A Truth Universally Acknowledged

by fro_baby

Summary

Things have never been quiet in the Xavier household, but they get entirely out of hand when the very eligible and very rich Mr. McCoy takes up residence in the estate next door. Charles, however, is quite certain that Mr. McCoy’s German houseguest is the most dreadful man he's ever met. The trouble is, his sister has fallen entirely in love with Mr. Lehnsherr, and Charles is beginning to suspect that he has, too. (Pride and Prejudice AU, starring Charles as Elizabeth, Erik as Darcy, Raven as Jane, and Hank as Bingley.)

Notes

I don't even know how this happened. Please bear with my glaring historical inaccuracies and pathetic attempts to write somewhat like Jane Austen.
Chapter 1

*It is a truth universally acknowledged, that a single man in possession of a good fortune, must be in want of a wife.*

—Jane Austen

Charles Xavier was, then, lucky in that, although he was both a man and single, his fortune was by no means good. For he could thus be excused from his complete and utter lack of interest in the seeking out of a wife; despite the casual flirting in which he engaged on a fairly regular basis, he had yet to find a woman who held his interest for more than a few minutes.

They were all, he mused as he strolled slowly around the crowded yard behind his family’s house, rather dull and obliging and *sweet*, with every last bit of disagreeableness and original thought bred out of them like very expensive horses. Dodging an amorous rooster making a beeline for his latest unfortunate avian conquest, Charles rather wished that everyone could just behave according to the laws that nature had so wisely laid out and stop letting silly things like manners get in the way. Like the chickens copulating madly in the muddy yard, they could all just get this whole procreating business over with and dispense with the ridiculous farce of courtship and marriage, which, although he had never experienced it, seemed a rather odious and tiresome institution altogether.

He was, of course, still quite a young man, and so the search for a wife had not yet become urgent. But he did not, as his mother so delighted in reminding him, have all of eternity to pick out a nice girl and settle down. As the eldest and only Xavier son, he was to inherit their rather ramshackle estate, complete with rambling house and overgrown grounds. And since he was, or so everyone said, the absent-minded intellectual type, he would most certainly need a level-headed sort of girl to run the household and see to it that the shingles were not falling off the roof. Or whatever it was that happened when houses went to rack and ruin; he was not entirely sure.

His musings were rudely interrupted by a shrill cry from inside the house that could only have issued from the lips of Mrs. Xavier, a stout woman of middle age whose twin goals in life appeared to be marrying her children off and embarrassing them to death, the advancement of both of which she attempted at every opportunity. At this very moment she was calling for Ravenna Xavier, her only daughter and Charles’ junior by two years. Out of a sort of general boredom and good-natured curiosity, Charles left the muddy yard behind and ventured indoors to see what had gotten his mother into such a state.

“Charles!” He had hardly set foot inside the house before he was accosted by the aforementioned madam, all aflutter with a bundle of ribbons in one hand and a crumpled letter in the other.

“Where on earth has your sister gotten to? Have you seen her?”

“I am afraid I have not,” he replied mildly, stepping aside to allow her to bluster out into the yard.

“Is something the matter?”

“The matter?” She turned round to look at him, head cocked to one side in a manner oddly reminiscent of the chickens. “No, no, nothing is the *matter*. I have only discovered something which may, with luck, lead to the first convenient marriage this family has seen in three generations. But nothing is the *matter*, my heavens. Oh, gracious me, where is that girl? Ravenna!”
“Mother?” A blond head appeared around the corner of an outbuilding, to be rapidly followed by the remainder of Charles’ sister. “Mother, what on earth is going on? Is everything all right?” Brow furrowed, she hurried across the yard towards her mother and brother, skirt hitched up in one hand and a small cloth-bound book in the other.

“Oh, everything is more than all right, my dear,” Mrs. Xavier twittered, taking her confused child by the arm. “Have you heard the news?”

“News?” Ravenna repeated, shooting her brother a perplexed glance. Leaning against the doorframe, he shrugged his shoulders, the corners of his mouth quirking upwards in amusement at watching his unfortunate sister fall victim to his mother’s hysterics.

“I have just had it from Mrs. Cassidy,” Mrs. Xavier began breathlessly, “That Netherfield Park is let at last!”

“Mrs. Cassidy?” Charles pushed himself off the doorframe, his interest finally piqued. “Is Sean about, then?”

Glancing over her shoulder, Mrs. Xavier spared her son a dismissive glance and an irritable, “Oh, do be quiet, you silly boy!” Miffed, he slumped back against the doorframe as she turned back to her daughter.

“Now, do you not want to know who has taken Netherfield?” she demanded of Ravenna, who was at this point beginning to look rather put-upon.

“You are going to tell me regardless of what I want,” she pointed out drily, which elicited a snort of amusement from her brother. Ignoring the both of them, Mrs. Xavier put her arm round her daughter’s shoulders and started to steer her towards the house.

“Well, Mrs. Cassidy says that the estate has been let to a young man of considerable fortune by the name of Henry McCoy. His family is of old Scottish stock, but he is by all accounts a perfectly amiable and upstanding Englishman.”

“He sounds absolutely delightful,” Ravenna muttered sarcastically, allowing her mother to shepherd her up the back steps and past her grinning brother.

“And what, pray tell, is his allowance?” Charles asked, for he knew his mother too well to believe that she cared so much for gentlemen who were merely amiable and upstanding.

“Don’t be vulgar, Charles,” Mrs. Xavier snapped, but her resistance was less than half-hearted. Her son’s grin only increased in size as she huffed, “If you must know, Mrs. Cassidy said it was something near five thousand a year.”

“My god!” Charles pushed himself away from the doorframe once more to follow his sister down the narrow hallway towards the kitchen. “You had best run over to Netherfield and start seducing him at once, hadn’t you, Raven?”

“Stop it, Charles!” Ravenna glared at him over her shoulder, folding her arms across her chest. She was just a few days shy of nineteen and, despite all her womanly airs, still rather prone to childish tantrums, a fact which entertained Charles to no end.

“That will not be necessary, young man,” Mrs. Xavier said coolly, herding her children into the deserted mid-afternoon kitchen, “For there is to be a ball in the village tomorrow night, and it is certain that Mr. McCoy is to attend.”

“Put on your brightest feathers, Raven darling,” Charles grinned, snatching up an apple out of the
bowl on the kitchen table. “You’ll be doing the mating dance tomorrow night.”

“You’re disgusting, Charles!” Ravenna shrieked, going a bit pink around the ears. “Absolutely filthy!” Still grinning, her brother merely leaned up against one side of the fireplace and took an enormous bite of his apple.

“I wouldn’t be so smug if I were you, Charles,” his mother said sharply, leaving her daughter be for the moment and bustling over to her son. “All the prettiest girls in the village will be at that ball, and you can be certain that you will be attending it as well.”

“Oh, mother, no,” Charles groaned, his dejected head falling back against the stone mantelpiece. “I fully understand your endless quest to marry Ravenna off to some rich and unsuspecting young man, but I beg of you, do not inflict those horrible village girls upon me.”

“I believe that marrying off your sister will prove considerably less difficult than convincing some nice girl to consent to a match with you,” his mother retorted, causing his sister to giggle in a way that Charles thought most priggish and irritating. But before her son could protest further, Mrs. Xavier hurried out of the room, leaving Charles to chew noisily on his apple and glare at his sister.

“Perhaps if you’re lucky, Charles, Mr. McCoy will leave a girl or two for you to dance with,” Ravenna said sweetly, giving him her stickiest smile as she followed her mother into the parlor. “For your sake, I hope they do not have too many warts,” she added over her shoulder with a simpering flutter of her eyelashes. Rolling his eyes, Charles tossed his apple core at her retreating back before turning and striding back out into the yard to kick irritably at the chickens.

The following evening saw the two Xavier children arriving at the village ballroom, which was already packed almost to the rafters with jubilant revelers of all ages. Followed closely by their parents (their mother dreadfully overexcited, their father rather irritated at having been dragged from his study for so frivolous an occasion), they found their way onto the dance floor, which appeared loaded beyond its capacity with pairs of bouncing feet.

At the earliest opportunity, Ravenna slipped away from her parents and went off to collude with a group of her giggling girl friends. Seeing his mother distracted by the disappearance of his sister, Charles followed suit and plunged into the crowd in search of his best friend, Sean Cassidy. The red-haired young man was soon located off to one side, leaning against one of the many columns that framed the boundaries of the dance floor.

“Charles!” he cried, straightening up to greet his friend. “How are you, sir?”

“About as well as can be expected under the circumstances,” Charles said drily, joining his freckled friend beneath the shadow of the column.

“Oh, don’t begin the usual moaning about being forced to attend a ball,” Sean scoffed, rolling his lively green eyes. “You always end up dancing with half the girls, entrancing three quarters of them, and having an absolutely wonderful time.”

“The first and last I will admit to,” Charles chuckled, “But I fear that I have seen little evidence of the second.”

“Please, Charles.” Once again, Sean’s eyes slid in the direction of his own eyebrows. “I saw more than a few heads turn while you were making your way over here. They all think that shabby old coat of yours is terribly dashing.”

“Do they?” Charles blinked down at the aforementioned frock coat, a rather battered black
specimen with slightly tarnished buttons and frayed cuffs. “I only wore it because all my others were covered in mud. All this rain has been absolutely murderous for the yard, you ought to see the state of it-”

“They seem to think you one of those ragged, impoverished poet types,” Sean interrupted him with a dismissive wave of one hand.

“Now, I say!” Charles cried. “I harbor no illusions about the state of my clothes, but I certainly do not go about in rags. And I am by no stretch of the imagination impoverished!”

“I cannot help what women think,” Sean shrugged. “Their minds are as mysterious to me as they are to you, I assure you. But I have heard that they all think you quite romantic, so I would not trouble yourself too much over it.”

“And how, pray tell, have you come by this information?” Charles asked, a trifle coldly. He was still rather smarting from the ‘ragged and impoverished’ comment. But to his surprise, Sean hunched his shoulders and shoved his hands into his pockets, quite the picture of discomfort.

“The girls of the village have taken to…importuning me for information about you,” he admitted sheepishly. “They have discovered that I am your closest friend, and since you are not exactly forthcoming about your personal life, they have turned to more desperate measures. Namely, me. I must, however, confess that I wonder at their ardent fact-seeking, for men of mystery seem to only further intrigue them.”

“Oh, Sean.” Charles shook his head, putting an apologetic hand on the shoulder of his friend, who by now looked rather like he had just tasted something bitter. “I am sorry, old man. I had no idea. If only the girls sought after you and not me; their efforts would prove far more successful, and they would not be wasting their time on an unworthy gentleman.”

“If you ever find a way to convince them of that,” Sean sighed grimly, “Do let me know.”

At that moment, the attention of both gentlemen was attracted by a small commotion by the front door, accompanied by a sudden silence spreading throughout the ballroom which had been so raucous only moments before. Craning their necks, the two were able to catch a glimpse of three forms moving through the parting crowd like Moses through the Red Sea.

“The famed Mr. McCoy, I presume,” Charles murmured. “But which one is he?”

For there were two gentlemen in the little triumvirate; both tall and dark-haired, but differing vastly in face and disposition. The man on the far left had straight, brown hair and a wide, open face with bright, curious eyes and a friendly sort of smile already half-formed on his lips. By contrast, the man at his side bore a far more foreboding expression, his dark locks pushed back from a heavy brow that nearly overshadowed a pair of piercing blue eyes. And he was by no means smiling; his expression was in fact more akin to a glare, his thin lips set in a narrow, firm line.

The third member of their party, a tall, slender woman, was equally imposing, but by dint of her beauty rather than her demeanor—though, to be sure, her delicate features had a rather haughty cast to them beneath their gleaming crown of fine, pale blond hair. Sharp eyes surveyed the surrounding crowd from beneath their thick, dark lashes, and the faint curl of her upper lip suggested that she did not much care for what she saw.

“I think him the gentleman on the left,” Sean whispered, craning his head still further to get a better look at the three. “The lady is his half-sister, one Emma Frost.”

“Aptly named, I think,” Charles chuckled quietly, observing the proud glint in her diamond eyes.
“But who, then, is the man in the middle? He glares at everyone as if they were plotting to murder him—or perhaps as if he were plotting to murder them!”

Ducking his head, Sean had to slap his hand over his own mouth to stifle the laughter bubbling up from his throat. “No, no,” he gasped after a moment, leaning against Charles to watch the progress of the imposing young man. “If my mother’s gossip was correct—which, I must admit, is by no means a certainty—then he must be Mr. Lehnsherr of Derbyshire.”

“Derbyshire?” Charles repeated, a touch of laughter in his voice. “I had no idea it was such a dreadful place.”

Perplexed, Sean looked over at him. “Dreadful?”

“It must be, for he looks the most miserable man I have ever seen,” Charles sniggered, and once again Sean had to strangle his own laughter.

“Stop it, Charles, or I shall suffocate!” he hissed, fighting to keep his smile off his face. “Besides, you mustn’t blame Derbyshire for Mr. Lehnsherr’s dour aspect. Mother says he was born into an absurdly rich family in Germany and spent the majority of his youth in that country.”

“I don’t know who I pity more,” Charles snorted. “Him or the Germans.”

“Oh, I shouldn’t pity him. I have heard tell that he is the heir of more than ten thousand pounds a year.”

“Mercy!” Charles breathed, looking on as the triumvirate stationed itself in a clear space at the far end of the ballroom and dancing resumed as normal. “Mother was wasting her breath on Mr. McCoy; it is this German that my sister ought to be after.”

“Yes, her and every other girl in the village,” Sean whispered grimly. “Though something tells me that they will find themselves rebuffed rather rapidly…”

“Whatever would make you say that?” Charles murmured, smirking faintly as he eyed Mr. Lehnsherr’s forbidding countenance. “Well, if anyone can seduce him it’s Ravenna. If nothing else, she’s persistent—oh, god, here comes my mother. Quick, let’s-”

He never got to finish his sentence, for in that moment his mother’s sharp eyes found him lurking in the dark shadow of the column. Piercing the dual ruckuses of the dance music and the ambient chatter of the onlookers, her apparently superhuman voice called out his name, and so, shooting Sean an apologetic glance, he pushed his way towards her and mercifully reached her before she could scream out again.

“For God’s sake, Mother,” he hissed, feeling himself start to flush under the many curious stares aimed in their direction. “What on earth do you want?”

“Help me find your sister, dear,” she ordered him, towing him through the crowd by his sleeve. “We are going to go introduce ourselves to Mr. McCoy.”

“Oh, God, Mother, no,” he groaned, attempting futilely to jerk his sleeve out of her iron grasp. “I beseech you, do not subject me to more of your social maneuvering-”

“You just hold your tongue, young man,” Mrs. Xavier snapped. “For your information, we are going to go welcome our new neighbors to the village, as they are strangers here and in need of new friends.”

“Neighbors—for God’s sake, Mother, Netherfield is over three miles away!”
“Never you mind that, now. Where on earth is your sister?”
They soon located Ravenna, who, although about as overjoyed to leave her friends as Charles was to leave his, brightened up slightly at the prospect of meeting their ‘new neighbors.’

“It have not the faintest interest in Mr. McCoy,” she confessed quietly to Charles as they followed their mother through the crowd, “But his friend is positively mesmerizing!”

“His name is Mr. Lehnsherr,” Charles whispered back, “And according to Sean, he’s German and twice as rich as Mr. McCoy.”

“Even better!” Ravenna giggled, clapping her hands in delight. Rolling his eyes, Charles went to stand beside his mother, who had stopped dead just a few yards shy of the party of newcomers. The three of them were conversing quietly amongst themselves, paying no heed to the curious looks being sent their way by sundry village revelers.

Before Charles could ask what was the matter, Mrs. Xavier said, in a voice so carrying she might have been a carnival barker: “Oh, my! They’re all so lovely!”

All at once, the three lovely heads turned towards the Xaviers, three lovely faces arranged in varying degrees of confusion and irritation. Out of the corner of his eye, Charles saw Ravenna turn bright red.

“Please, Mother,” he drawled sarcastically, engaging his usual defense against embarrassment, “Could you say that a little louder? I do not think the people in Constantinople quite heard you.”

A nervous titter escaped Ravenna’s lips as they made their way towards the lovely three, Mrs. Xavier still somewhat stunned and Charles still doing his absolute best to affect total disinterest. It was, he was discovering, rather difficult to do this when Mr. Lehnsherr’s eyes were fixed on him like he was the only other soul in the room.

“G-good evening,” Mrs. Xavier managed shakily, dipping down in a quick curtsy. “I wanted to introduce…that is, we are your new neighbors. We’re just down the road from Netherfield, at Xavier Manor.”

“Ah, yes,” Emma spoke up, smiling graciously. “I do think we drove past it this morning. A rather…rustic estate, if I recall correctly.”

“Most charming, I thought it,” Mr. McCoy added hastily, giving the Xaviers a smile of his own. “It had a very…charming garden.”

“Thank you,” Mrs. Xavier said weakly, her eyes flickering nervously from Mr. McCoy to his half-sister, who was regarding her with increasing disdain. From behind his mother, Charles cleared his throat, which appeared to bring Mrs. Xavier back to her senses with a little start.
“May I present my son, Charles Xavier,” she began somewhat more firmly, being on more familiar ground now. “And my daughter Ravenna.” The two Xavier children stepped forward and bowed and curtsied respectively, and were met with matching bows and curtsies from their new neighbors.

“A, uh, a pleasure to meet you, I’m sure.” Mr. McCoy smiled uncertainly, his eyes clearly drawn to Ravenna’s still flushed face. After a moment’s pause, he shook himself slightly, as if recalling where he was and what manners were, and added, “My name is Henry McCoy, and this is my half-sister, Miss Emma Frost, and my good friend Mr. Erik Lehnsherr.”

“The pleasure is all ours,” Charles replied with a genteel smile of his own, rapidly considering the best and most inconspicuous way to indicate to his mother that now was the time for her to make her exit.

Fortunately, there was no need to shove her unobtrusively towards the punch table; of her very own accord, she beamed shakily up at Miss Frost and said, “Well, it is certainly lovely to meet you, and I daresay that you shall have to come to dinner one of these days. Now, forgive me, but I must go find my husband and make sure he has not gotten himself into too much trouble.”

“Er…lovely to meet you, Mrs. Xavier,” Mr. McCoy called after her, for she was already bustling off into the crowd.

“How…quaint,” Miss Frost remarked, turning to Mr. Lehnsherr. “I must say, I find this country practice of getting to know your neighbors positively charming.”

“I did not realize that it was such a novel idea,” Charles put in with a half-smile. “We simple country folk must be terribly backward in our ways.”

“Not at all,” Mr. Lehnsherr spoke up at last. His deep voice surprised Charles with both its abruptness and its smooth, barely accented English. “In Germany we were well acquainted with all our neighbors.”

“And how do you find England, Mr. Lehnsherr?” Charles inquired, bouncing with practiced ease from shock to his customary polite curiosity. “I daresay it must be rather different from Germany.”

“In some ways,” Mr. Lehnsherr shrugged. “I have found, however, that there are some things that may be counted universal.”

“Indeed?” Mr. McCoy leaned in curiously, much like a scientist eager to receive news of his colleague’s latest discovery. “Do share your observations with us. What about England do you find singular?”

“There are many things,” Mr. Lehnsherr began thoughtfully, his eyes once again lingering upon Charles’ face. “But I must admit, one which impressed me early on is the singular beauty of the English people.”

“Ah, well, I rather think that any Englishman could have told you that,” Mr. McCoy smiled, and Charles did not miss how his eyes once again darted briefly towards Raven. “I—well, I do not like to sound presumptuous, but I cannot help but think that our women outshine those of the entire continent.”

“Indeed,” Mr. Lehnsherr said quietly, but with an inflection so odd that Charles could not help but look up at him curiously. For once, however, the tall German would not meet his eyes.

“Incidentally…” Mr. McCoy began, somewhat awkwardly, “I was wondering, Miss Xavier, if I
might have this dance?”

“Oh?” Ravenna blinked; she had been staring fixedly at Mr. Lehnsherr the whole while, hanging on his every word like an infatuated puppy. “Oh, yes,” she murmured, deflating slightly. “Of course.”

Beaming like a little boy who had just found an orange in his Christmas stocking, Mr. McCoy took her arm and led her off towards the dance floor, upon which a new dance was just beginning to take shape.

“If you will excuse me,” Miss Frost began cordially, moving to follow them, “I think I may join this dance as well.”

“I hope we shall meet again,” Charles said with a bow. Smiling rather blankly, she nodded and made her way onto the dance floor.

“Goodness, that was rather strange, wasn’t it?” Charles observed as soon as she was out of earshot. At Mr. Lehnsherr’s quizzical look, he added, “Going off to join the dance, I mean, without asking either of us to go with her.”

“Oh, that.” Mr. Lehnsherr waved a dismissive hand in Miss Frost’s general direction. “Do not trouble yourself over her behavior. She is rather…”

“Frosty?” Charles supplied with a grin. Mr. Lehnsherr’s countenance remained stony, eyebrows furrowing as if he were offended that Charles even dared to think that he would succumb to such a terrible joke.

“She puts more thought into how she does her hair than into the petty cruelties she regularly inflicts upon the many men who adore her,” he said coldly, his upper lip curling slightly in disdain, “For reasons which I must admit I cannot fathom.”

Taken aback, Charles raised his eyebrows and said, “Her half-brother, however, seems a most charming and likable gentleman.”

“Too likable altogether,” Mr. Lehnsherr scoffed. “He is as kind and spineless as an old woman, and for all his book learning understands little of the complexities of the human heart. The girls of this village will soon tire of him when they discover that he is terrified of them, a trait which women absolutely abhor.”

Before Charles could reply to that shocking statement about Mr. Lehnsherr’s purported friend, the German waved the whole conversation aside with one large, heavy-knuckled hand and launched abruptly into a new topic.

“But enough of them. Tell me, Mr. Xavier: do you agree with Mr. McCoy? Are English women superior to those of the continent?”

“I must admit that I am no connoisseur of women, continental or otherwise,” Charles shrugged with a self-deprecating little smile, doing his best to catch his balance on the rapidly-changing terrain of this conversation. “But if there were to exist a country populated by women who were at ease with their own intelligence, then I might be inclined to disagree with your friend.”

“I beg your pardon?” Mr. Lehnsherr’s dark eyebrows furrowed. “I’m afraid I do not follow.”

“My trouble, you see, is that I have no interest in women who lack intelligence,” Charles explained, slipping his hands nonchalantly into his pockets. “Or who are, in fact, intelligent but pretend not to be, which in my view makes them just as dull as their unintelligent friends.
“Why not, you may ask, seek out intelligent women? Unfortunately, I must confess that I find them equally disagreeable as the stupid ones. Perhaps even more so, for it seems to me that women who acknowledge their own intelligence tend to be incredibly hostile. They wield their minds as weapons. Many of them eschew any and all social diversions and disdain beauty, making them about as entertaining as dusty old books—extremely intelligent, yes, but dreadfully dull.”

“I fear that you seek a woman of unattainable perfection,” Mr. Lehnsherr remarked with a quirk of one eyebrow. “For you seem to demand not only intelligence but beauty, confidence, social grace, and good humor. It will not be long before you realize, Mr. Xavier, that your ideal woman does not and cannot walk this earth.”

“So be it,” Charles shrugged. “I think it better to pursue an ideal than to simply settle for every inferior alternative that throws itself my way.”

“And what if you do encounter your ideal woman,” Mr. Lehnsherr began, regarding Charles with an amused but detached sort of curiosity, “Only to find that she is married, or cares not for you, or is in some other way unattainable?”

Shrugging, Charles shook his head with a rueful chuckle. “You’re far too practical, my friend. Clearly, I do not think these things through as thoroughly as you do.”

“Clearly,” Mr. Lehnsherr repeated absently, his dark brows furrowing once more as his expression slid from amusement to bemusement. Those shadowed eyes once again fixed themselves upon Charles’ face, this time with such an intensity that he could swear that he felt his fair skin burning as if under hot sun. A silence began and stretched on uncomfortably, until Charles could bear it no longer.

“I do beg your pardon,” he said finally. “Have I said something to offend you?”

“No, no.” Mr. Lehnsherr shook his head firmly. “I must admit, however, that some of your English customs continue to confound me. We met only minutes ago, and yet you called me your friend.”

“Ah. That is not a custom peculiar to England,” Charles explained with a chuckle, “But to me. I make it a habit to assume every man my friend until he proves himself to be otherwise. Do forgive me if in your case I have assumed incorrectly,” he added, the smile dropping from his face as he noticed that Mr. Lehnsherr’s frown had only deepened.

After a moment of consideration, the German said thoughtfully, “I do not know whether to think you merely presumptuous or optimistic to the point of foolishness. You hold the most curious views of the world of anyone that I have ever encountered. I am, however, curious as to how you obtained them, for they themselves seem to suggest that you have experienced very little of life.”

Charles felt his mouth drop open, and he wasted a second or two gaping rather inelegantly at the impassive German as he sought desperately for an appropriate response to this unwonted attack. Nothing in his experience had prepared him for this; every gentleman of good fortune he had ever encountered (not that many chanced to pass through the village, but it did happen upon occasion) had been of good nature and finer manners, but this man was proving a rather flummoxing exception to the rule. How did one respond to a rude gentleman? When an ordinary villager spoke out of turn, one could, if feeling particularly pugnacious, speak back. But gentlemen of great fortune could not be spoken back to. On the rare occasion that anyone was rude to him, Charles’ solution was to simply remove himself from the vicinity and seek better company, but abruptly removing himself from this gentleman’s company was not a feasible option, either, especially if he
did not want to dash his sister’s hopes of a favorable match. Finally, he decided to opt for a rather
more conciliatory response.

“I realize that I must appear terribly provincial to you, sir, since my family has neither the means
nor the inclination to take me more than a small distance from this village. I submit to you,
however, that it is equally possible to gain knowledge from a provincial existence as from a
worldly one. In fact, I think that one might glean a greater understanding from a prolonged and
intimate study of one small English village than from gallivanting about the continent trying to see
everything all at once. A wide range of experience might, in fact, leave one with entirely limited
knowledge, having only scratched the surface of existence.”

“A feeble mind might console itself thus,” Mr. Lehnsherr remarked idly, “For it would surely be
overwhelmed by the vast wealth of culture that the continent has to offer. It pretends to learn from
a small village, when in reality that village is nothing but a protective shell for pathetically
untenable ideologies that would quickly disintegrate in the larger world. A truly inquisitive mind
would quit this shell regardless of the potential damage to its preconceptions, leaving the weak
mind to cower in the safety of provinciality, much like a child might confine itself to a cabinet for
fear of the possible dangers contained in the remainder of the house.”

Charles felt a stream of heat flood into his cheeks. Perhaps his own words had not come out to be
as conciliatory as he had intended, but they by no means invited this kind of insult. He was willing
to withstand a good many criticisms, but he would never allow anyone to call him feeble-minded.

“You condemn my quickness to call men my friends,” he began evenly, lifting his chin to its
haughtiest angle, “And yet you have judged me equally quickly to be feeble-minded. It is clear
that you think me optimistic to a fault, but it is equally clear to me that you merely occupy the
opposite end of the spectrum. Is that so much better, sir?”

“I do not count pessimism a fault,” Mr. Lehnsherr said firmly, fixing his piercing blue eyes upon
Charles’. “It is the mere result of experience, whereas optimism is born of a lack thereof.
Pessimism can lead one to be overly cautious, it is true, but it precludes insult and injury, whereas
optimism invites them both. Pessimism breeds clear-eyed views of true human nature, while
optimism breeds nothing but the silly, simplistic views that you clearly possess.”

Stung, Charles instantly retorted, “However silly you may think them, sir, my views are so strong
as to leave me with no doubt that for all your grand inheritance and fine continental breeding, you
are one of the rudest gentlemen I have ever met. But despite that, I pity you for the ill opinion you
clearly have of humanity. I do not doubt that it will lead you directly to a life of loneliness and
isolation after all the people who currently pretend to adore you realize that they cannot, in fact,
stand you. Good evening, sir.”

With that, he bowed stiffly to the unmoving Mr. Lehnsherr and beat a rapid retreat through the
crowd surrounding the dance floor, head held high and heart pounding rather loudly in his ears.
He was not entirely certain of what had just transpired, but he had not taken more than a dozen
steps before he realized that he had just told off a gentleman. Furthermore, he had just told off a
gentleman in whom his sister appeared to be developing an abiding romantic interest. Further still,
he had just told off, in an unspeakably rude fashion, the heir to ten thousand pounds a year who
might have been somehow convinced to marry Ravenna and considerably enrich the Xavier
family. Despite all that, however, he could not entirely bring himself to care.

“I absolutely forbid you to continue any sort of association with Mr. Lehnsherr,” Charles told his
sister, throwing himself angrily into one of the armchairs in the Xavier parlor. “He is cruel and
disloyal to his friends, and on top of that as ill-mannered and boorish as the meanest drunkard in
this whole village."

“If you had not been so busy dancing with all those pretty village girls,” Ravenna said coolly, turning her back to her brother as she went to stand by the fire, “You would have noticed that it was perfectly impossible for me to form any association with Mr. Lehnsherr whatsoever.”

“Whatsoever do you mean, Raven?” Charles demanded, beating his fingertips irritably upon the arm of his chair. The very mention of the man had proved enough to send him back into the grip of the rage that had so fully possessed him earlier that night in the ballroom.

“He expressed no interest whatsoever in forming any association with me,” Ravenna sighed, sounding altogether too disappointed for Charles’ liking. “He spent the entirety of the ball standing against the wall observing the proceedings as if they were of a funeral rather than a dance. He did not dance once, Charles!”

“All the better,” Charles huffed. “The man is not worth wasting a single dance upon.”

“Oh, but did you not think him dashing?” She turned from the fire and leaned upon the mantle, a lovesick look in her eyes that Charles did not like in the least. “That wild, dark hair; that forbidding brow; those chiseled features…”

“He is a rude and hateful man,” Charles said flatly. “I spent a few minutes conversing with him and did not enjoy a single one of them.” This was, in fact, something of a lie, for the conversation had been rather amusing before it had turned to insults, but Charles felt he was allowed a little exaggeration when attempting to dissuade his sister from another of her ill-fated romantic ventures.

“He was by far the most interesting man at the dance,” Raven proclaimed dreamily, and Charles could not restrain a dismayed groan. His sister’s proclivity for “interesting” men had caused both siblings nothing but mischief and heartbreak. “I wonder how long he will stay at Netherfield…”

“It is of no import,” Charles said brusquely, quitting his chair and crossing to one of the parlor windows. “You must not go and fall in love with him, Raven; it will do you no good, for I think the man is so hard-hearted that he could not love Aphrodite herself.”

“People can be taught to love,” Raven said softly. Charles emitted another groan and pressed his forehead to the cold glass of the windowpane.

“What of Mr. McCoy?” he asked plaintively of the silent, dark world beyond the window glass. “He seemed positively enchanted with you. I do not think that he took his eyes off of you all night.”

“He is a sweet enough gentleman,” Raven admitted, but Charles heard no interest whatsoever in her voice. “But I found him rather lacking in social graces.”

“Which, of course, Mr. Lehnsherr possesses in abundance,” Charles said sarcastically. “Raven, Mr. McCoy danced with you five times!”

“He is not a very accomplished dancer,” she said disdainfully. When Charles turned round and shot her an incredulous stare, she glared back defiantly. “Why do you look at me so, Charles? He stepped on my feet several times, and when we did not dance we had to converse, which proved infinitely worse. He prattles on endlessly about subjects which I understand very little and care about even less. I think you two would get along very well.”

Ignoring his sister’s diatribe for the moment, Charles gave her a pleading look. “He cannot be as terrible as you make him sound. I have heard that he is an extremely intelligent and learned gentleman, and from our brief encounter I thought him exceedingly polite and good-natured.”
“That’s just the trouble,” she sighed, poking at the frayed carpet with the toe of one shoe. “He is so intelligent and polite and good-natured and obliging and cheerful and it’s all so fretfully dull, Charles. He hardly holds my interest. Mr. Lehnsherr, on the other hand…”

“Do not speak of Mr. Lehnsherr any longer,” Charles snapped, leaving the window and striding towards the door. “He is so foul that I fear that any more talk of him will permanently upset my digestion.” Having reached his destination, he turned on the spot and told his sister, “I forbid you to be in love with him, Raven, and that is that!”

Her only response was a derisive and spiteful sort of laugh, which followed him out the door and all the way upstairs to his bedchamber.
Chapter Notes

Just a heads-up for all you hardcore Jane Austen fans: the plot arc of this fic is going to more or less follow the 2005 movie, not the book (with, of course, some significant deviations at the end, since Austen's happily-ever-afters are a bit more difficult when the lovers both wear breeches). I know it's a bit sacrilegious, but it's just more concise this way, and I'd like to write as few dances as possible. Anyway, enjoy!

“An invitation!” The shriek rang out so suddenly from across the breakfast table that Charles very nearly dropped his fork into his kippers. Blinking (he was still a bit foggy, mornings not really being his strongest time of day), he looked up at his mother, who was staring at the letter in her hand like it had just dropped one hundred pounds into her lap.

“What sort of invitation?” Ravenna asked eagerly, leaning around Mrs. Xavier in an attempt to read over her shoulder. Whatever she saw made her cry out nearly as loudly as her mother, her hands flying to her face in joy and shock.

“A letter from Netherfield, I take it,” Charles observed grimly. Shaking his head, Mr. Xavier got up from the table and fled to his study, muttering under his breath about “women’s affairs.”

Charles looked longingly after him; he had always taken after his father, inheriting the elder Xavier’s proclivity for thick, dusty books along with his absentminded habits and bright blue eyes. Unlike his father, however, Charles’ studious nature came paired with a nagging sense of responsibility for his sister and a desire to protect her from yet another romantic fiasco.

“Mr. McCoy has invited Ravenna to Netherfield for tea this afternoon!” Mrs. Xavier exclaimed, waving her hands wildly about and nearly knocking over several glasses in her excitement. “Oh, darling, you simply must go—you must go at once! Go, hurry, put on that blue frock—”

“Mother, the horses are out to pasture,” Charles reminded her, glancing warily at his overjoyed sister. He was all too certain that her excitement had nothing to do with the letter’s author and everything to do with his foreign houseguest. “I could send for them, but the carriage will not be ready for another two hours at least.”

“Never mind the carriage,” Mrs. Xavier scoffed, flapping her hand at her son as if to swat him out of her sight. “That abominable horse of yours is still tethered in the yard, is it not?”

“My horse?” Charles reared back indignantly from his breakfast. “Mother, Ravenna cannot ride him! Besides, the sky looks absolutely dreadful this morning. It’s certain to rain in no time at all.”

“All the more reason to hurry, then,” his mother said briskly, shooing Ravenna from the room. “Go, you silly girl, get dressed! Hurry, hurry!”

“I don’t like your haste,” Charles muttered, returning morosely to his kippers as his sister dashed upstairs. “It is unwise to send her out on horseback in this weather, and you know how recalcitrant Blackbird can be with an unusual rider. Why will you not allow her to wait for the carriage?”

“Ignorant boy,” Mrs. Xavier huffed. “You know nothing of the laws of courtship. Ravenna must go at once to demonstrate that she is well-disposed towards Mr. McCoy and responsive to his
wishes.”

“Responsiveness is no reason to get caught out in the rain,” Charles retorted.

“Don’t be ridiculous. That mad horse of yours will gallop all the way to Netherfield before the clouds break. And if it does rain, all the better, for it is almost certain that Ravenna will be invited to stay the night at Nethefield!”

“Your machinations never cease to amaze me,” Charles said frankly, shaking his head. “I hope you know that your daughter cares not a whit for Mr. McCoy or his five thousand a year. She has become perfectly enamored of the detestable German.”

“I have no complaint about that, for I had it from Mrs. Cassidy that his allowance is twice Mr. McCoy’s!” Mrs. Xavier failed to repress an entirely inelegant giggle that made all the hair on the back of Charles’ neck stand on end.

“For heaven’s sake, do you care for nothing but money?” he demanded hotly. “Mr. Lehnsherr is a cruel, bad-tempered creature who will bring Ravenna nothing but misery!”

“Do stop carrying on this way,” Mrs. Xavier said dismissively, rising from the breakfast table. “You’re nothing but a spoiled child. Ah! My darling, you look so lovely!” She promptly forgot Charles as her daughter reentered the room, radiant in a blue frock and white sash. “Come along, I bought some blue ribbons in the village last week that will look positively fetching in your hair.”

The two women swept from the room, leaving Charles to a grim contemplation of his tea that was interrupted mere minutes later when his mother bustled back into the room and cried, “You lazy child, get up from that chair and ready your horse! Up! Up!” Ignoring his faint protestations of the ill effects of an unfinished breakfast on the constitution, she hassled him from his seat and out into the yard. There she left him to saddle up Blackbird, which he did with many a muttered complaint and resentful glance towards the house. Finally, however, the horse was readied, and Charles had no choice but to lead him round to the front of the house, where Ravenna was waiting.

“Stop your fretting, Charles,” she cried gaily as she mounted. “I shall ride like the wind; no rain will catch me!”

“I worry less about what will transpire during the journey,” Charles said grimly, “And more about what poor decisions you will make once you arrive at your destination.”

“Oh, fie,” she laughed, taking the reins in her hands. “I’m positive I shall have a marvelous time at Netherfield while you sit here in the mud and mope. Good-bye!”

With a mocking look towards her brother and a cheery wave towards her mother, Ravenna urged her mount out onto the road and towards Netherfield. Shaking his head, Charles went back into the house and returned to his cold breakfast, which provided little comfort for his troubled mind. He picked at it briefly before giving up entirely and retiring to the library, where he took up a volume of botanical studies and attempted to forget entirely about his sister.

Not fifteen minutes later, it began to rain. From the library window, Charles watched with mounting horror as the dark skies opened up and released a perfect deluge of water that turned the muddy yard into an absolute sea in a matter of minutes. Charles knew his sister too well to dare to hope that she would turn back; the impossible girl was almost certain to ride the entire three miles to Netherfield in the pouring rain. He knew all too well that there was nothing to be done, but it remained dreadfully difficult to focus on diagrams of the root structures of dandelions. Matters were by no means helped by his mother’s maniacal cackles, which only increased in volume and frequency as the day wore on and the rain showed no sign of stopping.
Charles’ temper finally boiled over at supper. The meal was an unusually grim and silent one; Charles was brooding wordlessly into his potatoes, Mr. Xavier had a large tome on Norwegian history balanced beside his plate, and Mrs. Xavier was contenting herself with shooting increasingly smug and self-satisfied glances out at the driving rain. Charles almost found himself missing Ravenna’s ceaseless prattle, which normally drove him to distraction, and he could not bear to look at her conspicuously vacant seat at the table.

“Would you *please* stop *smiling*, Mother?” he snapped at last, the irritation that had been slowly building within him all day finally exploding like an alchemist’s experiment gone awry.

“I am not smiling,” Mrs. Xavier protested, wiping away the enormous smirk that had been stretching her already well-stretched face for the better part of the day.

“You might at least put up some kind of pretense of concern about your daughter’s safety,” Charles said angrily, setting his knife down on the table with a bang that rattled the candlesticks. “She ought to have been home hours ago, and yet you sit there with that priggish smirk on your face like a cat that’s got the cream!”

“And why should I not smile?” Mrs. Xavier retorted, her voice shrilly indignant. “You know perfectly well that she has had the good fortune to stay the night at Netherfield—which, I might add, can do nothing but good for her prospects—”

“Prospects!” Charles cried, drowning out his mother for what might well have been the first time in years. “Prospects! Like as not she’s caught her death out in that rain, and all you can think about are her bloody prospects!”

“Behave yourself, Charles!” Mrs. Xavier shrieked. (Out of the corner of his eye, Charles noticed his father get to his feet and beat a discreet retreat into his study, his nose still buried in his book. The mild-tempered gentleman was entirely resigned to his wife and son’s frequent quarrels and had no interest whatsoever in involving himself in them.) “How on earth are we to find you a match if you insist on using that sort of language at the table?”

“If I am to sacrifice my health and safety for the sake of a *match,*” Charles spat, pushing back his chair with a thud, “Then I shall undoubtedly remain a bachelor for the entirety of my existence!”

With that, he stood and strode out of the room, leaving his mother speechless. It was, he reflected as he climbed the stairs to his bedchamber, a surprisingly satisfying experience, and not one he would likely be able to replicate any time soon. Mrs. Xavier would most certainly have some words for him in the morning.

He would apologize over breakfast, he decided, undressing in the dim light afforded by the smoldering embers in his fireplace. His departing remark had been an unkind one, calculated to strike her where it hurt the most. Besides, Charles had no intention of fulfilling his promise; he had no doubt that he would someday marry, and not merely because it was what everyone expected of a cultured, attractive, and somewhat wealthy young man. As tiresome as he found the ordeal of courtship and marriage, he rather liked the idea of finding a companion, someone with whom he could share his innermost thoughts and hopes and plans.

He did not, however, understand the urgency that women seemed to feel in their search for a mate. All this desperate rushing about, it seemed to him, could only result in poorly-suited marriages and a great deal of unhappiness for all parties involved. Or, he reflected bitterly as he slid between his chilly sheets, silly girls stealing their brother’s horses and galloping about in the rain. It was all mad, he decided as sleep stole eagerly into his exhausted limbs. Completely and utterly mad.
Charles descended the stairs the next morning wearing an iron mask of calm, entirely prepared to do battle with his mother. But when he entered the dining room, he did not encounter the battlefield he had expected. On the contrary, Mrs. Xavier seemed hardly to notice his presence, so engrossed was she in the letter she clutched in one hand.

“Mother?” Charles asked hesitantly, hovering in the doorway. “Is everything all right?”

“This just arrived,” Mrs. Xavier said faintly, her eyes never leaving the parchment before her.

“News from Netherfield?” Charles surmised at once, crossing the room in a matter of moments. “What does it say?”

“Ravenna has been taken ill,” Mrs. Xavier said quietly, holding the letter out towards her son. He snatched it from her grasp and read over it as avidly as he devoured his books of French poetry. Written in Emma Frost’s delicate, slanting hand, the letter informed Mrs. Xavier that Ravenna had come down with “the mildest of fevers—nothing of great concern, I am sure.” She was, the letter went on to say, being treated with the utmost care and would undoubtedly recover shortly.

Charles scanned the letter a second time before tossing it aside and retracing the steps he had taken only moments before, striding back towards the doorway as quickly as his legs would take him.

“Charles!” his mother cried after him. “Where on earth are you going?”

“I must go to her, Mother,” he replied over his shoulder, hardly pausing on his path towards the stairs. “I shall leave at once.”

“But your sister has taken your horse!” Mrs. Xavier banged her spoon petulantly against the tabletop, and Charles had to restrain a sigh of aggravation at her childish behavior. “Charles Xavier,” she shrieked at his retreating back, “Turn around and speak to me this instant!”

“Mother,” he said irritably, turning round to face his hysterical, red-faced mother, “Since your foolish exhortations have merely served to endanger my sister’s health, I feel that it is my duty to go to her and at least attempt to represent our family’s responsibility and concern. Though heaven knows,” he added spitefully, “I doubt that I shall be able to undo the damage that you have already done.”

“But how will you get there, Charles?” Mrs. Xavier demanded. “Your horse is at Netherfield, and the carriage won’t be ready for several hours.”

“Then I shall walk,” Charles declared impulsively, and left the room in a huff.

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He only began to regret this decision when he was about two miles from the Xavier estate. The first forty minutes of his journey had proved surprisingly pleasant; the day was cool and clear, the brilliance of the spring sky marred only by the occasional small, white cloud scudding before the brisk breeze. Yesterday’s rain had washed the fields and forests clean, and the bright, refreshing scent of new life rose from the sprouting grass and budding trees that lined the way to Netherfield.

The rain had also, as Charles had only just discovered, made a rather dreadful mess of the road, leaving deep pockets of mud that disguised themselves as harmless, shallow puddles. Charles knew this because one of his legs was currently buried midway to the knee in one of those abominable sinkholes, and the cold, sticky mud was creeping inexorably towards the top of his boot.
“Oh, for heaven’s sake,” he muttered, tugging futilely at his leg and succeeding only in causing a wet squelching sound to bubble up through the mud. “Confound this bloody mud-” He took hold of his knee and gave another great heave, which quite violently extracted his foot from his boot and sent him toppling over sideways into yet another mud puddle.

With a litany of words that would undoubtedly cause his mother to despair of ever finding him a wife, Charles struggled to his feet and limped damply over to his recalcitrant boot, his one socked foot slapping unpleasantly against the muddy road. After a great deal of effort, he managed to wrest his imprisoned footwear free of the grasping mud and replace it on his foot, thereby successfully finishing what the sinkhole had attempted and filling his boot with freezing mud.

With a grim sigh, he set off once more, this time taking immense care to avoid any suspicious puddles. He was entirely soaked, his freshly laundered white shirt sticking to his skin and his navy frock coat so coated in mud that it now looked more brown than blue. The breeze that had minutes before seemed so brisk and refreshing now felt bitterly cold as it ghosted across his damp skin and through his sopping hair.

Still, he gritted his chattering teeth and pressed on, propelled forwards by both concern for his sister and the thought of a warm hearth and dry clothes. So cold, soggy, and miserable was his journey that he felt nothing but relief at the sight of Netherfield’s imposing façade rising in the distance. He could not even summon the energy to feel embarrassment at the state in which he was about to enter this great, stately home.

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Embarrassment, however, quickly overtook him when an astonished maid opened the manor’s impressive front door and discovered him shivering and dripping dun-colored water onto the beautiful, pale stone of the threshold.

“I do apologize for my appearance,” he said hastily, for fear that she would mistake him for some wandering vagabond and shut the door on him, “But I have just walked three miles from Xavier Manor. My name is Charles Xavier, and I have come to visit my sister, Ravenna.”

The maid’s eyes widened, and in that moment he recognized her as one of the pretty village girls he had undoubtedly taken a dance or two with at one of the less elegant country balls. He could only hope that this fact would work in his favor.

“My heavens, Mr. Xavier, what a state you’re in!” she exclaimed, stepping back and allowing him to enter the enormous, echoing foyer. “I shall show you in to see the Master, and then we’ll get you cleaned up.”

Charles could not prevent a look of dismay from crossing his face; even his tempestuous and unconventional heart quailed slightly at the thought of presenting himself to the elegant residents of Netherfield in such a deplorable state.

“Is there no chance of a change of clothes before then?” he asked hopefully. “Only, you see, I’m terribly cold, and I’ve got a great deal of mud in my boots.”

“I think it’s best if I present you to the Master first, sir,” the maid said firmly. “He’s the kindest gentleman I ever did meet, and if you’re kin to Miss Xavier then I’m sure you’ll be nothing but welcome.”

“Indeed,” Charles said faintly as she led him on into the bright, exquisitely furnished house. A grim sort of resignation overtook him as he made his muddy, squelching way through room after elegant room; if total embarrassment in front of Mr. McCoy—and indeed, he realized with an
unpleasant jolt, the dreadful Mr. Lehnsherr—was to be his fate, then he might as well go to it with pride.

“Good heavens, Jean,” said Miss Emma Frost, her pale eyebrows inching imperceptibly upwards into an expression that might have been shock. “What is this miserable creature that you have brought into the house?”

She was seated at a large, round table laden with the remainders of what looked to be a delicious breakfast. (A formidable growl from Charles’ stomach forcibly reminded him that he had not eaten a thing all morning.) On her left sat Mr. McCoy, a teacup in one hand and a book in the other, while Mr. Lehnsherr sprawled in the chair to her right, scanning a newspaper with an expression of ennui written upon his dark features. All three had looked up in astonishment at Charles’ entrance into the sunny, spacious breakfast room, and they now watched him with varying degrees of bemusement as he bowed stiffly and tried his hardest not to spray muddy water all over the polished floor.

“Please accept my most heartfelt apologies for this intrusion,” he said calmly, all too aware that his cheeks were burning red with shame. “My name is Charles Xavier, and I have come to see my sister—”

“Mr. Xavier!” Mr. McCoy cried, setting down his teacup and bounding to his feet. “I thought I recognized you under all that mud! My gracious, you’re a dreadful mess. Jean, go and fetch this poor man some dry clothes. Can’t you see how he’s shivering? What on earth has happened to you, Mr. Xavier?”

“I have just walked from Xavier Manor,” Charles explained, struggling to prevent his teeth from chattering. “I fear I rather underestimated the damage that the rain has done to the road.”

“I daresay you rather look as if you’ve been bathing in mud instead of walking through it,” Miss Frost remarked. “Jean, stop dawdling about and fetch some of my brother’s clothing at once.”

“Begging your pardon, Miss,” said the maid with a curtsy, “But all of Mr. McCoy’s shirts are being laundered at the moment, and I daresay they shan’t be dry for another hour.”

“Then he may have my clothes,” Mr. Lehnsherr spoke up in that deep, sudden voice that had so surprised Charles at the ball. It surprised him again; only with considerable effort did Charles manage to prevent himself from gawping at the impassive German like a child at a carnival. Hardly a week ago, the man had called him foolish, presumptuous, provincial, and feeble-minded, and yet here he was, offering him his clothing as if they were the closest of friends.

Charles had not the faintest idea of what to make of it, so he settled for another stiff bow and murmured, “Thank you, Mr. Lehnsherr.”

“Splendid, Erik, thank you,” Mr. McCoy agreed cheerily. “Jean, please escort Mr. Xavier to a warm fire and bring him some of Mr. Lehnsherr’s clothes.”

“You’re most gracious, sir,” Charles told Mr. McCoy shamefacedly, doing his best to ignore the derisive look Miss Frost was aiming in his direction. “I do hope you will forgive this imposition.”

“Oh, don’t trouble yourself over it.” Mr. McCoy smiled and waved in his usual amiable fashion as Jean led Charles out of the room and into the hall, where he breathed a sigh of relief at the escape from the cold, appraising gazes of Miss Frost and Mr. Lehnsherr.

“Now, if you don’t mind, sir,” Jean said as she hustled him back through the manor’s many
spacious rooms, “I daresay the kitchen’s got the warmest hearth in the house. Though if you’d rather something a bit more proper, sir, I could show you to one of the spare rooms…”

“No, I shouldn’t mind the kitchen at all,” Charles said firmly—or at least, as firmly as was possible when his teeth were chattering so rapidly that he could hardly speak. Large and airy though Netherfield’s rooms were, they were by no means warm or cozy.

The kitchen, on the other hand, was bright and welcoming, and so gloriously warm that Charles hardly even noticed that the walls were nearly black with smoke. With a shudder of relief, he collapsed into the rocking chair by the fireside and quickly set about warming his numb fingers near the flames. So glorious was the warmth of the fire on his damp, wind-chilled skin that he could not even be bothered by the astonished stares of the two footmen that Jean chased hastily from the room. He only looked up a good twenty minutes later, when she returned with a bundle of clothes under one arm and a basin of water in her hands.

“Bless you, Jean,” he said earnestly as she set the basin on the hearth to warm. “You are a true saint.”

“I’m sure you’re much too kind, sir,” she replied, ducking her head to hide her smile as she set his change of clothes on the stool beside him in a neatly folded pile. “I wasn’t sure which of Mr. Lehnsherr’s things would suit you best, so I just picked whatever looked warmest. There’s a cloth there for the water—I thought you might like to wash some of that mud off your face. And—” She broke off momentarily, turning to the long wooden counter behind her, from whence she produced the coup de grace: “I made you a nice, hot cup of tea, sir.”

“Bless you,” he said again, this time still more fervently, as he accepted the teacup from her hands. “May the angels rain down a hundred blessings upon your head. May the king himself shower you with honors and gifts—”

“Now, you mustn’t talk such nonsense, sir,” she said briskly, hitching up her skirt in one hand and bustling back towards the door. “Put those dry clothes on before you fall as ill as your sister.”

Charles subsided into grateful silence as she exited the room, shutting the door firmly behind her and leaving him to sip his tea in peace.
Chapter 4

Chapter Notes

Man oh man, I am so sorry that this took such a ridiculously long time. Unfortunately, actual life has a way of making you put off all the fun things, but at last I've got enough of a chapter to post here. I hope that you all enjoy it and leave me some comments!

A quarter of an hour later, he was warm, dry, clean, dressed in fresh clothes, and feeling perfectly decent and respectable once more. Mr. Lehnsherr’s garments, although slightly too large for his compact frame, were gorgeous nevertheless, and of a far finer quality than his own. The coat and breeches were a sober black, but Charles could not help but be quite taken with the waistcoat, which was of sumptuous blue silk. With a well-starched white cravat knotted carefully about his throat and his boots cleansed of as much mud as he could manage, he felt that he cut a rather dashing figure, considering the circumstances.

Thus, he was able to reenter Mr. McCoy’s breakfast room with considerably more grace than he had first appeared with. Once again, all eyes rose to meet him, but this time the reactions that followed were far more favorable.

“I say, you’re looking much better,” Mr. McCoy exclaimed. “Not that you looked—well, you certainly looked a mess before, anyway. But, uh, I must say, it does my heart good to see you clean and dry. Don’t you think so, Emma?”

“It seems that even country boys can clean up rather well,” Miss Frost admitted grudgingly, her judgmental gaze sweeping up and down Charles’ figure.

“Well, I, uh—I rather think those clothes of yours fit him quite splendidly, Lehnsherr, don’t you?” Mr. McCoy added—a touch too generously, Charles thought, for the coat was far too wide in the shoulders and the breeches sagged slightly despite his best efforts to tuck them into his boots.

“Indeed,” Mr. Lehnsherr said indifferently, barely lifting his eyes from the newspaper in his hand. A short silence followed, during which Charles could not help but notice the curious looks that both Miss Frost and her brother sent in the German’s direction.

“Well,” Mr. McCoy said with his customary awkwardness, getting slowly to his feet, “I daresay you would like to see your, er, your lovely sister, Mr. Xavier.”

“I should like that very much,” Charles said earnestly as Mr. McCoy set down his book and crossed the room.

“Then I shall take you to her,” he told Charles with a smile, placing a hand on his shoulder and leading him from the room.

“I hope you do not think that I mistrust your hospitality, Mr. McCoy,” Charles said to the young man as they climbed the manor’s sweeping staircase together. “I do not doubt that you are taking splendid care of her, but when I received news of her illness, I felt that I simply must go to her side.”
“Oh, of course, of course,” Mr. McCoy nodded. “It’s perfectly natural of you—I understand completely. Do not fret, however; Jean informed me at breakfast that Miss Xavier awoke this morning much improved. I believe, if we are, um, very fortunate, that she may even be out of bed to-morrow. But you shall see for yourself: look, here is her room.”

With that, Mr. McCoy pushed open a door, and the two young men entered a warm, well-lit bedchamber painted a pale sea green. In the center of the room sat a bed, and in the bed, propped up by several pillows, sat Ravenna, her hair loose past her shoulders and a book in her lap.

“Charles!” she cried upon catching sight of her brother, her eyes lighting up with delight. “What on earth are you doing here?”

“I left the instant that I heard that you were ill,” Charles explained, crossing to her bedside and taking her hand. “How do you feel?”

“Still a touch weak and feverish,” she admitted with a sigh. “But Mr. McCoy has been taking such wonderful care of me,” she added, aiming a smile at the young man hovering uncertainly in the doorway.

“Has he, now?” Charles asked with a smile, turning to Mr. McCoy, who was blushing and avoiding Raven’s gaze. “You mustn’t spoil her, my friend. She already has far too many silly notions in her head, I’m sure. Why else would she go gallivanting about in the rain on her poor brother’s horse?”

“Oh, hush!” Ravenna laughed, giving Charles’ shoulder a playful smack with the thin volume in her hand. “I expect that I shall never live this down, shall I?”

“Probably not,” Charles agreed with a grin. “But it does me good to see that you are not on death’s doorstep, you ridiculous girl.”

“And it does me good to see that you are here,” she replied, giving his hand a gentle squeeze. “Now stop your fretting, brother dearest, and go and socialize with Mr. McCoy and his friends.”

“I—are you sure that you would not like your brother to stay with you a little longer?” Mr. McCoy inquired from the doorway. “I am, you know, er, quite happy to leave you two be if you wish—”

“No, no,” she said airily, waving Charles away with one regal hand. “I am entirely engrossed in my reading, and he would only distract me with his worrying. You all must go and have a lovely time, and I shall join you to-morrow when I am well again.”

“Quite right,” Charles agreed cheerfully. “We would only drive one another to distraction if we were shut up together in this room. We barely manage at home, where we have an entire house in which to avoid each other.”

“Well, er, if you’re quite certain…” Mr. McCoy shrugged. “We were just about to move into the parlor to play cards—I expect Lehnsherr and my sister are there already.”

“Splendid,” Charles said, although privately he could not help but think that an afternoon spent playing cards with Mr. Lehnsherr was anything but.

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Downstairs, they discovered Mr. Lehnsherr and Miss Frost in one of Netherfield’s many elegant drawing rooms, the lady seated by the fire with embroidery in her lap and the gentleman standing by one of the tall windows that looked out onto the manor’s expansive grounds. At Charles and
Mr. McCoy’s entrance, Miss Frost looked up from her needlework with keen, curious eyes, but Mr. Lehnsherr did not stir from his stoic observation of the wind as it tossed the budding branches of the trees outside.

“I hope that you found your sister well, Mr. Xavier,” Miss Frost said in a languid tone which suggested that she did not, in fact, care very much either way.

“I did, thank you,” he replied with a smile, joining her beside the fireplace—which, he could not help noting, was not nearly so warm as the kitchen’s blazing hearth. “My fears were much assuaged.”

“I must say, I find your brotherly concern most…touching,” she said insincerely, lowering her eyes to her embroidery once more. “I expect that you shall make a most excellent husband.”

“And how, pray tell, do you divine that fact, Miss Frost?” Charles inquired, privately dismayed that the conversation had turned to matrimony so soon.

“If you attend your wife as eagerly as you attend your sister,” she explained, a faint smile quirking the corners of her lips, “Then she will be the happiest of women.”

“I think we might all learn a lesson or two in fraternal love from Mr. Xavier,” Mr. Lehnsherr remarked, turning from the window to shoot a pointed look at Miss Frost, who steadfastly ignored him.

“Er—yes. Well.” Mr. McCoy cleared his throat. “Who’s for a game of cards, then?”

Mr. Lehnsherr made an irritated noise in the back of his throat that clearly implied that he, for one, was not.

“Ah, yes,” Mr. McCoy chuckled. “Lehnsherr here scorns our frivolous card games in favor of more intellectual pursuits.”

“I see.” Charles folded his arms and leaned against the mantle, unable to keep a mocking smile from his lips. “He prefers a cozy evening spent perusing the encyclopedia, then? Or perhaps a few quiet hours in the company of some…illuminating tomes dealing with the manufactures of the British Isles?”

“I prefer chess, actually,” Mr. Lehnsherr replied coolly, meeting Charles’ eyes with the same calm stare that had so unnerved him at the ball.

“Do you play, Mr. Xavier?” Mr. McCoy inquired, trying and failing to hide his smile.

“A bit,” Charles admitted, somewhat reluctantly—he could see all too well the direction in which this conversation was heading, and he did not like it in the slightest. “The women of my family have no interest in it, but my father and I do play the occasional game.”

“Well, I’m afraid I have no head for it whatsoever,” Mr. McCoy said ruefully. “I expect that poor Mr. Lehnsherr is growing terribly tired of my attempts at strategy.”

“It’s settled, then,” Miss Frost said briskly, setting aside her embroidery and taking up a pack of cards. “My brother and I will play cards, and you and Mr. Lehnsherr shall play chess.”

“A, uh, a most perfect arrangement, I think,” Mr. McCoy agreed cheerfully as Charles’ heart sank quite rapidly into his boots. He had dreaded a mere card game with the man, but chess lacked even the merciful distraction of other players. The two of them had barely managed ten minutes’ conversation without insulting each other; how was he meant to survive an entire game of chess?
“Unless, of course, you have some objection, Mr. Xavier,” Miss Frost said sweetly, eyeing Charles with a shrewd look that he thoroughly disliked.

“Not at all,” he said genteelly, forcing a smile that he feared looked altogether too much like a death grimace.

“Do take the table by the fire, Mr. Xavier,” Mr. McCoy offered graciously. “Miss Frost and I will withdraw to the window so as not to disturb you with our chatter.”

*So that you may gossip about me, more like,* Charles thought bitterly, but managed to maintain a somewhat cheery façade as he settled into one of the chairs flanking the small, square table beside the hearth. Mr. Lehnsherr, still wearing that strangely impassive expression, sank into the chair opposite and set a slim box of honey-colored wood upon the table. Mr. McCoy and Miss Frost, as promised, retreated to the far end of the room, leaving Charles to his fate.

From the box, Mr. Lehnsherr drew first a board of dark wood inlaid with ivory squares, which he laid carefully upon the table. Then, drawing out a black king in one hand and a white king in the other, he glanced up at Charles and raised an eyebrow, daring him to choose his side.

“I shall play white, please.” Charles took the pale king from his opponent’s hand, noting with grudging admiration the flawless ivory and fine carving of the piece.

“This is a beautiful set,” he observed as each man set up his half of the board. “Is it yours?”

Frowning, Mr. Lehnsherr shook his head. “No, Mr. McCoy brought it with him from London—heaven knows why, for the man never touches it of his own accord.”

“It seems a shame to leave such a fine set unused,” Charles remarked, settling his final pawn into place.

“I find it a touch extravagant for my taste,” Mr. Lehnsherr replied dryly. “But it will do for the moment. Are you ready to begin, Mr. Xavier?”

Stung by Mr. Lehnsherr’s icy rebuff to his charitable attempt at making conversation, Charles moved his first pawn without speaking a word. They passed the next few minutes in a silence populated only by the crackle of the fire and the faint clicking of the pieces as they met the board.

Charles was just beginning to enjoy himself—the gentle heat at his back and the faint murmur of conversation from the other end of the room were proving thoroughly relaxing—when Mr. Lehnsherr startled him by saying, quite stiffly, “Your sister is better, I hope?”

“I think she is, yes,” Charles said after a moment’s pause, shifting one of his rooks across the board. Drawing upon his deepest reserves of politeness, he forced himself to add, “Thank you for asking.”

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“It was rather foolish of her, I think, to ride so far without considering the weather,” Mr. Lehnsherr said, capturing one of Charles’ pawns with one of his.

“She was merely overjoyed at Mr. McCoy’s invitation,” Charles said calmly, gripping the arm of his chair with slightly more force than usual as he captured one of Mr. Lehnsherr’s bishops. “She is given to impetuousness at times, but I do not think it such a fault.”

“A very politic answer, Mr. Xavier,” Mr. Lehnsherr chuckled, sliding his queen forward. “You are a most dutiful pawn in the game of matrimony.”
“I’m afraid I don’t follow,” Charles lied icily, for Mr. Lehnsherr’s meaning was all too clear. He set down a pawn with a forceful clack that belied the irritation he was trying so hard to hide.

“I have offended you,” observed Mr. Lehnsherr, his mouth taking on an amused tilt as he looked curiously into Charles’ guarded eyes. “And with good reason, I think; the women are the pawns in this game, not you. You are…a knight, who charges recklessly down muddy roads in order to protect the honor of the ailing lady, are you not?” Without breaking eye contact with Charles or removing that maddening smirk from his lips, he captured one of Charles’ white knights with his bishop.

“And what, pray tell, does that make you, Mr. Lehnsherr?” Charles asked, unable to keep a touch of disdain from his voice as he stared boldly back into Mr. Lehnsherr’s impenetrable eyes. “A king?”

“Perhaps.” Mr. Lehnsherr shrugged, and Charles found himself nearly overwhelmed with the urge to strike the knowing smile from the German’s face. “I think it is your move, Mr. Xavier.”

“I am thinking,” Charles replied coldly, finally looking away from those detestably self-satisfied features so that he could consider the chessboard. Yet as he pondered, he could not shake the sense that Mr. Lehnsherr’s gaze was still upon him, a feeling which plagued him still as he moved a pawn and sat back in his chair, fingers steepled before his mouth and eyes resolutely fixed upon the chessboard.

“You are angry with me,” Mr. Lehnsherr observed, and Charles looked up and found him, inexplicably, still smiling, as if discovering the punch line of a joke that only he could hear.

“I can see it in the set of your jaw,” Mr. Lehnsherr continued, shifting a rook. “You look much like you did at the ball in the moments before you informed me that I would doubtlessly die friendless and alone.”

“Forgive me,” Charles said tonelessly, capturing one of Mr. Lehnsherr’s knights. “I was exhausted from dancing and did not know what I was saying. My behavior was abominable and I truly regret it.”

“No, you don’t,” Mr. Lehnsherr contradicted him, quite calmly, as he moved another pawn. “I don’t blame you. No man likes being told that he is foolish.”

“So why do it?” Charles asked bluntly, startled once more out of his politeness. “Do you take some sort of perverse pleasure in irritating your fellow man?”

“Not at all.” Mr. Lehnsherr leaned back in his seat and crossed his long legs at the knee, a thoughtful expression settling onto his features. “I merely think it best to speak my mind as clearly and directly as possible.”

“It is cruel,” Charles told him flatly, moving a pawn.

“Is it?” Mr. Lehnsherr raised one eyebrow into a graceful arch. “Is it not crueler to hide the truth and allow people to labor foolishly under false convictions?”

“You think that you can enlighten people by speaking so harshly?” Charles scoffed, shaking his head. “Once you have offended a man, he shuts his ears to you and will consider nothing that you say. If spreading the truth is your goal, I think it far more effective to break it gently, with kind words that will win your listener over to your side.”

“Kindness.” Mr. Lehnsherr rolled his eyes. “An overrated virtue, I think, and too frequently merely a euphemism for weakness. How much time would you waste, Mr. Xavier, with your
kindness and gentleness, while I could speak the same truth in half the time?"

"Your truth would be wasted. For example: after you spoke to me so bluntly at the ball, did I reflect upon my views or examine my preconceptions? Hardly. I was so busy being angry with you that I could scarcely remember what we spoke about."

"Your failings, Mr. Xavier, are not my concern," Mr. Lehnsherr replied archly, capturing one of Charles’ pawns with one graceful swoop of his queen.

Rather than dignify that remark with a response, Charles concentrated fiercely on the board. He gripped his lower lip tightly between his teeth, fearing that if he let his mouth fall open, a stream of insults would tumble out. Once again, he sensed Mr. Lehnsherr’s eyes upon him, and he found himself wishing fervently that the detestable German would just stop looking at him quite so much. And then, through the fog of his anger, he saw it.

"Checkmate," he said quite suddenly, setting his lone white knight into place.

"What?" Mr. Lehnsherr leaned forward to frown thunderously down at the board.

"Knight takes king," Charles explained serenely, all his previous irritation melting away before a sudden surge of triumph. "You’ve nowhere to go, I’m afraid."

"Well," Mr. Lehnsherr said after a moment’s pause, sitting back in his chair with a dumbfounded expression that Charles found entirely satisfying. "I am impressed. Congratulations, Mr. Xavier."

"Remind me," Charles said sweetly, for he could not resist a bit of gloating, "What was that you were saying about kindness? Do you still think it interchangeable with weakness?"

"A kind man you may be, Mr. Xavier," Mr. Lehnsherr replied, the faintest hint of a smile glimmering in his eyes, "But when it comes to chess, you are utterly cruel."

"Hm? What’s that? Did he best you, Lehnsherr?" Mr. McCoy inquired, ambling up to peer curiously down at the chessboard. "My heavens, so he did. Well, congratulations, Mr. Xavier."

"Thank you," Charles smiled graciously. "It was a most…interesting game."

"Indeed," Mr. Lehnsherr agreed. When Charles sneaked a glance at his face, it was disappointingly impassive—Charles had rather been hoping to see him scowl or sulk.

"I thank you for playing," the German added courteously, extending his hand across the board. "It was my pleasure," Charles replied, and found, to his surprise, that he meant it. He took Mr. Lehnsherr’s large, long-fingered hand and shook it firmly, refusing to let his own small, pale hand be dwarfed by the other man’s grip. Though their hands quickly parted, their gazes remained locked, and Charles could not help but think that he detected a hint of approval dancing in Mr. Lehnsherr’s pale blue eyes.

"Might I propose a brief walk—just, you know, through the grounds?" Mr. McCoy suggested cheerily, entirely oblivious to the subtle exchange that had just transpired between his two guests. "I fear that my, ehm, dear sister has grown tired of cards and wishes to return to her embroidery—a pastime which, I confess, holds little interest for me."

"A walk sounds splendid," Charles said brightly, getting to his feet and stretching luxuriously. "The weather today is simply gorgeous."

"Provided that Mr. Xavier is not overtired from his considerable exertions this morning," Mr.
Lehnsherr said with the slightest of smiles, “I think that a walk would be most excellent.”

“I am much recovered, thank you,” Charles said coolly as Mr. Lehnsherr stood up. He could not stave off a touch of irritation that Mr. Lehnsherr had brought up his earlier humiliation, but the heady remnants of victory and the prospect of a walk in the sunshine made him far too cheerful to care. “Lead the way, Mr. McCoy.”

If possible, the day was even brighter and clearer now than when Charles had first arrived at Netherfield; the breeze, though still fresh and sweet-smelling, had grown gentler and warmer, and the sun shone so brilliantly overhead that the damp remnants of yesterday’s rain were nearly all gone. So agreeable was the weather that the three men decided to abandon their heavy coats on the manor’s stately patio, and thus ventured out onto the newly sprouted lawn in their shirtsleeves and waistcoats.

As they strolled through the sunshine, they spoke little aside from the occasional polite comment on the perfection of the weather or the exquisite grooming of the grounds. Mr. McCoy, it seemed, was not much given to conversation when politeness, society, or the silent pressure of his half-sister did not require it; he preferred to gaze about with an affable sort of curiosity, occasionally stooping to closely observe some small plant or insect that caught his eye. Mr. Lehnsherr, as usual, appeared lost in thought, and Charles was so relieved to have escaped the oppressive grandeur and judgmental stares of Netherfield that he was more than content to keep silent and listen only to the chirping of birds in the trees and the humming of bees in the newly opened flowers.

They made their way across the gently sloping lawn, past flowerbeds already bursting with sweet-smelling lavender and budding daylilies, and onto a well-tended gravel path that ran parallel to the manor house’s gleaming stone walls. There they paused for a moment: Mr. Lehnsherr looked broodingly out into the misty distance, Charles gazed up into the crystalline sky and watched the breeze herd the last shreds of cloud into the east, and Mr. McCoy knelt to peer into a small hole that had been dug in the soft dirt of a nearby flowerbed.

For the first time since the arrival of Mr. McCoy’s invitation yesterday morning, Charles felt fully at ease. The sun shone brightly down upon his face, driving the lingering dampness from his hair and with it all the foreboding and unease that had been dwelling in his heart. He had arrived safely, his sister was recovering, his mother was far from sight, and he felt that he had even managed to befriend the master of this enormous, stately park. He could not even bring himself to mind the presence of Mr. Lehnsherr at his side; on the contrary, he found that he harbored newfound goodwill towards the brooding German—especially now that he had bested him in chess.

“Rabbits, I think,” Mr. McCoy said cheerfully, bending closer to the hole that had so captured his attention. “Marvelous creatures, don’t you agree?”

“I can’t say that I have devoted much time to their study,” Charles admitted, crossing the path to stand beside Mr. McCoy’s crouching form. To be perfectly honest, he was not particularly interested in rabbits; although he had read a great deal of biology, he was a far more avid student of poetry, novels, and histories of far-off places and peoples. But he felt so well-inclined towards the world and everything in it that he was willing to indulge his host’s curious preoccupation. “What about them do you find so fascinating?”

“Oryctolagus cuniculus,” Mr. McCoy said thoughtfully, almost to himself. “One of the few species of animal known to form monogamous pairs, did you know?”

“I did not,” Charles confessed, rather wishing to change the subject but woefully uncertain of how
to do so.

“A single pair is able to produce thirty to forty offspring in a year,” Mr. McCoy continued, poking at the rabbit hole with a nearby twig.

“Indeed?” Smiling faintly, Charles shot an amused glance at Mr. Lehnsherr, who appeared to be entirely unaware of the bizarre conversation occurring beside him. “How, er…splendid, I’m sure.”

Fortunately, Charles was spared another fascinating fact about rabbit reproduction by the arrival of a footman, who cleared his throat loudly enough to startle Mr. McCoy back onto his feet.

“Miss Frost has sent for you, sir,” the footman informed his master. “She says it is most urgent.”

“Oh, very well,” Mr. McCoy sighed, the faintest trace of irritation entering his features for the first time since Charles had met him.

“Shall we head back, then?” Charles could not prevent a hint of disappointment from coloring his voice; the cavernous parlors of Netherfield were an even gloomier prospect after a mere quarter hour spent in the glorious sunshine.

“Oh, not at all,” his host replied hastily, brushing the dirt from his knees. “I must return to my sister, but you and Mr. Lehnsherr are welcome to remain outdoors.”

“Well-” Charles began to protest, for despite the sunshine, more time spent alone with Mr. Lehnsherr was gloomier still than all the gloomiest parlors in the world.

“I must insist, Mr. Xavier,” Mr. McCoy said firmly. “I shall be but a moment. Please, I beg you, explore the grounds. The woods are still rather bare, I’m afraid, but I expect the pond will be simply magnificent today. No, I shan’t hear a word of protest, sir, I refuse to keep you from this superb weather.”

“You’re too kind,” Charles murmured dejectedly as Mr. McCoy turned to follow the footman back towards the house.

“I shall only be a minute!” Mr. McCoy called over his shoulder, but Charles could not help but think that a minute was far too long.

Swallowing a sigh, he turned back to Mr. Lehnsherr, who was still frowning out at the distant hills as if they had done him some grievous personal injury. Charles opened his mouth to attempt to make conversation, but he immediately thought better of it and shut his mouth once more. For a few moments, they stood side by side in a curiously companionable silence, both staring off into the rolling blue distance.

Then, to Charles’ great surprise, Mr. Lehnsherr broke the silence.

“I have been thinking over your words, Mr. Xavier,” he said abruptly, clasping his hands behind his back and rocking forward onto the balls of his feet.

“Er…have you?” Charles said idiotically, rendered momentarily incoherent by shock.

“Yes.” Still frowning thunderously, the German kept his eyes firmly fixed on the horizon as he continued: “And although I remain for the most part unconvinced of the efficacy of your philosophy of kindness, I must admit that my remarks to you at the ball were most… ungentlemanly and uncalled for.”

“Oh.” Charles blinked, staring unabashedly at Mr. Lehnsherr’s impassive profile.
“And I have also come to the conclusion,” Mr. Lehnsherr went on, “That I judged you rather hastily, and that my initial impressions of you may have been…erroneous.”

“Indeed,” Charles said, his tone turning a trifle icy. Ordinarily, of course, he would have been delighted by an apology, but this one, delivered in such a peculiar and unwilling manner by such an unpleasant man, only served to irritate him. In fact, he found that it erased all the cheer and goodwill engendered by the sunshine and replaced it with the same kind of fury that had burned so hotly over the chessboard.

“You…are not pleased,” Mr. Lehnsherr surmised, casting a perplexed glance towards Charles’ newly tensed jaw.

“I am sure that you shall think me callous,” Charles replied, stowing his clenched fists in his—no, he recalled with a jolt of revulsion, Mr. Lehnsherr’s pockets—and affecting a disinterested tone, “But I cannot help but wonder at your motivation for this reversal. Since you speak of first impressions, I shall inform you that I at first took you for a man who conformed most rigidly to his opinions and was loath to change them. Unless I, too, was mistaken, you are either a weak-willed ninny who relinquishes his ideals as quickly as he takes them up or a calculating strategist who conforms his principles to whatsoever will best suit his own aims.

“Now,” he continued, warming to his subject and encouraged by Mr. Lehnsherr’s increasingly perturbed expression, “Since I am, as you yourself have so derisively said, a kind man, I shall flatter you by assuming you to be the latter. Thus, you must have some sort of motive for this admittedly rather half-hearted and grudging apology. One might assume that, being a good friend to Mr. McCoy, you have noted his interest in my sister and wish to make peace with me in order to benefit his prospects, but, to be frank, you have shown yourself to care little for your alleged friend’s well-being.

“Because of this, I must discard that explanation in favor of another: your pride, wounded by the outcome of our chess game, will simply not tolerate defeat at the hands of a man whom you have deemed feeble-minded, provincial, and foolish. Thus, you have been forced to change your opinion of me in order to explain away the fact that I was able to best you in a contest of the mind. Now, if you will excuse me, I think that I shall join our host indoors.”

With that, he offered Mr. Lehnsherr a tight-lipped smile and beat a rapid retreat across the lawn. Although he walked briskly, he felt quite overcome by competing emotions: irritation roaring in his ears, triumph singing in his chest, and an unnamed feeling hovering at the back of his mind, accompanied by the image of Mr. Lehnsherr’s strange, brooding face.

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