90. A Special Person

The sudden silence was as loud as thunder in our ears. The deep thumping noise that had been our constant companion for the last few hours had suddenly ceased. The vibrations of the ship had stilled. The sudden change woke me from the half-sleep which I had fallen into after hours and hours of waiting in the dark.

"The engine has been stopped," I whispered, drowsily. "We... we must have arrived."

"What a brilliant deduction, Mr Linton."

Instead of making a snappish reply to his sarcastic remark, I asked. "Do you think we are in the harbour of this place Dalgliesh mentioned? This 'Ill Marbow'?"

"Isle Marbeau, Mr Linton," he corrected.

"That's what I said, Sir."

"No, Mr Linton. You pronounced it like grotesque, half-English gibberish. But I am quite certain the name is French. 'Isle' is French for 'Island'."

"Oh."

"Yes, Mr Linton. An Island. Do you see now how getting away with the file might be a bit difficult?"

"Well... we could steal a ship."

"And man it ourselves?" The cold, disparaging tone of his voice told me that this was not in the realm of possibility. And I believed him. Other than me, he had been on many ships, most of which he probably owned himself. He knew what he was talking about.

Isle Marbeau... The strange-sounding name reverberated in my head, and made my breathing quicken. With my mind's eye, I saw a desolate, dark rock rising out of the sea towards a night sky black and grey with storm clouds. On the very top rose the ruins of an old castle, in which the infamous Lord Dalgliesh ruled like the King he saw himself to be.

I cleared my throat.

"We are really and truly outside England now?"

"Yes, Mr Linton."

"Really? Truly outside England?"

"I believe I have already told you so. Yes, we are. Why?"

I didn't know what to say. All my life I had dreamed of adventure, of leaving England to journey to faraway lands and see the marvels of the world. None of my dreams had included being stuck in a wooden crate with somebody like Mr Rikkard Ambrose. Still, I found myself glad that he was here. With a queasy feeling in my stomach, I thought back to the fight in the alley, to my fear of being shot down by sharpshooters at number 97. Adventures were not as easy nor as glorious as I had imagined, and it was good to have somebody with me I trusted.

Wait just a minute! Trust? Are you nuts?

But I did trust him. When had that happened? When I had first met him, I didn't trust him as far as I could throw him. In fact, I was deeply suspicious of his dark business dealings and chauvinistic ways. Some part of me still was. But another part of me wanted him to put his arms around me again.

Suddenly, I heard a dull thump from outside. It was repeated, and repeated again, and again, getting louder as it drew nearer.

"What is that?" I asked.

"Marching feet on the metal floor," Mr Ambrose breathed. "They're coming to unload the ship."

Unload the ship? But—bloody hell! I was cargo now! So that included me! I stiffened.

"Don't move, Mr Linton!" His voice was cold, but his breath was hot at my ear. "Don't breathe. Don't even think about making a sound. No matter how much the jostle us about, we must remain absolutely still. If they hear us, we are dead." He leaned even closer to my ear and hissed: "Understood?"

A shiver ran down my spine..

"Y-yes, Sir."

The door to our room opened, and I heard several people enter. They bent to pick up something, and left the room again. None of them came near our crate. I let out a breath I hadn't realized I was holding. Soon after, another group came, and then another, each time carrying off some of the smaller crates and sacks I had briefly seen lying about in the room. They seemed to want to make room for the big removal – in other words, us. I only hoped the big removal wouldn't include a removal from the realm of the living.

Finally, the footsteps returned.

"All right," a gruff voice called out. "Ye and Tom grab 'old on that side, me, Jim and Ezra on this one."

"Sure. On the count of three, mates! One, two, three... 'ere we go!"

Suddenly, the world swayed. We were lifted into the air.

"Bloody 'ell! That thing ain't no sack of feathers! What did they put in there? A block of granite?"

Granite? I wasn't that heavy, was I? My behind wasn't that fat! It was only generous, at most. Although... there was also Mr Ambrose to consider, and he could be classified as block of granite in my book.

"Keep your darn mouth shut!" Came the growled reply. "Don't ye know what 'appens to those as asks too many questions?"

The other man fell instantly silent. From this alone, I knew what happened to curious people in Lord Dalgliesh's employ. Or at least I could imagine.

Groaning and moaning, but not uttering another word, the four men carried us out of the room, down the corridor and... and I knew not where. I heard the sound of waves, saw faint strips of light fall in through gaps in the wooden wall, and once fancied I heard the distant chatter of many voices. Where was I? There was no indication of where we were among the sounds, or where we were headed. Not until the scream, that is.

It was faint, so faint that I might have almost imagined it. Almost. If we had been in another place, I might have taken it for a cry of joy, or the sound of an annoyed child. But I knew better. Where we were going, there were no children, and there certainly was no joy.

But what was it then?

I had already opened my mouth to ask, when I remembered Mr Ambrose's warning.

Silence. Absolute silence.

I clamped my mouth shut again and tried to ignore the gnawing feeling of panic in my stomach.

Silent. You must keep silent

And I did. Somehow, though, Mr Ambrose managed to be twice as silent as I was. He seemed to radiate negative noise. It was a trick I decided I had to learn, if I survived this.

In the distance, I heard another faint cry. I couldn't suppress the image of a dark dungeon creeping up on me. But both times, the cries had sounded like children. What kind of monster was this Lord Dalgliesh?

What few noises there were soon receded into the distance. We were venturing away from the coast, towards the centre of the island, of that much I was sure. But other than that, I knew nothing of where we were heading. There was only the rocking of the crate and the steady marching sound of the soldiers to indicate that we were moving at all.

Finally, the soldiers slowed down.

"Halt!"

At the command, the soldiers stopped. I heard the jingling of keys, and a creaking noise that was probably a door. It didn't sound nearly creaky and sinister enough to satisfy my idea of the rusty hinges of a dungeon door, so maybe there was still hope.

"All right, fellows. Put it down 'ere."

They soldiers were only too happy to comply. The crate smashed to the ground, and Mr Ambrose nearly squashed me beneath him, pressing all the air out of my lungs.

"Mpf!"

"Gently! Gently! The dickens knows what's in there. 'e will 'ave our 'eads on a platter if anything gets broke!"

There was no need to mention who 'he' was. I understood it as well as the soldiers did. They mumbled hurried apologies, and their footsteps moved away. Not long after, we heard a door lock click shut, and then there was only silence.

They hadn't opened the crate.

"What now?" I demanded in a whisper. "Are we just supposed to wait here until they come back for us?"

"By no means." Mr Ambrose tone was back to cool efficiency. The hint of defeat that had been there earlier was nowhere to be found. He grabbed hold of something lying beside me, and I saw a thin object sliding past my face. His cane?

"What are you doing?"

"If I am not mistaken, the soldiers rough handling of the crate has loosened one of the boards. I may just be able to slide the blade of my sword into the crack and use it as a lever. Don't move an inch. The blade is sharp."

I froze as above me I heard the slither of steel on steel. There was a creak, and for a moment, a small beam of light fell in through a crack in the wood. Then, the light was blocked by the figure of Mr Ambrose. He raised himself up as far as he could, sliding his sword into the crack he had discovered. Then, I felt his muscles bunch. There was a crunching sound, and suddenly light flooded into the crate – not the weak, blueish light of the moon, but bright, golden sunlight.

"It is morning!" I exclaimed.

"Of course, Mr Linton. We have been at sea for..." he pulled his watch out of his pocket and let it snap open. The coat of arms on the lid flashed in the bright morning light. "... exactly seven hours, thirty-eight minutes and four seconds. Dalgliesh must have taken a roundabout route to avoid being spotted."

"Seven hours!" I clapped my hands to my face. "Blast! That means that by now, my aunt must have noticed I am gone! What am I going to tell her?"

Mr Ambrose gave me a look. Oh, how I had missed that icy, spine-chilling gaze! "That, I would say, is the least of our worries, Mr Linton."

"Then you don't know my aunt."

Instead of replying, he sheathed his sword again, and shoved the cane through the hole that he had created in the wall of the crate. With a sharp pull, he twisted the cane, and another board flew away, clattering to the ground. He repeated the procedure again, and again. Then he nodded, satisfied.

"The hole should now be broad enough for an average person to climb through. I will go first. Wait here."

And before I could utter a single word of complaint he was already out of my sight, sliding out of the crate like some sleek, dark spectre. I listened intently, praying that there was no guard posted outside. Not a single sound came from outside the crate. I waited. One minute went by. Two minutes.

What the heck is he doing out there?

Three minutes.

He can't take this long, can he?

Four minutes.

Something has to have gone wrong! What if there is more than one guard out there? What if Mr Ambrose...

Five minutes.

What are you waiting for? Go and look for him! Maybe something had happened. Maybe–

"All clear." Suddenly, his face perfect granite face appeared above me and I breathed a sigh of relief.

"Where were you?" I hissed.

"Checking."

"Checking for what?"

"Soldiers, Mr Linton. There are none present, either in here, or out there."

"How do you know?"

"I climbed to one of the windows and looked out. All I saw was the sea, over the tops of trees, and a path leading downhill."

"Not even one guard?"

"I do not like to repeat myself, Mr Linton. No. There were no soldiers."

"But that's strange, don't you think so?"

"Exceedingly. Which is why I would suggest we leave this place before things change from strange to normal. Come!"

He disappeared from my view, and I gathered that now it was my turn. Slowly, I sat up. Every muscle in my body ached from lying down this long, and with so much weight on top of me. I tried very hard not to think about who that hard, muscled weight had belonged to, and gripped the edges of the hole in the lid above me to pull myself farther up.

With a groan at my protesting muscles, I stuck my head through the opening. Looking around me, I saw a large, bare room, with lots of crates piled in every corner and sacks lying on the floor. Light filtered in through a few, unglazed, but barred windows high up on the wall. Dust motes danced in the light, and somewhere I heard the little footsteps of a mouse, or some other small animal, hurrying across the stone floor.

"What is this place?" I whispered.

"I do not know, Mr Linton. But at a guess, I would say, a warehouse."

"It looks like nobody ever comes here."

"Let us hope so, or they will find you still half in the crate when they do come. Now get a move on!"

"Yes, Sir. Immediately, Sir."

Pushing my arms through the hole, I hoisted myself further up and bit by bit emerged into the outside world. This went fine until my waist had slid outside. Suddenly, I encountered resistance. Gripping the boards to either side of me, I pushed harder.

I didn't move an inch.

Again, I pushed harder. Nothing.

"What are you waiting for, Mr Linton?" Mr Ambrose was standing a little way away from the crowd, his gaze fixed on the door of the warehouse, prepared at any time for an enemy to come through it. "We have to go."

One final time I pushed – to no avail. "I can't," I growled. "I... don't seem to fit through the hole."

Certain generously endowed parts of me, anyway.

"The hole should be big enough for an average person, Mr Linton."

"Well, then maybe I'm a special person," I hissed. "At least that's what my little sister always says. Will you get rid of another board, already?"

"Manners, Mr Linton!"

"Will you get rid of another board, Sir, before somebody comes along and shoots us?"

In two seconds he was on the crate, his cane in hand. Placing it under the nearest board, he pushed down. There was a crack, as if from a pistol shot, and the board flew away. I popped out of the crate like a cork out of a bottle. Hurriedly, I slid down until I stood firm with both feet on the ground, and started to dust off my rumpled uniform.

"Thanks," I grumbled, my face two shades darker than normal.

He, of course, didn't even deign to notice my flushed cheeks. He was already at the door, sliding it slowly open, and peeking out through the crack.

"There is nobody in the vicinity. Come." And he slipped outside. Mumbling a very unladylike word, I followed him, and stepped out into a world of wonder.

I didn't know exactly what I had expected the island stronghold of the evil Lord Dalgliesh to look like, but this was certainly not it. We stood in a courtyard surrounded by a charming, low stone wall. Moss and other foliage grew out of the cracks in the stone, and it was just the right height to comfortably sit down and have a picnic – an idea to which the rest of the surroundings would have rendered themselves beautifully. The courtyard was surrounded by charming, little knobby trees, from which drifted a delicious smell of pines and the sounds of a busy wood. The sound of frolicking squirrels and twittering nightingales mingled with the distant rush of the sea. Bees flew between beautiful flowers which peeked out from between the foremost trees' roots, and a robin fluttered across the courtyard to disappear in the forest on the other side.

"What the heck?" I looked from left to right. "Did we get sont to the wrong address? Eden, instead of Evil Fortress?"

Mr Ambrose opened his mouth. But I never found out what he was going to say, because all of a sudden, we heard footsteps from around the corner of the warehouse. I hesitated for a moment – and then it was already too late to flee. A man came around the corner, and stopped in his tracks as he spotted us.

Blast!

My Dear Lords and Ladies,

I've started working on the publication! Right at the moment, I am trying to get an ISBN (International Standard Book Number), which every self-respecting book apparently needs ;-) Wish me luck!

Yours Truly

Sir Rob

P.S: I'll have a small surprise for you soon! Hope you're excited?

Continue reading next part