proper introductions?”

Tharkay said the polite nothings he had once learnt as a child, and spoke only in depth with the cook, Madame Cottingy, in order to ensure Gherni was immediately fed, and that any gobbets left over could be given to the eagle currently rustling its wings on his shoulder. Madame Cottingy’s staff were all terrified, but Madame Cottingy was not. She was apparently a recent immigrant and extremely used to dragons roaming about. She asked only if Gherni preferred beef or pork, and then sent her staff running to the kitchen. However, this still left Tharkay with the stable hands, the master of hounds, the groundskeeper, the gardening staff, and all the rest of the maids to greet. At some point, Tharkay had learnt how many servants were necessary to keep up a grand estate, but such knowledge had not been either necessary or useful in a life spent scrambling around the globe with dragons.

The oddness of the situation did not abate the longer he remained in the house. He had been relieved of his flying leathers by Mr. Button, provided with tea and biscuits by Madame Cottingy and her staff, and shewn what had once been his father’s study by the estate agent. Tharkay felt absurd as he turned around in the study, its furniture and decor an odd amalgamation of British and Nepalese— an inadvertent reflection of himself, perhaps, and, of his father’s interests certainly. Tharkay deposited his eagle on the back of a particularly hideous chair and strode slowly about the room, arms linked behind his back (a way of carrying himself picked up from Will Laurence). Tharkay began inventorying traces of his mother’s influence the second turn about the room— the colors of the leather armchairs, the calligraphy on the walls instead of paintings, the very layout of the study. The desk faced a window that overlooked the gardens, with an interesting rock formation in place of the bonsai tree usually to be found in a scholar’s study. The desk had only untrimmed paper set upon it, thus posing the question Tharkay had not posed to himself for many years: quill and inkwell or calligraphy brush and inkstone?

Tharkay began to open a drawer, hesitated a moment, wondered how sentimental his father had been in later years, and whether or not his uncle had even bothered to use this study after convincing the government he was the properest person to be an Earl, not a half-bred, probably illegitimate savage— but he opened the right-hand desk drawer and found the miniature of his mother, looking solemn and more than a little bored. Tharkay fought a smile. Of course his uncle would have kept a different book room. And of course his father had been sentimental to the last.

It was perhaps not nice but satisfying to know he had taken an accurate measure of all his family members. And, he thought with a pang, it was neither nice nor satisfying to have adopted his father’s definition of home only when the people who had made a Stately Home a home had gone, and the one family member who had made it Stately had died still wishing Tenzig, his father, and
his mother had never existed.

A knock on the door.

“Enter,” said Tharkay, wondering idly if ‘Come’ was more aristocratic.

“My lord, a Captain Laurence has also landed, as well as the dragon Temeraire--”

Tharkay, still standing, leaned against the edge of the desk, his back to the window. “Good. See that they are comfortably situated. Put Captain Laurence in the room that commands the best view of the lawn by the lake, and pray guide the dragon Temeraire to said portion of the lawn. You will have to set anyone who can be spared from the rooms to setting up a tent for Temeraire. Mrs. Pemberton will want a room adjoining that of her charge, Midwingman Roland. Other than that, make shift as best you can.”

To his credit. Button said only, “Ah. Will your lordship be hosting all of the officers at dinner this evening?”

The study was enough for one day, thought Tharkay, glancing down at the open drawer. To tackle the formal dining room, and in particular the silver epergne in the exact center of the table, the one that had always exasperated him as a child, would be straining his patience to the extreme. “I think not. Dinner on trays this evening, and hot baths all around--”

“This is a lovely room,” came a voice from outside. Tharkay turned. A large, draconic eye now filled the window. “You will not like to leave now, I am sure.”

Button would have gaped, if that was not too vulgar a term to use on so eminently refined a person.

"I think my butler would like to leave, if you will excuse him, Temeraire?” said Tharkay, dryly. “He has many arrangements to make.”

"Certainly,” said Temeraire.

Button bowed and strode off quickly and stiffly, with the air of someone falling back on good manners to make sense of the chaos about him. There was a faint rumble as Temeraire laid down by the window. “I cannot see all of it, but this is a nice room, Tharkay. A little plain, perhaps?"

“Think you so?” asked Tharkay, glancing at a particularly upsetting painting of the wheel of reincarnation. It was large, and featured many people being tormented by demons. His mother, who was technically Buddhist the way Tharkay was technically Christian, had always hated it. His father had loved it. Tharkay was sure that was symbolic of something.

Almost with satisfaction, Temeraire said, “It is not as large as Lord and Lady Allendale’s house, but--”

“My Lord?” came the voice of Button once more.

Tharkay turned. “Yes?”

"A, er, Mr. Bennet of Longbourne has come to pay his respects.”

Tharkay frowned. One of the benefits of being a social outcast had been the ability to avoid unpleasant personal obligations. He not really care to meet his neighbors.

Button, looking much harassed, added, “He, er, sir, I think-- if you will permit a word, my Lord?”
“I will permit a whole paragraph,” said Tharkay, dryly. “You have caught me in a generous mood.”

Button looked thoroughly confused, but persevered, “There is, er, talk, sir. Hill the under gardener-- his aunt is housekeeper at Longbourne. Mrs. Hill said one of the young ladies there is, er....” With the air of someone a little ashamed to be stooping to gossip: “She is also in the Corps, sir.”

“Really?” asked Tharkay, searching his memory.

“Pray, to what dragon is she captain?” asked Temeraire.

Mr. Button was thoroughly flummoxed to be addressed by a giant flying reptile.

"Do you recall?” asked Temeraire, a little doubtfully. “I hope her dragon is not dead.”

“Send Mr. Bennet in,” said Tharkay. “I think only he might successfully answer these questions for us.”

“And,” said Temeraire, from the window, “pray send for Laurence as soon as he has washed off the dust.”

As soon as Mr. Button had scurried off to bring in both of these men, Temeraire said, in a whisper that caused several sheets of paper to fly off the desk: “I thought you might not like to be too obvious about sending for him, but I assure you, none shall think ill of you for having Laurence there to help you with all the particulars. He is good at that sort of thing, and if anyone takes issue, I shall-- I shall sit on them!”

"Dear me,” came an unfamiliar voice from the door. “Let us hope it shall not come to that.” A man in late middle age came forward to shake hands with Tharkay. “I am Mr. Bennet, my lord. My second eldest is Captain Bennet of the Longwing Wollstonecraft. I have a high regard for aviators. Something about the service seems to knock the silliness out of them. Of course, if you miss such a staple of polite society, I can acquaint you with the finest specimens in the county.”

Tharkay was surprised and rather pleased to think he might have an ally in the neighborhood.

He took the portrait of his mother out of the drawer, set it on his father’s-- or rather, his desk, and turned to Mr. Bennet. “Sir, I could not ask for a finer welcome.”

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The news that Netherfield was let at last was very soon eclipsed by news of a more bewildering shade: the Earl of Hertfordshire’s apparently legitimate son off of a Nepalese lady had taken up his father’s title, and was renovating his main estate to better accommodate dragons. Aviators, the ladies of the neighborhood hastened to tell each other, were thoroughly respectable sorts now, and ought to be welcomed and hailed as heroes.

The Bennet family was particularly eager to promote this view. Indeed, to the youngest Miss Bennets, an estate full of aviators on half-pay was just as good as a campful of militiamen in training. To the eldest, news of dragon pavilions meant news of her favorite sister, Captain Bennet of the Longwing Wollstonecraft. And indeed, Miss Jane Bennet so carefully managed her family, distracted her younger sisters, and tended to her mother that Mr. Bennet was able to pay his visit earlier than other men of the neighborhood.

He returned quite triumphant, and by announcing that he had indeed called upon George Tenzing Tharkay, Earl of Hertfordshire, former captain of feral dragons, and former agent for the East
India Company, produced in his wife such competing feelings of delight and horror that she was silent for a full two hours altogether.

“Now Jane,” said Mr. Bennet, when his eldest daughter came eagerly into his library, “I can see that you dared not interrupt this very rare spell of silence-- for this I thank you-- but I am sure you have questions for me.”

“Indeed, sir-- had his Lordship any more recent news of Lizzy than we received in her last letter? That is, I hope you were well received and found him a very amiable man--”

“Ha! Jane, I will allow you, who possess so much amiability, to measure it for yourself.”

“Father--”

"I shall tell you the particulars, so that your judgement may be well-reasoned. But I must disappoint you on one particular.”

Jane held her breath in fear that some particular evil had befallen Captain Bennet.

"I saw but part of one dragon. A grave disappointment! I hope you will not grieve overmuch.” Mr. Bennet was so odd a mixture of quick parts, sarcastic humour, reserve, and caprice, that Jane had at first feared the Earl would take against him, particularly since Mr. Bennet had left Longborne declaring it his duty to acquaint the Earl with all the greatest follies and silliness within ten miles.

The Earl was apparently of a similar humor and, in any case, the mention of a Captain Bennet of the Longwing Wollstonecraft roused immediate interest. The Earl was more acquainted with a Captain Crawford, in Captain Bennet’s division, but knew of Captain Bennet by report, and had some visitors that might offer fresher news. A Captain Laurence was sent for, as well as a Midwingman Roland and her chaperone, Mrs. Pemberton, who were able to give more particulars about Captain Bennet. Jane listened eagerly and almost leapt up out of her chair for joy upon hearing that the Earl had offered to house Wollstonecraft should Captain Bennet be given leave enough to visit.

“That is very good of him,” exclaimed Jane, as fervently as she could.

"The manners of aviators may be rather easy, but they give one great satisfaction,” replied Mr. Bennet. “Now he has only to be prevailed upon to give a ball to be received with equal happiness by the rest of the family.”

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When he had been a young man, full of rage against the unfairness of society, and without any means of expressing that rage in a useful fashion, Tharkay had decided that causing scenes and randomly vanishing would be the best way to provoke the suspicions he knew everyone had about him.

In the soberer years past thirty, he began to think that it probably would have been equally petty and much more effective to train his eagle to steal wigs, or to defecate on the heads of any white men it came across. At least then, he would not have to break himself of the uncomfortable habit of looking for the nearest exit as soon as his estate agent looked elsewhere.

"-empty property greatly in need of repair,” he concluded, looking expectantly up at Tharkay from his leather portfolio of documents. Tharkay forced himself to settle back in his father's chair. He wished for his eagle, so he might have something threatening to fidget with, but all he could do was look aristocratically bored and search for the most upsetting answer he could give to the
problem.

“No matter; the ferals can repair it in a fortnight if they are overseen by someone competent. Where do we usually get our supply of stone and lumber?”

The agent gaped at him. “Sir, you-- you are planning on taking on... feral dragons as tenants?”

“‘Feral’ is something of a misnomer,” replied he, dryly. “You have seen Gherni. She has very pretty manners. I daresay her brethren will make better tenants than most people.”

The agent seemed to have lost all powers of speech. Tharkay leaned back in his chair, and steepled his fingers, as his father once used to do. Tharkay wondered, briefly, if he still possessed any ability to behave according to the expectations of others. The answer was ‘most likely not.’ But now, instead of being vindictively satisfied he was getting people to display their prejudice, he was merely shocking strangers he would have to live with for... the rest of his life.

He cleared his throat and said, “Mr. Beauclerk, I can assure you that you have nothing to fear from dragons. They can do the tasks of twenty men in a single day; Wellington himself used dragons to rebuild London. I am of the firm belief that they will be helpful to the whole neighborhood. Will you allow me to introduce you to Gherni?”

Though he did not look very pleased with this, Mr. Beauclerk allowed himself to be taken outside, and Gherni, promised a whole goat for her efforts, was induced to fetch and carry for the astonished gardeners. Mr. Beauclerk was persuaded, and Gherni likewise to go fetch some of her calmer brethren, or at least those happy with the promise of regular meals for regular work, and only one heavyweight for whom they must give way at feeding times. And indeed, they proved quick, strong workers-- perhaps not very efficient, but they minded Temeraire when he came to roar at them for their silliness, and Mr. Beauclerk stammered multiple times, “It should-- this should have taken a seven month, not a se’enight!” when presented with a very nice barn-turned-pavilion surrounded by fields full of crookedly drawn rows.

Tharkay was very pleased to have so easily solved the problem.

The neighbors were not very pleased to have dragons amongst their society.

“Did you think they would be?” asked Will.

"No, I thought I would be more amused by their shock,” replied Tharkay, as they strolled around the feral dragons’ latest attempt at a wheat field. “But I find I would rather not upset the entire neighborhood. Shocking, how war changes us all. What do you think I should do?”

"Hold a public day for your tenants, and a ball for your neighbors,” replied Will, promptly, with the air of someone stating an obvious fact.

Tharkay did not recall what a public day was, but misliked the sound of it. “Think you so?”

Will looked at him with a curious mix of concern and bewildered propriety. “Indeed. I have been astonished you have not yet held a public day. My father held them every fortnight-- Tuesdays around three or four of the clock.”

“Surprisingly, my father did not care to, er, display me or my mother during public days,” said Tharkay. He avoided looking at Will, who would look stricken and sorry for him. Tharkay had been desperate for pity as an adolescent but, having found none, he rather scorned it. It was easier to deny he had wanted pity in the first place, then to receive it with years of pent-up relief.

The ground shook as Temeraire landed to break up a squabble between two dragons eager for
their turn with their toy (a plow). “That is enough! If you cannot learn to share it, I shall take it from you!”

The little dragons began sulkily explaining their quarrel, full of gesticulation and flying histrionics.

No wonder, thought Tharkay, leaning his elbow on top of the stile, and his chin on his hand, that they could not hire any human farmhands even while offering the highest daily wage in the parish.

"A public day would go far in alleviating the fears of your neighbors,” said Will, presently. “Once they have been among dragons, they will know there is nothing to fear.”

Tharkay much doubted this, but he was always prone to irrational decisions where Will Laurence was involved. “Will they? Well, let us test your hypothesis. I shall hold a public day. Though I hate to suspend any pleasure of yours, I must veto the ball. Temeraire will want to come, and I really cannot justify remodeling an entire wing of the house.”

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When it was fine, Mrs. Bennet roused Jane early and bullied her into a riding habit, and onto a horse, thinking this the best way for Jane to meet the new young men of the village unchaperoned. Jane had found the path of least resistance the easiest one when it came to her mother and did as bid. She felt guilty no matter what she did, she had once written to Lizzy. To disobey her mother was unfilial, but she had no interest in chasing after a husband, for all she knew her duty to marry, and to marry well. To obey was improper-- not horrendously so, but skirting a line of good behavior Jane herself would never cross.

‘Sweet Jane!’ Lizzy had written. ‘I must confess that I have spent so long in the Corps I cannot entirely understand your scruples, but if you are lonely, I will ask Mrs. Pemberton to ride across your path some day. She is a gentlewoman of extremely good breeding, and has lived a most exciting life. I hope you will get along.’

Jane was still looking at this letter when someone called, “Miss Bennet?”

She looked up and was much surprised to see it had been a dragon.

The dragon was a small and pretty sort of creature, courier-weight. It trotted up to her with every appearance of friendliness, saying again, “Are you Miss Bennet?”

“I am, indeed,” said Jane, not sure how best to respond. “And you are?”

“Oh!” The dragon stared at her and said, solemnly, “I am a Greyling.”

"How nice,” speculated Jane.

The dragon nodded. “It is very nice. I am given very nice things to eat. Once, I had a cow! A whole cow! But I had a very nice goat this morning, though Termer insisted it be cooked with spices that made me sneeze. But Termer is nice, for he gave me the cow once.”

"That sounds lovely,” said Jane, to whose lips genteel commonplaces rose like fresh water at a spring. “Mr. Termer sounds like a very good friend to you. Pray, he is not your captain?”

The Greyling vigorously shook his head. ‘No! James is my captain! James is the best captain!”

“I am sure,” said Jane, soothingly.

“Volly, get back here!” cried a midwingman, running down the hill. “Captain James may let you
wander all over creation, but all of Tharkay’s neighbors are spooked by you—”

“Miss Bennet is not!” exclaimed Volly indignantly. Jane hastily agreed. Indeed, she could have imagined being more frightened of a month-old kitten than Volly.

"He really was not bothering you, ma’am?” asked the midwingman. Jane hesitated, unsure of a boy or a girl was addressing her, but the midwingman took this for reticence and whirled on Volly, saying, “I heard you calling out the lady’s name! However did you get it?”

“That nice fellow who gave us the chickens,” replied Volly, as if this made any sense.

“Mr. Bingley?” interpreted the midwingman.

"He said she was the most beautiful girl here, and his friend said she smiled too much.”

Jane did not know how to react, and blushed in confusion. She did like Mr. Bingley, as well as she could like anyone she had met once, at a public dance, but was mortified to be criticized, and to have that criticism repeated before strangers. Feeling she really ought to say something, Jane said wretchedly, “I was smiling at a letter-- from my sister-- Captain Bennet, of Wollstonecraft-- she is a great wit--”

“Oh!” exclaimed the midwingman, relaxing. “That’s all right then, Captain Laurence cannot scold me for telling you I’m Emily Roland, then, midwingman on Temeraire. And you cannot mind dragons if your sister is a captain! Say, I think I know her, but she is dark and you are fair, so it was a difficult connection to make.”

“Pray, have you seen her?” asked Jane, eagerly.

"No, but I think Mrs. Pemberton might have. They write each other. Come, I shall take you to the house. Tharkay is having a public day, so I think that means it is all right for a stranger to come into the house.”

This was technically true, but Jane was too embarrassed to explain all the reasons why a Miss Bennet of Longbourne could not possibly show up at a public day. Aviators were not apt to understand the nuances and careful gradations of social standing in the country, and Jane’s rather tangled protest that any member of the landed gentry would never show up for a public day, but apply privately to the housekeeper for a tour instead, was so confused that Midwingman Roland thought it best to ignore Jane entirely.

Jane was crimson with embarrassment as Midwingman Roland led her into the room where Tharkay, the new Earl of Hertfordshire, was very friendly to the small dragons nosing at the food set out, and dryly polite to all the local peasantry. His companion, who wore his blond hair in an old-fashioned queue and gold epaulets on his green coat, had a properer air about him, and seemed better able to handle the complex social code of the country. Indeed, he turned and looked rather shocked to see Jane present.

“Pray-- pray forgive me, but Midwingman....” said Jane, not sure how to continue.

“Midwingman Roland,” said the captain, looking severe. “Did you kidnap Miss Bennet?”

“The proper word would be ‘abscond,’ I believe,” replied the Earl, turning to face them. “I hope you are not planning to ask Mr. Bennet for ransom? Unless you wish the answer to Garrick’s riddle about Kitty, a fair but frozen maid, you will be disappointed.”

“I am not holding anyone for ransom,” replied the indignant midwingman. “Miss Bennet asked for news of her sister, and I said Mrs. Pemberton had some. Mrs. Pemberton!”
“We are in a drawing room, not aloft,” said the captain, severely. "Have a care to the volume of your voice."

The Earl gave her a short bow.

Jane curtsied, rather afraid he was someone like Mr. Darcy, who never looked at a woman but to see a blemish. But he was not inclined to find fault, for then he said, “Miss Bennet, it is a pleasure to meet you, though I regret it is under apparent coercion from one of my household.”

Jane murmured something, of which ‘pleasure’ could probably be distinguished.

“This is Captain Laurence, of the dragon Temeraire.”

Captain Laurence bowed. “Ma’am.”

Jane tried not to stare. It was not every day one was in the presence of so famous and so infamous a man. She had not expected someone who had more-or-less caused the invasion of Britain to be so formal and proper.

An elegant woman in early middle-age approached. “Miss Bennet, I am Mrs. Pemberton. I beg your pardon for the informality of our manners. Perhaps you would care to take a dish of tea with me in my private parlor?”

“I should like that very much,” said Jane, seizing onto this escape rope with alacrity. “Midwingman Roland told me you had seen my sister recently?”

Mrs. Pemberton had, and they spent a comfortable half-hour chatting about Elizabeth, and then about the sorts of commonplaces that always oriented Jane in any storm: families, the neighbors, homes. Jane was very much more comfortable when they were rejoined by the gentleman. She was inclined to be shyer and reserved, embarrassed at having shewn up at a public day, but she fancied she spoke sensibly enough, and was so used to her father’s continual sarcasms that the Earl’s manner put her very quickly at ease. She could then answer Captain Laurence with more energy, could better attend some shared story about opium smugglers in China, and could even contribute a little on the work of the militias in Hertfordshire during the invasion. She was quite at her usual serenity by the end of the hour, and agreed with the proposed plan of everyone to go see the new-hatched dragons Temeraire had insisted be put in the nursery.

These dragons were feral and refused to be harnessed, but they were very sweet creatures all the same, and Jane soon persuaded them to eat out of her hand and to say, ‘Thank you Miss Bennet’ afterwards.

"You do not fear them, miss?" asked a visiting captain, much astonished.

“No,” said Jane, by now surprized anyone could have ever feared a dragon. “I should sooner fear a newborn kitten. If you are kind to any thing capable of kindness, I do believe it will be kind back.” Then, eagerly, “I can see why my sister likes them so. She is Captain Bennet. Do you know her?”

Captain James did. Jane was not even put out when her mother and sisters descended upon them all, and was only sorry that her mother should catch her in such informality. She had been sitting with Mrs. Pemberton rather than with any of the gentlemen, but her arms were still full of small, snoring reptiles, and she was on the floor rather than on a chair.

Everyone hastily rose and Jane made introductions as she deposited her tangle of baby dragons into the pile of cushions by the fireplace.
“It is indeed a pleasure to have made your acquaintance at long last,” said Mrs. Bennet, ignoring everyone else in the room to focus on the Earl. “We had looked for you at the ball at Meryton, but I suppose you do not go to public dances, sir?”

“No, indeed,” replied the Earl.

“Then you must throw a ball, sir!” exclaimed Lydia. “Kitty and I both think so!”

“Kitty, Lydia!” exclaimed Jane. But neither of them paid Jane any mind and, skirting the dragons, approached the Earl and Captain Laurence, laying out the absolute necessity of a ball, the niceness of a private one in particular, the desire of the whole neighborhood to meet everyone, etc.

Jane was once again mortified, particularly as her mother crowned this silliness with, “Oh, indeed a ball! That is the very thing, sir the very thing! I hope you will not break the hearts of my two daughters by refusing.”

Captain Laurence coughed.

Looking rather put-upon, the Earl said, “I suppose I cannot. The next full moon, I hope, will satisfy everyone?”

A shadow fell across the room and the dragon Temeraire exclaimed, “Oh, that will satisfy me exceedingly!”

For the first time in many years, Mrs. Bennet opened her mouth without saying anything.

A wicked gleam came into the Earl’s eye. “Good. I am glad to hear it Temeraire. We shall be sure to invite Lily’s division, since you were so lately of it yourself. And Wollenstonecraft’s division as well.”

“Thank you,” said Jane, fervently.

“Indeed, you are much too good,” began Mrs. Bennet.

But the Earl had come across a way to strike her dumb: astonishing her. And so he turned to Jane, bowed and said, “All that is left, then, is to ask Miss Bennet for the first two dances. I think I have got the jump on my competitors-- I do not think you otherwise engaged, Miss Bennet?”

“No, I am not. You do me too much honor, sir--”

“Nonsense,” interrupted the Earl, still in a spirit of mischief. “There is no one with whom I would rather open a ball, Miss Bennet, particularly not when at least a handful of courier weight dragons will also be making up the set.”

Mrs. Bennet did not say a word for two days.

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Tharkay regretted agreeing to the ball as soon as the Bennets had left. For one, he was now subjugated to Will’s lugubrious dance instructions. Tharkay could not remember the last time he had danced, nor could he ever recall learning how to do so. Fortunately, Demaine and Roland were so much worse at dancing than he was, Tharkay could find at least something to amuse him in the wasted hours of effort.

“No-- my left-- my left-- ouch!” Roland broke the line and shook out her leg. “Ouch.”
“It was his left,” said Mrs. Pemberton, who was partnering Tharkay. “Shall we try again?”

“From the top,” said Will, who had turned out to be a high stickler about dance as well as any other strange social construct Tharkay could not understand. “Wait-- no, no, Tenzing, where are you going?”

“To the top of the set?”

“No, no, I meant from the top of the measure.” Will looked over his shoulder at the hapless Mr. Beauclerk, who had been drafted to play the pianoforte. “Mr. Beauclerk, if you please? No, Roland, you are to Mrs. Pemberton’s right. It would be easier if we had more than two couples....”

Tharkay said, “Oh, aye, let us invite Gherni back in. I’m sure there is a third pianoforte somewhere in the house that she could break by dancing into it. There are even one or two footmen left who have not yet been impeded in their duties. One must be fair about these things.”

Mrs. Pemberton disguised a laugh as a cough. “From the top of the measure, Mr. Beauclerk?”

It it was some consolation that Tharkay at least had got the movements correct, though he followed instruction woodenly and without grace. It was less that he did not know how to move, and more that he did not see the point of having to move in such a fashion. What *was* the point of hopping from foot to foot? Tharkay’s enjoyment of the ridiculous had heretofore been in others, not in himself.

"Beg pardon, my lord,” said Button, entering the drawing room, with the expression of fixed politeness that had become his signature expression. “Captain Bennet and her division have arrived.”

Tharkay fled the ballroom before everyone’s exclamations over this had finished, and was very pleased to hear the chorus of, “My lord?”s and “Where the devil did he go?” echoing down the hall.

Captain Bennet was all over dust, but was in very good spirits, railing him cheerfully about his asking her sister for the first two dances. “But I am glad you did,” replied Captain Bennet, with a laugh. “Jane is the sweetest creature alive. She will whisper all the steps to you, and make it look as if you are leading, when you are struggling to keep up.”

“That much relieves my mind.”

"I thought it might! I am flown ahead to greet my family. Mary-- Captain Crawford, that is, I think you worked with her during the French invasion?-- will arrive tomorrow with her crew, as will Captain Wentworth, of the dragon Laconia. I have but a small division to my name, now the wars are over.”

"Yes, but it is the best,” replied Wollstonecraft. “It took nearly two sessions of Parliament for everyone to accept that Henry Crawford was not half the captain his uncle was, and for Mary Crawford to be made, but she is the first female captain of any dragon not a Longwing. I have long disapproved of the human government’s insistence on providing only men about an egg. It is pure nonsense. Our division proves it. Why, even Laconia is equally happy to take orders from Anne, and she is not Laconia’s captain.”

"Have you met Temeraire?” asked Tharkay. “I think you will have much to discuss.”

And indeed, they did, much to the fire-breathing rage of Iskierka. Wollstonecraft spent the entire next day lecturing her on the socio-political implications of setting so high a store on the attentions of the male sex, and the two of them went off to do God-alone-knew-what.
"Wollstonecraft has always been rather odd," said Lily, when Tharkay got tired of greeting guests before the ball began and had sulked off to see the dragons. "I am surpriz’d she did not go off with Temeraire, for they both are strange about things no one can help."

Temeraire, meanwhile, was making a great show of pretending not to care by asking loud questions of the concertmaster.

"You are not too uncomfortable, I hope?" asked Mrs. Pemberton of the concertmaster, as she chivied the midshipmen inside.

“No indeed, ma’am,” said the concertmaster. “I have played for Temeraire before. It is a pleasure to do so again.”

Mrs. Pemberton paused a moment. “My lord! Why are you not indoors as well?"

“I do not wish to be,” said Tharkay.

"That is no good excuse. Come, I know Lord and Lady Allendale will soon arrive. Captain Laurence will turn purple if you are not there to greet them.” And so Tharkay did, with as much gracious politesse as he could muster while surrounded by a crowd of nodding acquaintances. He was uncomfortable in the extreme. He had no memories to fall back on of proper balls, and could think only to say, “Lord Allendale, Lady Allendale. It is a pleasure.”

Lord Allendale clearly did not agree, but was too polite to say so. Lady Allendale said, formally, “It is our pleasure to meet you, sir. We thank you for your kind invitation.”

Tharkay bowed. He did not know what else to say. Any compliments he could have paid to their son would be too heartfelt for Tharkay to be comfortable saying aloud anywhere, let alone in the receiving line for a ball, and any news of himself or his way of managing an Earldom would send Lord Allendale into an apoplexy. The Bennets were in the doorway, so he thought vaguely of the first two dances.

“I regret that I already asked the eldest daughter of my nearest neighbor for the first two dances, Lady Allendale.”

She smiled. “Oh! My dancing days are long over, my lord, though it is gracious of you to assume otherwise. I am here to see my son, merely.”

“I believe you will find him in the ballroom, madam.”

With the Bennets he was a little easier. He knew to bow to anything Mrs. Bennet said, to ignore anything Miss Lydia or Miss Catherine giggled, to look grave at anything Miss Mary quoted, and to immediately tell Miss Bennet the whereabouts of Captain Bennet. He was then able to pass his time very pleasantly making fun of the assembly with Mr. Bennet until the concertmaster came and asked if he might begin the ball.

Tharkay sighed and sought out Miss Bennet, who was in close conversation with her sister.

“Tharkay, I have heard the most shocking thing,” said Captain Bennet, with a twinkle in her dark eye. “Someone had something bad to say of my sister! Who is this Mr. Darcy, that I might challenge him to pistols at dawn?”

Tharkay glanced around the ballroom. Quite characteristically, Mr. Darcy was being antisocial in a corner. Tharkay envied him. “He is over there, by a wall sconce. I beg your pardon, Miss Bennet, has someone offended you in my home?”
"Oh no!" exclaimed Miss Bennet. She was more confident with her sister’s candor to bolster her natural feelings of what was right. “I think he must have been joking where he thought no one could hear, only Midshipman Roland was present. Mr. Darcy thought I smiled too much.”

Tharkay tried very hard not to laugh.

Captain Bennet did not. “What a wretched man, to have no pleasure in the smile of a pretty woman! Poor Tharkay, you must have a rough time of it here, in this horrid wilderness of landed gentry.”

"Your father has provided good company and, you know, Captain Laurence has been a constant houseguest.” Captain Bennet’s eye was a little too knowing. Tharkay held out his hand. “Miss Bennet?”

Miss Bennet curtsied and whispered to him, “Do not worry, my lord! I will take care of you.”

And indeed she did. Dancing was much easier with someone whispering all the steps to him, and dragging him through the partnered parts. Mrs. Pemberton was a fine dancer, of course, but she preferred to teach by example instead of letting him cheat. Jane Bennet was too good-natured to mind, and too charitable to begrudge someone clearly suffering any aid it was in her power to give. The two dances passed more pleasantly than he thought they could have otherwise, and to his surprise, he was afterwards surrounded by matrons hoping to get him to ask their charges to dance.

Tharkay wondered what he had done in a past life to earn a spot in such a personalized circle of hell.

The scent of expensive perfume wafted over, then came a silk-gloved hand on his arm, and the carefully modulated voice of Captain Mary Crawford: “My lord! I hope you have not forgot an old friend from the Battle for Britain?”

He turned to her with considerable relief. “Captain Crawford. Indeed, I have not.” Captain Crawford was in a gown of aviator green, unlike the other female captains, who had come in their best dress uniforms. She had always been best at quick skirmishes, and took some pride in the reputation she had amongst her division for ending fights so effectively, enemies would not dare fight her again. Tharkay was very glad of this skill as she tucked her hand into the crook of his elbow, and bore him off at once.

"There, I have saved you from the lions,” said she. “My division captain will be thrilled. It is difficult to impress her, you know, she has scruples. She will never confess herself pleased with my conduct unless I have come to the aid of some fellow creature.”

“I know how difficult that must be for you,” replied Tharkay.

With a glance at the group of fuming matrons, Captain Crawford laughed and leaned against his side. “Captain Tharkay! Your wit is the same as ever. Oh, I beg pardon-- my lord. I am so unused to addressing you with a title.”

“You still like to crush your enemies into dust,” said Tharkay, amused.

The matrons had dispersed, only their muttered imprecations against the laxity of the Corps lingering where they had stood.

"Naturally,” said Captain Crawford, releasing his arm. “We all of us were changed by war. I cannot be blamed for learning too well my lesson. Really, our whole division is plagued with
captains who keep facing uncomfortable truths about themselves. Captain Bennet still willfully misinterprets people she dislikes, and prefers to gather evidence of the bad of anyone she finds wanting rather than change her opinion— which was rather uncomfortable until I saved her life at Corunna. Machiellivan I might be, but at least I am loyal to those who deserve it. Captain Wentworth’s temper is implacable unless dear Anne talks him into reason, and Anne gives way rather too easily to persuasion.”

“You include Mrs. Wentworth in your list of captains?”

“If you had been in Spain with me, instead of traversing the globe in search of Captain Laurence, you would too. She kept us alive in ways the government would never reward with medals and fine speeches.”

They talked through the next set, but Tharkay was alarmed and displeased at how often people stopped their progress across the ballroom towards the dragons. Everyone seemed to want to talk with him. Tharkay was inclined to think it all a practical joke until he realized no one had taken on any superior tone with him. Even Mr. Darcy had treated him with the taciturn politeness he used on everybody except Mr. Bingley.

"Tell me plainly, Captain Crawford," said Tharkay, struck with a sudden, horrible thought. “Have I become respectable?”

Captain Crawford laughed. “You are as respectable as I am.”

Tharkay took what comfort he could from this, and turned to his guests. The duties of a Stately Home felt unnatural still.

Eventually, he managed to sneak out to the dragons, just in time to see Midwingman Roland showing off her garnets to the tenant dragons, Gherni showing to her fellows the steps of a cotillion, and Will patiently explaining to Temeraire why it would be a bad idea for a heavyweight dragon to stick his head into the ballroom even if it was for a minute. Tharkay felt a sudden onrush of affection. Balls at least saved more time than multi-year wanderings across the globe, thought Tharkay. He thought briefly and painfully of Sara and then thought, “She would not have been comfortable here. My mother never was.”

"My dear," said Will, to Temeraire, cutting through the painful fog of Tharkay’s thoughts, “you cannot enter the ballroom. It is a sad crush already.”

“There is no need to make it literal,” quipped Tharkay.

“Tenzing,” said Will, in the same tone of exasperated affection he had used on Temeraire.

Tharkay smiled. “My apologies, Will. But I must object, Temeraire, to my home being smashed when I have put such effort into its improvements. I have only just now felt I have arranged it to be a more accurate reflection of myself.”

Works inspired by this one [The Rich are Always Respectable [Podfic] by lattice_frames]

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