

70. A Trace of Fire brings the Winter

When I awoke, I was slumped in the visitor's chair, my head resting on my shoulder. My eyes didn't want to open, but I knew where I was sitting without looking. No one in London except Mr Rikkard Ambrose owned a chair this hard and uncomfortable. A soft groan escaped my mouth.

"Ah. You are finally awake."

The voice was cool, and as distant as Timbuktu. I didn't need to open my eyes to recognize it, either.

"What... happened?" I moaned.

"You went to the bathroom to get your shoes. On the way back you stumbled and passed out. I believe you hit your head."

Slowly, memories started coming back. The memories he spoke of came first – but there were faint images of others, too. I had bumped my head? Some part of me did feel as if a bruise were likely to develop, but it wasn't the back of my head. Almost unconsciously, I reached up and touched my lips. They felt unusually warm and swollen.

Could one knock oneself out by falling on the mouth? I wasn't sure. And shouldn't I have knocked my teeth out in the process? I felt my jaw. All teeth were still firmly attached. But my lips... My lips felt different, somehow. Not really in a bad way. Tingly, and hot. If that's what keeling over did to you, maybe I should do it more often.

Mustering all my energy, I forced my eyes open. Mr Ambrose stood over me, looking even more like the statue of some Greek god for the fact that he was towering above me. Any moment I expected him to start throwing thunderbolts.

Touching my lips again, I met his gaze. For a moment, something in his eyes flashed, something that was gone so quickly that I had probably imagined it.

"Did... anything happen?" I mumbled. "Anything else?"

Not a muscle in his face moved. "Other than you falling and nearly cracking your head open on the floor, Mr Linton? No. I must inform you that if you wish to remain in my employ, you will in the future have to refrain from such eminently clumsy displays of clumsiness. I have no time for them. Do we understand each other?"

"Y-yes, Sir."

"Good. Then maybe you can finally leave now. I wish to have my office to myself. Your presence here is distracting."

I got to my feet. Apparently, the floor still wasn't interested in a peace treaty. It wobbled threateningly under my feet as I made my way to the door. Mr Ambrose, who walked beside me, though, didn't have any problems, which confirmed my suspicion: he had been in cahoots with the floor all along! They had worked together to do... something.

Yes, something had happened.

But what?

If I only I could remember. Yet the memory was just out of my reach.

Had they collaborated to knock me down? But why would they hit me on the lips to do so? Surely, it would have worked better if they had tried the back of my head. Besides... I couldn't believe that Mr Ambrose had anything to do with my silly accident. The yellow piggies would have warned me if they saw him sneaking up on me.

"You would have, wouldn't you?" I asked one of them, standing in the corner and playing with the long tails of Napoleon's army uniform. It nodded solemnly.

"What?" Mr Ambrose asked.

"I wasn't talking to you. Come on. I want to get out of here before the floor tries to eat me."

-.--.-*-*

The whole way down the stairs Mr Ambrose kept a tight hold on my elbow for some unfathomable reason. Only when we had arrived in the cavernous entrance hall did he let go of me. But when I started towards the front door, he shook his head.

"Not that way."

"But that's the way we came in, Sir."

"Still, it will not be the way we leave."

"Why not?"

He stared at me pointedly.

"Why not, Sir?" I amended, exasperated.

"Lord Dalgliesh is sure to have this place watched. It is of no matter whether his men saw us enter – but they must not see you leave. Not when your next stop is your family home, from which he might infer your true identity. Have you any idea what Lord Dalgliesh would give for the news that I have lowered myself to employing a female as my private secretary?"

"You think he'd be interested?" I asked, curiously.

"Interested too mild a word for it. Come."

He led me straight across the hall, past the receptionist's desk and towards a large door at the back of the vast room. Though it was only illuminated by the scant moonlight that filtered in through the narrow windows, the hall was behind us in a matter of seconds. He seemed to know his way around perfectly, and never reduced the pace of his long, rapid strides. The door where we ended up was large and double-winged, almost as impressive as the entrance. I wondered what you needed such a large door for inside a building. The question was answered only a second later when the double-door swung open and revealed what lay beyond.

"Bloody...!"

We stood at the entrance to a large courtyard, surrounded by high, Doric columns which gave the yard a stark appearance in the cold moonlight. Under a portico at the far end of the yard stood Mr Ambrose's chaise, the grey beast of a horse already attached to it by an assortment of leather straps I didn't care to know the names of. A driver already sat waiting upon the box.

"Mr Ambrose!" A portly little man with a reddish nose came hurrying forward, wearing an anxious expression and a uniform-like tailcoat on which several buttons were missing. Mr Ambrose's night porter, I deduced. Only Mr Ambrose would be stingy enough not to replace missing buttons on his employees' uniforms.

"I'm honoured, Mr Ambrose, so very honoured." The little man bowed, and then bowed a second time for good measure. "So honoured that you would come down to give me your orders personally, Sir, I can hardly—"

"Yes, yes, you said that when I came down earlier," Mr Ambrose cut him short. The porter swallowed and froze in the midst of his third bow. It was obvious he had taken the night shift in the hope of never ever coming across his formidable employer – and now his worst nightmares had been realized.

"Is all ready?"

"The coach is prepared, Sir, all is prepared, Mr Ambrose, Sir. I have seen to everything myself. The horse has been watered and fed, the coachman awaits your orders, Sir, Mr Ambrose, Sir."

"Adequate. And where is Mr Linton's tailcoat?"

The porter paled.

"I... I don't know that it's dry yet, Sir. I will have to go and check."

"Then do so. Now!"

"Of course, Sir, of course. I shall go immediately. Just you wait, Sir, I shall run like the wind, Mr Ambrose, Sir!"

And he was off, as if the hounds of hell were after him, or maybe even Patsy swinging and jabbing him with her umbrella.

Mr Ambrose strode over to wait beside the carriage, and I followed him. There was something weighing on my mind. To be honest, there were several things weighing on my mind, all of which were feeling distinctly unpleasant and started giving me a headache. But this particular thing was weighing even weightier than the other weighty weights.

I gathered all my strength to speak.

"Um... Mr Ambrose?" My voice sounded slurred, even to my own ears.

"Yes, Mr Linton?"

"I have a question, Sir."

"Indeed."

I waited, but he didn't say anything. Then I remembered that I hadn't actually asked the question yet. By Jove, I was a tiny bit confused tonight, wasn't I?

I cleared my throat.

"Are you... are you sure that nothing else happened? Up there in your office? Nothing else but me passing out?"

He hesitated. I saw his hand tighten around the walking stick that concealed his sword. His lips parted.

"I..."

"Here, Mr Ambrose, Sir!" Like a fat little ball of lightning, the porter shot around the corner, and I mentally cursed the man and all his descendants to the seventh generation. Or maybe the eighth. "Here is the gentleman's tailcoat! Dried and cleaned as requested!"

Although it was my tailcoat he carried, he handed it to Mr Ambrose, an action that didn't endear him to me any more than his sudden appearance had. I added a few curses for the ninth and tenth generation. They probably more than deserved it. And I was sure my good friend Napoleon would see to it that they were adequately tortured if I asked him.

Mr Ambrose nodded to the man.

"You're dismissed. Take up your post again."

"Yes, Sir! Immediately, Sir!"

Emitting relief like a beacon did light, the man hurried off, and Mr Ambrose held out my tailcoat to me.

"Here."

"About what I said," I tried to return to the earlier subject. "About what happened up there in your office... I'm pretty sure I can remember something about you and me—"

I didn't get any farther than that. Suddenly, I was cut off by a violent hiss. Mr Ambrose's fingers had clenched into the material of the tailcoat, around a lengthy tear in the black cloth. He stared at the damaged garment with eyes like icicles.

"Look at this," he told me, his voice matching the coldness of his eyes. "Look at this, Mr Linton. Now!"

Uncomprehendingly, I stared at the tear in the coat.

"Yes? I see it. And? I must have ripped it somewhere. Maybe on a nail or something like that."

"That's no tear," he interrupted me with deadly calm. "Do you not see that the whole is round? Do you not see the blackened edges of the cloth where it is ripped open? Those are gunpowder stains!"

My fuzzy brain tried to grasp the meaning of his words. It needn't have bothered. Stepping so close to me that our faces were almost touching and I could see the darkness of his eyes, Mr Ambrose told me:

"A bullet grazed you and ripped your coat open! Another inch and it would have buried itself in your flesh!"

The way he said your flesh sent shivers down my back. Shivers of fear, anger and... something else I couldn't quite grasp.

He wasn't shivering, though. He was colder and harder than I had ever seen him.

"You could have died." He seemed to be speaking to nobody in particular. His icy eyes were staring right through me. "You really could have died." They were looking so far into the distance, those eyes of his—as if he was seeing some other world, another reality altogether. Suddenly, they refocused on me again, and he thrust the tailcoat into my arms.

"Here. Let it be a reminder, Mr Linton."

I staggered back, clutching the coat in my arms.

"A reminder of what?"

His hands, empty of cloth now, once again curled tightly around the handle of his hidden sword. "A reminder to never, ever cease to be careful!"

He turned towards the chaise and started towards it.

"You're right." I swallowed. Somewhere on a piece of my consciousness was hovering the knowledge that a blade of lead could have buried itself in me tonight. But my mind was so exhausted, it wasn't quite ready to let that realization in. Not yet. Hurriedly, I started to follow him. "Now... about that thing in your office... I could swear that you—"

"Nothing happened in the office." His voice cut through the air like a blade of ice. Without looking back at me, he swung himself into the carriage and slammed the door shut behind him. "You fell, you hit your head, no more. Nothing happened. Nothing at all. Let's go!"

I wish a good morning to you, my dear Lords, Ladies and Gentlemen! :-)

I'd like to extend a great big "thank you" to all of my fabulous fans! Ever since I requested in my last author's note that you follow me on Twitter, more than seven-hundred among you have been kind enough to do as I requested, and have signed up in to prepare for the coming contest! With so many people following behind me, I shall have to avoid small buildings, or they'll be filled up by the humongous crowd of Wattlepadders following a er me! :-)

Yet regarding Twitter followers, I fear we're still quite a bit behind our competition right now. What do you think? Can we gather sufficient support to catch up to the other authors and help our dear Lilly & Mr Ambrose emerge victorious from the Wattys 2015?

Since I'm not as stingy as our beloved stone-faced business-mogul, there will be some extra enticements. And no, I'm not talking about boxes full of solid chocolate :-) I will have something far better in store for you:

- Exclusive teasers for the next installments of Storm and Silence

- A big contest (the details of which will soon be announced)!

So, please follow my Twitter profile TheSirRob or the brand-new fan account StormSilence on Twitter, or Mr Ambrose will make you work overtime for a month!

Hm... I now realize that might not have been worded like a real threat, rather like a promise :-)

Anyway, regardless of how one may interpret it, I remain,

Yours Truly,

Sir Rob

GLOSSARY:

Doric Columns: On buildings with classical Greek, Roman or neo-classical architecture, there are three kinds of columns. Doric columns are simple, straight and austere, Ionic columns are curly-twirly, and Corinthian columns are extremely curly-twirly. Guess which ones are Mr Ambrose's favourite?

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