

## 96. Rising Waves

The helpful young member of the wait staff guided us to our cabins. I didn't know what Mr Ambrose did or disappearing into his. Stand in a corner and calmly calculate how much money he was going to make out of his new canal, maybe? I, for my part, slumped onto the thing that vaguely resembled a bed nailed to the wall. Bunk, dunk, shunk – I couldn't care less what it was called or what it was for. It was relatively so. That was all I needed to know.

The knock that woke me from my sleep was tentative but resolute. I blinked and yawned. How long had I been out? It didn't really care. My clothes had dried, so it had to have been some time.

Again, there came a knock from the door. Drowsily, I lifted my head. This didn't look like my room at my uncle's house. What was this? Oh yes, the ship! It all came back to me then: The island, the mine, the race, getting on the ship...

What was its name again? Urania? Yes. Had we really managed to escape, or had it all been just a dream? Was I still dreaming?

A third knock came from the door. I could tell from the sound alone that it wasn't Mr Ambrose on the other side.

"Yes?"

"Monsieur? Dinner is ready in the dining hall."

That decided it. I had managed to have some pretty strange dreams in my lifetime, but never could I dream up a French waiter calling me "Monsieur". Crazy things like that were reserved for reality – my reality with Mr Rikkard Ambrose.

Groaning, I pushed myself up from the bunk bed and stumbled towards the door. "I'm coming", I called. "I'm coming."

"Very well, Monsieur. You are, um, well! You seemed a little pale, earlier."

Well, what do I say? Getting shot at does that to me. "No, no. Everything is fine. Thank you."

"Excellent. I shall return to the dining hall. Your companion is awaiting you there."

Not long after, I stepped out onto the deck of the ship and closed my eyes for a moment as I breathed in the fresh sea air. It was cool, harsh and salty – not the best combination for a city girl like me, under normal circumstances. But just now, I revelled in it, revelled in the fact that it was no longer the dark, dusty air of the mine. I had to breathe in, revelled in the fact that I could still breathe because I was alive.

Opening my eyes again, I looked around. I stood on the upper of two decks aboard the Urania. The wooden structures supporting the deck, as well as the walls of the cabins, were painted in a cheerful golden-yellow and only served to re-emphasize the point: I was out of the dark. I was safe. We both were safe.

Stepping towards the railing, I took another deep breath and looked back the way we had come. Past the roiling clouds of smoke from the engine that propelled us forward, past the churning waters behind it, I could see, in the distance, the faint shape of a mountain on the horizon, rising out of the distant waves. He Marbeault looked like nothing more than a molehill from here. And regardless of how angry the mole that lived there might be right now, regardless of how much he might resemble a lion in his fury, we were out of his reach. I smiled.

Leaving the sea view behind me, I turned and went in search of Mr Ambrose. I hoped for his sake he hadn't eaten without me and already left, or there would be hell to pay!

It didn't take me long to find my way through the luxurious, wood-paneled corridors of the ship. They were not like the corridors of the Nemesis. Light shone in through curtained windows, gold and silver glittered in every corner, and everywhere there were helpful people willing to show you the way, instead of evil people willing to show you the way to your grave. One old lady, Lady Timberlake, even entangled me in a conversation about how small and underfed the young men in military service, like my good self, looked nowadays, when I asked her for the way. She discovered I had the cabin right next to hers, and it took me some time to pry myself away from her. She was sorry to see the young soldier (i.e. me) go; he reminded her so much of her grandson, the brave darling...

I hoped fervently this was due to the excellence of my disguise and not to the freakish anatomy of her grandson.

When I finally entered the dining hall, a grand room with plush leather chairs arranged around small, intricately carved tables, and crystal chandeliers dangling from the ceiling, the first thing I saw was Mr Ambrose, sitting at one of the tables and arguing with one of the waiters over the price of a glass of water.

"...two shillings for one glass?" Mr Ambrose was saying, trying to nail the poor waiter to the wall with his cold glare. The other guests were watching him with apprehensive looks on their faces. "What do you put in that water, man? Gold dust? This is not acceptable!"

"But, Monsieur! The waiter protested. "This is special mineral water with many beneficial properties for your health, directly from the wells at..."

"Well, as it happens, I do not feel sick in the slightest. Is it within your ability to procure some non-healing, but reasonably priced water?"

"Monsieur! This is a vessel of the very first class. We pride ourselves on the excellence of everything we serve, and it would be a disgrace if we..."

"Can you or can't you?"

A pained expression crossed the waiter's face.

"I might be able to, um... obtain some low-quality fluid out of the provisions for the ship's personnel, if Monsieur wishes it."

"Yes, Monsieur wishes it."

"Alors! I shall do my best. Before I leave, what does Monsieur wish to eat?"

Mister Ambrose eyed the bread basket placed in the middle of the table.

"Does this cost anything?"

"The bread basket? No, of course not, Monsieur! That is just an appetizer. Which of our delicacies does Monsieur wish to taste?"

"The one that doesn't cost anything." With one hand, Mister Ambrose pulled the bread basket towards him, with the other, he waved the waiter away. "This will be quite sufficient. That will be all."

The waiter was near tears.

"Monsieur cannot be serious! Water and bread? Water and bread? This is a first-class vessel, not a prison bark!"

"More's the pity. On a prison bark, I wouldn't have had to pay for the voyage."

"Monsieur! I beg you to reconsider. Please, here, I have a menu, will you not look and see if there is something that will please your palate? We have the best..."

He was interrupted by a hand snatching the menu from his grasp. My hand.

Casually, I flicked through the pages with golden corners and embossed, italic writing. Something caught my eye.

"I would like... Fois Grois avec Sauce Espagnole then a glass of Champagne..."

"The sparkling variety or pale red?"

"Sparkling, definitely sparkling. And as for dessert... well, we shall see. I look forward to tasting your delicacies."

The waiter bowed so deeply that his head almost smashed into the table.

"Thank you, Monsieur. Thank you so much!"

Shooting a last, long glance at Mr Ambrose, he glided away. I, meanwhile, sank down into the chair opposite my employer and gave him a bright smile.

He did not return it.

"The price for that extravagant meal shall be deducted from your wages," he warned.

"If you keep this up, Sir, there won't be anything left of my wages when you've deducted all you wish."

"That would be very convenient indeed, Mr Linton."

"Oh, didn't he seem grumpy? I admonished. "You got what you wanted, didn't you? We have the file back. We should celebrate!"

"I am celebrating. I ordered a glass of water, didn't I?"

"Dear me, you're right. Your extravagant exuberance is overwhelming, Sir."

He, oh great surprise, didn't reply. The waiter arrived with our drinks, and I raised my glass of champagne towards Mr Ambrose.

"A toast," I declared.

He regarded me with those cool, dark eyes of his.

"Similar to jokes, Mr Linton, toasts are a waste of time and breath. They also present the added hazard of spilling a drink one has paid for."

"Well, I like to waste a little breath and time now and again!"

"I noticed."

"A toast," I repeated, and to my utter astonishment, Mr Ambrose hesitantly raised his glass towards mine. To a successful operation. May you make so much money out of your canal that you choke on it!"

We clinked glasses. I didn't spill anything of my costly drink.

"A pleasing prospect, Mr Linton. However, quite unlikely. I have never had problems digesting monetary gain."

I hid a smirk behind my champagne glass. "I can readily believe that, Sir."

He watched me drinking, his eyes narrowing infinitesimally. "Should you be drinking, Mr Linton? Remember what happened last time."

My smirk widened into a grin.

"Yes, that was fun."

His eyes narrowed another fraction of an inch.

"There was a gunfight. You were hallucinating. We nearly died."

"As I said, fun."

"I think we must agree to disagree on that, Mr Linton," he said coolly. We lapsed into silence again. I wet my lips and opened my mouth – then closed it again. There was something I really wanted to ask. I didn't, though. I was afraid of what the answer might be.

"Messieurs! Voilà! Your meal has arrived!" The waiter swooped down on us like an eagle on a rabbit, only instead of grabbing us for his next meal, he brought us one. A steaming plate was set down in front of me, with a glistening, brown piece of something on it that looked incredibly so and succulent. It also looked like nothing I had ever seen before, let alone eaten.

Bowing and smiling at me, the waiter departed. He completely ignored Mr Ambrose. I looked down at my plate, and tentatively picked up the thing on it with a fork. It wobbled.

"You have no idea what fois gras is, do you?" Mr Ambrose asked.

"Of course! I do! I sent him an indignant look. How dare he adopt this superior tone with me? I was a member of the gentry, a gentleman. He was nothing but a paltry financier. Why should he just assume he knew more about French cuisine than I did? Granted, he might be right, but it was still a pretty damn cheeky supposition.

"Indeed?" The way he said that word alone made me want to stomp a fork down his throat. "Well, what is it, then?"

"Um... it's... I stared at the brown lump, trying to make deductions from the form and size. "Fish?" I suggested, hopefully.

"Not quite. Actually, it's goose liver."

"Oh."

Suddenly, I was acutely aware of how the ship pitched and rolled in the power of the waves, and I wasn't quite so keen on tasting the French delicacy as a moment before. Raising my eyes, I saw Mr Ambrose slightly smug, his face perfectly expressionless, but his dark eyes watching me.

Ha! I'll show him!

Quick as a flash I cut off a piece of the poor goose's inner fat and stuck it into my mouth before I could think better of it. Carefully, I bit down. It tasted surprisingly good. Not squishy at all, but so and buttery.

"Hmmm..." Swallowing, I cut off another piece. "Quite nice. Yes, returned to quite nice." I tried the sauce that came with it, and the grin really showed on my face. "Those Froggies really know what they're doing in the kitchen."

Cutting off another piece, I offered it to Mr Ambrose. "Do you want to try?"

Demonstratively, he took a piece of baguette from the bread basket and took a bite.

"Oh well, suit yourself."

We ate in silence for a while. I really enjoyed the meal. When you live on potatoes most of the time, tasting fois gras is something special simply for the scarcity value. Add to that the exquisite taste, and... well, it was just about heaven. I treasured every bite, knowing I wouldn't taste something like this again for a long, long while. Even with my own wages, I would hardly be able to afford this on a regular basis. Especially if...

There it was again. That question. That question I didn't want to ask. I did it anyway.

"Am I really that bad?"

My voice was quiet, hesitant. Mr Ambrose looked up from his plate, where he was cutting his baguette into geometrically similar pieces. "What?"

"You intimated that if you had deducted money from my wages for all the things I had done wrong, there wouldn't be anything left. Am I really that bad at my job, Sir?"

For once, there was no teasing, no scorn, no antagonism in my voice. That seemed to throw him off. He stared at me as if really seeing me for the first time. His dark eyes turned even darker.

"No," he said, finally. "You are not. In fact... His jaw worked for a moment. "In fact, one might say your services have been moderately satisfactory, thus far."

"Satisfactory?" Had I heard right? Had he just uttered praise? Praise, moreover, which in Mr Ambrose's limited complimentary vocabulary equaled heavenly trumpets announcing a triumphant procession in honour of my utter perfection?

"Relatively speaking, of course, Mr Linton. You are still no match for a real man, of course."

For some reason, this didn't make me want to bash his brains in. Instead, my lips twitched. "Of course."

"But for a member of the unmasculine persuasion, you showed considerable lack of fear, down in the mine."

"Courage, you mean, Sir?" I inquired sweetly.

"Courage would be too strong a word. I would be more inclined to attribute your actions to an impetuous nature and a tendency to rash behaviour. However, whatever the reasons might be, you exhibited a considerable lack of fear and weakness."

"You mean I was resilient, Sir? Strong, even?"

"Those words are not the ones I would have chosen. It is more likely – that my actions originated from some irrational part of my inferior mind, which simply didn't grasp the danger, than from any real strength of character?"

"Exactly."

"Why, thank you, Sir."

"You're welcome, Mr Linton."

Why was there a smile on my face? His compliments were badly disguised insults! He still was just as abominable a chauvinist as on the first day I met him. I should be shouting at him, demanding recognition of my work and my loyalty. I definitely should be moving my right hand across the table towards where his neglected on the tablecloth.

And why was his hand suddenly starting to move, too, sliding over the table until his fingers touched mine? His fingertips brushed the back of my hand, and a little gasp escaped me. Suddenly, my mind felt very irrational indeed.

"Will you pay me my wages?" I asked sofly. "Will you let me stay on?"

He seemed to weigh my words for a while.

"I shouldn't pay you a penny," he said, finally. "I should get rid of you as quickly as I can."

It was I who remained silent now, for once. It hadn't escaped my notice that he had told me what he thought he should do, not what he would do. So I waited in silence.

Without knowing why, I squeezed his hand. For some reason, I felt good to hold his hand, as if I were a ship in a storm, and he the line holding me in my safe harbour. Ridiculous, but there it was. The feeling wouldn't go away.

"Why?" I asked, still in this same tone of voice that was so totally unlike me. How had I managed to suddenly come up with it, without practising? Why was I even using it? "Why would you want to get rid of me? I was helpful, wasn't I? We got your secret file back. Soon, you'll be the unchallenged master of world trade. That's what you wanted, isn't it?"

His fingers grasped my mine more tightly.

"But the danger..."

"Well, there was a danger of not getting the file back. But it's passed. So why worry?"

His eyes flashed with sharp stards of ice.

"I was not talking about the file, Mr Linton! His fingers closed even more tightly around mine. It was as if they were squeezing my heart. I suddenly found I couldn't speak."

"What were you talking about, Sir?"

His dark eyes bored into mine, answering my question without words.

"You remember how I told you to be careful?" he asked, his gaze keeping mine prisoner. I nodded.

"Down in the mine you were not careful. You never are!"

I swallowed, dislodging the lump in my throat that had kept me from speaking, and attempted a smile.

"It would take all the fun out of life."

His hand clenched around mine, almost breaking my fingers. Why the heck did I feel good anyway?

"You could have died!"

"So... that's why you want to get rid of me?"

"I want to dismiss you from your job all right." He leaned forward, his chiselled face not betraying a hint of what he thought or felt. His eyes, though... His eyes were another matter. "That's not the same as getting rid of you."

Another one of those lumps had appeared in my throat. I swallowed, hard, but it was a stubborn lump that didn't like attempts to dislodge it. "What other reason could I have for staying around, Sir?"

"What if it's not up to you, Mr Linton? What if I don't want to let you go?"

I felt the floor under my feet sway in a way that had nothing whatsoever to do with swell.

"What do you mean? I asked.

He opened his mouth to speak.

"Excuse me, Messieurs!"

Our hands jumbled and le as if hit with a horsewhip. We stared up at the waiter, who had walked up to our table without either of us noticing. He bowed and flourished a second set of menus. "Would you like dessert, now, Messieurs?"

"-.-.-.-"

We ate our dessert in silence. That is, I ate my dessert in silence, while Mr Ambrose chewed another piece of baguette in silence, following the waiter through the room with a venomous, icy glare.

I was glad for his lack of fequaciousness. For once, I had enough to think about – most of all about Mr Ambrose's words. He had said he should get rid of me. And yet... and yet... he hadn't looked at me as if he wished to get rid of me. Quite the contrary, in fact.

"What if it's not up to you, Mr Linton? What if I don't want to let you go?"

I shivered. What if he didn't plan to sack me? What if he was planning on doing something even worse? Exposing my disguise, maybe? But no. That would also expose himself. But what then? could not for the life of me decipher his dark, intense looks or sparse words.

My dessert was soon gone. There was plenty of baguette in the bread basket still, but Mr Ambrose didn't seem in the mood to continue eating, even if it was for free. That fact alone was very worrying. He simply sat there in brooding silence, a brooding silence that was about three times as brooding as his usual brooding silences. Again, I couldn't suppress a shiver. I thought I had managed to prove myself to him, at least to some extent. To prove that I could be a valuable and reliable asset in spite or even because of my inability.

But the way he was staring at the table, avoiding my eyes. He looked like he had all those times when he had contemplated getting rid of me. What was wrong?

"Is... is everything all right, Sir?" I asked.

He nodded.

"You did get all of it? The file, I mean? Is there something missing?"

"What? He looked up, seeming to be in the moment to realize what I had asked. "No, no. The file is complete. Mr Linton?"

"Yes?"

"Are you hurt at all? I didn't get a chance to ask before. I should have made sure, as we got away from the soldiers. Are you all right?"

Why did he want to know? Was he worried I had gotten blood on the fake uniform he had paid for?

"No, Sir, I'm perfectly all right."

"Hm."

He lowered his eyes, and started glaring at the table again. It was a wonder that the piece of furniture hadn't fled from him yet.

Soon after, the waiter appeared with our bill, which didn't exactly improve Mr Ambrose's mood. He paid, but not without giving me a look twice as icy as that he had directed at the poor table. I carefully looked my wages would be high enough to cover this bill, otherwise I would be in big trouble.

The waiter bowed and left. For a moment I considered asking Mr Ambrose what was the matter. I hesitated briefly, looking at his chiselled granite face. I hesitated for an instant too long. Pushing back his chair, he rose.

"I'm tired, Mr Linton. I'm going back to my cabin. You should, too. When we arrive in England, we still have a long coach journey ahead of us." His dark eyes met mine, holding them for a moment. "And we'll have a lot to discuss."

Before I could say anything, he was gone. I shrugged. It wasn't as if this was the last chance we would ever get to talk. I'd have to get to the bottom of what was the matter with him sooner or later. But it could just as well be later as sooner.

Besides, I had to admit, a few more hours of rest would probably do me good. My muscles still ached from pushing the drainage up those hills, and all I wanted to do was lie down and relax.

When I stepped out onto the deck, Mr Ambrose was nowhere to be seen. Strange. Why was he in such a hurry to disappear? What was he avoiding me? But why would he do that?

The question kept nagging at me, even when I had entered my cabin and lain down. I mumbled how much I tossed from side to side, or how many blankets I pulled over myself, I couldn't find sleep. The sun started to sink and disappeared behind the horizon, and still my eyes hadn't closed. Mr Ambrose's strange behaviour continued to gnaw at me. Besides, the roar of the steam engine was doing its best to keep me awake. It felt like trying to go to sleep with a raging rhinoceros next door.

In the end, help came from unexpected quarter: the sea. As time passed, its motion became more turbulent, its ripples became louder, until it tuned out the drone of the steam engine. The rutturing up and down of the waves, instead of making me sick, turned out to be comforting, like the movement of the cradle, lulling a child into sleep.

Don't worry so much about Mr Ambrose... Whatever his problem is, he'll calm down... Everything will be all right...

With that comforting thought, I drifted into sleep.

I awoke, startled into consciousness by the ring of a bell. A bell? But why would I hear a bell? There was no church in the vicinity, was there? No, of course there wasn't. I was on a ship! The Urania! Did ships have bells? And when did they ring? Surely not for a wedding?

It was then that I noticed that the motion of the waves had once again changed. Before, it had been like a mother, rocking a child to sleep. Now, it rather resembled a mother bent on infanticide! Over the roar of the sea, I could hear thunder rumble in the distance. And were those running feet outside my cabin? Yes, they were! And they were coming closer.

With an almighty crash, my door burst inward, slamming against the wall – and there, framed in the doorway stood Mr Rikkard Ambrose, his silhouette only visible for a moment as lightning arced across the sky. Then he disappeared into darkness, and I only heard his voice, cold and controlled:

"Get up! A storm is coming!"

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**My dear Lords, Ladies & Gentlemen,**

**By now, I have made contact with all the fabulous fans who were nice enough to support the publication campaign for "Storm and Silence" with their hard-earned money. In case you are one of these awesome people, you should already have received your well-deserved perk, or an email inquiring where exactly I should send it. Yet if you've contributed to the crowdfunding campaign in some form but have not received any message from me so far, then the email I sent to you probably ended up in your spam folder. If that happens to be the case, please contact me through a Wattpad message and tell all about it so I can make sure you receive your richly deserved reward! ;-) Thank you very much, everyone, for your fabulous support!**

**Publication is progressing! I have reviewed most of the edits by now, and will get working on checking historical accuracy! ;)**

**Yours Truly**

**Sir Rob**

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