37. Ambrosian Waste Disposal Squad

Neither the next morning, nor the next few days after that did Lieutenant Ellingham put in an appearance. He did not write, he did not send a message through a friend, he did nothing. It was as though he had vanished from the face of the earth.

Lucky earth! In my opinion, her face was a lot prettier now.

I was still worrying about what exactly had happened to him, and especially if it was something from which he would return alive and in one piece. But with time, my worry eased. You can't worry too much about problems that apparently have disappeared by themselves when you have ones to deal with that are still very much present. And I had one of those every single day of the week from eight o'clock onwards.

If I had thought Mr Ambrose had been demanding and short with me before, he was reaching new heights now. He was pressuring me so hard, I was almost surprised I wasn't squashed and turned into Lilly-puree. From having me bring him single files, he went to have me bring him entire boxes, and let me tell you, those are heavy!

Did he have any helpful suggestions? Oh yes.

Mr Linton, start working on your musculature so you can carry several boxes at once. That would be far less time-consuming.

Mr Linton, walk faster.

Mr Linton, learn to open doors more quickly.

Mr Linton, I'm not paying you for tardiness! Get a move on!

I was absolutely sure now that me hearing him call me "lovely" had been my imagination. Maybe he had said "puffy". That seemed a far more likely explanation.

As time went by, I noticed that all the files I carried into his office dated from the same year as the one that had been hidden in his safe. Slowly, I realized: He was reading up on something. Preparing. Had Simmons spilled the beans yet, or the potatoes or artichokes, or whatever secret vegetables he was hiding from Mr Ambrose?

Finally, I resolved to ask him about it. In person. This was actually possible now. The file boxes being too thick to be shoved under a closed door, the connecting door between his and my office was open all the time now.

I knocked.

"Yes. What do you want?"

The customary friendly greeting. Oh, what a joy it was to have a kind and warm-hearted employer.

I entered.

"Mr Ambrose, I was just wondering..."

He listened to my question and took his watch out as he did so. When I was finished, he stated:

"You have just wasted 31 seconds of my valuable time with unnecessary speech, Mr Linton. Simmons has divulged nothing yet. Now bring me the file box I asked for."

"But what's the sense in keeping to question Simmons?" I persisted. "It's been days since the theft. Whoever has it must long have made use of the information it contained."

Which you still haven't deigned to share with me...

Mr Ambrose dark eyes flashed menacingly.

"Do you think I am a half-wit, Mr Linton? I'm sure they would have made use of it, if they could. However, the information is heavily encrypted. We have some time left yet."

"Encrypted? You mean... you invented your own secret language?"

"It is normally referred to as a 'code' by specialists of cryptology, but yes, a secret language, if you wish to put it that way."

I looked down on the files at the desk. "Do you do this for all your papers?" I asked, knowing the answer.

"No. The file was a... special case. Now get me the file box I want!"

"Mr Ambrose?"

It shouldn't be possible for a man to narrow his eyes while not moving one muscle in his face, but somehow, Mr Ambrose managed it. "I notice you're still here, Mr Linton."

"Yes, Sir."

"I told you to go."

"I know, Sir. I stayed anyway." Swallowing, I tried to gather my courage. "What is in the stolen file? What have they taken from you?"

His eyes flashed again. They looked more like the sea than ever. But if before they had been stormy, now there was a thunderstorm in progress. "I already told you that you will never know. I do not appreciate my time being wasted with unnecessary questions."

"Why won't you tell me?"

"It may surprise you to hear this, Mr Linton, but as your employer, I am in charge, and you have to do what I say. So if I do not wish to tell you something, I am perfectly well within my rights. Your incessant questions are wasting valuable time."

I gave him my most charming smile. "Then why not just tell me anyway? It would mean I'd never have to waste your time again."

There were a few moments of silence. Nobody could be silent like Mr Ambrose. His silence invaded your ears and pressed on your mind, making you wish for a single word to relieve you of the freezing, cold emptiness.

"Because," he finally said, his voice lower than usual, "your life has been put in danger enough already."

My breath hitched. What did he mean? He couldn't mean what I thought he meant, could he? He couldn't mean that to get that piece of paper, somebody might try to kill me?

And the more important question: Why the heck would he care if they did?

"And," he added, in a more usual, cool tone of voice, "because my last secretary sold this secret to my enemies. Something I wish not to happen again. I have plenty of enemies left."

Indignation rose up in me. "Do you honestly dare to suggest that I might betray you like that?"

He pondered the question for a moment.

"Yes," he finally decided, nodding dispassionately. "Everyone has his price."

"I would never betray you," I said with a bit more force than was strictly necessary. He looked at me intently for a moment – then quickly looked down at the papers on his desk.

"Bring me the file box I asked for, Mr Linton."

I didn't move. "When Simmons gives up his information..." I began.

"I will inform you," he cut me off. "Go get the file box, Mr Linton. Now!"

Ouch. What crawled up his derrière and died?

I quickly cut off that line of thinking, because it made me think about his derrière, and that wasn't a place I wanted my thoughts to go after the disturbing dreams I'd had last night.

Liar, a little voice in the back of my brain cackled.

I'm not lying! I assured myself. I have no interest in Mr Ambrose's derriere. None whatsoever!

Quickly, I hurried off to fetch the aforementioned box. And then the next. And the next. And for the entire rest of the day, I managed to keep my thoughts off Mr Ambrose's rather nice-looking behind. Yes, I did.

And how were things at home? Well, my aunt was pretty miffed about Lieutenant Ellingham's disappearance, but was consoled by Sir Philip's frequent evening visits. They became so frequent, in fact, that Ella missed several rendezvous with Edmund and became increasingly agitated. She didn't even notice my frequent absence from the house while I was at work.

My friends did of course. Since our last day out in the park, a considerable time had passed by, and they were wondering how it could be that I had so little time on my hands these days – until Ella let slip that I had a secret lover. Then, they laughed themselves silly. Thanks so much, my dear little sister! Where is the nearest butcher knife for sibling-dismemberment?

--**-*-*

"Mr Linton!"

"Yes, Sir," I panted. "The files are coming." I burst through the door and let the boxes of files drop onto his desk.

"Almost acceptable pace, Mr Linton," he said, sounding quite close to not disapproving and frozen. "Almost."

"Thank you so much for the compliment, Sir," I huffed, clutching my sides with a grimace.

"Bring me that file from over there, will you?"

Luckily, the "file from over there" was not a gargantuan monster with enough weight to break my back, but a rather slim file in a black folder. It wasn't numbered like the other files, but said in bold white lettering: L.E. from L.L. Waste Disposal.

I walked over to get it and hand it to Mr Ambrose.

"You seem no longer as distracted as the other day," came his voice from behind me.

"Well, I have less dead weight to carry around," I answered, distractedly. I was still focused on the black file. Waste disposal? I didn't know that belonged to the businesses Mr Ambrose was conducting. Strange. By now, I thought I had seen something of everything he did. "Do you remember the man I told you of the other day? The one who wanted to marry me. He's gone. Poof. Vanished into thin air."

"Indeed."

Seizing the file, Mr Ambrose flipped it open and placed a big, black ink check mark at the very bottom. For a moment I thought I saw a gleam of triumph in his eyes, but surely I was mistaken. After all, what could be so satisfying about getting rid of garbage?

"Well, I hope your performance won't be affected like this again."

"Yes, Sir. Um... if you don't mind me asking Sir...?" Taking back the file, I waved it in the air. "Are you expanding your business, Sir? I didn't think you were in waste disposal. Are you branching out?"

"No. This was a special case I had to take care of. Definitely a non-recurring venture." He fixed me with his dark eyes, and sent a glare at me that was as cold and threatening as an army of Banshees and hydras at the North Pole. "At least I hope so, for your sake, Mr Linton."

For my sake? What the dickens was that supposed to mean? What did I have to do with his waste disposal? Wait a moment... The initials on the file...!

Before I could let myself think too deeply about those initials, my thoughts were rudely interrupted.

Thump! Thump! THUMP! THUMP!

Heavy footsteps of a man running came up the hallway intruded into the office. We both stared at the door, distracted. A moment later it flew open and Karim stood in the doorway, panting.

"Mr Ambrose, Sahib!" he exclaimed, the accent in his deep voice more distinct than usual from his excitement. "I have done it! He is ready to confess! Ready to confess it all!"

"Simmons?" One second, Mr Ambrose sat behind his desk, the next he was on his feet, erect ready to move. This time there was no mistaking it: there was triumph in his eyes.

"Let's go," he ordered, and was already out the door. Karim turned and followed, wanting to close the door to the office behind him. I put my foot in between just fast enough.

"Excuse me. You seem to have forgotten me," I said, sweetly.

The bearded mountain grumbled something in some foreign language – probably "I wish I could!" in Urdu, or Punjabi, or some other Indian language. Then he marched after Mr Ambrose, who was already charging down the stairs. We could hear the harsh staccato of his shoes on the stone steps.

"Wait up!"

Mr Stone looked up, surprised, as he saw Karim stomp past him. Then his surprise doubled when I flitted by, even faster than the large Indian. I got to the staircase just before Karim did, and flashed him a charming smile. If his face hadn't already been so dark, it would have turned red like a tomato. This was just oojah-cum-spiff! Finally some excitement!

If only that bloody man would stop!

"Mr Ambrose! Wait!"

I ran down the stairs after him, and behind me, heard the Mohammedan muttering again. I caught the word Ifrit mixed in with several expressions that in spite of the foreign language, didn't sound very complementary.

Oh well. I suppose there are worse things than being seen as a 12 foot tall demon with fiery wings.

"Mr Ambrose, Sir! Wait, please!"

Did he wait? Did he slow? Well, let me put it this way: Are lions vegetarians? Probably not.

It took me forever to catch up with the basted man! He wasn't running, but he seemed to have the ability to march with military speed, even down a staircase. I just caught sight of him as he stepped off the last landing and into the great hall, which was buzzing with people.

I certainly hadn't expected what happened next.

The effect of his arrival was earth-shattering. Everybody stopped dead and turned, standing stiff and straighter. No, they didn't just stand straighter, they stood at attention, their eyes wide.

"Holy Moly," I whispered, gazing at the silent crowd.

Mr Ambrose stood at the edge of the hall. He stood on the same level with everyone else. Still, with their stares fixed on him like that, he seemed to tower over everybody, like some Greek God on Mount Olympus who wasn't above hurling a few lightning bolts at people who didn't worship fast enough.

His dark eyes met those of sallow-face, whose face actually lost some yellowness, turning white at the eye contact. He gave a tiny, curt bow, and bent over his books again, back to work. He wasn't the only one. That flicker of dark eyes had been enough: suddenly, everybody was moving again, only now they moved at double speed.

And Mr Ambrose started forward again.

Blimey...!

I could almost feel it radiating out from him: the power, like a spider's web, that joined him to every person in this building, the ends of the web connected to his employees' brains, right to the part that was responsible for fear and obedience.

Maybe that annoying little voice inside me said, just maybe, in comparison, he hasn't worked you that hard after all.

Mr Ambrose headed straight across the hallway. He didn't need to navigate through the masses of people: wherever he stepped, people made way for him. Not like they would for a king, forming a guard of honour or something, no. They were far too busy showing him how busy they were, working for him, making more money, to stand around doing nothing. But they never got in his way as he headed for a metal door at the other side of the huge room, marching along a line as straight as a ruler.

Taking a large ring of keys out of his pocket, he opened the door, stepped inside the corridor beyond and was just about to let the door fall shut behind him when I woke up from my daze. Bloody hell! I was supposed to go with him!

"Wait up!"

He was so intent on getting to his victim and start squeezing information out of him that he seemed to have forgotten all about me, and Karim, too, for that matter. But when I called, he looked up to see me dashing across the hallway. I was beside him in seconds, and after a moment's hesitation, he held the door open for me.

"I thought... it's only... ladies who go first," I panted, not able to conceal my grin. "Since when have you started acknowledging my femininity?"

"Since I want to have the door locked behind us and am the only one with the key," he shot back. I heard Karim come up behind me, huffing, puffing, and grumbling things in Punjabi. "Now shut up and get a move on!"

"Yes, Sir!" I smirked and stepped into the corridor beyond. After a few steps, I stopped, for a very good reason:

The corridor had no windows, and no lamps. Before me lay complete and utter darkness. Well, almost complete and utter. Through the open door, a few rays of sunlight shone into the corridor, but they only reached a few yards, then failed. All I could see were these few yards of cold stone floor.

"Err... Mr Ambrose, Sir...?"

I heard Karim step into the corridor behind me, and the door slammed shut, bringing us from almost complete and utter darkness to utter complete and utter darkness.

"Well, that's just spiffing," I commented, turning my head from left to right, which made absolutely no difference to the blackness I saw. "Now it's even easier for us to walk into walls!"

"This corridor leads underground," Mr Ambrose said. "That makes it hard to have windows. And why should I expend money on wall lamps...?"

"Yes, why? I mean, the human skull can take a few concussions, no problem."

"...why should I spend money on wall lamps, when it is perfectly possible to carry one single lamp and save a lot of money for oil."

A spark flared in the darkness. It caught on something, and a moment later, a yellowish light grew a few feet away from me, at about my shoulder level. It fell on Mr Ambrose's classic features, and he jerked his head to the left, down the corridor.

"Come. Let's go."

Holding the lamp over his head, he marched ahead of us. The little light was just bright enough to shine a few feet ahead. Luckily, the stone floor was as even as a ruler, or I would have stumbled and broken my foot a dozen times. Probably he'd polished it himself with sandpaper, to save the builder's bill. Or he'd just willed it to be smooth by staring at it long enough. I wouldn't put it past him.

The corridor started to slope downwards, into the earth, towards the cellars under Empire House. We went around several curves, and the angle downwards remained the same, yet we never came across any stairs.

"Why is there no staircase?" I asked.

"Sometimes, the things we have to carry down this corridor can't walk on their own," Mr Ambrose shot back without slowing his pace or turning his head.

Can't walk on their own...? Blimey! What was he talking about? Bodies? Dead bodies? Anxiety washed through me once again, as I thought of his threats to me, and of all the things that could happen to Simmons. Maybe I should go to the police after all...

"Cargo and papers, Mr Linton," Mr Ambrose added as if he'd read my mind. "You have an over-active imagination."

And you have threatened to kill me and have a man locked up in your basement, which should be the job of the police which the Queen of England is so kindly providing us with! That doesn't exactly inspire confidence!

But I didn't say that out loud. I definitely did not want to end up in the room next to Simmons'.

Finally, we reached the end of the corridor. Under a massive brick archway, that indeed would be large enough to admit large crates of cargo, we stepped into a room I recognized: it was the room just in front of Simmons' cell. At the opposite end of the room was the solid steel door behind which Simmons was held. To my left there was another door. I recognized it as the one through which we had entered the basement last time, by the back entrance.

Karim strode determinedly towards the door, but Mr Ambrose touched him lightly on the arm, and the huge Indian stopped in his tracks.

"Before we go in – Tell me, how did you finally crack him?"

Karim shrugged. "I am Sorry, Sahib, that it took me so long. It was my failure. I failed to take into account the character of the English."

"In what way?" I asked, interested. After all, I was English. I had no idea that I shared a character trait with other English people. So far, I hadn't found a lot of common ground.

The bearded mountain threw me a glare and shut his mouth. Apparently, he wasn't ready to answer any questions that came from me.

"In what way?"Mr Ambrose repeated my question, so now he had no choice but answer.

Karim cleared his throat. It sounded like a volcanic explosion. A very embarrassed volcanic explosion.

"Well, Sahib, I threatened him with the usual European, Arabian, Indian, and even Chinese torture methods. Nothing seemed to terrify him. But that was the wrong I approach. As I said, I failed to take into account the character of the English. Then it finally came to me. I..."

He cleared his throat again – and then the sneaky son of a bachelor bent down and whispered something in Mr Ambrose ear! And Mr Ambrose, Mr Immovable Stone-Face Ambrose, actually lifted an eyebrow.

"Is that so? And it worked?"

"Did what work?" I demanded.

"Oh yes," Karim said with grim relish, ignoring me completely. "He is talking like a trader on the bazaar. Only he does not wish to sell, but give it all for free."

"What did you do?" I demanded. "Karim, what did you do to the poor man?"

This time, they both ignored me.

"Very well then." Taking the keys from his pocket once more, Mr Ambrose unlocked and unbolted the door. "Let us see who is behind this infernal intrigue!"

He thrust open the door and stepped forward, into the dark.

My dear Lords, Ladies and Gentlemen,

I've been working like a fiery ifrit to bring you this longer installment on this wonderful morning ;-) I hope you enjoyed it?

What do you think of Mr Ambrose's effect on his employees? Isn't he cold and scary? ;-)

Yours Truly

Sir Rob

P.S.: This story is really getting popular, thanks to all of your awesome support! :) There's even been a facebook fan page started! Click on the external link to join :)

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