

39. Pink Espionage

Suddenly, Simmons shook his head. 287

"No, I don't want anybody else to hear it." 285

He threw a look at me and Karim. 286

What? Was he joking? I was on the tips of my toes here! 292

"I don't want him to find out. If he does..." 289

Quickly, he leant forward and whispered something in Mr Ambrose ear. 299

Blast the man! 288

I had been waiting breathlessly all this time for the solution of the mystery, and now I wasn't going to hear it? I wanted to clobber Simmons over the head with something heavy, especially when I saw Mr Ambrose's eyes lighting up in recognition. 297

"Him!" His hands were balled into fists again. "A er all this time, him!" 286K

For a moment, his eyes flickered to me – then they were back on Simmons. 287K

"Well," he said, almost as if speaking to himself, "at least now we know that the file is still in England. Hewouldn't dream of having to run and hide. He probably thinks himself untouchable." In a so er voice he added: "And who knows... He might be right." 284

Abruptly, he fixed his icy glare on Simmons. "You will not speak of this to anybody else, understand?" The threat was there, hard and cold in his voice. 285

Simmons's lips twitched. There was no humour about it. "Certainly not, Sir. I value my throat just as it is, without any decorative cuts or slashes in it." 282

"Very well." 287

Mr Ambrose rose and strode towards the cell door. 289

"What about my ticket?" Simmons called a er him. "When will I be released? I want to get out of here!" 287

Mr Ambrose stopped. Slowly, he turned. When he was facing the cell again, both Simmons and I couldn't help but gasp. He had a knife in his hand. 289

"No! Please don't!" Simmons croaked. "I've done everything you asked! Please..." 285

"Be quiet and hold still, man!" Mr Ambrose commanded. "I nearly forgot – there's something I still need from you." With two quick steps he was back at Simmons' side and grabbed him by the hair. The knife flashed in the darkness as it shot towards Simmons' head. 285

And then it was over, and Mr Ambrose's hand came away, holding a lock of blond hair he had severed from Simmons' head. 287K

"That was all." 288

I stared at him, incredulously. For once, Karim seemed to share my feelings. He was looking at Mr Ambrose as if he'd grown three additional heads. 284

Pointing to the blond lock in my employer's hand, I hissed: "What's that supposed to be? A memento?" 287

"In a way." 281

He turned away again, and said, without sparing neither me nor the ghost-white Simmons another glance: 283

"Somebody will be along to bring you a change of clothes soon. You can't be seen coming out of my building in the filthy rags you're in right now. The man will show you to the street and give you everything you need. Our business is concluded, Mr Simmons. Our paths will not cross again." 287

Without waiting for an answer, he strode out of the cell. Karim and I followed him, the former grim and silent, the latter, that is to say my good self, twitchy and curious to the point of madness. 285

"What did you do to him so that he'd spill the beans?" I blurted out as soon as the metal door had closed behind us. "And who was it that ordered him to spy on you? And why should anybody want to spy on you anyway?" 285

Mr Ambrose had already started up the corridor again. He didn't turn around or, God forbid, stop to let me catch up. 289

"Mind your own business, Mr Linton!" 283

"I work for you, so your business is my business. What's the point of someone spying on you?" 289

"It is commonly referred to as 'industrial espionage,' he called. Blast! That way of his to talk into the opposite direction of where you were standing was really annoying. "It means the stealing of secrets of one businessman by another businessman." 289

"What's that good for?" 281

"It's not only nation states that seek to discover each other's secrets. Secrets mean faster development and more money. Always remember: Knowledge is power is time is money!" 281K

I frowned. Something seemed to be wrong with that sentence. "I thought it's 'knowledge is power' and 'time is money'?" 284

"I combined the two to save time." 287K

"Oh." 289

I lapsed into silence again for a moment. But then I remembered. 287

"Wait! That wasn't my only question. I had others! You were trying to distract me." 289

"Oh yes. Karim's innovative torture methods." 283

That hadn't been the question at the top of my list, and I was about to tell him that actually I was more interested in the name of his mysterious enemy, but then... this was something I was pretty interested to hear, too. 287

"Tell her, Karim," Mr Ambrose commanded. 287K

God God! Did he just use a feminine pronoun to refer to me? Whoever is behind all this, hearing their name must really have gotten to him! 283

"Tell her?" The bearded mountain's eyes bugged. "Sahib You do not mean that!" 287

"Have I ever given an order that I have not meant?" 286

"No, Sahib but..." 289

"Have I ever fallen into the habit of joking or making other kinds of remarks that were not of a serious and literal nature?" 288

"I must admit, Sahib no, but in this case..." 283

"Tell he- I mean, tell him!" 281

Karim lowered his head. 289

"As you wish, Sahib" 285

With a few longer strides of his massive legs he had caught up to me and was marching next to me. I looked sideways. His face was trying for impassive, but I could see the wrath of seven hells burning under the surface. 281

"A er I failed in my attempt with the Chinese water-torture," he said in a voice that was supposed to be detached, "It came to me in a divine stroke of inspiration, that a less classical approach might be more effective. So I stripped Simmons of all his clothes including his undergarments, and threatened that if he would not divulge his information, I would drug him, dress him in a pink French ballet dancer's costume, and tie him to the fountain in Trafalgar Square for the crowd to discover in the morning." 281K

There were a few seconds of silence. 282

"He didn't seem to believe me at first. That's when I went out and bought a costume. I brought it back and showed it to him... and that broke him." 289

There were a few more seconds of silence. 287

"A... ballet costume?" I finally asked. 289

"Yes. Pink, with a short silk skirt, and golden lace trimmings." 288

"I see." 287

Cautiously, I looked sideways again and could see Karim's hand at his belt, gripping the hilt of his scimitar. His eyes found mine. "Come on," they seemed to say. "Laugh. Come on. I'm the one with the huge sabre. Laugh, and we'll see if you're still laughing when I have separated your head from your body." 283

"Um... a very interesting method indeed," I managed. I was fighting an epic battle to keep a straight face. Let me tell you, Waterloo was nothing to it. I might have lost it a er all, just like Napoleon, the poor chap, if a more serious thought invaded my mind, providing much needed reinforcements. 286

"You distracted me!" I exclaimed. "Again!" 287

"I?" Karim's stare changed from threatening abrupt death to confusion. "I didn't..." 281

"Not you! You!" I pointed at Mr Ambrose. He couldn't see it though, because he was still walking briskly ahead of us, his back to me. 287

"You've done it twice now! I want my first question answered! I want to know that name! Who was spying on you, damn you?" 289

He didn't stop, didn't answer. Just held up one admonishing finger in an abrupt movement. What the blooming hell... Oh, right. Be courteous. Be respectful. 289

"Who was spying on you, Sir?" I asked, my voice sweeter than a pot full of honey. 282

He didn't even glance around. 287

"Can't tell you that." 281

"Why the dickens not? Um... Sir?" 282

"It is for your own good, believe me." 286

Oh, of course I believe you. Why would I ever doubt a word that comes out of your mouth? 281

"Who is he? Who is this chap who's hiring people to spy on you?" 285

Mr Ambrose gave a snort. "I'm not sure that 'chap' would be the right noun to describe him." 282

"Well, what would describe him, then?" 287

He didn't fall for the trap. 287

"Adequate try, Mr Linton." 281

Not even good try? 283

"Why won't you tell me?" 284

I looked sideways at Karim again, but although he tried not to let it show, he was just as nonplussed as I was. He didn't know who this mystery man was either. And if Mr Ambrose motivations of not telling for our own good also applied to Karim.... 285

Eyeing the large sabre at the Mohammedan's belt, I shuddered. Who in the world could be a threat to Karim? Who could be more dangerous than a sabre-wielding bearded giant? Maybe I really shouldn't delve too deeply into this. Maybe it would be wise just to let it go. 288

But then again, when had I ever been wise? If I were, life would be so very dull. 287

"We could better guard against him if we knew who he was," I pointed out. 285

I could see he'd rather have bitten his tongue o , but Karim opened his mouth. 281

"She does," he said, in a slow tone of voice as if he had to drag every word forcibly from the pit of his stomach, "actually have a point, Sahib" 286K

"No, he doesn't." Mr Ambrose shook his head. 283

We turned a corner and suddenly stood before the door into the main hall again. There Mr Ambrose waited till we had caught up with him. He stood, silent and still as a statue, facing the door as if he could see images there that were invisible to anybody else. We stepped up beside him, but still, he didn't move. Karim, who obviously – unlike me – didn't have the intention of arguing with his master any more, felt the need to change the subject. He cleared his throat and asked: "Should I buy a ticket for Mr Simmons, Sahib?" 281

Mr Ambrose twitched, seeming to awake from a trance. 289

"What did you say?" 289

"The ticket for Mr Simmons. The train ticket out of London. Should I buy it, and give it to him when he leaves the building?" 285

There was one more moment of silence. Then, Mr Ambrose shook his head. "He will be dead within a day of leaving this building," he said matter-of-factly. "Corpses need no tickets." 283

I paled, and stared at him, wide-eyed. 286

"D-dead?" I stuttered. "But you said..." 284

"Oh, I won't kill him." He turned to look at me. There was a slightly different set to his mouth. If I didn't know that he didn't have such a thing as facial expressions, I would almost have said he looked... grim. "I won't need to. He told me the name of his employer." 289

"And?" 285

"And I know the man. Once he leaves this building, Simmons has only hours to live." He turned again, and opened the door. "So you see, there's no reason to waste perfectly good money." 281K

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My Dear Lords, Ladies & Gentlemen, 286

A few of my esteemed Indian readers have been asking me why Karim, who is, a er all, an Indian, speaks Arabic and not an Indian language. The answer is that, back in the 19th century, Pakistan was still part of India, and as the main intellectual and religious language, Arabic was, I believe, very widespread in Pakistan. Also, unless I'm mistaken, among the merry mix of languages which have their home in Pakistan, their do exist pockets of native Arabic-speaking people. I realize that languages such as Urdu or Punjabi are more common, but I decided to make my character an Arabic-speaker. 285

I truly hope that my explanation has satisfied you, my dear readers :-) 283

Yours truly 287

Sir Rob 281

Continue reading next part