38. The Adversary

I followed Mr Ambrose into the dungeon, and even by the dim light of the oil lamp, I spotted Simmons immediately. He was sitting on a chair in the middle of the room, his arms tied to the backrest, and over his head...

I blinked, not sure I was seeing right in the gloom. Finally, I leaned over to Karim.

"Why does he have a bucket of water with a hole in the bottom hanging over his head?" I asked him out of the corner of my mouth.

"I do not hear your voice, Ifrit Allah is my strength and will protect me from thee!"

"Oh. Thanks for the helpful information."

Mr Ambrose approached the thin, blonde man in the chair, whose back stiffened at the sudden sound of footsteps. He hadn't seen us until then, with his head sunk on his chest and his eyes closed, but when Mr Ambrose stepped closer, he raised his head to face his former master.

"Mr Ambrose, Sir."

Simmons' voice was rough. It sounded like he hadn't used it for conversation in days.

Drip.

A drop of water fell out of the hole in the bucket and landed on Simmons' forehead. He shook himself.

"Could you..." His voice dwindled, and he coughed. "Could you please tell your servant to get rid of that bucket? It is quite annoying, having water drip onto you all the time."

He didn't seem afraid any more. I wondered why. When we had caught him, he'd been terrified. Then I abruptly realized why. What was the sense of being afraid? The worst was already behind him. He had been broken and made to confess.

"Please..." Simmons rasped. "Please, get rid of the bucket."

Mr Ambrose considered in silence for a moment – then he made a hand gesture to Karim. The Indian stepped forward, and with a speed that made me yelp in surprise, whipped his scimitar out of its sheath, severing the rope that held the bucket. It fell, sloshing water in every direction, and with a resounding thump bounced off Simmons' head, drenching him in cold water.

Simmons' face contorted in a grimace. "That's not exactly what I meant."

"It's down, isn't it?" Karim growled. "Now start talking, or I'll start doing things with this you'll like even less." He held the point of his scimitar to Simmons's throat. "Talk!"

"I believe Karim has voiced my expectations very succinctly," Mr Ambrose said, crouching down so that his dark, sea-green eyes were on one level with Simmons'. "Talk."

"What do you want me to say?" Simmons asked in a voice that sounded very tired, and yes, now very afraid again, too. Looking into Mr Ambrose's eyes obviously made him feel there might yet be worse things in store for him. I knew the feeling.

"When did all this start?" Mr Ambrose asked.

"All this, Sir? I'm afraid I do not..."

"Don't play games with me Simmons! With me, the stakes are far too high."

Simmons swallowed.

"I know," his former employer continued in a cold voice, "that you must have been in the pay of one of my enemies for some time. They could not simply convince you to break into my private safe overnight. You are far too insecure and timid for that. So I repeat: when did this all start?"

"S-six or seven weeks ago, Sir."

"I see." Mr Ambrose didn't seem to be fazed by the information. But then, when did he ever seem fazed by anything? "How did it happen?"

"T-they came to my house one evening. They told me that they had a proposition for me, that they would pay much better than that miser Ambro-"

Simmons almost bit his tongue off, realizing a bit too late that it might not be very wise to relate the men's exact words. I had to stuff my fist into my mouth to keep from sniggering. Karim noticed and threw me a look that could have burned holes in solid metal.

"Is that what they said?" Mr Ambrose mused, his facial expression not changing a bit. "Well, and did they pay much better than that miser Ambrose?"

"Um... well..."

"Let's assume from the suitcase of banknotes we found in your room that they did indeed. What did you do for them?"

"I... I gave them information on your daily routine, your correspondence, on what files and papers passed through my hands, Sir. At least at first."

"And later?"

"Later they wanted more, Sir. They wanted me to start taking things. When I refused, they started threatening they would reveal to you what I had so far done for them."

Mr Ambrose nodded. "Of course. You are stupid, Simmons, do you know that?"

"Yes, Sir."

Simmons lowered his eyes, but Mr Ambrose moved stepped closer, and with his penetrating dark gaze forced the man to look up again.

"These things you took – what were they?"

"All manner of things, Sir. Business letters, tables of cargo, personal letters..."

The silence in the room was sudden, frigid, and cut Simmons' speech off more effectively than the loudest of screams.

"You," whispered Mr Ambrose in a voice I had never heard him use before, "gave my personal correspondence to these men?"

"Err... yes." There was a squeak of panic in Simmons' voice now. "But... that's not that bad, is it? It's not like you ever read it, Sir?"

"Letters written by a woman?" Mr Ambrose inquired, ignoring the question. "Letters in pink envelopes?"

"Y-yes, Sir."

Silence again. Then, Mr Ambrose stated, as cold as Antarctica itself: "You are lucky that Karim is the one holding the sabre right now."

"Yes, Sir. I am sorry, Sir."

"You certainly will be."

Again, Simmons tried to look down, and again Mr Ambrose held him with his dark gaze. "Now tell me. Tell me about the day you stole the file."

"Well... they told me to take it and... and I did."

"How many days did they have to work on you before you agreed?"

"A w-week and a half. I didn't want to take it. I knew it was important."

Mr Ambrose eyes narrowed infinitesimally. Simmons winced as if he'd been hit with a whip.

That reaction told me more about the contents of the file than any of my wild guesses.

"Oh, you're right about that," Mr Ambrose said in low voice. "It's important all right. When and how did you leave the house the night of your theft?"

"I... I was just finished with work, Sir. I knew you were still working on the Emerson papers in your office. I locked the door to the hallway, went into the safe and took the file."

"How did you know where to look for it? You had never handled that particular file."

"They told me it had to be in the safe, and told me the time it concerned. I knew your filing system, and so knew what to look for."

"I see. And your way out?"

"That was easy. I am – was – your private secretary. Nobody challenged me on the way out. I had the file concealed under my waistcoat, tucked into my trousers."

"Trust!" It was a vicious grow, a sound unlike any other I had ever heard escape from my employer's throat. With surprise I saw that Mr Ambrose had both hands clenched into tight fists. "Of course, it would have to be trust that brought me down! Again! Ah, but we will change that. No more! Karim!"

"Yes, Sahib?"

The huge Mohammedan stepped forward.

"Talk to Warren. Have him station one of his men at the exit to my offices' inner sanctum at all times. From now on, we will search everybody who comes in, and everybody who goes out. Understood?"

"It shall be as you command, Sahib."

Karim left the room. Something clicked outside, and after only a few moments, he was back in the cell. How...? He couldn't have possibly run up the corridor and delivered the message that quickly, could he? Then I remembered: pneumatic tubes. Apparently, they didn't only connect Mr Ambrose's office and mine. They had to be running through the whole building!

My employer, meanwhile, had his full attention focused on his captive again.

"What did you do with the file next?"

Simmons wet his lips. He seemed to be getting more and more nervous, which I didn't understand. He had already admitted the worst – taking the file, right? So what was there about his story that could cause him greater anxiety?

"I took it right away to a house in Penrose Street."

"Mr Linton?"

It took me a few seconds to realize that Mr Ambrose had addressed me. He was still staring fixedly at Simmons, his back to me.

"Um... yes, Sir?"

"I haven't been back in London long, and neither has Karim. We've spent years away in the colonies. What kind of Street is Penrose Street?"

I cleared my throat. "Not a very reputable one, I believe, Sir. It's one of the names that often comes up in police reports in the papers."

Simmons nodded eagerly, and shuddered. "It was a dreadful place, full of coolies and other lowlife. I have no idea why they always wanted to meet there."

"I can think of only one explanation," Mr Ambrose mused. "In case you were caught, or followed there, they wanted everybody to think it was low criminals you were consorting with. Which makes me think that the exact opposite was the case."

"They weren't criminals?" I asked, confused.

"Oh, they were criminals all right. But certainly not low ones. In fact I suspect they were rather high up the food chain. Am I correct?"

Simmons' shudder was more than enough answer.

"The address?"

"Number 12, Penrose Street, Sir."

"What exactly happened?"

"They gave me the money, and said this was our last transaction. When I asked them why, they said that unlike the other times, this the would not go unnoticed. They advised me to get out of the country as right away. The expression on their faces... I'll never forget it."

"Now we come to the interesting part." Mr Ambrose took out his cane and placed the end on Simmons' chest. I remembered, as no doubt Simmons did, that there was a sword concealed inside it.

"Who are those 'they' you keep talking about? Who hired you to steal from me?"

Simmons paled.

"I d-don't know. They never gave me their names."

"But you do know one name, don't you? It's useless to deny it, I can see it in your face."

"No, I don't! I swear, I don't know anything, Sir!"

Mr Ambrose's head whipped sideways to glare at Karim, and the Mohammedan retreated under the force of his cold stare. "What's this? I thought you said this man was ready to confess everything!"

Karim looked pretty uncomfortable. I tried not to smile, but it was kind of funny to see that mountain of a man shuffle around like a told-off school boy.

"He was. I swear to you, Sahib, he was."

"Hmm..."

Mr Ambrose turned to his captive again, scrutinizing him intently.

"You're scared. That's why you won't tell me. You're scared of this man whose name you won't speak."

"No, Sir! I swear, I don't know anything! I don't..."

Mr Ambrose's cane pressing against his throat cut off his words in a croak.

"Simmons, let me put it this way: who are you more afraid of – this man, or me?"

The ex-secretary opened and closed his mouth like a stranded goldfish, but nothing came out, even when Mr Ambrose drew back his cane.

"Interesting... apparently, it's a tie?"

Simmons nodded.

"Well, then think of this." Mr Ambrose leant forward, and whispered in a tone so calmly threatening, it made the hair on the back of my neck and on some other more delicate place stand up: "I have you in my power. He does not."

Simmons slumped.

"All right," he moaned. "All right, I'll tell you. But only under one condition."

"Which is?"

"You let me go, and give me a train ticket out of town. If I tell you that name I'll need to get out of town, and my legs won't be fast enough."

Mr Ambrose didn't hesitate.

"Granted." He nodded, curtly. "The name?"

"I... don't think I was supposed to hear it," Simmons said in a low voice, looking around as if he expected somebody to appear out of the air and strike him down. "They were talking, one day when I arrived early, and I heard it."

"The name, Simmons!"

"The train ticket! You have to swear that I'll get the train ticket!"

"I swear! The name Simmons! Now!"

Simmons looked around, and wet his lips again. "It's... It is..."

My Dear Lords, Ladies & Gentlemen,

That was a nice piece of cliff hanging, don't you agree? One of my best so far, if I do say so myself! I'm quite proud of myself for my cliff hanging skills! ;-)
On another note - I would like to take this opportunity to address a certain subject which has recently come to my attention. Apparently, a number among you have recently been sending me messages on Wattpad, asking:

Are you a girl?

This query had been put to me by you, my fabulous fans, once in the past already, and back then I answered with a resounding negative. However, since then, I seem to have gained quite a lot more fans and followers, and the old rumor has come back with a vengeance! ;-)

It's really understandable, considering how very girlish I look, you know, with my charming feminine smile, my close-cropped hair, my three-day beard, and all my other aspects that make me look so incredibly female... ;D :D :D

But I'm afraid I have no choice but to disappoint you: I am, in fact, a guy (also known as bloke, male human, chap, or man).

Your (very, very male) Victorian storyteller

Sir Rob

P.S.: Really, I am a guy. You can believe me... ;-)

GLOSSARY:

Scimitar: A curved one-edged sword popular in the Orient from the Middle Ages to the nineteenth Century.

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