

The boxes arrive screaming. Not aloud; the sound is inside her head, a nail against her skull. Karolina learned long ago the screams aren't real. Whenever she'd ask a colleague, *Do you hear that?* they'd always answer, *Hear what?*

So Karolina stopped asking questions.

Two boxes this time. Sealed metal containers she always thought looked too much like coffins, save the metal grills for ventilation. As loaders heave the boxes off the hackney wagon and into thin early-autumn snow—"A-one, a-two, push!"—Karolina takes a drag of her cigarette and ignores the screams scraping her skull. Thick-furred horses whinny, stomp. Another drag. After the boxes are shoved onto the train floor—"Again: a-one, a-two, push!"—it's almost quiet. Almost peaceful.

Karolina Guzik, conductor for the Arborean Railway Network, watches her town of Heilung breathe chimney smoke into polar twilight. Grey houses blend with the sky like dirt with melting snow. Spellcrafted lights shine pale blue from lanterns, flickering softly. Anaemic little stars.

Heilung wasn't always her town, and she doesn't know for how long it'll remain so. ARN workers can expect frequent transfers, and the Bureau is fickle. Perhaps somewhere southern. Somewhere with—oh, she can barely recall—leafy trees, vineyards, riverside beaches. That'd be nice.

The left-hand box thuds from within. The right-hand one ululates.

She tosses the cindering cigarette onto pavement and stomps. Who is she kidding? She's here for life.

A man in black hops off the wagon to greet her, paper bag in hand. His name is not for Karolina to know, but it's a small town, so she does.

Unwanted knowledge is best ignored.

"Fine evening, Guzik," the man says. He has a voice like an off-tune violin.

"If you say so."

He shoves the paper bag into her hands. She looks inside: a bottle

of cognac, chocolate, and a box of tea. Featureless packaging, so it must be confiscated import. Entirely too expensive for her effort.

She gestures to the coffin boxes. "What's wrong with the delivery?" "Nothing." The man grins. "All secure, go check if you like."

Karolina narrows her gaze. Clicks her lips, irritated.

This man takes joy in irritating and disquieting others. He leers, his eyes bulging like those of an inbred dog.

He jerks his head to the right-hand box. "With eleven, you've got nothing to worry about. Twelve, though." To the left-hand one. "Twelve's rowdy. Or so I'm told."

Behind the man's back, three figures huddle in shadow, having also left the wagon. These people, Karolina truthfully doesn't know. They're above the likes of her, and she takes care not to pay too much attention. Now, though, when that box the man called "twelve" isn't screaming anymore; when it's gone awfully quiet save the scraping; the long, screeching scraping of something hard against metal—now, though.

"...should've placed that spellcraft. It's not that expensive, and—"

"The sedatives will do. Otherwise, twelve will die by the time it reaches Bluthagen."

"Well maybe it should."

The first voice, neurotic, like a smoker that's quitting. The second, frigid, unshakable, ice on the Northern Sea.

A third chimes in, sweet and hissing:

"Yes-yes, but this is all moot. If it were up to me, it'd be incineration. But—"

The cold one: "Absolutely not. If we're to understand the cause—"

"Oh shut up!" the sweet one snaps. "It's your mess I'm sweeping. You assured us your selection system was foolproof—*again*—did you not?"

The neurotic one chuckles spasmodically. "Course it is. Everything she does is foolproof until it isn't."

"This is moot, I said. We have our commission. It's not our problem anymore."

A hand seizes Karolina's wrist. Her leather gloves rasp as the grip

constricts, fingers pushing into fine bones, squeezing the joint. In the cold, her limb numbs very quickly.

The man's breath is searing and foul on her cheek.

"I like you, Guzik. You're incurious."

She can't feel her fingers.

"You want me to keep liking you. Don't you?"

The gilded badge on his coat catches a lamppost's blue false light and glints. Bright. Hurtful.

She must not forget she's here for life. Likely, so is he.

"I'm set to leave in six minutes," she says. "Let me go."

He doesn't, of course, not for a few moments. Says something else, something vicious. Karolina lets her mind drift, subsumed by that scraping. It's grown slower. Quieter.

When the man and the figures hop back into the hackney wagon, none tell the driver to leave. They watch Karolina, all four made into dark outlines by the lamppost's harsh shadow, spectres with dim and dull eyes. They watch her walk along the train, check its alignment. Or rather pretend to—it doesn't truly matter whether the train is in order. Unless it's catastrophically broken, she will signal the locomotive driver to start the engine, and she'll board the caboose at the end. Her course of action is already determined and dictated. As it usually is.

When she passes the carriage with coffin boxes, she notices the scraping has stopped altogether. The ululation's gone quiet too. But there is now a pressure. A strange aura of heat, spilling over Karolina through the carriage's rusted metal; sweat breaks out all over her body. Except she hears no crackling flame, no breaking of pistons.

She shoves the door open. Even through the glove, the metal almost scorches.

Inside, the freight carriage is dark. Empty but for two boxes. She's not sure whether they're in the same place as the loaders left them, but nothing else seems amiss. The latches look firmly shut, at least to her eyes. And the engine isn't burning yet; no glyphs of spellcraft here, either. Nothing that could've caused a malfunction.

The temperature must be just her age, surely. A hot flash. During

her routine citizen evaluation, the physician told Karolina this would happen eventually.

Pressure encases her skull. A restlessness spreads through her mind like blood in water. Aches ignite in her joints, as if she hasn't moved in days.

COMPLICIT.

It is her thought. Her voice. But the cadence is someone else's. Someone completely unfamiliar to her.

ALL OF YOU ARE COMPLICIT.

Why did Karolina ever file that complaint? Yes, seamanship was lonely; yes, it was cold—always so cold. But it was the place the Bureau deemed worthy of her. Her place in the Authority's design. But no, she had to wag her tongue about it. Had to ask for something she thought preferable, safer, had to be so arrogant as to presume she knew what was best.

The freight carriage remains still and dark. Silent.

Karolina slides the door shut. This is the last carriage before the caboose; her inspection is almost done.

Even as a small part of her hopes for it, no catastrophic failure is found. It never is. Karolina raises an *all clear*, and the train's klaxon answers.

The hackney wagon's horses neigh as the whip spurs them into motion. The wheels leave a deep trail, stark and visible for now, but snow will swallow it by the time the sun remembers to rise in late morning. In a few brief moments, narrow streets hide the wagon in their bowel-like twists. As far as Karolina's concerned it was never here to begin with.

She steps inside the caboose as the train lurches, set on its inexorable way south. The spellcrafted chandelier ignites above her, and with that comes a sense of comfort, routine, repetition. The magic works as it should; the train departs as it should. All does as it should.

That is the difference between working with ships and trains, Karolina thinks. Ships are always at the whims of nature. Even the greatest icebreaker is only ever bobbing on fickle waves, at least a

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little scared it might sink. The railway, once constructed, is not unlike the Authority.

Constant.