

82. Pneumatic Freedom

Slowly, as if I feared they might run away if I approached them too quickly, I stretched my hands out in the direction of the quill and paper. My fingers were only a few inches away from the pen, my way to freedom. It didn't seem to want to make a run for it. My fingers closed.

Yes! A way to get out. A way to get to him
But one thing a er another.

Putting one of the little squares of message paper right in front of me, I dipped the quill into the ink. For a moment, the quill hovered hesitantly over the paper. I thought of the pale man who sta ed the desk downstairs. What was sallow-face's name again? Mr Ambrose had mentioned it to me once, not appreciating the accuracy of the nickname I had come up with...

Ah yes: Pearson!

Quickly, I wrote in my best imitation of Mr Ambrose neat, precise handwriting:

Dear Mr Pearson,

Be so kind as to bring me a list of all last week's visitors, which I require for a project I am currently working on. I may not be in my office when you arrive. If that is the case, unlock the door and leave the list on my desk. Thank you.

Yours Sincerely,
Rikkard Ambrose

For a long moment, I stared down at what I had written. Then I crossed it out, grabbed another piece of paper and wrote:

Mr Pearson

Deposit a list of last week's visitors on my desk immediately.

Rikkard Ambrose

"There," I murmured. "Much more realistic." My heart fluttering excitedly, I put the message into its metal container, shoved it into the tube and then examined the control board right beside it. This one was much more complicated than the one in my office, with innumerable dials, levers and buttons to reach every part of the vast complex which served Mr Ambrose as his headquarters.

I selected a lever labelled "E.H." and hoped fervently I stood for "Entry Hall" and not "Excrement Hatch". Why did men have to make all technical devices so infernally complicated? With bated breath, I sat and hoped for a result from my wild plan.

Only two minutes later, hurried footsteps approached from outside. Very hurried footsteps. A grin spread over my face. Yes, my plan had worked. Whoever was coming did indeed believe the message to originate from Mr Ambrose.

It didn't take the runner long to reach the office door. He tried to turn the door knob, and, finding the door locked, hesitated. A moment later, I heard the sound of salvation: the jingling of keys. The lock made a clicking sound, and the door swung open, revealing sallow-face, standing in the door frame.

"Mr Ambrose," he began, holding up a sheet of paper, "I have you..." Then he noticed that the figure he was facing had little resemblance to his master.

"Mister Linton!"

"Mr Pearson!" My smile widened into a joyous grin. "You don't know how glad I am to see you."

"Mr Linton," the pale bureaucrat managed, having obviously to struggle hard in order to contain his tumultuous emotions, "why, pray, are you sitting in Mr Ambrose's private chair?"

"Oh," looking down, I saw he was absolutely right. I had completely forgotten that I was reposing on my employer's official chair with my feet propped up on his desk, something that secretaries were probably not supposed to do. "Well," just thought I'd give it a try, you know?" I wiggled my behind for emphasis. "To see if it is comfy or not."

Sallow-face's features turned a little more yellow, which seemed to be his version of getting angry red blotches on the cheeks.

"It is no concern of yours how 'comfy' this honoured seat is, Mr Linton," he informed me, glaring at me as if I had sat on a king's throne and committed high treason. "You shall never have another chance to sit there! Where is Mr Ambrose?"

"Oh, he... he is in the safe, checking something." I lied, and when sallow-face turned into the direction of the safe, hurriedly added: "And he doesn't want to be disturbed."

"I see." Sallow-face turned back to me. I, by now, had risen from my traitorous position on Mr Ambrose's throne and was thus not quite as fiercely glared at as before. Mr Linton, Mr Ambrose told me to bring him this... "He held out the list of visitors. "Should I wait here for him, or..."

"Leave it with me," I told him. "I'll see that he gets it."

He narrowed his eyes mistrustfully. "On your honour as a gentleman? This is very important business material. Mr Ambrose trusts me with the most important tasks of all his employees. He told me himself that he needs this information as soon as may be."

"Of course," I replied, trying my best to keep a straight face. "I swear on my honour as a gentleman that he shall receive it as soon as possible."

"Very well, then, Mr Linton. Here, I shall trust you with this important document. Do not fail me, or Mr Ambrose."

"I shall not."

He nodded still ly. "Until later, Mr Linton."

"Yes, until later, Mr Pearson. And..."

"Yes?"

"Leave the door open behind you, will you?"

"--...--...--"

Five minutes later I was out on the street, hailing the nearest cab. The very important business information Mr Pearson had delivered was crumpled up in the waste paper basket in Mr Ambrose's office.

A cab drove up beside me, and at exactly the right time! Just as I climbed in, I saw Mr Ambrose's chaise approach from the West End. Whatever arrangements he'd had to make before embarking on his secret mission lay in the opposite direction from his destination in the East End. Quickly, I ducked out of sight, peering over the top of the cab's window frame. From this hidden post I watched, while the cabbie regarded my antics with interest.

There he was! Karim was driving, and Mr Ambrose, his face colder and more distant than ever, was sitting straight as a rod, a two large bags and a small chest beside him.

"Follow that chaise!" I hissed at the cabbie without resurfacing from my hidden position.

"Are ye from Scotland Yard, guv?"

"Yes," I said, boldly. "This is a criminal investigation of the highest level. The fate of the British Empire, maybe even the world, is at stake!"

"Blimey!" The cabbie seemed very impressed. "Well, we'd better be going then, ain't we?"

I was in hearty agreement. The cabbie was about to spur on his horses, when my hand shot up. "Stop! Don't!" I had just remembered something. Of course! "Don't follow them. I've changed my mind."

The cabbie's face fell. "No chaise, guv?"

"I... I... I... Only because I already know where they are going."

"--...--...--"

On the entire way to number 97, East India Dock Road, the cabbie mumbled and complained. Apparently, he had read somewhere the adventures of Scotland Yard detectives to know that this was not how things were done. Detectives of Scotland Yard were supposed to chase a er their prey in an exciting race, not leisurely drive to wherever it was their prey was going because they already knew the place. Such a thing was apparently simply not done.

On arrival in East India Dock Road, still some distance away from number 97, I paid him with the last money I had left over from pawning my uncle's walking stick and got out of the cab, promising myself again to retrieve the stick with my very first earned money. Well, maybe a er I had bought a really big piece of solid chocolate. A girl has to have her treats in life.

The cabbie took the money, and looked around curiously. "This is where ye wanted to go, guv? But there's nothing close to here except the docks."

I winked at him, in what I hoped was a mysterious manner. "Exactly. Things being brought in and out of the country... maybe not as they are supposed to be."

"Oh, I see," the cabbie said, though this obviously wasn't the case. "Well, good luck to you, guv!"

Turning his coach around, he cried and encouragement to his horse, and drove o towards the western, safer parts of the city. Looking a er him, I suddenly wished I could follow. But I had made my choice.

With a sigh, I turned to face my destination. Not that I could see very much of it - it was mid-day, and the broad street was crowded as could be. Carts loaded with goods and large omnibuses packed full to bursting with dockworkers drove up and down this broad way of British Commerce, people stood on all street corners, waving their wares and yelling at the top of their voices to get the attention of potential customers. I supposed they thought yelling would give them an advantage over the large, but completely silent billboards and posters which spread over many of the exterior walls.

I probably should have been grateful for all the noise. Nobody paid attention to me as I wandered down the crowded street. While in the West End of London, people had given my baggy trousers and loose-fitting old tailcoat strange glances, here, nobody looked twice at the strange little figure wandering down the street. A lot of people here wore clothes that didn't fit them well, probably because they had originally not been theirs. It was quite liberating in a way, swimming in a sea of people who didn't pay any attention to me, and winning nothing from me but that I returned the courtesy. It made me feel... free.

Of course, the aforementioned sea of people also blocked my view of number 97.

I slowly made my way down the street. As I got closer to my destination, I started to draw more curious glances from the surrounding people, as if they found me unusual to look at. I had to admit, I returned the feeling: the further down East India Dock Road I went, the more the faces of passers-by changed and shade and form: from glances I caught of their faces, I thought noses were broader than usual, and their eyes strangely slitted. I thought I was imagining things, until one of the street-hawkers approached me, starting to address me in a strange tongue I had never heard before. At the sight of his face, I jumped back in shock.

Holy Hell! Who plucked me up from the earth and put me down in Peking?

Then it came to me. Of course! I had heard once, that in the some parts of the East End, there lived a large group of workers from China. This must be it. Chinatown.

Locking frantically from one strange face to another, I tried to remember what else I had heard about this area of my own city that was a foreign country. The docks, the street was the colourful ribbons suspended over the street, the dragons painted on house walls, and the strange cuts of people's clothing.

Think! Think! Isn't there anything you recall about this place?

Vaguely, I seemed to remember somebody calling it the filthiest, most disreputable rat hole in all of London. Who had this information come from again?

Ah yes, my aunt.

So hopefully, it's actually a quiet neighbourhood with nice, well-behaved people.

I caught the gaze of a particularly slant-eyed youth who was staring at me over a knife he used to clean his fingernails.

Hopefully...

Making some apologetic gesture to the hawker who had now taken something strange-smelling and steaming from his tray and was waving it in front of my face, I retreated hurriedly, pressing myself as closely to the walls of the houses I could, I started to make my way down the street without any further delay. As if I could protect me from the strange environment, I turned up the collar of my tailcoat and buried my too European face in the depth of Uncle Burd's old, moth-eaten Sunday best.

I went down the street as quickly as I could manage without running, counting the numbers on the opposite side as I did so.

Number 89, a butcher's shop...

Number 91, an apartment building...

Number 93, an... an... an...

Well, I wasn't exactly sure what it was. It was some kind of unidentifiable building with a few ladies around the entrance whose clothing seemed to be even more loose-fitting and considerably more revealing than mine.

Number 95, a liquor store...

Number 97, a... Hell's whiskers!

Quickly, I jumped back into the nearest Alley. The man I had spotted on the opposite side of the street turned his head; he must have caught my movement out of the corner of his eye. As he turned, I saw I had been right in thinking I had recognized him.

Warren.

Warren was here. And where Warren was, Mr Ambrose would not be far behind.

He looked around once more, then, shrugging, started to haggle again with a Chinese hawker over the price of some oriental artefact he was apparently trying to purchase. Or more likely, pretending to purchase. He wasn't here to buy something exotic for the mantelpiece. He was here for the same reason I was here. The building right across the street from the alley in which I was hiding.

It was an impressive brick building with a broad facade, at least forty yards, with a higher portions of the building rising threateningly up out of the roof in the centre and at every corner. Originally, I must have had many windows, but now it was obviously a warehouse, since most of the windows had been bricked over.

Or... was it? Behind the few, narrow openings in the brick walls, I could see movement. Not what you would expect in a warehouse where tin plates and cotton trousers waited for weeks before they were shipped to God only knew where. And the narrow, high parts of the building at each corner, connected by walls and walkways... they looked almost like watchtowers.

On the highest of the towers, I saw, blinking in the mid-day sun, the brass number 97.

Over the top of the building, in the distance I could make out tops of masts, for nothing. The Docks. The street wasn't called East India Dock Road for nothing. The Docks of the East India Company, the centre of its web of power extending over half the world to the distant, tropical sub-continent of India was only a few dozen yards away. Right next to this building.

There! There it is again!

Once more, I saw something move through one of the narrow windows, and caught the flash of a red uniform.

This is no bloody warehouse!

I waited, hidden in the shadows of the alley. A er a while, Warren disappeared. In his stead, other men appeared, some European, some Chinese, some an unidentifiable mix. All lingered in front of number 97 for a little while before disappearing, only to reappear some time later, hovering and watching. Nobody would have noticed. Nobody, that is, who hadn't seen many of these faces before in Mr Ambrose's office.

I had.

Slowly, the sun began its descent towards the horizon. As it did so, people started to disappear into their houses. Nobody seemed to want to stay out in the street at night in this neighbourhood. Doors closed, and little could be heard from inside. Only from number 93 you still heard sounds. The scantily dressed ladies who lived there seemed in no hurry to go to sleep.

As the last vestiges of sunlight dwindled, lights were lit inside of number 97. Squinting, I concentrated on one of the narrow windows, high, high above me. It wasn't long before my earlier observations were confirmed: a flash of red and gold past the window. And again! And again! Red and gold—like on the uniforms of a soldier of the Presidency Army.

Suddenly, I heard a rattle and behind me, whirling around. But the rattle was not coming from behind me, nor was it coming from the main street. Rather, it sounded as if it were coming from a side street, parallel to the one I was hiding in.

Quickly ducking into a narrow path between two brick houses, I made my way towards the origin of the sound. I thought it was somehow familiar—and I was not mistaken.

Looking around the corner of the house, I saw Mr Ambrose's chaise coming up the street. It stopped, well out of sight or hearing of the guards in the towers of number 97. Mr Ambrose slid out of the passenger compartment with one fluid, precise movement. The tails of his black tailcoat fluttered around him like dark wings.

"Warren?" he called in a voice no louder than a whisper.

The black-clad figure of Warren stepped out of a doorway, where he had concealed himself. He bowed to Mr Ambrose.

"We've been watching the place, observing the soldiers just as you instructed, Sir."

"Adequate."

"Thank you, Sir. Here is the report with their duty roster." He handed over a piece of paper to his Master, who nodded in acknowledgement. "But..."

Warren hesitated.

"But what?" Mr Ambrose voice was cool and distant as ever.

"But we think the soldiers are not the only guards, Sir. We have caught glimpses of movements on the roof. Understand me, we didn't actually see anybody, we only caught a flash of dark brown and grey here and there." He shook his head, looking over his shoulder at number 97 nervously. "I've never seen anything like it."

Mr Ambrose's jaw-muscles twitched, and Karim let out a long string of foreign jargon that were better not translated.

"They are here?" Mr Ambrose hissed.

"They?"

"A Squad of special riflemen in the Presidency Army who are at Lord Dalgliesh's disposal alone." Mr Ambrose's voice could have frozen Lava. I gathered he had met this special squad before, and did not have fond memories of them. "They use a native plant to die their coats in mottled tones of brown and grey, which makes them hard to see in daytime, and helps them to disappear almost into nothing during the night."

"But why should one wish for soldiers not to be seen during a battle?" Warren asked, his mouth slightly open.

"These special riflemen are not intended for open battles. Dalgliesh employs them for... di erent purposes."

His tone of voice made it clear that nobody who wished to continue to sleep at night should ask what those purposes were. Warren looked slightly sick. Mr Ambrose didn't seem to care. He said no more, but started to study the paper Warren had handed to him. A er a while, he nodded.

"Whether Lord Dalgliesh's personal commando is here or not, this will have to su ice."

Karim looked worried. And if I could see that from where I was standing, in the dark, and through the vast amount of beard blocking my view of his face, he must have been really worried.

"Sahib maybe we should..."

Mr Ambrose threw him a look, and the Mohammedan stopped in mid-sentence.

Warren was not as wise, however. He cleared his throat.

"Um... Sir, forgive me for asking, but why exactly have we been noting down the guard changes and been keeping watch on this house?"

Mr Ambrose was studying the list again. He didn't look up. "As preparation for a break-in, of course."

"What? At an angry gesture from Karim, Warren lowered his voice, but it sounded no less stricken than before. "Sir! You have to be joking!"

"No, I do not have to be. In fact, I have never in my life felt any irresistible compulsion to joke."

Warren swallowed. He seemed to realize with whom he was arguing here.

"Sir!... I... I'm afraid I cannot in good conscience be a part of an illegal activity."

Mr Ambrose now had exchanged the list of guard changes for a groundplan he had taken out of his leather bag. He still didn't look up.

"Then do it in bad conscience, Mr Warren. I don't care either way."

"Mr Ambrose..."

"You didn't seem to care about breaking bending the law when we laid our hands on that snake Simmons..."

Warren bit his lip. "That was di erent."

"Because," Mr Ambrose concisely stated, "he was a private Secretary, not a Peer of the Realm, like the owner of that building over there, correct?"

To this, Warren didn't seem to have anything to say.

"Don't worry," Mr Ambrose exchanged one set of papers for another. "What you have done is quite enough. I won't require your services further tonight."

"You won't?"

Mr Ambrose gave a derisive jerk of his head. "You don't think I would entrust you with a task as important as this? No. One thing I learned early in life is: If you want something done well, do it yourself."

If possible, Warren paled even more.

"Mr Ambrose, you cannot mean... You are a gentleman, not a criminal! You cannot mean that you are planning to break into..."

At that, Mr Ambrose looked up, his eyes flashing icily.

"Dalgliesh took something that belongs to me, Mr Warren. If that happened in the colonies, and if he were any other man, I would not hesitate to put a bullet in his head. Here, business practices are slightly di erent. But I will get back what is mine, and you'd rather not stand in my way."

Warren swallowed again. He retreated a step, and bowed. "No, Sir. Of course not, Sir. Your word is my command, Sir."

"Indeed it is." Mr Ambrose stuck the groundplan back into the bag, slung it over his shoulder and took another one out of the coach, which he handed to Karim. "Stay here, Mr Warren. Guard the coach, and wait until at least one of us returns." He turned away from Warren, towards the entrance of the alley and number 97. "Karim, we're going in. Stay behind me and watch my back."

"Yes, Sahib!"

I thought it was about time to make my presence known.

With a little smile, I stepped forward, out of the shadows, and raised a hand. "And where do you want me, Sir?"

My dear Lords, Ladies and Gentlemen,

Another special chapter to thank you! :) A er today, I'll have to return to my weekly schedule because of my studies, but hope that someday my tutor will stop bugging me long enough to give you another extra chapter! :)

I'd like to express a big load of thanks to all my sp! ng fans! You provided me and my stories with the most steadfast support during the Wattys 2015! My first big load of thanks goes straight to the many valiant members of the @StormOfSilence fan account team. The founders as well as all the helpers who have gathered on the account have worked around the clock to keep the account running throughout the competition!

Next, there is the Storm and Silence family:

@LintonLilly

@ambrose_rikard

@CaptainCarter_J

@UncleBuord

@lam_EllaLinton

@AmbrosianSquad

@captjcarter

@rikambrose

@foreladedmund

@Karim_lfrit

@LordDalgliesh

@RikkardAmbrose

@lillylinton

... and many, many more.

Then, of course, we must never forget the amazing dancing @yellowpiggies!

Also, another big boatload full of thanks goes to all the sp! ing frits who've been voting like the dickens for Storm & Silence! :) To name only a few who have supported Lilly & Mr Rikkard: Ambrose with hundreds upon thousands of tweets and retweets: @SSNTC4

@ellowarrior

@AliaFrancesWatk

@randomfangirl02

@colorsofgray

@HannahJoseph

@Thebookthief

@quinnaristide

@Tama_mallaab

@daisifrommars

@aysahred

@hamley

@fooddelicoustr

@passingStar_1 & @passingStar_2

@esjr88

@SLVennett

@mu_insuccorns

@Tardis12co

@p_nareeta

@CrysAlliWhit

@OREGONST3R

@jksyuv

@zaurasaura

@97KrishnaMohan

@aurayan98

@mirasasha2

@WaikawayCindy

@MissMysteriousM

@midh318

@alexamova

@cannonotta

@hannahbonafide

@randomfangirl02

@QuinnAristide

@Terry01401647

@hamley

@aya_malae

@mirosasha2

@ERerer

@Lillahzima

@cruz_alie

@QueenOfLightz

@Mamona1D

@KichChaang

@P33tly_MuthaFah

@Sedraboss

@Sedroloph

@ststout1

@Sedraboss

@... I just realized that if I were to continue this list, I would probably reach the word limit for wattpad chapter! :) These are just a few, standing as representatives for the massive multitudes that have come to the aid of Lilly and Mr Ambrose in their hour of need! I simply have too many awesome frits to praise! So thank you all! I look forward to the next great event to share with you! You are the most amazing fandom in the whole of Wattpadland! :) Yours Truly

Sir Rob

P.S: The results of the wattys shall be announced by wattpad in the Fall. So excited! :)