

erent Sorts of Silence

I stared at him, uncomprehending. His words had registered, but I had no idea of their actual meaning.

The centre of the world.

"Forgive me, Sir, but I don't..."

His eyes narrowed infinitesimally.

"Get out."

"What?"

"You understood me, I believe? I have told you what you wanted to know. Now get out! And shut the door behind you."

"But..."

"This is an order!"

My hands opened and closed in helpless anger. I had no choice. I had to obey, or be dismissed. And right now, I could see, he was hungry for me for to give him the chance. His words came back to me, ringing loudly in my head – a action is not among the services I require of you What was I doing? Why was I arguing to risk my life alongside him? I whirled on the spot and stormed out of his room, into mine.

My room. The centre of my world. But not the centre of all the world.

The centre of the world..The words echoed in my head with ominous significance. What on earth could he have meant?

He didn't give me much chance to ponder his strange revelation. As soon as I was in my o ice again, the door firmly shut behind me, I heard him get up from his chair and lock the door from the other side.

It didn't take long until I heard a familiar plink from the wall beside my desk.

The rest of the workday went by in a blur of fetching papers, and plink and not trying to worry about the writer of the pink letters or what Mr Ambrose intended to do.

I shook my head. He couldn't really be planning to break into Lord Dalgliesh's...?

No!

I mean, he was a businessman not the leader of some street gang. Though... he hadn't practised his business here in London, I remembered, but in some corner of the former colonies. The West of America, if I remembered correctly? There was something about that region... I seemed to recall having heard it called the "Wild West" once.

Personally, I couldn't see what was so wild about it. From the few pictures I had seen, it was a country just like any other, with trees, rivers, mountains and people.

Though, now that I thought about it, most of the people in the pictures I had seen had carried guns.

Just like the guards at Lord Dalgliesh's headquarters.

Mr Ambrose couldn't be planning to do what I was thinking he was planning to do, could he?

Really? Not even for the centre of the world?

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It was about seven pm when the messages stopped coming though the pneumatic tube. Some minutes later, I heard keys rustling, and a slightly confused looking Mr Stone unlocked the door to my o ice.

"Um... Mr Linton? Mr Ambrose instructed me to 'let the Ifrit out of the dungeon', as he put it. Was he referring to you?"

Had I been in a better mood, I might have grinned. But now, only a scowl managed to make its way onto my face.

"Yes."

"I see." Mr Stone cleared his throat. "Um... excuse me, but still don't quite see what his words actually mean? Could you explain, perhaps?"

"No!"

"Oh. Very well, then... I suppose I'd better pack my things and go. Until tomorrow, Mr Linton."

Grumbling a response, I rushed past him and down the hallway. Maybe, just maybe, I could still catch Mr Ambrose before he le the building. I raced down and into the main hall at breakneck speed.

Just as I stormed into the giant stone monument that was the entrance hall of Empire House I saw the end of a black tailcoat disappearing through the front door.

"Wait!" I shouted, and all eyes turned towards me as I ran across the hall. Over the slap of my footsteps on the polished stone floor I could hear the whispered words "secretary" and "new" and "replacement" echoing from all around me.

Wait! I wanted to shout again. What about the centre of the world? What is it? Where is it? How can it be on a piece of paper?

But I knew better than to speak those words aloud. I might not know what the "centre of the world" was – but I knew the words had power. If I let them become common knowledge, I was as good as dead. With a last burst of e ort, I threw myself a er him. He would not escape me! He would tell me everything! Finally, I was out at the door and, pushing it open, jumped outside – just to see a chaise drawn by a beastly grey horse disappearing in the distance.

I uttered some very unladylike words.

But there was nothing to be done. For now, he was gone. And gone with him was the chance to convince him to explain his mysterious words, the chance to convince him to let me go with him. For now, I could do nothing.

But, I had to remember, I still had three days to convince him to let me into the secret, and to make me part of his plans. There was another occasion coming for which the timetable was slightly more pressing.

Turning the other way, I started down the street, towards home.

Another centre of my world...

As soon as I turned into our street, I could see that the preparations for the ball were in full flow. Or perhaps it would be more accurate to say that I could hear rather than see.

"Faster, faster, girls, the carriage will be hear in less than an hour! What are you thinking, still running around only half-dressed? What if he should happen to arrive early? Maria, your hair looks like a haystack! Take it down again. No, here, let me. Someone fetch me a comb! And where in heaven's name is Lillian?"

Quickly, I glanced around, to check if any of the neighbours were around to hear. None of them were outside, but my aunt's tirade was audible out here in the street with all the doors and windows closed, what did a few additional walls mean to a shriek as impressive as hers?

"Leadfield! Go and look for Lilly, and bring her to me as quickly as your feet can carry you!"

Good. That meant I had plenty of time.

"And bring Ella too, if you can find her. What she is thinking..."

Ella wasn't with them? My breathing quickened, and I hastened my steps. Soon I was past the front entrance and at the door to the back garden. Unlocking it and slipping through, I made my way to the garden shed and disappeared into the shelter of its darkness.

I was probably less than presentable when I did up the laces of my dress, but since I would take it o and exchange it for my makeshift ball-gown as soon as I was in the house, I didn't think much of the fact. I was too concerned about the fact that my aunt hadn't been able to find Ella.

Dear God! She didn't... she couldn't just...?

No! Not without saying good-bye to me!

Don't jump to conclusions! told myself. It doesn't have to mean the worst.

The worst.

What I had feared all along.

That she had run away.

In a dash, I crossed the last bit of distance to the door and pushed it open.

No. It didn't have to mean she had run away. She could be in a part of the house they hadn't thought to look in, or she could be on a walk, or she...

...could be hurrying across the garden right in front of me!

There she was! Even in the darkness, that white gown and golden hair was unmistakable!

Like a flash, I was back inside the shed, the door only opened a crack now, just enough to allow me to see through. There could only be one reason why Ella would visit the garden at this hour, only one person she could have come to see.

As if my thinking of him had conjured him up, Edmund appeared from between the bushes on the other side of the fence. Ella gave a little cry and hurried towards him. She was already in her ball-gown and not caring a bit if she got grass stains on it. I had to admit, this was real love. Or at least a very convincing imitation.

"Ella, my love!"

"Edmund, my love!"

They ran towards each other as if they wanted to jump into each other's arms. Fortunately, they remembered the fence in time and didn't crack their skulls.

Instead, they clasped hands. A much wiser policy.

"Oh, Ella, my love, is it true what I have heard?"

"I don't know. What have you heard, my love?"

"That there is to be another ball at Lady Metcalf's this evening, and that Sir Wilkins is taking you. I heard something of that mentioned by Mrs Richardson, and now I hear that your house is busy..."

Busy. What a very diplomatic way to describe my aunt's forceful tones.

"Say it isn't so, Ella my love!"

"Alas, I cannot, Edmund. For we are indeed invited to Lady Metcalf's ball, which is tonight..."

"And...?"

"...and Sir Wilkins is taking us."

"Taking you you mean to say."

"We will all go. Me, Aunt, Gertrude, Lisbeth..."

Edmund's eyes were aflame. "But you it is he wants there. You it is he wants with him!"

Ella shuddered, her hands slipping from his.

"Don't you think I know this?" she asked. "Don't you think I wish every waking moment it weren't so? But I cannot wish him away!"

Edmund's freed hands balled into fists. "Neither can I. I have tried o en enough."

"But..." Ella hesitated.

"But what, Ella my love?"

"But maybe I can wish myself away."

He looked confused. Ella hesitated again, then suddenly set her small chin and looked up at him.

"Take me with you," she said, her voice trembling, her eyes two shining pleas. "I do not wish to go to this ball. I do not wish to dance with Sir Philip. I do not wish to be in any man's arms but yours. Take me away from the place, just as you said you would."

"Tonight? Now? But Ella, the preparations..."

"I don't care about preparations! I only care about that I love you, and that I want to be with you. Take me away, Edmund, please!"

Edmund closed his eyes.

"I am sorry, my love, but I cannot," he whispered. "I could not yet procure a marriage license. And I will not soil your honour by taking you without the knowledge that I can make you my wife, to love and to hold."

There were tears in Ella's eyes.

"Then, it is adieu for us, Edmund. I shall go to the ball. You will procure a license as quickly as you can, I know that. Just... just don't take too long. And know that whatever might happen my heart will always be yours."

"Whatever might happen? His eyes snapped open, hearing the weight of her words. "You don't mean to say that... Ella, you don't think Sir Philip will chose tonight to ask you to... oh, I cannot even say the words! Tell me, darling! Tell me that it will not be tonight!"

Ella remained silent. I had spent enough time around Mr Ambrose to be able to distinguish di erent kinds of silence. Hers was the silence of someone who wished to speak, but could not.

"Ella!" With both hands, Edmund reached through the bars, attempting to grasp her shoulders. But she retreated a step, out of his reach. "Ella, at least tell me that if he asks you tonight, you will not say yes! Please! I beg you!"

Ella's tears were rivulets now, streaming down both her cheeks.

"I... I cannot," she whispered.

"Ella!"

"G-good-bye, Edmund. Goodbye, my love."

"Eellaaa!"

His cry echoed through an empty garden.

This is it.

The Big One.

The One we've all been waiting for.

The Last Chapter before the Wattys start!

In a few days, on the 24th, I'll be posting that all-important tweet on my twitter profile - the tweet you will need to retweet in order for Lilly and Mr Ambrose to win! So far, to judge by my number of twitter followers, they are among the top 3 most likely to carry away the big prize.

BUT we're still behind a certain Fan-Fiction. What do you think, my Lords, Ladies and Gentlemen? There are over two-hundred thousand dedicated Storm and Silence fans. If a few thousand more of you join in to help, can Lilly and Mr Ambrose vanquish their contemporary competition? :-)

And by the way, if you say "No", you had better think up a very good excuse to tell Mr Ambrose, or he's going to give you a VERY cold stare... :-)

Yours Truly

Sir Rob

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