83. A Man's Work

To see actual surprise on the rock-hard face of Mr Rikkard Ambrose would have been too much to hope for. But I had the satisfaction of seeing one of his eyelids twitch about half a millimetre when he caught sight of me.

"Mr Linton...!" he breathed.

Karim jumped back, uttering another incomprehensible curse.

"She really is *Ifrit*, *Sahib*! She can walk through walls and appear out of thin air!"

"Actually," I remarked, smiling at him, "I drove here in a cab. Sorry to disappoint you." My eyes flicked from Karim to Warren. Apparently, he was too startled to have noticed Karim's slip of referring to yours truly as "she." But really, it was not Warren's reaction to my appearance, or Karim's, that I was interested in. Slowly, my eyes drifted back to Mr Ambrose.

His face was still devoid of anything akin to emotion. But there was a muscle twitching in his chiselled jaw.

"A *cab*?" he said, as if it were the dirtiest of words.

"Yes, Sir."

"And this cab, I suppose, is not in the vicinity any more to take you right back to where you came from?"

"No, Sir."

"I didn't think so."

Stepping closer to me, he lowered his voice to a chilling whisper that only I could hear.

"I am not commonly given to expletives, Mr Linton, yet under the present circumstances I find myself justified in inquiring what the bloody hell you think you are doing here!"

"Coming with you," I said, cheerily, though the tone of his voice made my whole body quiver.

"Did I or did I not tell you to stay away from this, Mr Linton?"

"You did, Sir. But it is after hours. You cannot tell me what to do now."

Thunderclouds full of lightning flashed in his dark eyes.

"Did you or did you not hear what I discussed with Warren, Mr Linton?"

"Yes, Sir. I did."

"And? *Well?*"

"Well what, Sir?"

"Tonight's operation will be deadly dangerous. The moment we are spotted, we will be shot down like animals. Our corpses will be thrown from the docks and never again see the light of day!"

His words sent a cold shiver down my back. To die... to actually die. I had never contemplated it before. I was nineteen, still so young, and had hardly seen anything of the world. And I could die tonight, if I continued on this mad course. Why not turn back? Why not turn away from him, let him go alone? He surely wouldn't fault me for it.

"Never see the light of day again? My, my." I shook my head. "I'm sure that would worry me a lot, once I was dead. Terrible fate for a corpse."

What was I doing? This was no time for sarcasm? This was serious!

Yes, it is, a tiny voice in the back of my mind said. *Deadly serious – which is exactly why you have to go with him.*

"Never, ever joke in my presence again, Mr Linton," Mr Ambrose said in a voice that could have frozen an erupting volcano. "I do not appreciate it."

"Really? I would never have guessed."

"The same goes for flippancy, Mr Linton." He stepped forward until we were almost nose to chiselled chin. Damn, he was tall! "I meant what I said. This is dangerous." For a moment I saw a flash of something in his eyes which I think I was not supposed to see. Anxiety, maybe? For what? For the recovery of his lost file?

Or for you?

No! Impossible!

It was gone too quickly for me to see, in any case. Again, a coating of frost closed the brief opening in his armour.

"I know that it is dangerous," I said, impulsively, reaching out to touch him. "That is why I have to come."

Hell's whiskers! Why did I just say that? What if he interpreted something into it that I hadn't meant? Or worse, what if he interpreted something into it that I *had* meant? I snatched my hand back before it made contact with his face.

Quickly, I added, trying for a lighter tone: "After all, I can't let you go in there only with *him* for protection." I gestured at Karim. "You'll be dead before you take two steps."

Though my words had been too for him to have heard, Karim seemed to have guessed the general message of my gesture. He gritted his teeth, and his massive right paw closed around the hilt of his sabre.

Mr Ambrose took another step forward. We were now almost standing close enough to touch.

"And what," he hissed, "makes you think that I will take you along? I could have Warren take you and hold you here until Karim and I have returned. He might be afraid of Dalgliesh, but even he should be capable of restraining someone like *you*."

Heat rose to my cheeks. I knew what he meant – someone like me: a girl.

"Don't count on it," I growled, putting my hands on my hips and returning the cold glare he shot at me with fire in my eyes. "I'll bite the first man who dares to touch me! And I'll scream bloody murder, too!"

Mr Ambrose, who had just been about to signal Warren, froze.

"No, you won't," he said, in a low, threatening voice. "You won't make a sound, understood?"

Immediately, I saw I had found my perfect weapon. "I won't if you take me with you," I offered. "Otherwise..." I let the sentence hang in the air with dark promise.

Mr Ambrose hands clenched into fists. His eyes flicked from me, to the exit of the alley and his goal beyond, and back again. I knew exactly what he was thinking. If I screamed, the guards would hear. His precious operation would have to be postboned.

"If you scream, I will sack you," he threatened.

"You can't sack me for something I do after hours. I could paint Buckingham Palace in pink and you wouldn't be allowed to throw me out. So, what is it to be?"

Silence.

I quirked an eyebrow at him.

"Well, Sir?"

More silence.

"Oh, well... as you wish." Opening my mouth, I took a deep breath.

Before I could utter a single syllable, Mr Ambrose was on me. His hand clamped down over my mouth, his hard arm shot around my waist, pulling me towards him. Suddenly, my back was pressed against a hard wall of sinews and muscle. I struggled, but it was in vain. His arms held me as tightly as iron fetters. Only that iron fetters would probably not have felt quite so interesting. After a few moments, my resistance waned. I became very aware of his fingers on my lips, almost as if I were...

"You," he said in a tone imported straight from Iceland, "are an insufferable nuisance."

His arms tightened even more for a second or two, holding me closer than iron fetters ever could. Besides, Iron fetters could never make my heart-rate pick up like it did just then.

"You also," he continued grudgingly, "have some courage and loyalty. More that I would have expected from a-"

He cut off.

Yet I knew what he had been going to say.

All of a sudden, he released me, and I stumbled away from him, turning as I did so. He was staring at me with his totally unreadable, sea-coloured eyes, the gloom of the alley making them appear even more dark than usual.

"You can accompany us," he said. "But if you get us caught, you are dismissed, no discussion! Understood?"

"Um... I thought if we were caught, we would be shot."

"I will dismiss you *before* we are shot, Mr Linton."

"Yes, Sir! I understand, Sir!"

Turning away, he motioned to Karim. Suddenly he was all business again.

"Show Mr Linton the plans, Karim."

Karim's beard bristled in outrage.

"But *Sahib*...!"

"If he does not know where we are going, he is likely to get us caught. Show him the plans of the building, Karim. Now!"

Karim clenched his teeth. His master's tone brooked no discussion. Reluctantly, he unslung the bag from over his shoulder, and pulled out of it a large roll of paper, which he unrolled and held against the side of the coach in a spot where the moonlight shone into the alley and illuminated all in its path. By the cold, blueish light I was just able to make out thin lines on the paper, forming what looked like the intricate plan of a large complex.

"We got these out of the city records," Mr Ambrose explained, curtly. "They're decades old, and probably not up-to-date anymore, but Dalgliesh has made sure that any more recent versions have disappeared from the face of the earth."

He pointed to a spot at the eastern side of the complex.

"We will enter the building here-"

"Why on the east side?" I asked. "That's between the building and the docks, Lord Dalgiesh's centre of power. Isn't it likely that there will be many of his men, there?"

Mr Ambrose through me a look. "Which is exactly why we will come from this direction. He will not expect it. Do not interrupt me, Mr Linton. I don't wish to have to repeat myself." He tapped the point on the plan. "As I said, we will enter here-"

"How exactly?" I demanded. "In case you hadn't noticed, there's a wall in the way."

His finger stopped tapping.

"What did I say about not interrupting, Mr Linton?"

"Excuse me, Sir. Carry on, Sir."

"The guards will be drawn off by a distraction on the western side of the building. We will have to climb over the wall, and thus penetrate into the inner courtyard."

I still couldn't see how we would be able to climb over a wall that was at least 24 feet high, but I held my tongue. From the way Mr Ambrose's left little finger was twitching, I surmised this was not a time to rile him.

"There will be guards on and in the inner building too." His finger moved across the courtyard to a central, U-shaped building consisting of a large central part flanked by two wings. "They might not see us against the dark brick wall, but the courtyard is brightly lit. As soon as we want to cross it, we will be spotted."

"So what do we do?"

Instead of receiving another rebuke for having interrupted his mightiness, it was Karim who answered this time.

"Disguise ourselves," he grumbled, opening a bag and pulling out something bright red. It took me a few seconds to recognize uniforms of the Presidency Armies.

Suddenly, Mr Ambrose whirled around to face me.

"But that's it! Karim, you only brought two uniforms! So *s*h- *he* can't come with us. Mr Linton, you..."

His voice trailed off as he saw Karim's embarrassed expression. Then, his gaze wandered to the uniforms, of which, there was no doubt, there were three.

"I thought," Karim growled, throwing a venomous look at Warren, who retreated a step or two, "that *he* would be coming with us."

Mr Ambrose's little finger twitched again, overcome by uncontrollable rage.

"Fine," he said, coolly, and turned back to the plans. "We will descend from the wall and hide behind this shed here, where brooms and tools are being kept, according to my information. There, we will change into guard uniforms, so we can cross the courtyard unmolested."

With his forefinger, he tapped a spot marked with a longish rectangle, and a question mark.

"The door to the main compound may or may not be locked. My sources have not been able to determine that. But from what I know of Dalgliesh, it will be locked thrice and bound with chains. That, however, is no insurmountable problem."

It seemed to be, to me, all right. I was just about to open my mouth, when Mr Ambrose looked up from the map to throw me a cold glare. I closed my mouth again.

"Once inside, things will become more difficult," he continued.

Oh, so they've been easy up until now?

"We do not know exactly where the file is. We believe it to be somewhere in this area." His finger moved to a red circle which centred on the upper left corner of the building. "This is where the office of the overseer was, back in the days when this was still a factory. It is, in all probability, where Dalgliesh's office is situated now, and where the file is kept."

He traced a route from the front door to the red circle. I could see faint lines on the old paper, marking a narrow hallway. "We will follow this corridor here, and hopefully will not encounter any guards. Yet even if we do, they should take us for comrades and let us pass. The corridor will lead us straight to where we suspect Dalgliesh's office to be. When we are there, we will take the file and leave the same way we came."

"But... won't the file be behind locked doors?"

Mr Ambrose patted one of his mysterious bags. "Doors are not impenetrable, Mr Linton. What did I say about interruptions?"

"So sorry, Sir."

"Karim?"

The Mohammedan stepped forward. "*Sahib*?"

"Since you were so obliging to provide three uniforms, you surely have also brought three of the cloaks?"

"Certainly, *Sahib*."

From his bag, Karim withdrew three mottled brown and grey cloaks. A strangled gasp came from Warren, and I remembered what Mr Ambrose had said about the special Commando of riflemen under Lord Dalgliesh's command.

Mr Ambrose threw Warren a look. "Yes. It is not only Lord Dalgliesh's men who can steal up on you unsuspected, Mr Warren. Remember that. Remember it well."

He threw one of the cloaks at me, wordlessly. As I caught it, he threw the second around his shoulders, and a moment later seemed to melt into the darkness. I saw only a vague shape moving away.

"Come, Mr Linton," his voice called out, cold and imperious.

I made a move to follow him. Suddenly, Warren, who had watched the whole scene from the background, his mouth slightly open, was stirred into motion. Quickly, he took two steps forward and grasped me by the arm.

"Mr Linton! You are not truly going to accompany them, are you?"

I looked down at his hand. Quickly, he removed it.

"Yes," I said. "I am."

"I hope you do not think I am speaking out of term, Mr Linton, but I would strongly advice against it. The man they are going up against..." Warren drew his coat closer around himself, as if he were suddenly feeling the cold night air more strongly. "Let us just say, you hear rumours when you serve the members of London's High Society like I do. I council you, Mr Linton, desist. Go home. It is nothing any man would have to be ashamed of."

I gave him a scathing look.

"Yes," I said. "Any *man* wouldn't have to be."

Then, without staying to explain my words, I turned and, drawing the cloak around me, followed Mr Ambrose into the darkness.

My Dear Lords, Ladies and Gentlemen,

I have FABULOUS NEWS for all of you! With the Wattys 2015 now officially concluded, I shall start working on getting my next book published as an actual paperback that can be purchased through Amazon and through the traditional trade! The book I am about to to take on in this regard is "The Robber Knight's Love", the 2nd book of the Robber Knight series and, if everything goes as expected, it won't be long before I can start working on this latest project of mine! To reach the lofty goal of publication, I will need to ask for your help! Especially from anyone among you who might have some (semi)-professional editing or proofreading skills. That would be really helpful! :-)

If possible, I want to publish my book in a professional & pristine a manner - however, unfortunately, professional proofreaders & editors demand quite high fees, and I, as a humble student with quite limited funds, don't really have sufficient funds to be able to afford their services at the current time. Thus, I'm asking you, my dear readers, to help me out in this regard. If any of you happen to have some experience with editing and/or proofreading texts, and would like to help me in preparing "The Robber Knight's Love" for professional publication, it would be a great help! :-)

I look forward to hearing from you :)

Yours Truly

Sir Rob

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