

88. Danger! Explosive Cargo!

My finger froze in mid-movement. Outside, I could hear footsteps passing the door of our room. Lord Dalgliesh and his cronies had heard nothing, were not coming to investigate. But right now, I couldn't have cared less what they did or did not do. Turning my head to get my face out of the wood wool, I looked up, but saw only darkness. Mr Ambrose must have pulled the lid of the crate shut over us.

Mr Ambrose, who at present was lying right on top of me!

No! Don't think about it! That's not Mr Ambrose on top of you! I can't believe it's a sack of coals, or potatoes, or...

His cool breath tickled my cheek. He moved, in a way no sack of potatoes could ever move. A sack of potatoes wasn't as hard as this. A sack of potatoes didn't have muscles which, even through the fabric between us, pressed forcefully into me. A sack of potatoes most certainly couldn't make me shiver all over like this!

It's the cold! screamed at myself... You're shivering because it's cold in here! That's all!

But even though it was freezing inside the crate, I didn't feel cold all of a sudden. I had before, while wandering through the damp, dark passageways of the Nemesis. But now, heat was spreading throughout my body. It came from a place deep inside me and climbed upwards, and upwards until it finally reached my face. Why did my cheeks not light up the crate from inside? They were burning like fire!

Something brushed against my cheek, and my whole body twitched. I could feel him move against me, shivering...

No! Don't think! Don't imagine!

"Mr Linton?" The voice above me was as cool as the winter wind.

"Your finger. My ear. Remove. Now, if you please."

My lips moved aimlessly, in search of something to say. Finally, I struck on an intriguing fact that was worth spelling out.

"You said 'if you please,'" I whispered, incredulously. "That's almost as bad as 'please' or 'thank you.' Since when do you have the time to spare for civilities?"

He moved closer. I couldn't see a thing, but I felt it. His face was only inches away from mine now, his mouth at my ear.

"At present," he breathed, "I find myself with free time at my disposal. At least until Dalgliesh is far enough away for us to get out of here."

With my left ear, I could still hear the murmur of voices from the next room. Lord Dalgliesh's orders to his soldiers. But all my attention was reserved for my right ear – the one which was only separated by a finger's breadth from Mr Ambrose's lips.

"But you are right," he continued. "One should never deviate from one's principles. Take your finger out of my ear at once!"

My hand jerked away from his ear, touching something so in the process. A strand of his hair, maybe?

Don't think! Don't think about the fact that he's lying right on top of you! Just don't think!

"Very good," Mr Ambrose said into my ear, his voice still cold and controlled. Didn't he care that we were... that he was practically...?

"Now be still until they have concluded their business and gone. It shouldn't take long. Then we can continue with our mission here."

He sounded as if he were sitting in his office chair, giving me orders about which file to bring next. But of course he wasn't sitting in his chair. He was lying. Lying on top of...

No! Don't think!

I swallowed. "Very good, Sir."

Just as he had said, footsteps soon left the room next door. They came closer.

"Now," he whispered. "Not a word until they have gone."

I held my breath.

And then, the footsteps stopped outside, right in front of the room in which we were hidden.

"What should we do with this sack, My Lord?" I heard one of the soldiers' muffled voices.

"See if there's still room in that room, and put it there."

"Aye, My Lord."

"That room? They didn't mean... they couldn't mean that room, surely?"

A moment later, my silent question was answered by the creek of the door as it swung wide open. Hell's whiskeys! They were inside, separated from us only by an inch or so of flimsy wood! I pressed my face into Mr Ambrose chest to keep from screaming. My nerves were stretched to breaking point.

And then, something happened which I would never have believed possible in a million years:

Mr Ambrose put his arms around me.

He didn't say anything, didn't try to lie to me, saying that it was going to be all right, or that we were sure to get out of this alive. He just put his arms around me and held me, close to his chest, in a way no man ever had dare to do before.

I inhaled the clean scent of him – the clean scent of soap, simple soap, with a hint of something musky I couldn't identify. Maybe his own odour – or maybe the smell of too much money. Whatever it was, it was oddly comforting.

How could a smell be comforting? How could it feel so good for a strong, independent girl like me to be held in the arms of a man? This man, whom I hardly knew, and from whom I only wanted nothing more than a paycheck every month? Why would it make me feel warm and safe to be in his arms?

Memories began to well up inside me, memories long repressed and half forgotten, of a night at Empire House, and of the same man, doing much the same thing, and a lot more besides. Hard arms around me, hot lips on mine, heat rising inside me...

I tensed in anticipation as I felt his hands move up and cup the side of my face.

"Silence," he whispered into my ear in a voice so cool and so it felt like the caress of a snowflake. "Simply silence. They must not hear a thing."

You see? yelled at myself. He's simply doing this to keep you quiet! Be sensible. Don't dare to imagine there's anything else behind it!

His hand began gently stroking my face, so as the first snow of winter falling on rose petals.

Oh God...

Don't think. Don't move, don't feel. Then, maybe, you can make it through this without contemplating who is just now pressing you to his chest as if you were his heart's desire! Don't think! Don't think!

I forced myself to freeze, to sit on into an unresponsive block of wood, as dead as the wood wool beneath me. I forced my ears to concentrate not on the breathing right above me, not on the hyperactive thumping of my own heart, but on the voices outside.

And it was as well I did so, considering what came next.

"Hear, your Lordship?"

"Yes, Exactly."

I heard a dull, metallic thud as something heavy was dropped on the floor outside.

"Very well," Lord Dalgliesh's voice, muffled by the wall of wood between us, came from somewhere to my left. "I will go and instruct the Captain about our course. You men check that everything is secure and then take up your posts. Understood?"

"Aye, Your Lordship."

There came several sharp clacks, and I realized the soldiers were snapping their heels together, and saluting. Footsteps left the room.

No! Don't go! You're the only thing that keeps me distracted from Mr Ambrose – from the someone who can't think about, but who holds me in his arms, so strong, hard, unyielding! Don't go, my dear, deadly enemies! I need you!

The hand on my cheek slowly wandered downwards, over my neck, down my spine, to the small of my back. The man whose name I couldn't think pressed me closer against him. If only I were not totally daft around us – the business robes me of any distractions, made touch the only sense I had and intensified it a thousand fold. I could feel every breath he took, every tiny movement he made against me.

He doesn't mean anything by it! He's only doing this to keep you calm, to keep you from screaming, to keep you from acting as he thinks every silly girl who meddles in men's affairs would act! Keep it together! He doesn't care about you!

I knew it was true, every part of it. Yet the longer he held me, the harder it was to believe.

"It won't be long now." His voice at my ear was still as steady as stone – so cold and hard it sent another shiver down my back. "Be still for a little longer... just a little longer..."

How could his voice be so distant while his hands were so gentle? It was a mystery to me – a mystery that tore at my heart.

Suddenly, right when my heart was torn about half way down the middle, I heard movement from outside. The soldiers still weren't gone. Only Lord Dalgliesh had left.

"Think! Distract yourself! What could they be doing? Probably they are checking the room, making sure that nothing has been disturbed, like Dalgliesh said."

"Soon, My Lord, soon." Mr Ambrose's voice was still just as low, just as cold as before. "Soon they will be gone."

Suddenly, a voice boomed, only a few feet away:

"Ey, look! This crate ain't shut right!"

Above me, Mr Ambrose stepped. His hand froze at my cheek. "Well, then, what are ye waiting for? 'ere!"

We heard a clinking sound. Only a second later, the crate shuddered under a series of heavy blows – the blows of the hammer which was rapping shut the lid. It took a few moments for the icy realization to flood through me: I was trapped. And, what was far worse, I was trapped with him on top of me!

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The moment the soldiers had left, shutting the door behind them, Mr Ambrose's arms unwound from around me.

"They're gone, Mr Linton. You have my official permission to scream hysterically, now."

"What?" I stared up at him, incredulously, although I was actually not able to see anything of him except a vague outline in the darkness.

"I don't have the time to listen, though, I'm afraid," he continued, rising a few inches above me. "I have to get this lid open."

At his words, my heart ripped the last few inches and fell apart.

You knew this was going to happen? yelled at myself. You knew he was only trying to keep you quiet. So don't you complain now! You had better get cracking on the problem of how to crack open this infernal crate!

However, Mr Ambrose was already on it. Having lost all interest in me – if he ever had any – he had risen up with his back and was pushing against the lid of the crate. I could see him straining against it in the faint light that fell in troughs a crack in the crate wall. Yet space was even sparser here than light. He could hardly rise a few inches above me, let alone get any leverage.

I could feel his muscles bunch and loosen, bunch and loosen. Bilem! He didn't look that much racked in his straight-cut black tailcoat, but he had plenty of power tucked away under that simple, smooth black cloth.

My legs knees screamed under pressure he was putting on them, but I didn't care. I was too busy trying to ignore the pressure he was putting on certain other parts of my body, parts which were much more intimate than knees.

"It won't move," a bizzard-like growl came from above me. "Brace yourself, Mr Linton. I'll have to get a little more... forceful."

"You'll shatter my kneecaps if you're any more forceful!" protested. I shied hastily, trying to get out from under him, but my elbows hit something hard on either side.

"Don't move!" He commanded. "There's hardly enough room for us here. If you try to get out from under me, we'll end up in a tangle and will never get out of here."

I had a mental picture of me, eternally entangled with Mr Ambrose. I swallowed, hard.

"Very well, Sir. But what will we do?"

"I'll soon have to push my knees past you, so they won't press down on you when I push. Is there a little space on either side of you further down? Test with your feet."

"Yes, there's room there."

"Well, that solves the problem. Spread your legs for me."

For a few moments, silence filled the small, black space inside the crate. Utter, complete, silence.

"What?" I asked, very slowly and deliberately. "did you say?"

"I said 'spread your legs.' I was sounded surprised that I hadn't understood, and slightly irked that I hadn't immediately done as he commanded. "Go on, it's not that difficult. The leg to the left, the right leg to the right."

"I know what 'spread your legs' means!"

"Well, then there's no problem, is there? Hurry up, Mr Linton, we haven't got all night."

Now, let me clarify: I didn't know all too much about what went on between men and women behind locked doors. My aunt had never been very specific on the subject of sexual congress, and the one time I had asked her, she nearly bit my head off and told me ladies did not talk about such lowly matters. But I did at least know enough to realize that spreading your legs was not something you did for a man, especially if this man was not married to you, not interested in you, and was stuck with you in a crate full of wood wool inside a steel warship on the way to God only knows where!

And he was so close... so terribly close! If he came even closer to me now, pressed to the very centre of my body, he did not know what would happen. I was afraid a lot might happen. I was even more afraid that nothing would happen at all.

"Mr Linton? I am waiting."

Slowly, torturously slowly, I slid my legs apart. I could feel his hard thighs pressing against the insides of mine, forcing their way into the opening until they rested solidly there, in my midst.

"That feels better," Mr Ambrose said, contentedly. "Now we should be able to get going."

Switch to your imagination, Lilly! Switch to your imagination now!

A moment later, I heard a dull thud as his shoulders collided with the lid of the crate with the force of a rampaging bull. Again and again, he struck out, upward and forward, making the crate rock violently, and needless to say, myself along with it.

There followed a few moments of panting and hammering in the dark. Finally, his attacks ceased, and he collapsed on top of me, his breathing hard.

"This is quite vexing, Mr Linton. I cannot get the infernal thing to budge."

I had trouble finding my voice to answer him. My mind was in a hot, foggy place very far away.

"Err... the thing? What? What, Sir?"

"The lid of course, Mr Linton. Stay focused."

His hard muscles digging into me... his laboured breathing right above me, only inches away...

"Focused... Focused, of course, Sir!"

"What is the matter with you? You're sweating, and shivering all over. Are you ill?"

His hips bucking into me... his breath hot on my overheated skin... "N-no, Sir. I simply find it rather hot in here. Don't you, Sir?"

"To be absolutely accurate, I could not care less about the climatic conditions in here, Mr Linton. We have to get that lid open."

"Why are you in such a hurry?" My voice sounded rather dreamy. Well, I felt rather dreamy. The last few minutes had been an... well, let us call it an "interesting experience".

"Don't you see? Mr Linton, if we do not get the crate open, the ship might sail with us on board, and we would be stuck in here together until we reach our destination!"

I gazed up at the dark shape of the man above me. My eyes had grown used to the gloom by now, and I could make out his classical Greek profile, his strong arms and his dark, dark, sea-coloured eyes.

"And that would be bad because...?"

There was a pause.

"Mr Linton?"

"Yes, Sir?"

"I order you to focus!"

"Yes, Sir!"

"We must leave this crate before the ship leaves the harbour."

"Yes, Sir! As you say, Sir!"

It was in this moment that the ship shuddered, and we heard the steam engine start with a deep, menacing rumble. Slowly, very slowly, the ship started moving forward.

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It was as if Mr Ambrose were a puppet and somebody had put his strings. The last tension that had held his panting body upright went out of him, and he collapsed on top of me, a hundred and seventy pounds of solid bone and muscle slamming me back into the wood wool. His heart was hammering like a deranged woodpecker against my chest, and his weight was almost keeping me from breathing.

But he wasn't too heavy. Oh no. The words 'too heavy' would have implied I wanted him to get on me. And I didn't want that. How could I? How could I wish him farther away, now that his cheek rested against mine, and his mouth was so close, almost close enough to kiss...

Except that you don't want to kiss him, right? Because you're a su rgeonette, and he's a chauvinist, and you would never want to do with him! You would, for instance, not want to layour head the few inches that separate you and so you press your lips on his, caressing, comforting...

No, I definitely didn't want to do that. I would never even think of it. Oh, well, maybe I would think of it a little.

Unbidden, images attacked me out of the dark. And because of the dark, I had no other images to dispel them. They were images of me and Mr Ambrose in his office, clutched in a passionate embrace. They were images of me practically tackling him and throwing him over backwards. They were images of me wanting. Wanting him. Not just his stern lips, or his granite face, or his deep, dark eyes, but every part of him.

Lies! All lies! That was a dream. An alcoholic fantasy, like Napoleon and the little yellow piggies, nothing more.

Yet the storm of images in my head didn't want to be quieted. It expanded, roaring, and feeding on my anxiety and desperation, until it had finally reached my heart. There, it found fresh strength in the secret recesses of my soul, and turned into a hurricane which swept me along, unable to resist.

My head inclined up, my lips moving closer to his.

Mr Ambrose still lay heavily on me, his breathing unsteady. He didn't seem to notice my movement at all. I hesitated. What was I doing? Yes, the images in my memory seemed real enough, but could I really trust them? Mr Ambrose had been cold as an iceberg during the entire time we were shut in here. Even when he held me in his arms, it was not for my sake, it was only to keep me from giving away our presence. Could somebody who was this cold really want me?

And an even better question: supposing he wanted me, did that mean that I should want him? My feminine dignity raised her head and shook it firmly. No. He was the kind of man whom, indeed, I should never even contemplate to want.

My mouth was only a hair's breadth away from his now. I could feel the gentle breeze of his breath caressing my lips. It was such an achingly pleasurable feeling.

I didn't dare to move, frozen in indecision.

And then, he spoke. They were just four words, four little words. But they shook the foundation of my world.

"I am so tired." His head slid to the side, away from mine, to come to rest on my chest. "I am so tired, Mr Linton."

He didn't seem to realize, or care, on what delicate part of my body his cheek now rested. At least I hoped for his sake he hadn't realized, because if he had, I'd slap him from here to Honolulu.

But any thoughts of aggression I'd had went out of me as I caught sight of his chiselled face in the half-light. He looked tired. More than tired, in fact – exhausted. There weren't any lines on his perfect face, nothing visible that spoke of exhaustion. There was only the slackness of his normally so stern, hard features.

It was an instinctive decision, born of all the strange, unfamiliar emotions raging in my innermost self. I raised my arms, and put them around him. He stiffened for a moment, but then relaxed into me. He did not push me away. What did that mean? Did it mean anything?

My mouth felt bone-dry. I licked my lips, and tried desperately to think of something to say.

"What happens now?" I asked, so lightly.

His answer was a long time coming.

"We stay here, shut in this crate, until we reach our destination, Mr Linton."

"You're still calling me 'Mr Linton' while you have your face pressed into my pair of Cupid's kettle drums? You have a problem with reality, mister!"

"I know that, Sir. And then?"

"That depends on the circumstances."

"Could you elaborate, Sir?"

"I do not feel very communicative at present, Mr Linton."

"When do you ever, Sir?"

"Adequate point, Mr Linton."

Somehow, I thought I could feel some life seeping back into him. Was it only my imagination, or was there a bit of dry humour in his voice? I had to keep talking – if only to keep myself from thinking too closely about what part of me his nose was currently pressing into.

"So, what will happen, Sir?"

"Either the crate is opened by a single soldier, or unarmed worker – in which case, we will overpower him and try to make our escape, or it is opened in the presence of Lord Dalgliesh – in which case, we die."

"Oh..."

"Bravely, of course."

"Certainly, Sir."

"At least well. You, of course, have my permission to die, with the Mr Linton." The unspoken words "You are a girl, a real, a woman in front of me. I didn't feel as much like kissing him as I had a moment ago. Withdrawing my arms from around him, I crossed them in front of my chest, shoving him away. My elbow might have grazed his cheek in the process, purely accidentally."

"No, thank you!" I growled. "I'll go for the brave option, if you don't mind, Sir."

His words echoed in my head. In which case, we die... in which case, we die...

A shiver ran down my spine, half born of fear, half of... wanting? Not wanting to die, of course. No, I was shivering because I wanted something else entirely – or rather, someone.

If I was going to die anyway, what was the sense in resisting? The silence expanded around the two of us, and in the stillness and the dark I felt him stronger than ever before. If we were going to die, what was the sense in my keeping my self-esteem? My dignity? Dignity was no good to a corpse. But to spend the last few hours of my life in the arms of another human being, warm and comforting...

Except that he isn't warm. He's cold as ice. He feels nothing for you. And you should not feel anything for him. You can't!

Suddenly, it came. The first wave was almost imperceptible, a gentle swell that hardly moved us, cushioned as we were by the wood wool. But then came another, and another. The rocking intensified. My breath hitched, as I could feel his body press into mine, and draw back. Press down, draw back, press down, draw back.

"What is that?" I asked, my voice sounding strange in my own ears.

"The sea," he said, cool and resigned. "We have left the Thames and are now out in the Channel."

Blast it!

I never liked that damned piece of sea! Why couldn't England be part of the Continent, like every other decent European country? It was simply not fair, the tortures that were inflicted on poor people trying to cross the Channel stacked on top of each other in a small wooden crate!

The motion of the waves grew ever stronger, pressing me against Mr Ambrose with a devilish, regular rhythm. Bilem! I brimmed in my ears, and my breathing became laboured.

"Mr Linton?"

"Y-yes, Sir?"

"Are you sure you do not suffer from fever? Your skin is getting hot again."

"No, Sir, it's perfectly fine."

Desperately, I grasped around for something to talk about, something to distract me, so I would not succumb. But there was nothing. Nothing I wanted to say, or do, or know...

Wait a moment. That wasn't strictly true. There was something I wanted to know. Something I wanted to know badly enough to even drive thoughts of Mr Ambrose from my mind for a few precious moments.

"Mr Ambrose, Sir?" My voice was unsteady.

He turned his head towards me without uttering a word. It from my chest, I could feel his chin press into my shoulder.

"Yes, Mr Linton?"

I could feel the breath of his words on my face, smell his smell of rough soap and too much money. What had I been about to ask again? And was it really that important...? I could just lean surrender and...

No!

"I just wondered, Sir... the centre of the wood, what is it? I mean, if we are going to die in any event, you can tell me, right?"

Silence. Silence and darkness. The only other thing existing was the feeling of his closeness: omnipresent, omnipotent, omniconvenient.

Damn him! Why wouldn't he tell me even now? What could be so important that he wouldn't divulge it even at the brink of my and his own destruction?

"Tell me!"

Nothing but silence. I could feel myself yielding, feel my arms snaking around him again, my lips moving closer to his. What did it matter if I betrayed my principles? What would it matter if he pushed me back, laughed at me, mocked me? At least I would get to taste his lips again. Nobody would ever know.

Wrong. You would know. You would regret.

Still, my lips moved ever closer to their destination. I could feel his breath on my tongue now, so close was I.

"Tell me!" I whispered in a last, desperate attempt to distract myself, though at this point I wasn't sure that even the long-sought mystery of the centre of the world would hold me back. "Please. Don't people who are condemned to death usually get a last wish before they die? Well, I have one.

Kiss me.

Not.

"Tell me. Please. Tell me what the file I'm going to die for is about."

A shudder went through his still form.

"You want to know what the file contains?" Some part of me manifested how he managed to keep his voice calm and controlled, even at such a moment as this. "You want to know what the centre of the world is, Mr Linton? Fine! I'll tell you..."

My dear Lords, Ladies & Gentlemen,

The time for the big challenge has arrived! Lily & Mr Ambrose are in urgent need of your help!

Why? Because the Storm and Silence publishing campaign has officially begun!

Yes, you heard right: Your chance has arrived to help with getting Lily & Mr Rickard Ambrose's big adventure published as an actual book! From this day forward, you've got exactly one month to contribute to the crowdfunding campaign or tell other people about it, until we reach the ultimate goal of 700 US Dollars. Then, Storm and Silence will be ported both as a an ebook and a printed book! :-)