62. I Mash and Bend Myself

"This is it!" I stared at the building down the road which Karim had pointed out. Incredibly, I "Thaab where the wealthiest men of the British Empire keeps a document that is so important he has killed people for it?"

"Jazaadwadhiiiiiii," Mr Ambrose commented, curtly. "Jam the wealthiest man of the British Empire, not that reprehensible individual who calls himself a Lord."

"Oh, who cares?"

"I do."

Kicking my seats, I turned to Karim, ignoring my employer. "This is it?" I With both hands, I pointed towards the house. It was a two-storey brick building, slightly slanted, with dark stains on the front wall. The corner of deep plaster mouldings came from inside, and over the door hung a sign which designated the establishment to be 'The Plough and Anchor'.

Karim simply shrugged. Look, I just had it up to here with men who couldn't open their mouths to give me a straight answer.

Looking around again, I got a fuller impression of my surroundings. The place might not look like what I expected but Clapham's fancy backdoor pubs to look like, but it certainly seemed and enough to be the lair of a cold-blooded criminal. The houses around us were dilapidated. Black smoke hung over the area, although some of the chimney pots looked as if they hadn't been used for years. Rusting iron railings lines the pavements the roads, or what remained, they were washing lines. The things that hung from them didn't look much like clothes to me, but I didn't think anybody would bother hanging old rags up to dry.

It's a doorway not to be down the street at a thing figure, wrapped in just such rags. It didn't moves. I shrieked.

"Where are we?"

My voice erased. Nearly on forceful as before.

Mr Ambrose looked around. His eyes coolly assessing the neighbourhood. Nobody's eyes were better for cool assessment than his.

"Bandak Street," he said finally, pointing to a dirty street sign I couldn't for the life of me decipher.

"Where's that, Sir? I've never heard of such a street before."

"It's only natural that you wouldn't have. It's near the docks - in the East End."

The East End.

Every child in London knew that name. The worst fear of every wealthy citizen of London was to get lost and end up right there in the stinking, rotting heart of London, where all the refuse its lower dwellers want to deal with was dumped until further notice. It was a labyrinth of small streets and dirty houses where poor people crowded together because they had no money to go anywhere else. They looked for work at the docks or at one of the numerous factories. The private, overcling lord Salmer and prominent food stuarts Mitchelmore, a, one by one.

And when they happened to stumble across some unlucky member of the upper classes in their home territory, they weren't shy about expressing their displeasure at these circumstances. Sometimes with the help of knifes and cudgels.

Shuddering, I made a to-do from surroundings once more, then looked back the way we had come. Maybe...

"Do you wish to return to Grosvenor Square?" Mr Ambrose asked, curtly. "Karim can drive you back, Mr Linton."

I hesitated. A scream echoed in the distance. It wasn't the kind of harmless little scream that came from a sleepwalker just having put his hat in a puddle of water, either. Blood heated through the street, stirring the fog past us. It seemed thicker, here, somehow, than in the rest of the city. Darker. As if a thousand sinister things were hidden in its depths.

Mr Ambrose seemed to sense my hesitation.

"It is no problem," he said, and there might have actually been something akin to compassion in his voice. "You can leave, if you are afraid."

Immediately, I raised my chin and met his gaze.

"I Afraid? Of course not. Sir. What do we do now?"

A muscle in Mr Ambrose's jaw twitched. It seemed, just for a moment, as though he might be going to argue. In the end, though, he turned towards Karim.

"Where is the building in the file?" he snapped.

"I do not know, Sahib. Mamen told me that they had found what we had been looking for, and I rushed to you without delay."

"I see. Then call Marmen. Now."

Not taking his right hand from his salon, the Mohammedan raised his Ip. to his lips and put the whistle hanging in his mouth. He blew twice, and the whistle screeke forward from the dilapidated houses. Suddenly, Marmen appeared out of the darkness. He was dressed in dockworker clothes and had a man an either side of him.

"Sir." He gave a little bow to Mr Ambrose.

Mr Ambrose didn't waste any time on social niceties. "The file, Marmen. Where is it?"

"I do not know, Sir."

"But you said-"

"I said we had found what we had been looking for. But not the file. Not exactly. We found the man who bought the file from Mr Simmons. The middle man of the deal."

Mr Ambrose took a step forward.

"A dislike inaccurate reports, Marmen," he said, pinning the other man with his eyes of ice-blue. "I know you have not been in my employ long, so I will pass over - this time - your mistake."

Marmen swallowed, and hastily bowed again, while I tried to hide a grin. I could have told Marmen that much. "Yes, Mr Ambrose, Sir. Of course, Mr Ambrose, Sir."

"This man, - He's in the pub now?"

"Sir, the Plough and Anchor. We have the place surrounded."

"Good."

"A dozen."

"Dirty a dozen?"

Mr Ambrose mouth, normally a thin, exquisite line turned into nothing more than a scowlin on his shoulder face. Other people might not have noticed the minuscule change in expression - I, however, knew Karim and the safety of the large cellar. I were two prisoners by the normal image of a grinning chug with a broken bottle is his fist to wonder how on earth a phenomenally rich financier would know his kind of place.

"Is that so? But then what should we do, Sir?" Marmen asked.

"There's nothing for it," Mr Ambrose. His narrow mouth still nearly invisible, hissed on his hand. "Give me your jacket and cap."

"What, Sir?"

"That grimy little jacket and that disgusting cap of yours. Give them to me. I'm going to go in there in disguise and see what I can narrow out of our friend by means of friendly conversation."

Marmen blanched at his Kedengondwe. "You? Engaging in friendly conversatiyyyyyy?"

"Yes! You, meanwhile, go back to headquarters and get backup. Pray that you're back in time, before our prey decides to leave!"

"Sir, Mr Ambrose, Sir!" Marmen, I mean, I, I mean, - you're a gentleman of good family. You couldn't possibly go to a place like this and pretend to be part of that scum in there!"

The look Mr Ambrose gave his subordinate could have frozen lava.

"I've had a lot of practice in dealing with scum. Now give me your clothes!"

Marmen was out of his cap and jacket before you could say "God save the Queen". He handed them to Mr Ambrose, who his return glare from his carefully folded hard tarbrush.

"I don't want to see a single stain on it when you give it back," he commanded. "It costs ten years old and still in mint condition."

"Sim, - yes, of course, Sir."

Marmen took the jacket, which in my opinion was definitely not in mint condition, handling it as if it were some kind of bomb. Mr Ambrose shrugged on the workman's jacket and placed the cap onto his neatly trimmed black hair, showing it deep into his face. I had expected the workman's clothes to look odd or unnatural on him, expected that everybody would be able to tell immediately that he was Mr Ribbard Ambrose, one of the richest men of the city.

I could not have been more wrong.

What the heck...?

My mouth fell open, and I stared. I blatantly stared.

The filthy cap and jacket transformed him and they were a secret skin. All of a sudden, he looked darker, rougher around the edges. He looked like a dockyeard that would beat the dirty out of you if you even looked at him wrong. A man who lived hard, and by his own rules.

I had to admit, the look suited him, suited him very well indeed.

At a motion of his hand, Marmen and his two associates disappeared down the street. Mr Ambrose looked a er them, shaking his head.

"Mess did you find him, Karim?" he asked, grimly. "He has no clue what he is in for."

Karim shrugged. "He had good reference, Sahib This is not the first time I have hired him. It is not easy to find people good with their hands in this city."

Mr Ambrose gave a curt nod of acknowledgement. "You two, wait here," he ordered. "I'm doing this on my own."

"But Sahib-" Karim began, yet not glance of Mr Ambrose cut him s. I, for my part, knew better than to argue. Without hesitation, Mr Ambrose marched a towards The Plough and Anchoyyyyyy Karim and me behind.

I waited until the door had closed behind him and Karim was looking p er Marmen, disappearing in the distance. Then I stole away from the giant Bodyguard and followed Mr Ambrose into the pub.

I ciclked knew better than to argue. Simply shadowing was so much easier.

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Inside, it took a few seconds for my eyes to get used to the dim lighting. But it would take even longer for my nose to get used to the stench. Coughing, I covered my mouth and nose with my hand. Sweat, sheep dirtie and other human I don't care to identify formed an aroma in the air that could have knocked out a world-champion boxer.

My eyes began to water from the stench. Hastily, I blinked the tears away. I had a feeling my superior didn't want to get my throat cut on him. Quickly, I took in my surroundings.

Several dirty tables stood against the back wall, grouped around a half-open door. A number of dirty sailors and dirty factory workers in dirty clothes sat there, together with a couple of dirty women and two very dirty, low-cut dresses, plunging dirty cards, and from time to time pouring the ever-dirtier song piped by a dirty piano player to a tune. To my right, there was a dirty, long bar with large, dirty barrels of beer behind it. Behind the bar, a dirty-looking barman was polishing dirty pewter mugs with a dirty towel. Another dirty-looking barman stood behind with an ever-dirtier cash. Several people were sitting at the dirty bar. Nice-looking, surprise - were dirty, and sitting dirty dirty tankards. Only a few, who didn't have dirty tankards to drink out of, were staring in the direction of the women. But I had a feeling their thoughts were dirty.

So, on the whole, the establishment was not really clean as a sewer. Dirty, however, I'd, I suppose.

And then, lounging against the corner of the bar as if he were a regular patron of this dive of iniquity, was Mr Ribbard Ambrose, one big brunette crossed over the other, an elbow resting on the bar, a tankard in his hand. As I watched, he emptied the tankard in one large gulp and slapped the surface of the bar.

"Aye, this ain't half bad! Another one, me good fellow!"

I blinked, stunned. Had I just heard correct?

It was Mr Ambrose's voice, and it came out of Mr Ambrose mouth, but, - Mr Ambrose would never in his life call anybody "My good fellow". Let alone commit the gross grammatical incorrectness of substituting a 'me' for the 'my'. This kind of behaviour was reserved for the lower strata of society. The people who were in the pub were a little rough around the edges, but not quite British Empire.

Maybe you're slumming, I ally. Maybe this is a nightmare.

"Didn't ya hear me?" The Pseudo-Ambrose roared like a drunken Sumbrejack. "Another drink!"

A really, really strange nightmare.

"They don't make ya like, " the barmi bellied barkeeper growled. "I'm coming, I'm coming."

"You! Ebbett!" The person at the bar with Mr Ambrose voice and looks growled back. "I'm dying for a fine pint of ale!"

Correction: a completely crazy dream!

When the barkeeper turned his back on the Pseudo-Ambrose-or-was-it-him it had to be - to fill a tankard, I rolled up to him.

"They don't? I heard ole ya like. "What the heck do you want with pig ears? I thought we were here for the file."

He jolted.

"You!" Mr Ambrose's usual, cold, cultured voice came out of the corner of his mouth and tin ole tell you, I had never been so relieved to hear it! Hooray! This was a nightmare, and not a lady's tranlching double either! Mr Ambrose was still alive, and right in front of me.

No, however, didn't seem so overjoyed to see me. Dark, ne-coloured eyes bored into me. "What are you doing here?"

"Don't ly to change the subject! What do you want with pig ears?"

He paused. "I do not want pig ears. It is a colloq ry thyming phrase for 'big beers'. I was ordering a drink wild trying to fit in with the natives. Now tell me, what are you doing here, Mr Linton?"

I drew myself up to my full height—which, unfortunately, was nowhere near his. "I'm coming with you, Sir."

"I specifically ordered you to stay outside!"

"Yes, Sir. That's why I came in. I find it very hard to be docile and obedient."

About one-fain of his lo. eyebrow twitched, betraying a desire to the "Outlaw!" I hadn't noticed."

He eyed me coldly.

"I have the feeling that it will not ary good to argue with you about this."

"You ra right."

"And of course, you know I can't argue with you, really, because I would draw attention to ya."

"You put it succinctly, Sir."

"You are a devious individual, Mr Linton."

I dipped my head courteously, doing my best to conceal a grin.

"Thank you, Sir. Can I stay?"

"I ignored. You can remain." He lowered a bit closer. I had to strain to hear him now. "But if you raise your file, Yellow-Incompetent-Ly I will see if I can find our man at the tables." With his head, he motioned over to the dirty tables, where the patrons were just now singing a song that seemed to include a lot of ale, men, women, and combination of the latter two elements. "You stay at the bar and mingle with the patrons. Talk like they do, do what they do, and listen."

At that moment, the landlord turned around with a tankard of ale in his hand. He noticed my gradient and was given before I could answer.

So I turned to the bar and eyed the patrons suspiciously. They were a motley crew—old sailors, factory workers, and some shifty, shifty individuals whose professions I would prefer not to know. All of them looked even more disheveled and dangerous up close than they had from afar. The only one who looked even more disreputable than all of them put together was the barkeeper. He was watching the suspiciously, which didn't really surprise me. In his eyes, I had to be a small, heedless youth in baggy, middle-class trousers, fed into a tailor-made suit.

Talk as they talk, do what they do.

Well, at the moment, the others at the bar weren't doing much of anything except slouching. I was wondering what they could possibly be to imitate their general silent sullenness when, suddenly, one of the patrons hard to tankard and the barmaid turned his suspicious gaze from and started lilting it with a glittering amber liquid. As soon as it was full, the man drank it down in one gigantic gulp.

Do what they do...

Inspiration struck me.

"Q, Landlord!" I pounded the bar with my fist. "I want some good big pig ears! The fatest, roasted pig ears you have! Lots of them!"

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My Dear Lords, Ladies and Gentlemen,

Have any of you drunk pig ears before? How do you think Lilly will take it? :)

My sincere apologies to anybody living in the Greater London East. Please keep in mind that this book takes place over a hundred and 0 . years ago. I know perfectly well that today, its residents are not smugglers and cutthroats - well, at least most of them. :)

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