

22. My All-Important Task

Karim let out a low oath in a language I didn't understand. But the way he said it, I didn't have to know the words to know that it was a curse. He had obviously understood. I, on the contrary, was still completely in the dark.

"Simmons?" I echoed, making it a question.

He met my eyes with his deep, dark, blue-grey ones.

"Yes. Simmons, Mr Linton, Simmons, my previous private secretary. Simmons, who disappeared a few days ago without any explanation. Simmons, the treacherous snake."

With a few long strides Mr Ambrose was over at my desk and started rifling through my drawers. The wooden ones in the desk, I mean.

"What are you doing?" I demanded. "I thought your big bull already checked those."

Karim threw me a look that signified about a ton of displeasure. Apparently he didn't appreciate his new nickname. I made a mental note to use it again at the earliest opportunity.

"Karim did search the drawers," Mr Ambrose agreed. "But he searched them for the missing file, not for a sign of where the traitor that has taken the file might have gone. This was his desk once."

"So you think that this Simmons did it now? You no longer think it was me?"

"No! I was a fool to ever have thought it. A er all, you're only..." He waved his hand non-committally.

"A girl?" I piped up. "Is that what you were going to say? We females can steal things just as well as any man, thank you very much!"

"A moment ago you were afraid of me thinking you're guilty, and now you praise your skills as a thief?"

"Not my skills, but the skills of womanhood in general! And I was certainly not afraid."

"You were not?"

"Do I look afraid to you?"

"No," he admitted. "You look superfluous. Leave the room. I and my men have a thief to catch." He nodded to the door and returned to his work of rifling through the desk, as if I had already le, or as if I had ceased to exist entirely. That, I was sure, was how he would have preferred things.

Crossing my arms, I planted myself in front of him.

"I'm not going anywhere."

"I give you the rest of the day o," he said, not looking at me. "Go and enjoy your holiday. Trust me when I say I do not give holidays o en."

"With me it seems that is almost the only thing you do! I did not come here to juggle meaningless pieces of paper like a monkey trained for some circus and then be chucked out a er half a day. I came here to work! And if you have a thief to catch, I will come with you!"

"Just for your information," he said, "the pieces of paper that you have 'juggled' as you put it have most certainly not been meaningless."

He still didn't bother to turn around and look at me. All I could do was send my furious glares at his broad, hard back and that did nothing to calm me down.

"They all pertain to my business in a very real way," he continued. "And you are nothing whatsoever like a circus monkey. A monkey wouldn't talk back at me."

"But it might bite!"

"I'm not sure I wouldn't prefer that."

"Is that so?" I took an involuntary step towards him. "Well, I could try, if you wished."

His neck-muscles tensed. "No need to put yourself to trouble. Go home. That is an order."

"No!" I stamped my foot. I didn't care if I made a spectacle of myself. He was going to accept me, whether he wanted to or not.

"You cannot refuse to go home if I send you away." I wouldn't have believed his voice could grow colder than it already was. But he was reaching new heights of work deep-freezing. "You work for me."

"Exactly." I nodded. "I work for you. And just as I could protest if you were to keep me at work longer than the normal hours, I have the right to protest if you send me away early. You accepted my work in exchange for a salary, Mr Ambrose, and I intend to earn that salary. I will not accept charity from anyone, and most certainly not from you."

He looked up then, and met my gaze again. Had something in my little speech actually managed to capture his attention?

There was something in his eyes as he looked at me... Something different from before. It was intense—but I had no idea what it was, though.

"You are wasting my time," he said. But his voice wasn't quite as hard and immovable as just a second ago. "I need to catch Simmons."

"Then let me help," I pleaded.

Instead of answering, he returned to rummaging through the last drawer. Slamming it shut, he turned to Karim, who stood waiting at the entrance to the safe.

"Nothing here. Get the men here. The entire team. Tell Warren to go over this place with a fine-tooth comb. Anything he finds, and I mean anything is to be brought to me immediately, understood?"

"Yes, Sahib"

"Why not just tell the police about this?" I dared to interject.

"Because I do not want this business in tomorrow's newspapers," was the curt reply. "And because if we find the thief, they will get in my way."

I had to swallow. Taking into account his recent threats towards yours truly, I could only imagine too well what he meant by that.

"So what now?" I asked.

"Now you will go home."

"No. I will not!"

Karim, who had been striding towards the door to embark on his errand, hesitated there. "Do you truly wish me to leave you alone with her, Sahib?"

I rolled my eyes. Oh, please.

Mr Ambrose nodded. "Yes, go, Karim. I need Warren here as soon as possible."

"As you wish, Sahib" But Karim still looked doubtful under his beard as he unlocked the door and le the room.

When the door closed behind him, I stepped up to Mr Ambrose until only a few inches separated us. There was no point in beating about the bush further.

"Why won't you let me do my job? What exactly is your problem?"

His eyes, seeming darker than usual, almost black, bored into me like a steam-engine driven drill. "You know."

Angrily, I put my fists on my hips. "You mean the fact that I'm a girl?"

He didn't say anything, but from his look I knew that was it. What was the matter? This was going beyond chauvinism. Wasn't he even able to say the word 'girl' allowed? Did he have such a strong distaste for it? For me?

"Do you behave like this to all females?" I demanded.

A faint noise escaped him. It might have been a snort.

"Hardly. All females don't put on trousers and trick me into giving them jobs!"

"I did not trick you!"

"Maybe. Get to the point."

"I already have. Why won't you let me help you, let me work for you properly?"

He shook his head in exasperation. "You don't understand. Where I am going, what I will be doing... It will be dangerous. Very dangerous. I cannot let you accompany me."

"Why not?" I asked, heatedly. "Simply because I am a girl?"

He stared at me for a second, seemingly lost for words. For this one moment I saw something flicker in his eyes, something different from the iron determination that was usually there. He looked almost... frightened? Longing?

Then the shutters came done again, and he nodded. "Yes, that's exactly the reason. I am a gentleman. As such I cannot allow any lady-person of female gender allow to be in danger."

It did not pass my notice how he had avoided using the term 'lady'.

"Oh really?" Sarcasm was dripping from my voice. "If I may remind you, you were threatening to do away with me yourself not ten minutes ago."

"That," he answered in a chilling voice, "was when I thought you had betrayed me. I do not take kindly to traitors, Mr Linton."

The sarcasm drained from my voice and face.

"I am not a traitor", I said, my voice full of hurt.

For one instant, I thought his granite face so ened a bit. "I know. You have done an acceptable job so far – for an Ifrit"

My eyes flew wide open. Had my ears betrayed me, or had Mr Ambrose, Mr Silent and Sullen Granite Face Ambrose, just made a joke?

"But your capabilities as an o ice worker don't have anything to do with this. You simply can't get involved in this matter! You see that, don't you?" he continued so quickly that I immediately forgot about the maybe-joke and my hackles rose.

"No! I most certainly do not see. You have taken me on to work for you!" I folded my arms in front of my chest. "I demand pay! I demand to work bloody hard for every penny you will pay me, just like Karim, and this Warren fellow, and every other man you employ, do you understand? I want to earn my own money, and I will, whether you want me to or not."

Once again, he studied me with his dark, sea-coloured eyes. There was something growing there, slowly, very slowly. Acceptance? More likely it was resignation.

He took a step towards me. Whereas before our faces had been inches apart, now it was only a fraction of an inch.

"I will not be able to reason your mind, I?" he asked. His voice was arctic. But for some change, I didn't feel cold. Instead, I felt heat rush over my body. Where his and my face almost touched, my skin began to tingle. The tension between us was burning.

"No." I grinned. "And you don't have the time anyway. You have to catch a thief."

"Good point." Again, he studied me. "You really wish to help?"

"Yes!"

"Very well then. Follow me."

He whirled, and before I knew what was happening he was striding away. I followed instinctively, only now realizing how my breath had sped up during our little stand-o.

Strange. Why had I reacted like this? It must have been the exhilaration of finally triumphing over him. Yes, that had to be it.

He led me back towards the entrance of the safe. There, he stopped and turned to me. I had to work hard to keep a triumphant smile o my face. This was it. He was finally going to accept me and give me responsibility.

"I have a very important assignment for you," he said, looking me directly in the eyes. "One of vital significance, which I expect to be finished by the time I return."

"What is it?" I asked, breathless.

He pushed open the door to the safe, which had fallen close behind us. Then he pointed to the chaos of files on the floor. "Clean up that mess."

My dear Lords, Ladies and Gentlemen,

Some of you have inquired what exactly the shiny new orange check mark on my Wattpad page represents. Simply put, this symbol is there to tell everyone now on, I am an 100% o icially verified Wattpad author. This means that, in case some rascally confidence trickster should get it into their head to impersonate me, I, Sir Rob, will now be able to challenge them to a duel to the death and avenge my gentleman's honor as a Victorian gentleman! :-)

If something like this should ever happen, I give you my word of honor that you will all be invited to the duel. I'll need all of my fabulous dear fans to keep their fingers crossed while I demonstrate my prowess with the dueling pistols :-)

Yours Truly

Your Victorian author (polishing his pistols)

Sir Rob

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