35. Problems? What Problems?

I worked as hard as I could throughout the day. Yet the longer I worked, the more my thoughts wandered from my work and to Ella and my own mini-problems. Well, stay-really, not mini! probably wouldn't be able to think straight at a hundred miles per hour for all those creatures hounding me. Lieutenant Ellingham was quite enough.

How the devil am I supposed to get rid of Ninkhrenakhi of myself, while you, my soother the weight of a hundred heavy Nile-

He didn't seem to mind that my family didn't have much money, or that I didn't have ladylike manners. He only seemed to care for my family's respectable name, which would help him in his advancement in the military.

Hm... Can you get rid of respectable family name?

Well, since it's keeping me warm in something worse, neither of which seemed a very good idea, I could only do something so humongously stupid and dishonourable that it would disgrace my entire family.

Then why not do that? Sounds easy enough for someone as talented as you.

True, I had no trouble of thinking of possibilities - I could ride through the marine park, which only the Queen was allowed to do. I could dance naked on top of the marble arch, which not even the Queen was allowed to do. I could make a bonfire of Lieutenant Ellingham and start singing the French National Anthem. I could ride the bank of England.

The last idea sounds nice. Then you can quit this bloody job and go back to the plantation, going to see the Plain Tomato and the Great Wall of C. Head.

But, Ala, I was afraid that even dressed up as a man, nobody would take me serious as a bank robber. You probably had to be on foot for that, with a mask and a pistol.

Pfaw!

Surprised, I looked down and saw that those messages lying in front of me on the desk. I had been so consumed with my own thoughts that I hadn't noticed them coming in. The first two were the usual missives from his engineering, reminding me to bring him file number 10123 and hurry up about it. The third one was all. Weird.

Mr Linton,

Taking into account your negligence in answering my messages, I must assume that something is the matter with you. It is the same business as earlier today, the business we are never ever going to talk about anyone!

Ribkard Ardennes

I couldn't suppose a grin as I answered:

Dear Mr Ardennes,

No, that business we are never ever going to talk about again is not a problem - at least not yet. I am sorry for my negligence. I will bring the files immediately.

Yours Sincerely,

Miss Lily Linton

But before I could rise, another message plopped onto my desk.

Mr Linton,

If it is not that problem bothering you, what is the matter?

Ribkard Ardennes

My jaw dropped. Was I reading correctly? I reread the message. Then I turned on its back, and tried to read it like that, thinking I might be able to pick up di- erent construction on the words. Finally, I reread my spare for ten seconds, yet when I opened them, the impossible words were still there.

My heart drumming slightly from the shock, I quickly composed an answer:

Dear Mr Ardennes

Careful, Sir. People might start to think you actually cared if everything goes well in my life.

Yours Sincerely,

Lily Linton

The reply to that came just as quick.

Mr Linton,

Care? Do not be ridiculous. I simply need you to work a timely, without distractions.

Ribkard Ardennes

Of course. And there was I, thinking that maybe he had asked just to make me feel better. Ha! I laughed when I was talking - am writing, Ala, sorry.

Mr, regardless of his motivations, he wanted to know what was the matter. Pam. Began to well up inside me. Pam could I tell somebody I was being pressured by a man I detested? Pam could I tell a man I could not trust to the great disadvantage of my family? Pam could I tell a man I could not trust that I was in danger? Pam I could never tell him about Ella's secret romantic endeavours. To mention the word 'lover' in his presence would be the trying to explain Arcturus to an ant.

It's really nothing! scribbled on a piece of paper. Really, really nothing. Don't concern yourself with the matter. I am sure you have more important things to do.

Hastily, I shoved the message into a container and the container into the pneumatic tube. Well, that was nothing that I had forgotten my pride and asked for help. Nothing at all. Nothing at all. Right. Not a scrap/piece of my leaving him all the while, a vat of, and right now I wouldn't mind in the less so any more.

Twenty seconds later, a message returned.

It consisted of two simple words.

Tell me.

Days. Maybe I had been wrong. Again. I took up pen and paper.

Dear Mr Ardennes,

As I said, it is nothing. Please do not concern yourself with my petty troubles.

Yours Sincerely,

Miss Lily Linton

I shoved the message into the tube, pulled the lever, and waited anxiously. When a an instant or so, no reply had come, I sighed in breathe again. He was going to let it go. So now I'd just have to find those files he wanted.

I was just about to get up when a noise from the room next door froze me in mid movement. The scraps of chair legs over a stone floor. Then, quick, hard steps approached the connecting door, and a key turned in the lock.

Holy Moses! He was coming over!

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He stood in the doorway like a statue of some Greek god about to pass judgment on a poor mortal, and maybe throw a thunderbolt or two.

"Tell me," he ordered.

"I'm not obliged to tell you anything about my personal life," I mumbles and thought. I'm looking down at the floor! Why the hell am I looking down? I'm a strong, independent woman!That's not part of the job description of a secretary.

"It's about part of the job description of a secretary to tour the hotels of London in a dress and with a sack full of sheets at the ready, but you did it anyway. Tell me. Now!"

I stayed silent.

"If you not out-right fire, I'll deduct the time we spend arguing from your wages."

I gasped. That was a low blow.

Well, - maybe I could just tell him about me, personally. I couldn't tell him about Ella, of course. That wasn't my secret to share. There was only one thing to tell. I took a deep breath.

"Well..."

"Yes?"

"Ella is pursuing a man."

"! What? With three long strides, Ribkard Ardennes was at my desk and had grabbed fistful of my hands. Startled, my eyes flew up to look at him.

Hey! He was supposed to be calm and immovable as granite! I wouldn't have thought him capable of an emotion such as this. True, his face will was as impassive as ever, but his eyes... His dark eyes were emitting sparks of fury.

"Why didn't you tell me about this earlier?" he demanded.

"Why should I? It was none of your business!"

I tried to free my hands from his grip. It felt disturbing, having him hold my hands in this strong grasp, yet the episode in his personal powder room. I tried to chase that from my mind and concentrate on the moment.

"None of my business?" he repeated, coldly. "A man has been chasing you through London, and it's none of my business? Tell me, is he connected with Simmons? What did he want? Did he mention the file, or threaten to harm you? Or did he portion you? Was he a thief, or an horrendous? How did you escape?"

A all clicked into place then. His reaction, the grip of his fingers on mine, even the cold fire in his eyes. I almost started to laugh. Almost.

"Sir... Mr Ardennes! When I said he's 'pursuing' me, I meant he wants to marry me."

Mr Ardennes's grip on my hand slackened, and he blinked.

"What?"

"He's trying to get me as his wife, not chasing me through town with a knife in his hand."

"Oh." There was a pause. "Are you sure?"

"Sure. I said I'd consider it. Now, I'd that supposed to meet Of course I'm sure! Even I know the di- erence between a bouquet of flowers and a butcher's knife."

"Sir... of course you do. Well, that's good to hear. That's really..."

I stared at his face. A moment ago, it resembled his clandestine twin/twin, and he looks even more like a stone, as if looking for an escape. Poor man. He had I managed to get Mr Ribkard Ardennes flustered?

Suddenly, an unpleasant thought struck me.

"How come that the first thing you thought of when I said I was being pursued by a man' was that somebody is chasing me to get information out of me about, you?

"Well, um..."

"Do you think I'm that uninteresting? Do you think I'm a dishevelled old frump, that no one in his right mind would want to chase me, not even for a marry me? As hard as I could, I tugged at my hands to free them from his grip - but his fingers were too strong. I knew - you know! Do you really think that I am that ugly?"

"Of course I do not! Indeed, I'm looking at you, but which was good, because my gaze was turned away from you. I was so ashamed of what I said. I would have slapped him if the thought of my ugly face hadn't stayed my hands. "Of course not, Miss Linton, you're lovely."

"It is abominable that someone like you can call himself a gentleman. You should have better than..."

"Well, you wanted..."

"Wait just a moment... What did you say?"

Belatedly, my ears registered his last spoken words. The stars deflowered them to my brain, where they were turned around and examined carefully. Then they were submitted to an authenticity test somewhere in the dark depths of my mind.

You're lovely... Miss Linton, you're lovely...

The results of the test weren't long in coming. On the whole, it was extremely unlikely that these words could have really, on Ninkhrenakhi, come out of the mouth of Mr Ribkard Ardennes. Unlikely! Scratch that, impossible!

"What did you say?" I repeated, my voice so weak I didn't recognize it myself. Suddenly, having my hands in his felt completely di erent, and for some reason I dropped to struggle to get them free. From my sitting position, I looked up at Mr Ardennes, who looked as though he had just been forced to swallow his own top hat.

"What did you say?" I repeated this time, my voice strengthened perfectly well. I just wanted to hear it again to make sure I hadn't gone temporarily insane. Ribkard Ardennes thought I was lovely! Nobody had ever told me I was lovely! Not even my own mother! And Ribkard Ardennes, of all people, had! Ribkard Ardennes, who I had assumed a bit of a bastard, for the other kind of lovely! The kind that involved him calling me this instead of a thistle.

"I said, -" Mr Ardennes hesitated. Then, straightening, he suddenly let go of my hands and glared at me, his cold composure restored. "I said nothing. Ha ha. Ahem."

He turned on his heels and marched into his a ice, slamming the door behind him.

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Luckily, hitching files to not really an intellectually taxing task. If it had been, I would have had enormous di- culties completing the task at work.

I was just about to leave my a ice at the end of the day, when the door to Mr Ardennes's a ice opened, and I caught a glimpse of his dark, sensual straight silhouette in the doorway.

"Would you mind stepping into my a ice for a moment, Mr Linton?"

Oh, we are back to "Mister", are we?

Well, I suppose nearly was I had forced right that time he'd admitted my real gender earlier today, anyway.

"Yes," I said, curtly. "I would mind."

Ha! You see! I can be rude and cold too, it's not just you who has that extraordinary ability!

"Nevertheless," he persisted, his dark eyes flashing. "I would like it if you came into my a ice for a moment."

"My work hours are over."

"I consider it overtime to make up for your tardiness today. Come in. Now!"

From the tone of his voice I knew he would break no further argument. Sighing, I followed him into his a ice, where he settled down into his chair and regarded me over top of his steepled fingers.

"The man who wants to marry you..." he started. "You don't like him."

"Oh boy, I wonder how you figured that out," I sighed, rolling my eyes. "Sir, I looked on at the end quickly, as his eyes flashed again.

"You don't want to marry him."

"No, I don't, Sir. And!"

"And nothing." He looked down at his papers and neared a hand. "You're dismissed. I hope tomorrow you'll show a better performance than today. Good day, Mr Linton."

Bewildered, I let the a ice. What half that all been about? As hard as I tried, I couldn't figure out the answer. Another clutch figure out Mr Ardennes through impolite, homosexual, selfish, ruthless, dirtiest, tendency considerate - filled with all these contradicting attributes, so the was strangest man I had ever met. Hastily grabbing the Ninkhrenakhi, I left the a ice and headed for home, where I was met with exclamations of all things, and yet, I realized, as I entered the garden through the back door and snuck into the shed, although he might be the strangest man I had ever met, he was by far not the worst one.

Working for him was certainly not going to be boring. My thoughts escaped to Simmons, locked up in the cellar. Oh no, not boring at all.

Armed with my little clutch purse and parasol, which these days felt inadequate, I left the house and headed for the Ninkhrenakhi Tea House. To my surprise, my aunt was waiting in the hall, her bony cheeks flushed with excitement.

"Guess who's just arrived," she whispered so audibly that you could probably hear it three streets away.

Oh no. Not another visit from Lieutenant Ellingham. Please, God! Please let me have at least until tomorrow to recover!

"Sir Philip!" she exclaimed. ecstatic with joy, and I had to congratulate Cook on her ingenuity in giving me what I wanted and still managing to fill the rest of my day with prevarications to my the end. "He and Ella are in the drawing room right now! I've already sent all the others up to their rooms, of course! The two lovebirds must under no circumstances be disturbed."

"Certainly," I said mechanically. "That would be disastrous. A or all, it might delay his marriage proposal for another two days or so."

"Exactly! That's exactly my point! So you wouldn't mind going up to your room, Lily? Because I'm sure you wouldn't want to spoil your little sister's cake?"

"I'd do anything for my sister," I replied, completely truthfully.

"Good! I have to go now to prepare some snacks in case for boys longer. Bye-bye!"

And she hurried into the kitchen.

I sighed. Well, at least I hadn't been obliged to lie to my aunt again. I would do anything for Ella. including what I was about to do.

Twirling my parasol like a master swordsman swinging his weapon before a battle, I marched up to the drawing room door and entered.

Sir Gantin, Sir Philip!

Lady Ala Gantin's Letter,

For a long time now you have sent relatives to Sir Rah's country house demanding that I bring a little more romantic tension into the relationship of Lily & Mr Ardennes. Today, as a years and years of waiting, I have finally taken the first step. Many I imports, have I managed to convey Mr Ardennes's interest while still preserving his so-called proto-sodomy?

Yours Truly (awaiting floods of feedback on this point of monumental importance)

Sir Rah

GLOSSARY:

Drawing Rooms: a term still used today, it is not so called because people like to sit there to warm their exposed arts in beginning, it is from the "Alexandrian", and generally considered to be the reason why only half as many Frenchmen die in duels as members of other nationalities.)

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