

95. Urania

Mr Ambrose had suggested that the bushes would cushion our fall. I didn't know what kind of cushion he preferred, but the landing in the bushes gave me a pretty good idea. Basalt, maybe? Sandstone?

By the time I came to a stop at the bottom of the hill on which the bushes were perched, I felt as though I had been squeezed through a meat-grinder. A strangled moan escaped from my throat.

'You should have rolled,' a cool voice commented from above me.

'I did roll! I did nothing but roll and jump and bump! I feel like a flipping football!'

'I mean actively To break your fall.' A firm hand gripped mine and pulled me up so quickly I couldn't even try to protest. In a moment, I was standing beside Mr Ambrose, whose red uniform - curse him! - somehow still looked immaculate. He hadn't even gotten one twig in his smooth, shiny black hair.

For a moment, we stood like this, each close enough to hear the other's heart beating, our hands intertwined. Then he let go and abruptly turned.

'Let's go!'

'There they are!' The gru voice from the tunnel entrance was much too familiar. 'Get them!'

Behind us, a shot rang out. It was the starting signal for our race. We dove into the brushes, and now I blessed the thick foliage I had cursed a moment ago. Bullets whipped through the forest to my right and left, but none hit Mr Ambrose or me. We were too well hidden among the green leaves. As quickly as possible, we slid between the trees, farther away from the tunnel.

Suddenly, Mr Ambrose stopped.

'Be quiet!'

'Oh really?' I hissed. 'This isn't the right time for your obsession with silence! We've got to run, and I don't care how loudly we do it! We-'

'No. I mean, I heard something. Be quiet and listen, just for a second.'

Grudgingly, I did as he told me. Over the hammering of my own heart I couldn't hear anything, at first. Then, slowly, I began to hear a low chatter, far on the other side of the undergrowth.

'Voices!' I exclaimed.

Mr Ambrose nodded. 'Yes. Probably the crowd at the harbour. If we can reach it in time, we'll be safe!'

Without another word, he dove between two bushes and disappeared.

Muttering a low curse, I followed. The farther I got, the louder the voices became. I redoubled my effort, almost running headlong, raising my arms to shield my face from the sharp branches that attacked me from all sides. It was with a shocking suddenness that I stumbled out of the trees and into the open, onto a square paved with cobblestones.

The harbour. We had really managed to reach the harbour. In front of me stretched a wide, seaside promenade, with dozens of people strolling up and down, enjoying the view. Some of them glanced towards the forest when I burst out from between the trees, and looked more than a little surprised by the sight of a soldier with leaves and twigs in his bird's nest of hair, but most were too busy watching the ships arrive and leave.

Or, to be more precise - two ships arriving, one ship leaving. The ones that were arriving looked older, but the one that was about to embark was a brand-new steamship. Passengers were just getting on board the shiny, new vessel, all looking like wealthy tourists returning to England for a wonderful holiday. For a moment, my eyes fixed on the cursive word emblazoned on the ship's hull: Urania

Quickly, I threw a sideways glance at Mr Ambrose and saw in his eyes the mirror of my own thought: our only chance. We rushed forward, slipping into the line at the gangway of the luxurious ship, and ignoring the protest of a thick-set French gentleman right behind us.

'Two tickets to England, please,' I gasped, slamming my hands on the counter of the official at the gangway to steady myself.

'I beg your pardon, Monsieur?' the man asked, looking at me with his nostrils instead of his eyes. But I worked for Mr Rikkard Ambrose! This little Frenchman's derisive glances were nothing in comparison to the ones I had learned to withstand.

'Tickets. To England. You do sell tickets to England, don't you?'

'Naturelement, Monsieur since this is our vessel's only destination.'

'Well, then, you heard my companion.' Mr Ambrose stepped up beside me and fixed the official with an icy glare. 'Two tickets to England, third class.'

The official didn't back down. If anything, his look became even more disgusted. 'Third class, Monsieur? I am afraid you have the wrong vessel. This is a ship of a respectable line, offering its services only to the better classes of society. We have no cabins of third class on board.'

Behind the granite mask on Mr Ambrose's face, a momentous struggle seemed to be going on. A muscle in his jaw twitched. His little finger jerked erratically. Finally, he managed to say: 'Fine! Second class, then! How much does it cost?'

The official seemed to decide that looking at us with his nostrils was too great an honour for us, and he switched to regarding us with his wobbly chin instead.

'There is no second class, either, Monsieur Please remove yourself. You are holding up the line.'

I saw Mr Ambrose's little finger twitch again, violently.

'Two tickets, first class, to England,' I said, before he could do anything he would later regret.

His head whipped around to stare at me. 'What are you doing?' he demanded, his tone low and hard.

'Saving our skins from your miserly ways,' I shot back amiably. 'I hope you have enough money on you.'

He opened his mouth to reply, but was cut short by the official.

'First class? As you could pay half the sum required! I have no time for your silly jokes, Messieurs Remove yourselves immediately, or I will be forced to call security.'

Slowly, Mr Ambrose turned back towards the man. When the Frenchman caught sight of his eyes, he flinched back.

Mr Ambrose reached into his jacket and drew out a wallet. Opening it with deliberation, he pulled out two one hundred pound notes and slammed them down on the counter.

'You can give me my change when we arrive in England,' he said, his voice cold enough to freeze sunlight in mid-air. 'I wish to be shown to my cabin. Now.'

'Why, certainly, Monsieur At once, Monsieur'

Staring incredulously at the banknotes, the official waved one of his underlings over. 'Quick! Pierre! Take these two gentlemen to the best cabins on the ship. Now!'

'But Monsieur the best cabins on the ship are occupied by...'

'Do it!'

As we were led by the bewildered young man, who kept sneaking glances back at his superior, Mr Ambrose leant over to me and whispered:

'The money for the tickets shall be deducted from your wages, Mr Linton.'

And for some reason, this didn't make me want to snarl back at him. It made me smile.

Get them! Get them!

The soldiers fell silent the moment they stumbled out of the undergrowth onto the seaside promenade, and several hundred people turned to stare at them. They seemed to realize several things at once: firstly, their prey was nowhere to be seen, secondly, they were wearing British Indian Army uniforms on French territory, and thirdly, the crowd did not seem to appreciate the guns they were waving around.

'Ehem.' One of the soldiers, probably the commanding officer, cleared his throat. 'S-sorry if me and my friends gave you alarm. We... just had a bit too much to drink. Got a bit above ourselves, that's all.'

Weak though the explanation was, it was generally accepted, and as the soldiers lowered their guns, the crowd slowly returned to their business. The men - there were only two; Mr Ambrose had indeed hit the third one, apparently - huddled together and began whispering.

Up on the deck of the Urania Mr Ambrose and I crouched behind the ship's railing, peering through the gaps down into the harbour.

'What do you think they will do now, Sir?' I asked.

'They are alone and do not know what to do. They will not risk attracting the attention of the crowd in order to find us. They have no authority here. Were Dalgliesh present, it might be different, but with things being as they are, we have a chance - if the ship leaves before they get reinforcements or, worse, support from the French authorities.'

'Do you really think the French are in on this?'

Mr Ambrose's face was grim. Even more so than usual.

'I'm convinced of it. Dalgliesh is no fool. He wouldn't set up his base in an environment he cannot control. Our only chance is to get away before the authorities can be notified.'

As he spoke, one of the soldiers darted off and up towards the centre of the island like a bullet shot from a gun. The other one began moving among the crowd, stopping people, asking questions. We remained where we were, watching, our anxiety rising with every minute. Or at least my anxiety was rising with every minute. I wasn't sure about that of Mr Ambrose, or about whether he had any at all. His face still looked like the bust of some stoic philosopher, only without the long beard and the toga.

The soldier down on the promenade moved closer and closer to the Urania Not long and he would figure out that it was the only ship due for departure, the only way his prey could get off this island. But at the same time, the line in front of the Urania was dwindling. People were hurrying to get aboard. The sun was setting, and they seemed eager to get to their warm cabins before the cold of the night set in.

Beside me, I could hear Mr Ambrose let air hiss through his teeth, as the French officers rose over the babble of the crowd as the ship detached itself from the jetty and lurched forward, its steam engine roaring to life like some giant, ancient beast. But unlike the Nemesis this was a friendly beast. It had come to take us to safety.

With a dizzying mix of relief and disbelief, I watched as the harbour moved away from us, slowly at first, then faster and faster, as the ship gathered speed and moved away from the island into the channel. The French and British Indian soldiers shouted in vain, their voices drowned out by the engine that carried us farther and farther away from the danger.

Mr Ambrose's hand didn't loosen its grip on mine.

'We made it!' I whispered. 'We actually made it!'

He turned towards me. There was something in his dark gaze - not cold, this time. Something else. Something indefinable. He opened his mouth. But before he could speak, we heard a gentle cough from behind us.

Letting go of his hand as if it were a block of ice, I whipped my head around and stared up into the concerned face of a member of the ship's wait staff, looking down at the two of us crouching on the floor with concern.

'Um... we do have seats on this ship, Messieurs It is not necessary to sit on the floor. Would you like me to show you?'

My dear Lords, Ladies & Gentlemen,

Yay! 3 Cheers for Lilly & Mr Ambrose! Finally, they've escaped from the danger zone. Or have they? The two of them alone on a ship, sailing into the sunset...who knows what might happen? ;)

Time for sparks to fly, do you think?

And there happens to be an even better reason celebrate! I've got fantastic news for all of you: "Storm and Silence" has won a People's Choice Award during this year's Wattys! Thank you from the bottom of my ink-filled writer's heart, everyone, for your stupendous support throughout this whole contest, and all the votes you cast so diligently to support our favorite Victorian couple & their great adventure! **deep, gentlemanly bow Without you and your support, we would never have triumphed in this competition! I'm still trying to discover whether we ended up on first or 2nd place (since there's apparently more than one single award, the first few places will each receive one), but whichever place we end up on, I already know for sure that you are the most fabulous group ever!**

Yours Truly

Sir Rob