

## 21. I Defend my Honour, More's the Pity

He cocked his head.

"No?"

"No! Definitely no! Despite what you have been trying to tell yourself, I am still a girl and I am most definitely not going to let you rummage around in my knickers!"

"You would rather end up face-down in the Thames?"

"I would rather that you trusted me!"

"Trust..." The word came slowly over his sculpted lips, as if he hadn't used it in a very long time. "Mister Linton... in Russia they have a saying about that. Do you know it, Mr Linton?"

He took a step closer.

"How the heck should I? I'm not Russian!"

"The saying is: 'trust, but verify'." He took a step closer again. "I do not subscribe to that saying. I never trust. But I always verify."

"You are not getting me out of my dress so you can rummage around in my underwear!" I declared, maybe a bit too forcefully. That was largely due to the fact that a part of my mind was occupied with how it would feel to have him rummage around in my underwear. And another part of my mind was busy being furious at the aforementioned part of my mind for having such thoughts.

"You are not wearing a dress, but trousers," he pointed out in his usual cold, curt manner.

"Whatever! Are you a gentleman, Sir, or a cur?"

"That depends on the necessities of the situation."

"And in this situation?"

"Give me back the file, Mr Linton, and I will not have to search you."

"For the hundredth time, I do not have it!"

"For the fourth time, actually," he corrected. "Do not exaggerate."

Heavy footsteps approached. They needed a few seconds to break through my concentration, and it was the same with Mr Ambrose. We were glaring at each other with such intensity that at first we didn't notice the giant bearded figure who had appeared in the doorway.

Finally, Mr Ambrose wrenched his gaze away from me.

"Yes?" he asked.

Karim shook his weighty turban and beard, as well as the head that was squeezed in between. "Nothing, Sahib"

At which Mr Ambrose's gaze returned to me, with double intensity.

"You know what that means, Mister Linton?"

"What?" I snapped. "And don't call me Mister!"

"It means that I have no choice but to search you."

"No!" I crossed my arms. He wasn't going to touch me! Not ever!

Well, not that I really would have minded so much. But if I would ever let him take a closer look at my underwear, it would not be to search it for some stupid paper, thank you very much! I mean, every girl has to have some self-respect.

Self-respect my inner feminist screamed at me. Under what circumstances do you think him taking a look at your underwear would be all right with your self-respect? Have you forgotten that you despise men, in whatever form they come?

"Karim?" Mr Ambrose said, darkly. "I'm going to take care of this. Close the safe door and lock us in. Open it only when I call again."

My eyes widened. I rushed towards the door, but before I could reach it the huge Mohammedan had slammed it shut and plunged us into utter darkness.

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"Ouch!"

"Ng!"

"Let go!"

"Stop wriggling you..."

Slap!

The noise echoed quite loudly in the dark, hollow room. There were a few seconds of silence, then I heard Mr Ambrose calm voice—calm in the way a volcano was calm before the explosion.

"Karim? Karim, Open the door again."

Slowly, the door slid open, admitting a brilliant ray of sunlight that cut through the darkness like a red hot knife through butter. It fell on Mr Ambrose's face, which also was pretty much red hot, at least in the places where my hand had made contact with his cheek.

"You," he said decidedly, his jaw taut, "are either as guilty as the devil himself or have more morals than apparent at first sight."

I narrowed my eyes. "What is that supposed to mean, 'more than apparent at first sight'?"

"It is supposed to mean more morals than one would expect from a girl who runs around dressed in men's clothes!"

"Hey, this was your idea, remember?"

"An idea I thought no sane individual would take seriously."

"Well, I have, and now I'm here. So what are you going to do with me?"

His threatening sea-blue eyes fixed on my face again.

"I must search you, Mr Linton. It is useless to resist."

The fellow had just intended to undress me and he was still calling me "Mister"? This was unbelievable!

"Why should I steal your stupid file?" I shouted. "I don't even know what's in it!"

"You could have been put up to it."

"By whom?"

"By one of the men who want me ruined and dead."

He said that so coldly, so calmly, that it cut right through my anger. I looked closer, and saw that behind his granite façade, emotions were boiling inside him. He was just too stubborn to admit it.

"What's so important about that file?" I asked, so ly. Well, relatively so ly, anyway.

"If you took it, you already know," was his response. "And if you didn't, I will not tell you."

"Why not?"

"I do not have to explain myself to you!"

"So what now?" I asked again.

"I could tie you down to search you," he threatened.

"You could try." My hands came up defensively again. Unconsciously, Mr Ambrose's hand went to his cheek, and I had to grin. Was I crazy? It was still a very real possibility that I would end up face down in the Thames today, and here I was, grinning like a Cheshire cat.

But I just couldn't help being excited! This was the first half-way thrilling thing to have happened in my massively mundane life.

Mr Ambrose noticed my grin. Just before he turned to his turban-wearing henchman, I thought I could see a faint scowl on his face. What? I had elicited a facial expression from Mr Granite Face? Surely not!

"Karim? Would you be so good as to search her?" Mr Ambrose inquired.

The Mohammedan's eyes flickered to me for a moment. He stood straighter and gripped the hilt of his sabre.

"I would fight an Ifrit for you, Sahib, but this creature?" He gave me a look that reminded me of the way my aunt always looked at me. "I must respectfully decline."

"I thought so," nodded Mr Ambrose.

"What in God's name is an Ifrit?" I demanded.

"A powerful half-demon from Arabian Mythology," Mr Ambrose informed me. "They are over 12 feet tall, armed with huge swords and have fists and wings that burn with hellfire."

Dear me. I had no idea Karim thought so highly of me.

Mr Ambrose started pacing up and down with long, measured strides. I watched him carefully, my heartbeat still not returned to its normal rhythm. With his impassive face, fathomless eyes and long black tailcoats fluttering behind him like bat wings, he really looked more than a little intimidating. For a moment, I considered running. Maybe I could make it to the hallway and scream for help. Mr Stone would hear me. Maybe he would run for the police.

Karim met my eyes. His small, beady specimen weren't quite as impressive as those of his master, but his were full of suspicion and animosity.

"I sent Stone away," he stated. "The door to the hallway is locked."

Mr Ambrose didn't cease his pacing. I knew it wasn't him the comment had been meant for, anyway. I gave Karim a curt nod, which he returned. If I had the slightest doubt before that Mr Ambrose could and would kill to protect his interests, it was now gone. With such servants at his command, the deed would be easy to accomplish.

I wondered why I didn't feel more afraid.

Suddenly, Mr Ambrose stopped in his tracks and whirled around to face me.

"You," he said curtly, "have placed me in a difficult position, Mr Linton."

"Because you have to kill me now?" I inquired.

"No." Maybe I was mistaken, but I could have sworn his jaw tightened a little bit. "Because I cannot kill you, Mr Linton. Any man under the same suspicion you are under now I would simply challenge to a duel and shoot like the dog he is. However," he paused for a moment to take a breath, "that will not be possible in your case, since you are... not quite as male as I could wish."

There! That was why I was not afraid.

"You mean because I'm a girl?" I pointed out. "Which means I am female not male. You can say the word, you know. It's not poisonous."

"Oh, but it is," he responded, coolly. "Poisonous to my reputation, and now to my interests. I must have that file, Mr Linton. However, you were right: I am gentleman. And because of that unfortunate condition you conceal under your trousers, I, as a gentleman, can neither search you nor kill you to gain what I must have."

Unfortunate condition? Ood, this fellow really needed his head examined!

"Why are you so bloody convinced that it was me who stole your precious papers, anyway?" I lashed out. "Why so determined to think that I am the guilty one? Why not some other member of your staff? The file could have been gone for days."

"No, it couldn't," he replied curtly. "Because nobody had access to the files in the safe."

"Nobody else had another key? And what about the one you gave me?"

"Why these pointless questions?" he asked, shaking his head. "We both know that you are guilty! There is no duplicate key, and the one I gave you was in my own possession the entire time since last Wednesday when--"

Abruptly, his headshaking ceased. His whole body froze.

"Yes?" I demanded. "When what?"

Slowly he came out of his paralysis and turned his head to face me directly. His dark eyes flashed as though a storm was raging in them. For one moment he looked so dangerous I actually took a step back.

But then I realized that for once, his anger was not directed at me. A word passed his lips, like the hiss of a snake preparing to strike:

"Simmons!"

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**Welcome to the big mystery, My Lords, Ladies and Gentlemen! :) Who do you believe is this mysterious Mr Simmons and in your opinion? How is he linked to the the ? And, still more importantly, shall Lilly get another chance to slap Mr Rikkard Ambrose...? :D :D**

**I hope all of you are as interested in finding out as I am! :-)**

**Yours truly,**

**Sir Rob**

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**GLOSSARY:**

**Ifrit: A kind of demon from Arabian mythology. As mentioned above, it is twelve feet tall, armed with gigantic swords and has burning fists and wings. Arabian mythology has generally very interesting creatures, up to and including beasts with three-thousand arms and eyes. Much more interesting than your run-of-the-mill dragon, right? ;)**

**P.S: A helpful fan let me know that the proper pronunciation of "Ifrit" is would actually sound something more like 'Ifreet'.**

**Transcribing Arabic into a latin alphabet apparently doesn't happen without a few mistakes.**

Continue reading next part