

## 23. Little Ifrit

All right, so I did it. So what? He was my employer, after all, and he could order me to do anything he wanted. The fact that I was fuming and fantasized about choking him didn't really count as an excuse to shirk my duties.

By the light of the small gas lamp Mr Ambrose had given me, I started to sort files.

Soon, I found that while the work itself was deathly boring, being positioned in the safe room had unsuspected advantages. Once I had pushed open the door, which Mr Ambrose had shut, I could hear everything that was going on in my office – which was quite a lot, let me tell you.

There was a knock on the door.

"Enter," Mr Ambrose's curt voice called.

"Mr Ambrose? Good morning, Sir," a quiet, respectful voice said in answer. Several pairs of feet shuffled into my office. Apparently, it had been selected as official HQ for the thief hunt. "I came as soon as you called. What is the matter? Karim didn't say."

"Warren." No "good morning" from Mr Stoneface Ambrose of course, and certainly no "How nice to see you." He got right to the point.

"Have you seen Simmons?"

"Simmons, Sir? I thought you gave me to understand that he suddenly gave up his post."

"He did. And he took something of mine along with him, it appears."

There was a short, heavy silence. It wasn't hard for me to imagine the merciless ice in Mr Ambrose's eyes right then. Just from the feel of the air I got the impression that the people in my office experienced a twinge of pity for Simmons.

"I see. What can we do, Sir?"

"First answer my question, Warren. Have you seen him since he left?"

"No, Sir."

"Has he come back to pick up his belongings?"

"I can send someone and check, Sir."

"Do that. Now."

Footsteps hurried on. There were a few more minutes of silence, which nobody made even the slightest attempt to fill. Apparently, Mr Ambrose didn't think much of small talk. What a surprise.

The moment the footsteps returned, he asked: "And?"

"His things are gone," said a third voice. "I asked Mr Garfield down at the lockers, and he said that Simmons took them with him on the same day he disappeared."

"That settles it," declared Mr Ambrose. "He's the thief. He has been planning this."

"It appears so, Sir," agreed the man called Warren. "May I ask what was stolen?"

"No."

What was this? No? Just like that? No? Mr Ambrose didn't even trust his own people? Well, I shouldn't be surprised that I was stuck in here sorting files then, instead of being out there where the real work was being done.

"You are looking for a folder with the inscription 'S39XX300'," Mr Ambrose told them, icily. "That is all you need to know."

"Yes, Mr Ambrose Sir."

"First you will search this office. I have some urgent business and will leave you to it. If you have any questions, ask Karim."

"Yes, Sir."

His footsteps receded, and the noises from the other room indicated that Mr Warren and his cronies had begun their search. I returned my attention to my work.

Quite a good idea, it appeared: I had been so distracted that I hadn't noticed I had tried to stuff a bunch of files into the open mouth of some wooden African totem. Hurriedly I removed them and started looking for their proper container.

For the next few minutes I busied myself with the files. Then I suddenly heard footsteps approaching the door of the safe. Yet before I could panic and begin to wonder what they wanted with me, I heard Karim's voice.

"Not in there, Warren."

"But Mr Ambrose said to search everywhere."

"Everywhere in this office. Not in the safe. There is..." Karim's voice dropped to a whisper as he explained something to Warren. I didn't exactly hear everything, but I thought I caught the word "Ifrit".

"Really?" Warren whispered. "Are you sure?"

"I saw it with my own eyes," Karim assured him.

"Right in there? In the safe room?"

"Indeed. So you see you had better not..."

"Of course! I'll steer clear of it, don't you worry."

For the following few minutes my fantasies changed from strangling Mr Ambrose to braining Karim with a wooden African totem. In the end I suppose the difference didn't much matter. Men! They were all the same.

During the following hours I worked ceaselessly, clearing up the mess my dear master had left behind. He wouldn't have an excuse to accuse me of slacking, oh no! The task actually wasn't as hard as I had feared. All the folders strewn over the floor were numbered. Since I had already fully grasped the sorting system, and the one here in the safe was simply an extension of that in my office, I got on quickly, and orderly rows of boxes grew on the shelves.

Finally, the door to my office opened and I heard his unmistakable voice.

"Are you done, Warren?"

"Nearly, Mr Ambrose."

"As soon as you're done here, prepare your men for a little trip, by which I do not mean a stroll in the park. Do we understand each other?"

"Yes, Mr Ambrose."

"Very well. I shall join you in a minute, as soon as I've seen how my little Ifrits are doing."

"Your what, Sir?"

"Forget what I said, Warren."

"Yessir!"

His little Ifrit? I supposed I should have been outraged, him calling me names and all, but for some strange reason I felt warm inside. Maybe because of my flaming wings, who knew?

Mr Ambrose had obviously not intended for me to hear his words. Quickly and quietly I closed the door to the safe room, just as he had left it, and retreated to a corner, a demure little smile on my face as I looked around the room. All right, maybe the smile wasn't totally demure. Maybe it was even a little bit self-satisfied. So what?

The door was pushed open and Mr Ambrose entered. "I will be leaving on the search soon," he began. "So sorry that you are occupied and can't come with us. How many hours do you think you will still need to finish your..."

As his eyes adjusted to the gloom of the safe-room, his voice trailed on.

"You were saying?" I inquired sweetly.

Slowly, Mr Ambrose's gaze wandered over the long rows of impeccably ordered boxes on the shelves of the safe room. He bent to examine the floor, maybe in the hope that he could find a stray piece of paper still lying somewhere, or at least a few fleck of dust.

When he finally straightened again, his eyes fixed on me.

"You are finished?"

"Yes. Why?" I fluttered my eyelashes at him. "Were you by any chance expecting me to take longer?"

"No," he lied smoothly. "In fact I was expecting you to be finished long ago. Don't be so lazy again, or I will have to reduce your wages."

"Well, well," I glared at him, even though for some strange reason, inside I wasn't feeling angry. Somehow I knew he was only putting on a show and I was dancing in triumph. "You had better stop or you'll drown me in compliments for my work."

"Don't be afraid," he assured me. "That will never, ever happen."

I could readily believe it.

"Mr Ambrose?" The man called Warren appeared at the door to the safe room. He was an average-looking fellow with a thin moustache and high forehead. Spotting me, he looked at me curiously for a second. Then his gaze returned to our master. "We're ready to go, Sir."

"I see." Mr Ambrose's voice was as cool as could be. "Warren, I think you haven't met before?" He indicated me. "This..." he swallowed, as if he had to get something unpleasant down his throat. "This is Mr Linton My new... private secretary"

"I see. A pleasure to meet you, Mr Linton." Warren extended his hand to me. As if in a dream, I took it and shook it.

"Likewise," I heard myself say.

He has admitted it! He has admitted to another person that I work for him!

"Enough pleasantries," Mr Ambrose cut short our pleasantries. Abruptly, he whirled to the door. "We have a thief to catch." With two long strides he was outside and out of sight. "Come!" We heard his commanding voice from outside. "Both of you!"

I was still so thrilled by his admission, that it took me a few seconds to register his words.

"W-what?" I managed. "Me too?"

"Are you deaf? Get a move on, Mr Linton!"

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**My dear Lords, Ladies and Gentlemen!**

**Lately I've been receiving quite a lot of messages regarding the exact meaning of the word "Mohammedan", which I have used at a number of points in my book to refer to Karim's character. Here's a clarification: "Mohammedan" is an alternative term for "Muslim", derived from the name of the Prophet Mohammed.**

**Since some of you, my honored readers, seem to be labounging under the misapprehension that this word is a derogatory expression, let me assure you that this isn't the case.**

**"Mohammedan" is not a slur, it is just a slightly archaic term used back during the Victorian Era, the time when this story takes place. You'll find the word in quite a number of 19-century novels (such as Rudyard Kipling's Kim for instance). Also, an acquaintance of mine was kind enough to ask a Professor of Islamic studies about the matter, and was assured that the word "Mohammedan" is can in no way disrespectful, because it is derived from the name of the Prophet Mohammed. I truly hope this is sufficient to convince you of my gentlemanly manners :-)**

**Now, how do you think will Lilly approach the task of thief-catching? I have a few interesting ideas already... :)**

**Yours Truly**

**Sir Rob**

Continue reading next part