

Chapter Nine

Zorana

After an intriguing conversation with the thief in my attic, I'd come downstairs to receive my new visitor. The man who'd come to retrieve 'Mr. Cunningham'—cheeky of the thief to use that name—barely passed as someone from the respectable parts of society, but I couldn't pay much attention to how he looked. He'd said the one thing that could rip the rug out from under me, and at it, I fell to pieces.

Somewhere outside the fog of my mind, a door slams.

"What did you do?!"

Walter's upset. That's... disturbing? Yes, I think that's the word. I can't think of a better one at least.

"I just mentioned how excited she must be about her father coming home tonight."

"Oh, no... I thought we had another-"

I stop paying attention, and time might pass. I'm not sure. Either way, only one more thing reaches me, deep where I've hidden inside.

"-right, Ms. Zorana. Let's get you ready for him."

But... I don't want that.

Through the motorcar's window, I watched as expansive estates gave way to smooshed-together homes and apartments, built over shops. After the commotion at home this afternoon, Walter was taking me to the train station, just outside of the city, but as we trundled along, I wasn't thinking about that or what was waiting for me there. Instead, I was dazzled by the many distractions available to me.

The sun was setting over Flosa, and as that orange light steadily vanished, it painted increasingly complex pictures on the faces of the pedestrians outside. Those morphing colors fascinated me—every brush of shadowed purple, bordered by gray or brown—and for once, I let it. I wouldn't let myself listen to these people's conversations, muted by the glass between us or their overlap over one another, but the colors? Noticing those minute details was an acceptable indulgence for now.

My other distraction existed only in the hallways of my mind: a scruffy man who'd fallen through my window last night. Unfortunately, I couldn't think of him for long before the world around me faded to fuzz, and considering what was soon coming my way, I couldn't afford to let that happen right now.

So, much as the mysterious thief, Lyle, banged around in my mind's crevasses, popping up at the most random of times, I didn't let my attention linger on him for long.

I could only let myself watch as the sunlight's glow slowly surrendered to twilight.

Soon enough, we arrived at our destination, and after parking the motorcar, Walter hurried around it to open my door. My attendant smiled at me as he helped me to the ground.

"It's a lovely evening, Ms. Zorana," he said, "and from what I understand, this month's round of business trips went well for Lord Claud. He should be well-pleased to see you tonight."

One can only hope, came a whisper through my mind.

Rather than voicing it, though, I grinned at Walter.

"I'm sure he will," I said. "We haven't seen each other in so long."

And thank you for that.

Walter led me to the train station's platform. So many other families were waiting for their loved ones here, and together, we watched a distant point on the horizon, where the tracks disappeared into the trees.

Some people found solace from their anticipation in hushed conversation, and as always, I did my best to keep from eavesdropping. Doing that was difficult, however, when my every sense was locked onto where a locomotive would soon emerge from the forest, straining for the first sign that *it* had come.

Waiting was always the most difficult part of this for me. I knew what was coming, but I could never know how it would go. I could only hope.

Fortunately, Walter was well attuned to me. He might stay silent, as any good attendant would in such circumstances, but he risked placing himself closer to me than he should, radiating such confidence and calm energy that I couldn't help but let it touch me in my storm.

Before long, I heard the far-distant clatter of wheels on the train track, and as I tensed, Walter briefly touched my shoulder before returning to his still pose. Besides him, though, no one else noticed a change in my bearing, which was how it should be.

Long had I practiced the art of a blank facade, holding all emotion in check. The skill came in handy, most especially when I'd detected something that no normal human could.

By the time it came into view, the train had already slowed from its careen, and people on the platform turned alert as it chugged to a stop, releasing a long, dying hiss once it had. Considering how late it was, this journey was probably the locomotive's last one of the day. Its cooling corpse could rest now, or it could until the morning sun reawakened it once more.

Closing my eyes, I shook my head, smiling at how morose I must sound. It wasn't like me, but then, this evening's events weren't normal either.

If only, a whisper in my mind said. *You just wish such things were rare.*

People around me started crowding toward the train, intent on greeting loved ones, but Walter and I stayed where we were. We knew well that our anticipated arrival would come to us once he was good and ready.

I chewed on the inside of my lip until I spied a familiar head of hair bobbing through the crowd, but then, I relaxed, donning a wide smile.

Once he was clear of people, my father spotted me. Dropping his bags, he spread his arms wide.

"My angel!" he cried.

And I only winced a little inside. I *hated* when he called me that.

Still, I hurried to him—as fast as I could in this damn dress—and accepted his embrace.

"Oh, it's good to see you," my father said. "How has she been, Walter?"

Avan help us if I was ever allowed to report on my behavior.

Walter merely said, "As always, Ms. Zorana has been the perfect lady."

Retaining a snort, I backed away from my father while he laughed. Perfect lady, huh? What a bald-faced lie. Thank goodness my father had believed it.

"But of course she has!" he said. "I'd expect no less."

Nodding, Walter gestured to my father's luggage.

"May I take your things, Lord Claud?" he said.

My father made a face, flapping a hand.

"Yes, yes. Let's head home, shall we?" he said. "I'm sure both of you are tired. Thank you for coming to greet me. I couldn't catch an earlier train."

A concession to the fact that he'd inconvenienced us? My father *must* be in a good mood.

Once we were back in the motorcar, I leaned my forehead against the window, once more intent on what I could see through it. The march of buildings, passing us by, progressed back to solitary estates, surrounded by expansive grounds, and all the while, my father and Walter discussed what had changed in the city during his time away.

My attention switched to their conversation when the topic of Ostiu came up. Whenever that place... my distant homeland was mentioned, my father tended to get grumpy, so all of my senses honed onto him: his subtle shift in his seat, the tone of his laugh, the genuineness of his smile.

"Another spat of unrest, eh? That's not surprising. I wonder if those uncouth rebels will ever learn their place," he said, "but it's not my place to comment about that nation and how it's run. I'll leave that to the Prime Minister and all of his wisdom."

With a slight sneer, my father rolled his eyes, and I relaxed. If he'd chosen to focus on the rivalry between himself and Lord Cunningham, then I wouldn't have to endure another temper tantrum, thrown over Ostiu.

"Please, Walter," my father continued. "Has nothing interesting happened in the last month? Nothing that might require my attention?"

Hesitating, Walter glanced at me in the rearview mirror, and I sighed.

"I'm not some delicate flower to be sheltered," I said. "I am a lady, yes? And a lady should know of any potential upsets to her routine."

Chuckling, my father patted my knee.

"That's my angel, with as stiff a spine as ever," he said. "Go on, Walter. What's the problem?"

Flicking his eyes back to the road, Walter cleared his throat.

"There was another execution while you were gone, Lord Claud," he said. "You may have heard?"

Ah. That was why he hadn't wanted to speak up. He knew how much I disliked this subject.

"Yes, I had," my father said with a wince. "Did something happen?"

Nodding, Walter said, "For this one, the site was left unmonitored, and presumably because of that, someone decided to... interrupt the proceedings. They killed the condemned before his time."

Slumping into his seat, my father hummed to himself.

"I'm not sure if that's reprehensible or admirable," he said. "*Avan* knows that even *I* think our current method of corporal punishment is a bit much."

And I distinctly did *not* think about what he'd meant.

"There's more," Walter said. "Whoever killed the condemned left a message at the site. Should I...?"

Again, he glanced at me, and my father waved a hand.

"Go on. Zorana has already expressed a desire to be included," he said.

I was surprised he'd listened to me about that.

Sighing, Walter said, "The message was, 'Your system is flawed. I'm coming for you.'"

Again, my father hummed in contemplation, but I barely noticed, listening to an echo of a voice from earlier this afternoon.

"IT'S NOT ENOUGH! Our whole system is corrupt. It needs to COME DOWN!"

Hell. Could... could *he* have written the message? If he had, who had I been helping over the last day? Did he actually mean to try what he'd implied? And if he did, why, oh why, did my heart cry, *he's right?*

Perhaps noticing how much I'd tensed, my father laid a hand over my clenched fists.

"It's all right, angel," he said. "Dissidents like this crop up all the time, and when they do, the police quickly catch them, or they disappear, back to the dark hole they crawled from."

Avan, I didn't want either of those things to happen. Still, I smiled and nodded, and with a final squeeze, my father returned to his conversation with Walter.

Content to be ignored, I leaned against the window with a single question on my mind.

What would I do with the thief in my attic?

I didn't get the question answered that night. By the time we arrived home, it was *very* late, and Walter hovered too much for me to check on my thief. So, I got ready for bed, ignoring the noises of my father doing the same on the other side of the house.

Once I was in my nightgown, I stood in front of my bedroom window, staring out over the city through the branches of my mother's tree. I could hear the roar of so many people over those distant kilometers, and maybe, if my father hadn't been occupying all of my senses, I could have distinguished individual conversations from the noise. As it was, I let the world fade, seeing without seeing, until Walter came to wish me a good night.

Then, I made my well wishes of him and a tree, my only comforts in this world, and it was off to bed.

In the morning, things seemed brighter. I could appreciate how lucky I was to live in such a lavish home with an attendant who doted on me. I could see how foolish I'd been to lament my familial

situation and everything related to it.

This ability was helped by the fact that I'd heard my father leave the house hours before, in the deep dark of the early morning.

Unfortunately, before I could take my breakfast, Walter brought me an... irritant, I'd put it. Something neither good nor bad, but also something I'd rather never deal with.

Lady Ada Watton's presence.

As she entered the drawing room, wringing her hands with red eyes, I forced myself not to wince. She was clearly in distress. How dare I judge her!

She sat opposite me as Walter left the room, and I hurried to kneel in front of her, placing my hand on her knee.

"Ada, what is it?" I softly asked.

Had someone died? Was her mother ill again?

With her face screwing up, Ada wailed, "We've been *robbed*, and daddy won't let me buy a new dress for the ball because of it!"

As the expression on my face froze in place, I could only blink at the woman opposite me. Years? She was worried about the loss of years and the minor ways in which it could affect her, not because it could potentially see her dead. *That* I could have understood, but no. She was distraught because she couldn't add another piece to her already expansive wardrobe.

Pinning a sympathetic frown in place, I patted Ada's knee, murmuring reassurances, before returning to my seat, and all the while, a blaze threatened to eat me up inside. I was having trouble swallowing it, but even still, I sat and folded my hands in my lap, politely nodding as Ada continued talking.

Was this what my thief had been feeling yesterday? Was this what had prompted his sudden outburst?

Could this be one reason why he'd fallen through my window in the first place?

When a thunk wakes me from my dreams, I shoot upright, clutching the comforter to my chest. I scan my bedroom with my heart thundering in my ears until I spot a lump on the floor at the foot of my bed.

A man. What on earth-?

He lifts himself onto his elbows, as if to crawl, before once more dropping to the carpet with a muffled crack. That's... worrying.

Slipping out of bed, I tiptoe toward this trembling mess, ready for him to attack me at any moment. Really, I should have called for Walter by now, but something about this man... something...

He's mumbling to himself, an unintelligible garble about a friend, and when I crouch in front of him, my fear that he might hurt me fades to nothing. Such a pitiful sight, this broken face, twisted with anguish!

I have to help.

Before I can try anything, though, footsteps approach my room. The silly intruder must have made too much noise when barging inside, so I hurry to hide him, and after dealing with Walter, I fling myself atop the stranger.

As I speak empty words of comfort, I pull his shirt's collar aside to check his readout and gasp with tears filling my eyes at what I see.

Five fucking seconds? What the-? No wonder he's a limp, weak mess!

Slapping my band to his, I push my timepiece's button, and as years fill his, he mutters nonsense, something about the dark and a brother. I'm not sure how much time I should give him, but as I reach ten years, he shudders beneath me, bucking off of the floor in a worryingly rhythmic pattern, before falling unconscious.

Later, when he wakes up, this picture of a vulnerable man has been erased, replaced with an empty husk, and my mystery deepens.

"Zorana!"

Rapidly blinking, I focused on Ada, who was looking at me with a wrinkled nose.

"Did you hear anything I just said?" she asked.

With an awkward smile, I said, "Something about your family's steward running off with some of the Watton's wealth. I'm sorry to hear about that, Ada."

Clicking her tongue, Ada crossed her arms with a head shake.

"Of course you weren't listening. Why should I have expected differently?" she said, as if to herself. "I don't know why I put up with you."

It probably had something to do with how many years her father owed mine or perhaps how much he hoped to use our 'friendship' to advance his goals in Parliament, but I didn't say any of that. I kept smiling, and as hoped, Ada moved on to another topic soon enough.

"Whatever will I do about the ball this weekend?" she moaned. "Simply *none* of my gowns will do for this one, not when the Prime Minister himself will be hosting it!"

"I'm sure you'll figure something out. You've always been so resourceful," I said. "Perhaps that new beaux of yours could help?"

Cocking her head, Ada frowned.

"Eldon? Maybe," she said. "I *am* meeting with him later today, and he owes me. I swear. That man could wake up the dead with his snoring."

Did that mean the two were sleeping together? That was... interesting. Ada had always been more of a free spirit when it came to love. She was unapologetic about it too, but usually, she was more discreet, especially in situations that could lead to gossip. Not that I would talk about her behind her back but she didn't know that.

She did still seem upset, though. It had probably just been a slip of the tongue.

"In that case, I hope he can repay you," I said. "Is there anything else I can help you with, Ada? I was about to take my breakfast when you arrived. You're welcome to join me, if you like."

Somehow, Ada managed to make a face without actually grimacing.

"No, thank you, although you're lovely to offer. I should be going," she said. "Look at me! Wasting so much of your time with my woes."

Fluttering her eyes half-closed, she fidgeted in place, leaving me to wonder what she was doing. I wasn't some suitor to be flirted with, although... I supposed our relationship was like courting, of a sort.

"Really, it was no trouble," I lied. "I'm always happy to see you."

With her face brightening, Ada jumped to her feet, and as she made her farewells, I went through the motions without thinking about them. It was terribly rude of me but honestly? I had a hard time focusing during conversations with ladies like her.

Avan, I was such a horrible person.

After Ada had left, I wandered into the kitchen, hoping to grab some food for my thief before breakfast. As I entered, however, I heard harsh whispers coming from a door to the outside, and frowning, I headed that way, idly filling a plate as I went.

In the next room, my family's cook was leaning through a door with it hiding most of her body.

"-can't be here, girl," she was saying. "Lady Barbary stretches herself so thin, helping you lot. I'm sorry you're hungry, truly, but there's nothing I can do, and I certainly won't bother-"

"Me?" I said.

Jerking upright, the cook partially closed the door with guilt written all over her, and I set down my plate.

"Who's come looking for me today?" I asked

With her mouth gaping, the cook couldn't find her words, so I sought an answer for myself. Looking through the door's crack, I saw the girl on the other side, and something just as small as her broke in me.

Absently, I waved the cook away.

"Hi, Cary! It's good to see you!" I said, forcing as much cheer into my voice as I could. "Did you need something, sweetie?"

With tears already dribbling out of her eyes, Cary's lip trembled as she said.

"I'm sorry, Miss Zorana. Didn't want to bother you, but... I didn't know where else to go."

Wincing, I crouched, taking her hands in mine.

"The job with the cobbler didn't work out?" I gently asked.

Cary's mouth pulled tight, and a hiccupped sob burst from her.

Shaking her head, she mumbled, "He said my hands were too big."

That was what I'd been afraid of. Sighing, I bowed my head for a moment, but then, I rallied myself, squeezing Cary's hands.

"Well, that's all right. It just means we'll have to try again, yes?" I said. "I'll look for another opportunity, but in the meantime... how much time do you have?"

Refusing to look at me, Cary said, "Two weeks, three days."

And my grip on her turned into an iron vice. As she winced, I made myself loosen it.

"Sorry," I said, "but you know you're supposed to come see me if you get below a month."

"I know, but I didn't want to-"

"Don't you dare," I interrupted. "Let me see your band."

Cary hesitantly offered me her wrist, and placing my band on hers, I gave her about a year from my timepiece, refusing to look at it. I wasn't sure how much time I had left, not after everything that had happened last night, but it was surely more than this little girl had.

Once the exchange was done, I rose from my crouch, ruffling Cary's hair.

"Come back in a few days, ok? I'll see about another job for you," I said. "For now, I'm sure we have something you can eat in here."

As if summoned, the cook reappeared with two sad looking loaves of bread, but despite their appearance, I knew that they were probably the best either of us could spare right now. She handed them over, and wiping her eyes, Cary tucked them under an arm.

"Thank you, Miss Zorana," she said. "Thank you so much."

"Sure, sweetie," I said. "Have a nice rest of your day, ok?"

Nodding, Cary hurried across the lawn, and as she went, I kept an eye out for any members of my father's security force. Fortunately the little girl was smart. She'd come here at a time when their numbers were diminished, so no one saw her escaping from the estate.

Once she'd disappeared, I turned on the cook, and it was as if all the heat I'd been retaining over the course of the morning spewed out of my mouth.

"I understand that you were trying to protect me," I said, "but I do not need anything like that from you. If one of them comes looking for me, you let me know. You do not shield me from it. Ever."

Cringing, the cook nodded, and that huddled posture... hell, it reminded me of a pose I'd often worn.

I couldn't be like my father.

So, with a sigh, I lightly touched the cook's shoulder, bending forward until I'd caught her eye.

"Nicely done with the bread," I said. "Thanks for helping me with that."

The cook weakly chuckled.

"I wish I could have done better, Lady Barbary, truly," she said. "If I may, why are you in the kitchen? Did you need something?"

Right. My food for my thief. And breakfast would be nice at some point.

"Maybe some toast and tea in five minutes?" I said. "I have to take care of a small matter, but I'll return soon."

"I'll have your favorite blend waiting for you," the cook said.

She hurried away, leaving me free to once more grab my plate.

As I mounted the stairs, I let myself return to a question left abandoned since last night. What would I do about the man in my attic?

I'd love to keep him hidden until he'd fully healed before sneaking him out of the house, but while I might have suggested that to him yesterday, I wasn't sure how feasible such a plan would be. Getting him off of the estate's grounds wouldn't be that difficult—he'd snuck onto them, after all—but making sure no one found him in the meantime might be problematic, especially if he had another nightmare like he had yesterday.

That screaming... I wasn't sure what had caused it, but I had my ideas, and if it was because he'd gone to his brother's execution, like I'd theorized, then...

Avan, I didn't know how to feel about that.

Hopefully, he could keep quiet while he slept, although given that I'd heard nothing from him last night, that must be possible. With that in mind, the only thing I could do now was hope for the best and work on my plan.

Once I was in the attic, I made sure to step more heavily, hoping the noise would alert the thief to my presence.

"Miscreant!" I said after a moment. "I've brought you some-"

His spot was empty.

With a frown, I set my plate down, brushing my fingers over cold, wooden boards, before searching the rest of the attic. He couldn't have left, right? Where would he have gone, especially with how injured he'd been?

Unless he'd had help. My visitor from yesterday could have gotten him out. Maybe.

Still, he'd made a promise.

Where would I go? For the moment, I cannot leave, he'd said, in reference to the sunlight around us.

...I suppose that hadn't been a promise, had it? Still, I'd thought that reassurance had been implied.

Even still, this place was empty, much as I might hate it, and again, heat rose from a hidden place in me.

Curling my hands into fists, I whispered a single word into the dusty attic.

"Liar."

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Revision #3

Created 10 January 2025 19:23:36 by FatalisticFable

Updated 25 October 2025 17:30:26 by FatalisticFable