

84. Bifurcated

I nearly had to run to keep up with Mr Ambrose as we passed through the dark streets of Chhatwon. We circumvented number 97, always keeping a great distance between us and the wall. Not once did he or Karim slow down, his long legs swinging as regularly as a pendulum, the strange mottled cloak fluttering around his shoulders.

"Why... are we... in such a hurry?" I gasped, out of breath. His voice as he answered was of course perfectly calm and collected. Our unexpected appearance and the necessity for an explanation of our plans had cost us time. Time we do not have. The distraction for the guards was only a moment. For a moment, I saw the coat of arms on his pocket, he let it snap open. For a moment... I saw the coat of arms on the lid shining in the moonlight. "... six minutes and thirty-seven seconds."

"What is this distraction?" I panted.

"Wait and see."

Apparently, he was not in a talkative mood. What a great surprise. By the time we stopped behind a cart parked on the side of the street that ran along the eastern side of number 97, my lungs felt fit to burst. I leaned against the cart, and for the next few minutes concentrated fully on getting my breathing under control again. I really had to find some way of building up my stamina if this sort of thing would come up regularly in this job.

Out of the corner of my eye, I could see Mr Ambrose glancing around the cart. My lungs feeling normal enough by now to allow some movement, I followed his example and saw the bright red figures of Presidency Army soldiers, parading on the walls. Decays only, as I now knew. The real guards were hiding in the shadows.

"We can thank God this cart is standing here." I whispered. "Or else we would be clearly visible—perfect target practise for Lord Dalgliesh's personal team of pheasant hunters."

"Thank me instead of God." Mr Ambrose told me without taking his eyes from the roof of number 97. "I had one of my men park the cart here this morning."

"How... it had been clever indeed. But if he expected a compliment from me, he would have to wait for a long time. Besides, I was much more interested in something else. "What is this mysterious distraction you keep not talking about? How will it direct the attention of Lord Dalgliesh's guards away from us?"

Retreating behind the cart again, he let his watch snap open a second time. "You shall find out in exactly two minutes and fourteen seconds, Mr Linton."

"Why not tell me now? Are you absolutely sure it will get the attention of all the guards?" I persisted. "I'm not anxious to get my head perforated, you know. What if your distraction isn't distracting enough?"

"I am certain that they will not have eyes—or ears for that matter—for anything else. We will have about a minute before they direct their attention back on the street again."

Once more, I opened my mouth to ask what was going to happen. But before I could speak, he pointed around the cart towards the corner of number 97's outer wall.

"When the distraction occurs, we will head for the corner, understand? I suspect that the gunmen aren't actually sitting on the roof. More likely, they are looking out through dormers or even led roofing tiles. This will mean they will have a blind spot at the corner, where the sides of the roof meet. Once we are across the street and at the wall, they should not be able to see us, and won't shoot."

Oh, good! I breathed a sigh of relief.

"But we should be quick anyway, just in case I am mistaken."

Not so good.

Mr Ambrose nodded to Karim. "You know what to do once we're there?"

The mountainous Mohammedan nodded, patting the bag slung over his shoulder. Not for the first time, I wondered what he was hiding.

"Yes, Sahib"

"Adequate." Mr Ambrose raised his watch again. "Brace yourselves, it will begin in ten... nine... eight... seven... six... five... four... three... two... one... now"

Nothing happened.

With an angry snap, Mr Ambrose shut his watch.

"They're late," he complained. "You can't rely on anybody to be punctual anym"

Suddenly, there was an almighty crash from the other side of the building. Screams pierced the night over the city. For a moment, I thought that some sort of street brawl had broken out.

Bloody hell! Has he hired people to attack Lord Dalgliesh's guards? "They'll all be shot down!"

But then the clash came again, and it didn't sound like swords or guns—rather, like a cymbal.

Or orchestra attack?

"What the bloody hell..." I started to whisper, but was cut to by more screaming. It didn't exactly sound painful. If I had to choose a word to describe it, I would have said 'enthusiastic'. But that couldn't be, could it?

Curiously, I peered around the cart. Coloured lights were visible around the corner of a house. It sounded like people were cheering. But the sound of the footsteps was not right. It didn't sound like normal troops or even soldiers marching—more like people on a ball, dancing to a rhythm. But who would be crazy enough to stage a ball on a street in the middle of Chhatwon in front of a house with professional gunmen on the roof?

Who do you think?

The sound came nearer—and then, without warning, the head of a giant, red-golden beast appeared in the street. It was at least two feet high, with thick spikes on its forehead and snout. A livid red tongue protruded from its horrifying mouth that could surely swallow a pig whole and as it reared up into the air, a roar and renewed clashing cut through the dark night again.

The monster's eyes fixed directly on me.

I opened my mouth to scream—and a hand clamped down on my lips. "I said," I heard a very cool, controlled voice at my ear, "brace yourselves. That means no horrified screaming."

"Bimni Himp!"

My attempts to warn him of the approach of the giant monster went unheard. He pressed down harder.

"Look," he told me. "Look closely."

No! I don't want to look! I can't even stand to look at that grey beast of a horse you own and this—is this a thousand times worse! Run! Run for your life, you granite-headed idiot!

What apocalyptic demon had he set loose in the streets of London, while the unsuspecting public slept in their beds, and the police was nowhere to be seen?

"Look, Mr Linton. That is an order."

Unwillingly, I moved my eyes to rest on the red and golden monster. For a moment, I just stared in fear as the wild eyes moved from left to right and the head jerked in wild contortions. Then...

Then I saw the pair of legs protruding from the lower part of the head. Dear, merciful God! Has the monster already devoured somebody?

But no. Those legs weren't sticking out of the beast's mouth. They were just protruding from the bottom of the head, as if a man were standing inside it, holding it up. For the first time, I noticed that the face of the beast was hard and immovable as wood, and that it's tongue did not move, and neither did its jaws. I saw the glint of paint on its features, and it dawned on me that I might have slightly overreacted.

My body relaxed.

Mr Ambrose arms, still around me, did not.

And for the second time in half an hour, I realized that I could feel his fingers on my lips, and his stone-hard, gimono body pressed against my back. Suddenly, the fake monster was only a dim memory.

Suddenly, I was wondering whether he remembered the last time, too, and what it felt like to him. My derrière was pressed very tightly against him, so flesh against hard muscle. More so flesh than was probably advisable. I found myself wishing that I had tied my corset a bit more tightly in that area.

Don't be ridiculous! chided myself. Why should you care what Mr Ambrose thinks about how you feel, or that he probably thinks your bottom is too fat?

Not that it was, mind you. A little on the generous side, maybe, but not fat. No, definitely not.

Mr Ambrose cut short my posterior musings by releasing me and stepping back.

"Be quiet, Mr Linton," he warned me, his voice as cool as ever. No. He definitely hadn't been thinking of anything... down there.

Quickly, I tried to push all thoughts of the feel of his body out of my mind. It wasn't too difficult, considering the circumstances. My eyes were drawn once more to the giant beast, of which I now, not only the head but a long, snake-like body was in view, each part of it supported by another pair of legs. The snake-like thing had by now started advancing towards the western side of number 97.

"What in St George's name is that?" I panted, pointing at the wagging head of the fake monster.

"Chinese new year celebrations," Mr Ambrose said, his face as straight as a ruler. "The performance is called 'The Dance of the Dragon' I believe."

"Is it the Chinese new year?"

"No. But I doubt Lord Dalgliesh's guards know that. They are not Chinese."

"Well, fortunately, neither am I," I said, watching the head of the monster with trepidation. "Real animals are scary enough. I have no idea why any people would want to dream up even more monstrous creatures, and for a celebration, to boot. Give me a nice, quiet su ragist demonstration any day..."

"If you're quite finished, we should get going." Mr Ambrose jerked his head into the direction of number 97. "Or we will get shot in spite of the performance of our Chinese friends, and I'd hate to have spent enough money for an entire dragon and twenty-four pairs of legs for nothing."

Without waiting for my response, he whirled. Drawing his cloak in closely around himself, he started across the street, crouched low, and avoiding the light of street lamps, jumping from shadow to shadow. Karim followed without hesitation.

I gazed at the thirteen steps or so that separated me from number 97 with trepidation. At any one of the thirteen steps I would have to take, I might get shot. I wondered what it would feel like, having a bullet pierce my flesh. Yet—the longer I stood here wondering, the more likely it would be I would find out. And, he was already half across.

You don't really have a choice, do you?

I threw myself forward.

When I had just taken my first step, I thought I saw a glint on the roof of number 97 and my heart almost stopped. The barrel of a gun! I expected the crack of the shot, the bullet hitting me—nothing came. It must simply have been a drainpipe, glinting in the moonlight.

Ten steps le...

Inwardly, I cursed the London authorities for making this road so damnably wide. Couldn't they have reduced the size a bit? Couldn't they have felt compassion for poor girls who were running across the street in the darkness, hoping not to get shot by villainous assassins? I was sure if there had been a woman on the planning committee, she would have thought of it! It was such an obvious point to consider in city planning.

Seven steps le...

Every time one of my feet hit the ground it sounded like a drumbeat in my ear. I wondered at the fact that men on the roof hadn't heard it yet and put a nice, round hole into me. But in reality, the clash of the cymbals and dozens of thundering feet on the opposite side of the building were probably more than covering the noise of my advance.

But they could still see me, if they were not looking the other way. I drew in the mottled cloak tighter around me, though I could not really believe in its powers of disguise. It was only a cloak, a er all...

Three steps le...

I surged forward with renewed effort. In front of me, I could see Mr Ambrose and Karim appearing out of the gloom. They were pressed against the brick wall of number 97. Closing my eyes, I heaped forward. If I was to get shot at the last moment, I didn't want to see the blood.

I slammed into something hard—much harder than a brick wall! From above me, I heard a sharp exhalation, and then, suddenly, a set of arms was around me, pulling me to a chest that felt wonderfully familiar.

Well, maybe that's because you've been pressed up against it twice already in the last hour!

This time, he wasn't holding me to shut my mouth, though, and my back wasn't to his front. Instead, the hard muscles of his chest were pressed more tightly against mine that they had ever been before. He was holding me so tightly I thought he didn't even want to let go again. I would not have minded if he never did. I felt so overjoyed to still be alive, and here, and with him...

A strange feeling flooded my body. A feeling of heat and weakness and wanting of... something. From one moment to the next, I went limp in his arms, collapsing against his chest with a faint sigh.

What the hell is happening? Lily to legs: start working again, now! Right now, do you hear me?

Above me, I heard him catch his breath. And then, something happened which I would never have thought possible, certainly not here. Not now. His hands started roaming over my body, expertly probing my face, my neck, my arms, my... oh, my!

My heart beginning to beat a frantic rhythm, my legs wobbled and almost gave way. His hands travelled farther down, over my waist, down my hip and to my legs... wait a minute! What did he want down there?

My eyes fluttered open, just in time to see him straighten and give me a cold, questioning glance. "Why did you sag against me?" he demanded in a low, burning cold voice. "I have checked everywhere, and cannot detect a single sign of a shot wound! Have you sprained your ankle?"

Checking for shot wounds? He was checking for shot wounds?

"Um... no." Hurriedly, I straightened, hoping that with my tanned complexion and in the gloom of night, nobody could see my furious blush. "I was just exhausted from the run, I suppose."

He made a soft noise in his throat that combined a minimum use of his vocal cords with a maximum of male scorn. Then he turned to the Karim, who had been watching everything with narrowed eyes. The minute Mr Ambrose turned towards him, his features became as neutral as Switzerland, though they remained considerably hairier.

Mr Ambrose didn't speak, but made a few, quick, hard gestures with his hand. Obviously, they must have meant something to Karim, who unsling the bag from over his shoulder and opened it. From its depth, he retrieved... was it a rifle? My eyes widened.

Is he going to shoot at the guards on the wall?

But no. Mr Ambrose was many things, but not a fool. And now that Karim II had the thing up and I could see more clearly, I contrasted against the moon which rose above the roofs to the north. I could see that while the object had the same basic shape as a rifle, two slightly curved arms extended from it, one on each side.

And there was something pointy at the end, some kind of arrow with a strange head. What in Heaven's name...

Twang!

With a sharp snapping noise the strange arrow flew upwards and over the wall. Behind it, a sort of tail was flailing in all directions. No—no tail, a rope!

I had to strain my ears to hear the dull thud as the arrow landed beyond the wall. And even so, I only heard it because I knew it was coming. The racket from the other side of the building was still overwhelming.

Mr Ambrose made another one of his cutting, silent gestures. I raised an eyebrow, quizzically.

"That means 'move'," he hissed. "Now move"

Oh, but he wouldn't have to talk to me at all, or write, but could just order me about with a twitch of his hand. And what did he mean, move? Move where?

Karim was in motion already. With two steps he was at the rope. Giving it a hearty tug, he tested whether it sat well. Apparently not displeased, he gripped it with both hands.

For the first time, the significance of the rope hit me. Bimni! He was expecting me to climb up there!

Bracing his massive legs against the wall, he began to climb, determinedly. Soon, he had vanished into the darkness above me. Mr Ambrose followed, swif and graceful. And I...

Well, I followed too. Probably more determined than swif or graceful. A er only half a yard or so, my arms began to scream in protest. My palms were on fire, bitten with the hot teeth of the coarse rope I hung from the top of a rafter from a meagre hook, gleaming my teeth and prying the palm I took one of my hands from the rope and reached upwards. Thank God I was wearing men's clothes! The weight of my usual collection of petticoats would have been enough to drag me to my doom.

Half way to the rope I decided that yes, my derrière was too fat. I really had to do something about it. Not for the sake of appealing to Mr Ambrose. No, not at all! Simply for the sake of rope climbing. Maybe I should eat less solid chocolate...

Three quarters of the way up, I looked towards the sky, only to see Mr Ambrose's face above me. He made another sign at me, which I immediately understood: Hurry up! What are you dangleing down there for?

I clenched my teeth again, wishing I had enough breath for a solid, unadmirable curse, and reached up once more.

Finally, I felt another hand close around mine and pull me up. It was a hand I knew well. Strong, smooth and hard. Mr Ambrose's hand. His other hand closed around my wrist and heaved. Maybe he groaned a little more than was strictly necessary. My derrière might be a little generous, but I wasn't that heavy!

I had just gotten my feet on solid ground once more, when Mr Ambrose grabbed my shoulders, pushing me forward and down. Before I knew we were covering on a stone staircase leading up to the wall, and looking over the edge of the walkway, immediately, I saw why Mr Ambrose had grabbed me. At the other end of the walkway, a soldier in red uniform had just reached one of his round and was turning towards us. He had to have heard something, for there was a frown on his face when he surveyed the walkway.

Karim, who was kneeling beside us, raised an eyebrow, touching his sabre.

Mr Ambrose shook his head.

The soldier, who had no idea what kind of danger he had just escaped, shrugged and continued, while we slowly started edging down the stairs, away from him.

"Can soldiers of the Presidency army act as soldiers outside of British India?" I hissed. "That is outside of their jurisdiction, isn't it?"

"Their jurisdiction is wherever Lord Dalgliesh can buy them jurisdiction," Mr Ambrose replied coolly. "Now be quiet, and follow me."

He inclined down the stairs, pressed tightly against the wall, his cane, which he held in a somehow managed to retain while climbing up that infernal wall, clutched tightly in his hand. I had no doubt it was the one with the concealed blade inside. He had come well prepared. For a moment I wondered what arsenal Karim might have concealed underneath his turban. Probably a large one.

But large enough for an entire garrison of soldiers?

I latched myself on the turrets away from glinting steel and crackling guns. I had more pressing concerns. It was pitch-black here, in the shadow of the wall, and I had to be very careful not to stumble over my own feet and break my neck.

At the bottom of the stairs, we could here faint voices. Mr Ambrose inclined towards them, the grip on his cane tightening even more. Beyond him I could just make out the outline of a large, wooden shed. The voices seemed to be coming from around its corner. Mr Ambrose leaned forward and raked a peek.

Turning to me, he made a quick jerking movement with his hand.

"It is all right to move," Karim, who stood next to me, growled into my ear. "They are past me."

He moved past me, behind the shed, and I followed. This must be the shed Mr Ambrose had mentioned. The one behind which we were to change into uniforms.

Opening his bag, Karim threw me and Mr Ambrose one uniform each, and kept another for himself. They quickly slipped into the one ready, the voices on the other side of the shed, meanwhile, moved away, until we were completely alone in the night.

Then Karim withdrew rather abruptly, looking blue but with buttons on it from the bag and put it on his head in place of the turban, glaring at me, daring me to make a comment. Yet I was too busy to comment on his headgear. I had difficulty of my own.

With all the strength at my disposal, I tried once more what I had been trying for the last three minutes: to force the first button on my uniform into its buttonhole.

"There... um... is a slight problem," I whispered.

"Indeed?" Mr Ambrose asked in a frigid whisper. He was wearing a hat with buttons on it too, and, to judge by the twitching of his little finger, wasn't too pleased about it.

I waved my arms, making the uniform stretch uncomfortably. "The uniform is rather tight over my other clothes."

"It may surprise you to hear this, Mr Linton, but I do not care! This is not a Paris fashion show."

"It's not just uncomfortably tight, Sir. It's too tight to wear without popping buttons—at least over my other clothes. I shall have to... um... undress."

For a moment, I saw a flicker of something in Mr Ambrose's eyes. Nothing hot, not even something warm, but there might just have been the hint of something red in the center of those dark, icy orbs. Yet he turned so quickly, I couldn't be sure.

"Get on with it, then," he commanded, his voice as cold as ever.

Karim followed the example of his master and turned, though I had the impression that what he really wanted to do was run and hide behind the next wall.

I was feeling a little queasy myself. For all my forthright behaviour in other areas of life, I had never been very forthright in the one area of life which usually led a girl to undress in front of me. I had to shiver at the very idea of it. Certainly I shiver at doing it here, in the cold night air, behind this dilapidated shed.

You probably wouldn't dispise it quite so much if Mr Ambrose and you were alone, somewhere nice and warm, hm?

Immediately, I kicked that thought out of my mind, where it didn't belong.

Changing your clothes told myself. That's all the reason why you're undressing now. To change your clothes. And he has got his back to you. He's not looking at you. He couldn't even want to. And you do not want him to want to understand!

Glancing up at the back of the two men, I saw that Mr Ambrose's had his arms crossed behind his back, and his little finger was twitching with the tempo of a sewing machine.

"Hurry up, Mr Linton," he hissed, straightening his pesky blue hat. "If one of the soldiers comes around the shed now..."

"I thought they had gone."

"They might come back. If you find you like this..."

"What do you think they will do?" I asked in a voice which, for some unfathomable reason, sounded teasing.

"Sound the alarm and come back with heavy artillery," he growled.

Now that was a blow below the belt! Or not really, because currently, I wasn't wearing any belt. In fact, I wasn't wearing much of anything, except a pair of drawers and my corset. It was getting rather chilly, particularly around the shoulders, and I shrugged into the red uniform as quickly as possible. I had expected it to feel awkward, but it didn't. Wearing Uncle Burd's Sunday best for so long, had made me become accustomed to wearing trousers. The military outfit with its doming collars and padded shoulders rather gave me a feeling of confidence, though that feeling was slightly offset by the ridiculous hat.

With a deep breath, I fastened the last button.

"All right," I whispered. "We can go."

Mr Ambrose didn't move.

"You are fully clothed?"

"Yes."

"Karim, turn around and check if she's fully clothed."

"Sahib! Karim protested, not moving an inch. "I can't..."

"Do it, Karim!"

"Yes, Sahib! As you command, Sahib"

One hand over his eyes, with only a minuscule crack open between two fingers that could be closed the moment he detected any sign of indecency or devility, Karim slowly turned towards me. I rolled my eyes. To tell the truth, I was getting slightly miffed, and had almost forgotten the hundreds of soldiers around us and the mortal danger we were in. I mean, I surely didn't look that bad in underwear...

"She is decent," he announced in a low rumble. Then, thinking again, added, "As least as decent as she can be."

"Is she wearing just sixteen or more items?"

Without turning to glance at me, Mr Ambrose strode the corner of the shed and peeked out into the courtyard.

"There are no soldiers nearby," he whispered. "There are two of them further down the courtyard, approximately twenty yards away from us. We will go around the back of the shed. When we emerge from behind it on the other side, they will not notice or think we had come from the other side of the courtyard. From where they are standing, it would be nearly impossible to tell the difference."

He crossed to the other side of the shed and positioned himself at the corner there.

"Ready?" he asked.

"Yes, Sir," I said, my heart hammering. By now, the soldiers that surrounded us had more than returned to my consciousness; they had usurped it. Playing dress-up behind the shed was all too well, but now we would step out into the open again, and our disguise would have to hold.

"Yes, Sahib"

"Good. Remember, when you step out, look relaxed and comfortable."

"You mean like you always do?" I asked, sweetly.

"Mr Linton?"

"Yes, Sir?"

"Be quiet"

"Yes, Sir! Of course, Sir!"

"On the count of three. One... two... three!"

He stepped out into the courtyard, and a started marching in the most proper military step I had ever seen. In his brilliant red uniform he looked the picture of a handsome young soldier. I stared at a him, my red lips trembling on my lips.

"Come on!" Karim growled from beside me. "Or do you wish to stand around here gaping for the rest of the night?"

With a hurried shake of the head I started forward.

The moment I stepped out from behind the shed, I could feel them on me: the gazes of the hidden gunmen that were stationed all over the roof. I could feel their eyes boring into me, probing me, as Lord Dalgliesh's eyes had probed me, searching for truth and purpose.

My eyes fixed themselves on Mr Ambrose's back a few yards in front of me. Please! I thought, desperately. Please don't let them guess the truth about him.

Would you even see blood on that red coat? Or would there just be a bang, and he would crumple silently to the ground? I don't know. All I knew was that I didn't wish to find out.

Get a grip! snapped at myself. The gunmen aren't watching you. They are watching the outside for intruders, not the inside for their own soldiers, and that's what you are not. It is just your imagination running wild!

It only had been better at convincing myself.

Beyond Mr Ambrose, the gigantic double-winged front door loomed. I was just wondering once again how the Dickens we were going to get it open, when suddenly, one of the wings swung open with a creak. Two soldiers stepped out. My heart almost stopped. What would we do? What would we say?

Mr Ambrose gave the soldiers a curt nod. He didn't say anything. They gave him a curt nod back. They didn't say anything.

And then we were past them and inside the hallway.

"I knew did that just happen?" I asked, my voice unsteady.

"What?" Mr Ambrose enquired. He wasn't paying attention to me. His eyes were sweeping over the different doors that lead from the hallway in different directions.

"Our getting past them?"

"I nodded, they nodded, we walked past. It's not that complicated."

"But, why didn't they stop us? Question us?"

"That's why we are wearing a disguise, Mr Linton. So people won't know who we are. Come on. This is the right door."

And he set o towards a door in the le corner of the room. It opened without resistance and the three of us entered a narrow corridor, dimly lit by the occasional gas lamp on the wall. Mr Ambrose never slackened his pace or altered his brisk gait. I marvelled at how artfully he walked. He could have been a general, or a Lord leading his army into battle.

Which maybe he was, in a way.

Shaking my head, I quickened my pace to keep up with him. We passed a door, and again he didn't give it a glance. We passed many doors on our march down the narrow corridor, some on the right, some on the le. From behind some there came raucous laughter, from behind others there came the sounds of swords being sharpened, from behind yet others we heard only silence. Mr Ambrose did not deviate from his straight course once until we reached a dead end in the corridor. There, he stopped dead, and without turning, said:

"Around the corner, there is a straight corridor. It should lead directly to the door of Dalgliesh's ice. In case we encounter someone, we cannot speak or discuss our route anymore. The closer we get to Dalgliesh's office, the more soldiers will meet. Karim? Another look at the map, to make sure."

The Mohammedan f