

40. Dysfunctional Dismissal

Hours to live. He has only hours to live. ⁴⁸⁷

The sentence, so calmly spoken, was still echoing through my mind while I followed Mr Ambrose up the stairs and through the hallway. I barely noticed Mr Stone's greeting in time to return it. ⁴⁸

Hours to live. Only hours. ⁴⁹

Should somebody warn Simmons? Shouldn't Mr Ambrose? But I saw that wasn't going to happen. He wasn't going to kill Simmons for what the man had done, but neither was he going to lift a finger to preserve his life. I knew that from looking at his face alone. ⁴⁶

"Mr Linton?" Mr Ambrose's calm and cool voice startled me from my thoughts. "Step into my office for a minute. There is a business matter I wish to discuss with you." ⁴⁸⁷

A business matter? Now? What about the fellow you're setting up to have his throat slit? ⁴⁵

"Of course, Sir." Rolling my eyes, I followed him into his office. I should have guessed this was going to happen, of course. ⁴²

Knowledge is power is time is money, right? ⁴⁴

So we find out who has stolen this incredibly important document. What do we do next? Take a day to celebrate? No, not with Mr Ambrose. There's a 'business matter' to take care of. And a matter that, probably another. And another. ⁴¹

I wondered what we were going to do? Start tracking this man down, whose name Mr Ambrose wouldn't divulge? But then, what did he need me for? I could hardly look for somebody whose name I didn't know. Not even with a sack full of onions was I that good. ⁴⁸

Mr Ambrose sat down behind his desk. I sat down directly opposite him in the visitor's chair. Yet instead of cutting to the chase in his usual manner, he started arranging all the papers on the desk into neat piles. ⁴¹⁵

What the heck was going on? Was Mr Ambrose, Mr Save-time-or-die Ambrose, actually stalling? In other words, wasting precious moments that could be transformed into money? ⁴⁶¹

He was. Something was seriously wrong here. I bit my tongue to suppress the urge to ask. Only when the last piece of paper was where it was supposed to be did Mr Ambrose finally look up. ⁴

"You will be leaving in an hour. Stone will pay you for your services rendered so far, and order a cab for you to take you home." ⁴⁶⁴

I frowned. What was this? ⁴

"I... I do not understand." ⁴⁶

"It is very simple. Our employer-employee relationship is hereby terminated. You will receive a note of dismissal at my earliest convenience. Good day, Mr Linton. Do not let me detain you." ⁴⁴⁴

He looked down again, and started to read one of the files in front of him as if I weren't there anymore. It took me a few seconds to get it. To fully appreciate what he had just done. When I did, my hands clenched into fists. ⁴⁶

"You... you're dismissing me?" ⁴⁸⁹

"Indeed I am. Or rather, I already have." Slowly, he looked up again, fixing me with his dark gaze. "It would appear that you are still present. Perhaps you didn't understand me. You are dismissed. Which means you can leave. Now." ⁴⁶¹

"Why?" I felt bloody moisture in my eyes. No, no! I was not going to cry in front of him! I was not going to prove every single prejudice he had about girls right there and then. I was not an overly emotional, silly female! I wasn't! I wasn't! "Why are you doing this? What have I done wrong?" ⁴⁸⁰

He cocked his head, minutely. "Wrong?" ⁴⁷⁸

"Bloody hell! Isn't it sort of a rule that an employee can only be dismissed if they've done something wrong? What did I do? Didn't I carry your files fast enough? Didn't I dress male enough for you? Did I breathe too loud? Tell me, blast, what did I do?" ⁴⁴⁴

He shook his head, but his eyes didn't go with the movement. They remained fixed on me. His gaze was disturbing. I had never met a man filled with so much silent concentration. ⁴⁷⁵

"You don't understand, Mr Linton. You didn't do anything wrong." ⁴⁸⁶

"What?" I blinked the moisture out of my eyes before it could spill over. "Then what is the matter? Why are you trying to get rid of me?" ⁴⁰¹

"Don't you see?" His hands on the desk curled up into fists. I could see that behind his calm exterior, a storm was brewing. But I wouldn't be put off by that. I couldn't leave this job! Not now of all times. Not now that he was in trouble, and up against someone dangerous! ⁴⁵⁹

And since when have you started worrying about what he's up against? Haven't you got enough problems of your own? ⁴⁰

No, I didn't. Problems were fun. Problems were adventure. Besides, I'd be damned if I left before I got my first paycheck out of that miser! ⁴⁷¹

That miser was just now staring at me as if he'd like to strangle me instead of pay me. In a very low, controlled voice, he said: "Mr Linton... I'm no run-of-the-mill businessman who sells tin cans at the market. I have my own Empire, and consequently must deal with my own espionage and fight my own wars. Right now, a war is coming." ⁴⁴¹

"A... war? Over one piece of paper?" ⁴¹³

"Yes. A war. Possibly the biggest I've ever fought. I don't want you to be caught in the crossfire." ⁴⁸⁹

"Why?" My voice was trembling. My bloody stupid, unreliable voice was actually trembling! "What do you care?" ⁴⁰⁸

For a second, I almost believed a muscle in his face twitched. But no, I was surely mistaken. ⁴²⁵

"I...I cannot have a girl being in danger," he said, raising his chin determinedly. "Any girl. My honour as a gentleman forbids it." ⁴⁴⁴

Out of all the possible answers, this wasn't the one likely to go down well with me. I leaned forward over the desk, my glare almost matching his. ⁴³

"I'm not some helpless maiden who needs to be protected! I am a free human being and can do whatever I wish. And if I wish to remain in your employ, then I will remain in your employ, until such time I give you a reason to dismiss me, Sir!" ⁴³⁴

Slowly, Mr Ambrose clenched and unclenched his fingers. ⁴¹⁴

"You know, Mr Linton, you have a way of saying 'Sir' that makes it sound astonishingly like a synonym for 'miserable chauvinist worm'." ⁴⁴⁴

"I wonder why that is." ⁴⁸⁸

There were a few moments of silent brooding. Nobody could silently brood like Mr Ambrose. He seemed to fill the entire office with an utterly still, quiet, silent and dark disapproval that was so thick you could choke on it. ⁴⁹²

"So you won't go of your own free will?" he finally asked. ⁴⁸

"No!" ⁴⁵

"You, Mr Linton, are stupid and reckless." ⁴³⁵

"Indeed, Mr Ambrose?" ⁴²⁶

"Yes, indeed, Mr Linton." ⁴⁸³

Half a minute more of silent brooding followed. Oh yes, he could brood exceedingly well, and shoot sinister glances. But I wasn't too bad myself. ⁴⁵¹

"Why won't you go?" he demanded. ⁴¹⁹

"You know why. This is the only chance I'll ever get at a career, at independence." ⁴²⁵

And, I don't want to leave you in your hour of need. ⁴⁴⁴

The blasted thought was there, undoubtedly. But I couldn't admit it out loud. I couldn't even admit it to myself inside. ⁴

"You could get killed." It wasn't a threat. Not even a warning. It was simply a statement of fact. ⁴²⁰

"I know, Sir. Would you pay for my burial?" ⁴⁵⁴

"Are you completely mad?" ⁴⁷⁹

"Not completely, no." ⁴⁰⁵

"Well, then you should leave right now!" ⁴³⁶

"I won't!" ⁴²

"I could make you leave," he threatened. "We both know that in reality, there is no 'Mister Victor Linton'. I could reveal you for what you are, and make you leave so easily." ⁴²⁷

"You gave your word not to!" ⁴⁵²

A cold hiss rose from his throat. "I never felt more like breaking it! You have no place here. It is all just a mirage. A phantasm. An insane dream of yours." ⁴⁸⁸

I leaned forward some more, putting my hands on his desk. ⁴¹

"What do you want?" I hissed back at him. "What do you dream about? Have I ever asked, or dared to criticize?" ⁴⁴

The question seemed to catch him off guard. His mouth opened a little bit. "Well... no." ⁴⁹⁸

"Then don't you dare tell me my dreams are insane! Because my dreams are what I live for!" ⁴³⁴

Silence again. This time, though, it wasn't brooding. Rather, it was pondering. And so was he. He pondered for a while – a long while. In the end, I decided that this time I had better break the silence. ⁴⁴

"You didn't answer my question, Sir." ⁴¹⁶

"Which one?" ⁴³⁵

"If I die, will you pay for the funeral?" ⁴⁸⁹

He stared down at his fingers for a moment. ⁴¹⁰

"I don't know. It depends on how well you have served me. Maybe, if you've earned me enough money by then, I would consider it." ⁴⁰⁶

A grin spread over my face. ⁴²

"Does that mean you'll keep your word? I can stay? In spite of the danger? In spite of being a girl?" ⁴

"Yes!" he growled. "Yes, you can stay, until and unless," he added, "you leave of your own free will." ⁴⁴

My grin widened. ⁴

"Ha! That's not very likely, Sir!" ⁴²

Unclenching his hands, he carefully stapled his fingers together, gazing at me over the top. "Don't be so sure." ⁴⁴⁶

"Why? What are you going to do? Make me carry twice as many files as before?" ⁴¹¹

I could have been wrong, of course, about what I thought I saw next. Afterwards I thought I probably had to be wrong. Maybe he was having a muscle-spasm around the mouth or something. But for a moment it looked like one of the corners of his mouth actually twitched up in the beginnings of a smile. ⁴⁷⁴

"That's not exactly what I had in mind, Mr Linton." ⁴⁶⁴

My Dear Lords, Ladies and Gentlemen, ⁴¹

I, Sir Rob, stand humbled before you. After having received numerous messages from my honoured Pakistani readers, it appears that choosing another language for Karim would make him a more authentic character. I bow to your superior knowledge in these matters and thank you very much for your expert feedback! :) As soon as I've developed Karim's back story in my notes, I will pick a more appropriate language for him. I'm thinking of Punjabi... ;-) ⁴⁰³

Now, as for Mr Ambrose... I think we all agree that it's best to have him say nothing at all but simply be silently and hotly smoldering, agreed? ;-) **I hope you're all excited about what he's got in store for our Lily.** ⁴²⁷

Your Victorian writer (delving into Pakistani linguistics) ⁴¹³

Sir Rob ⁴¹³

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