

Transhumance

The only man left inside the train grinned as the machine roared back to life. After two hours, they finally managed to resuscitate the engine. He didn't mind. While the other passengers explored the market town he was perfectly content staying inside, where he could observe from the comfort and security of his little sleeping cabin.

He glimpsed from behind the curtains, his window just above the outdated font that read "Edelweiss Express: Hallein. Kaprun. Heiligenblut". In the forefront of snow-capped mountains, vibrant flowers spilled over wooden balconies, and the atmosphere was bustling with the sounds of people wandering between beer gardens and dirndl boutiques.

Colton yanked the curtains shut. *Tourists are the cattle of humanity*, he thought, *they travel in packs, have that stupid blank stare and always overcrowd the streets*. He looked down at the little red notebook on his desk and traced a gentle finger over the illustration before him. Under the dim tiffany shade the ashen pages looked golden.

Unlike them, he wasn't here to peregrinate the Alps; he was here because of *the book*. Because of what was written in it. He looked down at the drawing. It was distorted under layers of notes, but his fingers were guided by memory.

The book was meant to be found by him, he knew it. It was no coincidence that he had had the urge to look behind that dusty bookshelf of that grim antique shop. *When the spring equinox Carinthia slays, from snow three ears of wheat meet the sky, the buried knight is kept at bay, if They are brought from low to high...*

In the market square, the church bells struck six long chimes, and while the echoes filled up the cobble streets, the passengers returned to the train for dinner. Once loaded, the Express whistled and picked up speed until its wheels struck the rails like mallets on a ribcage.

Then, the hundred year old train drove into sunset.

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"You still wear them, Josef," she hissed, pointing at the fleur de lis cufflinks. The man in front of her looked up from the menu. His eyes wondered over to her ring finger.

"You do your part and I'll do mine. I'm just following the lawyer's orders." He scrutinized the congregation of economy class passengers before him, adjusted his cufflinks and then returned to his reading.

She knew how much he despised them; that's why she bought them. "One night, one

more night and then this whole train thing is done,” she mumbled. As one of Mendelssohn’s symphonies played Cassandra inched closer to the window and strained her neck until her jugular pulsed. She wanted this journey to be over before it even began. Thank god this was just a formality, just a business trip to finalise the fine print in the breach of a contract that bound two individuals declaring the highest commitment to love— with a document to prove it.

They ordered another bottle of white.

Cassandra stared at Josef’s reflection on the window. She despised the way his hands gripped onto the base of the wine glass as if it were a can. She reviled his tailored suits, his CEO-like deportment, the way he breathed. But she despised for making her pretend she didn’t. Pretending was the venom that peeled her raw, and Josef knew it— that was his gift to her. The lawyer urged them to act as if their marriage was fresh like summer lemonade, and what better way than to share the last league of their European trip in a romantic overnight steam train across the Austrian Alps?

Back at home, Josef was about to strike an important entrepreneurial deal, and in his circle Cassandra’s wealthy background was a positive influence. Because the divorce would grant them an even financial split, it was in everyone’s best interest to feign, especially since they were warned that rival companies could send scouts.

“One night...” she muttered.

“You say it as if it will make time go quicker.”

She curled her fingers into fists and closed her eyes. Sometimes she yearned for the unspoken deference that came with the promotion from wife to widow. She smiled and twirled the ring around her finger until the skin began to sear. The music, the trivial conversations, and the sweet, warm summer air... all within normality. Still, she had an underlying sense of being watched.

Cassandra let go of her ring and took out a camera. She hated playing the tourist, but if this would keep her incognito, she would do it.

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A few seats behind, Colton observed. One hand was holding the notebook open, the other gripping onto the pen. The couple was a peculiar duo, but the woman was far more unusual. She took photographs without enthusiasm, and after a while she resorted to staring out the window, transfixed on the horizon. The sunset turned her into a portrait silhouette,

and when stretched her leg, he could make out a faint scar that ran from her ankle to the top of her knee.

Colton frowned and shuffled the pages. There was a mistake. Up to this point, all the information was true and accurate, but now, she appeared. As he tried to put together this new puzzle, the noises around him slowly mediated into a small funnel that filtered only dissonance.

The noises fizzed into a drunken slur. The music no longer went with the rhythm of the train. The machine fiddled faster and faster against the rails, and as Colton looked up the scenery was a smeared oil painting, a mismatch of colours and shapes. He looked back down at the notebook but the words made him feel sick. Louder and louder the noises, faster and faster —

The sudden halt thrust the passengers forward. The train screeched and glasses and plates smashed to the floor as cutlery flew forward. When it finally lithered to a stop, most of the passengers were too busy getting up to notice the aggressive static coming from the intercom. It was low, but it was there and Colton knew he wasn't the only one who heard it.

Where was she? *Where was she?* The children were crying, the adults were angry and amidst the surging noise he was losing track of her. He stood on tiptoe and scanned head after head. Finally he saw her, on the other side of the room, talking with the man. The overhead clicked off and the woman looked up to the speakers, puzzled. She had a good ear, she was attentive. Colton shook his head.

Up to this point, all the information was true and accurate...

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“They’re in panic,” Josef pointed to the waiters. “Look at their faces, Cassandra.”

Cassandra flinched. His breath reeked of alcohol. She saw the staff huddled together by the door that led to the kitchen, all taking at once. All but one seemed alarmed. It was the head waiter, the one wearing the distinctive purple vest with the edelweiss flower embroidered on the front pocket, who stood solitarily in one corner, shaking his head and rubbing his temples.

“That doesn’t mean anything,” she replied.

Josef leaned closer. “When there’s heavy turbulence and the flight attendants behave normally, it’s just heavy turbulence. But when they act scared, then you know the plane is going down. “

The overhead clicked again. Some of the passengers were more attentive this time, but lost interest when they realized no voice was coming through. The head waiter swore under his breath. Cassandra grunted in his direction. “Do you know where we are?”

The head waiter lifted his head. His eyes were dark, and there was something about his reservation that Cassandra found unnerving. He looked over at her husband. “I can’t tell with certainty. Somewhere near Kaprun. We should’ve arrived by now. This is not good, the mountains are dangerous at night.”

He pressed his pulsing head against the door.

“Dangerous how?” she asked. Her eyes wandered over to a group of people slowly gathering by the window, pointing and murmuring at something as if they were at the zoo.

“The High Alps are not suitable for humans to pass the night in. They are not even suitable for cattle.”

The noise of the passengers became more despaired. She opened her mouth to reply just as one of them screamed.

He cleared a table closest to the door and gestured for them to lay the injured there.

As soon as they placed him down, the passengers swarm around him like flies to carrion.

The head waiter pushed them back and examined the patient. He couldn’t have been older than forty. His shirt was drenched in sweat and his hair was pressed against his face like a misplaced swimming cap. His legs dangled from beneath him, and one of them was gushing blood from just below the knee. He removed his belt and secured it tightly above the bleeding, then called his colleagues.

“Press this against the wound,” he whispered. “If it oversoaks grab another. Nobody moved from here. Tell the others to keep the passengers calm. I need to get a first aid kit and call for help.”

The head waiter pushed past the crowd and looked back to see the woman disappear behind the curb of the carriage, being followed by a frail young man in a brown suede coat.

The head waiter mumbled. The first aid kit was towards the front carriage, but this was a far bigger emergency. The injured would have to wait.

“Have we met before?” Cassandra was standing next to the emergency call button. She turned to Colton, but it was the man behind him who she cared for.

The head waiter slouched against the connecting door like a reprimanded dog and gestured at her hands. “What are you doing?”

Cassandra eyes narrowed. “Who sent you here? Who do you work for?”

“I work for the damn train company now what are you doing?”

Cassandra glared back. “Calling for help, what else?”

“I can’t let you do that.” The head waiter stood up straight. “No communication to the conductor, no access to the locomotive. It’s for the best. Trust me, I know this area.”

His eyes widened as she hovered her finger over the button.

“Why can’t I call them? What happens if I do?”

Colton looked back and forth like a child caught between his parents’ arguments.

The head waiter stared at her. “Don’t press it.”

“That is not good enough an answer.” Her finger rested nimbly against the metal. “There is a man out there bleeding to death, and you are telling me not to call the conductor. Why?”

The head waiter wiped his brow with a shaky hand. “Because that man bleeding to death *is* the conductor.”

They stared at each other like feral cats. She turned to Colton for help, but he was at an equal loss for words.

“The man out there is the conductor. I don’t know what happened to him, I can only presume, but we mustn’t make a call—”

“Presume then. Share your thoughts!” she touched the base of the button. He walked over to her with slow steps with his hand reached out in calm demeanour.

She recoiled. “There is something here you’re not telling us and I have the feelin—”

“There is nothing I can tell I’m asking you to trust me—”

“*Trust* you? Who is taking care of the train, who is up there in the front?”

“It is not who, but *what*. Please, the sun is going down, I am begging you not to—”

“Enough!” she pressed down and the coach was filled will a continuous *beep blip, beep blip of the alarm*.

At the noise, the head waiter ran back to the door and fumbled with his keys. He secured it shut and then signalled to the others. “The windows! Close the windows lock them!”

Colton ran to do as told because he, too, knew what was at stake, but the woman was catatonic. She stared back with tears in her eyes, clutching the sides of her skirt.

“Woman, please, the windows!” When she still didn’t move, the head waiter stretched his arm to her. She jumped back and skidded towards the furthestmost doors leading to the back of the train. Just as she was about to get there, the alarms stopped and the intercom clicked alive with static. The three of them stared back at it. Then, a sound came through, a low, excruciating wail.

Cassandra opened her mouth but the head waiter raised his hand sharply, and shook his head.

The voice was heaving, and then they heard the footsteps, the opening and closing of a metallic door, and after what seemed like minutes of listening to the static, something clicked again, and the three of them were left in silence.

The head waiter crawled to a corner and ushered them to follow. He pointed to the back carriages. “We have to get out of here before They come,” he whispered. “They know we’re here, but if we move quickly, we still have a chance.”

Cassandra shook her head. “What about the people in the other coach—”

“There is no time to think about them, dammit, I’m asking you to *trust me!*”

She closed her eyes. *My husband is in there*, she wanted to say, but the honesty of her concern repulsed her. Cassandra nodded slowly. “Through the door, then—”

“Not through the door!” both men retorted. They stared at each other. Colton looked down at the floor.

“We can’t leave the train,” the head waiter asserted. “This is the last time I am asking you to trust me.”

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Colton was afraid of the state she was in, but even more than that, increasingly convinced that his precious red notebook had a mistake, a misprint. Everything else had been right until then: the location, the date, even the train’s description. But then she came along, and completely destroyed the puzzle.

“We have to wait until sunrise. Only then can we leave,” the head waiter explained.

“If we make it past night,” Colton murmured.

Cassandra turned to him. “And how do you know about this?” Why are you going along with this, *why?*”

No, Colton didn’t like her fear. It made him nervous. He could smell it, the sour, bitter aroma of adrenaline, the need to escape.

The head waiter looked away. “I won’t force you to stay, but if you decide to go out I will not let you back in. I can’t risk that.”

“*But what is out there?*” She looked at Colton for help, but he merely stared back. Instead he crawled underneath one of the tables. She stared back in anger and mumbled to herself before sitting back down. Colton waited a few minutes before going back to the notebook to review his records. Somewhere along the way there had to be a mistake.

The coach was quiet save for the faint scribbling of ink on paper and the drizzle against the window.

An hour passed. Cassandra stared out at the droplets on the glass. She didn’t even know what to call her situation. A hijack? Yes, a hijack, a carefully planned capture from one of the rival companies. She sighed. Thunder spat at them like a pestered cobra. Beyond the glass the scenery was swallowed by obsidian...save for one flickering light in the distance

She straightened up and squinted. In the distance was a button-sized light, too far away to identify, but close enough to see it was definitely a flame. It wasn’t moving, it was just standing there. Against the very faint glow of the moon, she could make out the figure of a man. The head was tilted at an unnerving angle and the body was emaciated and extremely tall.

“There’s somebody out there,” she muttered.

The scribbling stopped. The men turned to her.

“What do you mean?” The waiter asked.

“There. Look.” She pointed.

“Is it moving?” he asked.

“No... I think it’s watching us.”

She suddenly remembered she had the camera. Slowly, she lifted it to the glass. She was afraid to look into the lens, even though she knew she wouldn’t be able to see anything until she took the photo.

The head waiter realized what she was about to do and sprang forwards. “No no no no wait *don’t do—*”

A harsh set of continuous flashes reflected against the glass. As the waiter pulled her back Cassandra hit her face on the corner of the table and cracked the monitor with her weight.

“What is wrong with you?” the head waiter slammed his hand against the table.
“They saw us now! Are you *happy?*”

The flame flickered from side to side and then became smaller and smaller.
Cassandra crouched underneath one of the tables and tried to resuscitate the monitor. Colton crawled to her and watched as she fumbled with the apparatus.

“None of you listened, you inept group of tourists—”

“What can you see?”

“I don’t know it’s not turning on.”

“ — we won’t make it to morning, we won’t make it to morning!”

“What is it?”

“I don’t know!”

The monitor light up.

“What is it?” Colton whispered. “What do you see?”

Cassandra’s lips quivered. She opened her mouth but all she could emit were soundless croaks. Then, in a sudden fit of rage, she slammed the camera down over and over again, screaming for them to open the door.

The overheads flickered like lagging strobe lights and then the pounding noises began, slow and soft at first. The trio crouched underneath the tables. Whatever it was, it was circling their coach, getting fainter as it retreated and louder when it came near.

Colton grabbed her wrist. “What did you see? On the camera, what did you see?”

Cassandra wiped her nose. The back of her hand was coated in blood. “We need to get out”, was her only reply. The pounding noise was getting closer. She crawled to the opposite side of the train and like a magnet it followed. She recoiled and curled underneath the window.

When the pounding reached Cassandra’s side, it stopped.

The others looked up anxiously, and ever so slowly she saw their faces turn into a horrible expression of terror.

As turned her head up to the foggy glass and saw the flame, the shadow of a face moved into the light, and then the room went dark.

Cassandra woke up to somebody nudging her. She mumbled. Her vision came into focus. The lights were back on, but weak and flimsy. She looked up. “We shouldn’t have done that,” she murmured, “I told you we shouldn’t.” She crawled up and crept to the door. “We shouldn’t have done that. We made a mistake. We shouldn’t have locked it.”

The head waiter stood up idly. “Locking it might have been the only thing that saved our lives.”

Cassandra’s eyes gained a darker tone, as if hatred and rancour had overpowered her DNA. “Oh really?” she spoke low and slow, “because the door was ripped apart from the inside!”

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“How many coaches are after this one? We have the locomotive, first class, the restaurant. So how many economy?”

The head waiter sighed. “Three.”

She glared at him. “*Liar!*” Cassandra hugged herself and lowered her voice. “Four. Four carriages after this one.”

The head waiter tightened his fists. “*Three* economy carriages. The last one is cargo.”

“Cargo for *what?*”

“Kitchen equipment, maintenance, machinery. We’re just three coaches away.”

“What, in the back of the train?” Colton murmured.

The waiter didn’t answer.

She took a deep breath and started pacing back and forth. “We have to go to cargo, then. Kitchen equipment means knives, mallets, fire. Who’s to say whatever happened won’t happen again? At least we’ll have a better chance till morning.”

The head waiter hesitated. “Yes. Weapons are good. But if the door was ripped apart from inside, one of us must have done it. Taking that person to a place full of weapons is like asking enemy to pull the grenade you’re holding.”

She followed his gaze to the door. “How funny of you to so suddenly blame it on us, when you are clearly the one with the upper hand here. You know the area, don’t you? *Don’t you?*”

“I am no—”

“The door is ripped to shreds! We are more vulnerable than before, and you stand there trying to blame us!” She pulled her hair and slumped down. “You keep talking about ‘Them’, and ‘They’ and never give a proper explanation. It’s like going through piles of

paper work with you and trust me I *know* that routine! I knew this was a fucking mistake the moment we came here, the moment we stepped on that stupid altar of *god the music make the stupid music stop!*”

In her head she heard every symphony, every note of that dreaded Mendelssohn piece, and it brought her back to the Italian country side: the bouquet of lavender and orange blossoms, the warm autumn sun and the smell of cologne. *How people had clapped, how people had wished them a long, healthy life!*

It made her sick.

Cassandra punched the wall until the pain was enough to make the wedding memory fade. She curled herself up. She was scared of the photograph, scared enough to describe what she had seen, but knew that the only way to get through the night was to get to the cargo section.

They had to.

And they would.

“Make him take us to cargo,” she crooned, and with a shaky finger pointed at Colton. “Trust me,” she mocked.

Colton stared at her from beneath the table. She could feel him string at the vein on her neck.

“What makes you think I’ll trust you? What makes you think I’ll trust *any* of you?”

Cassandra relaxed. She leaned her head back and looked up at the ceiling. The wind that pouring in from the gaping hole was crisp and hostile. She let it dry the makeup-stained tears on her cheeks, and then reached into the pocket of her blazer. “Because you don’t have a choice,” she said, holding the little red notebook tightly to her chest.

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The lights died out just as they reached the sleeping compartments. The head waiter walked with his head down and his body away from the windows. At a distance behind, Cassandra and Colton followed. What the reserved young man told the waiter, she didn’t know, but it worked. It took a long time for a man like Colton to convince the waiter to take them, but Cassandra knew they needed him— he had the keys to cargo. She wasn’t too worried about the young man, either; as long as she had the book, she had control.

“Did you write it?” she taunted, scratching until she left imprints on the cover.

“I found it,” he snarled.

“Is it a good read?”

“It’s not that kind of book!” He sprung forwards but she was quick, snatching his arm with viperous strength. She looked down at him and suddenly had the urge to snap his bone.

She let him go.

“It’s not a story book,” he continued, massaging his hand. “It’s more of a...I can’t describe it. You have to read it to understand it.”

She stared at him until he avoided her, then cocked her head in the direction of the waiter. “Go, you first.”

They were falling behind. She gripped the book tightly and used the other to push him forward. She knew she was stronger than him, but still a small part of her was reluctant to give him back the book, as if the reconciliation would grant him an otherworldly power. “It’s written in code,” she murmured. The thought of him being able to decode it made her anxious, and all of a sudden she wasn’t so sure if she was as fearless of him as she had convinced herself.

“It’s not code,” he answered. “It’s riddles. It takes studying....” He stopped. Cassandra withdrew her hand, leaving a sweaty imprint on his shirt.

“What’s it about?”

He hesitated. “Some books speak about a chapel in Heligenblut that contains a flask with the blood of Christ. Thus the name. This flask was carried by a knight who was buried in an avalanche, but just before he died, he hid it in an open wound in his calf. When the peasants brought the cows up from the villages during summer, they found his corpse.”

He turned around and looked her straight in the eye. “That book is about the art of transhumance. Moving livestock up to the mountains during summer, and down to the villages during winter. It’s a common tradition around these areas. It’s very easy if the animals are tame, and for the most part, they are. They have the tradition bred into them. Rows and rows of cattle, all submissive under the domination and trust of a single shepherd. It’s an incredibly interesting thing, control, isn’t it?”

Cassandra raised her head higher above his. She looked behind Colton, towards the head waiter. “It’s a feeble thing,” she indicated the book. “I could rip in half in a second...”

Colton gulped but kept his calm. “Control is just as easily destroyed, if you have the right knowledge. And there are some things that are best kept hidden, but unfortunately, don’t always do.”

She stared at him, at the man with the scruffy black hair and the emaciated face, the bibliophile with the quiet demeanour and unnatural obsession with riddles. There was no

way rival companies could send over someone like this, and if they did no way they would disguise him as such.

“Who are you? Who are you really?”

Before she could get an answer, the head waiter emerged from behind the connecting doors and handed them each a cloth napkin.

“Tie them around your nose. And don’t breathe deep.” He signalled for them to follow him into cargo.

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“Christ...” Cassandra pressed the napkin against her nostrils. The three of them stood facing the open cargo door. The corpses hung upside down, their feet tied together and suspended by meat hooks. They had gashes all across their skin. Below them their bodily fluids accumulated in puddles of varying sizes. There were more of them than there had been in the restaurant coach.

She watched in horror as the head waiter began to scavenge the dead’s pockets, meandering his way across the cadavers as if they were bead curtains. The cargo was much bigger than they imagined, and as the head waiter dissolved into darkness, the incomparable silence fell over the pair like a thin mourning veil.

“Why do you keep the wedding ring?” Colton asked softly.

Cassandra looked down and cursed. She had done it again, again let her stupid fingers go to the ring like a lost child! She made her hands fall obediently to her side, but did not answer his question. Instead, she asked one of her own. “In the story, what happened to vial of blood?”

The waiter’s footsteps oscillated closer and further, his presence sometimes marked by the distant shuffling of keys, or a nearby shake of coins.

“You said he’s not your husband, but you keep the ring. Is there a reason to keep it?”

She laughed nervously. “When they found his corpse, the peasants certainly didn’t think to look inside his leg.”

The footsteps stopped. Colton pressed on: “Is it because deep inside you still love him?”

Her neck stiffened. “Why hide it in a wound when he could hide it in his clothes?”

“No, that’s not it. It’s got nothing to do with love. You never loved him.”

Cassandra rested her elbows in her hands. “Perhaps he expected the ‘blood of Christ’ to heal him?”

“Not money, either...”

“*Why is the passenger list written in the book?*” She flung the book and connected with the corner of his mouth, splitting open the lip. “*Why are our names printed in this thing?*” Her knee came up and struck his chest. He heaved and stumbled back. Before he had time to think, she grabbed his collar and chocked him. “*Who are you, and where did you get this?*”

He spat in her face. “So suddenly you can read it? It’s not code anymore?”

She staggered back, her hands shaking. Colton crawled towards her.

“Well I’m glad you read it, because I have a question: why is *your* name not there?”

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The head waiter returned to find her sitting against the side of the train, humming. Colton was next to her, crouched into a little ball.

“I heard screaming. What’s wrong with the boy?”

Cassandra shrugged nonchalantly. “He got scared. The darkness got to him. What’s that?”

He handed her a piece of paper. “I would say I’m sorry, but I’m not sure you are.”

She turned it over slowly. It was Josef’s ticket, one he insisted on keeping with him at all times. “Is it only him in there, or all of them?”

“All. Also those who weren’t in the restaurant. I just don’t know how they got there.”

Cassandra nodded slowly. She folded the paper into airplane and threw it towards the darkness, then turned to Colton and nudged him lightly. His head snapped forward and she grabbed it gingerly, pushing the chin up and brushing the hair off his face. His eyes were wide open and milky. He was wheezing. She pursed her lips. “I don’t know what got into him. He just...snapped. And you, what treasures did you scavenge for yourself?”

The head waiter retreated discreetly. “I was looking for passenger evidence. I would never do such an immoral thing...lady, what really happened to the boy?”

“Why immoral? They’re dead. They won’t mind. And I told you, it was past his bed time. Did you know about this?”

She showed him the book. The head waiter shook his head. She put it back in her pocket. “The book talks about transhumance, but it’s not really about that. I mean, there are images of cattle, diagrams of beef cuts... but it’s a giant metaphor.”

She stood up. “It’s a metaphor for all of us here... this is the freight train...we’re being transported.” Her face turned sombre. “I think I know who you are.”

He didn't answer. From across the room where the bodies hung, a paper airplane floated in the air and landed at their feet.

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In a few hours, daylight would come. The birds would chirp, the moon would hide, and the rain would stop. The air was so cold it was difficult to breathe, but it was perfumed in smells of damp earth and pine resin. Needles and small stones cut and pierced her bare feet, and goose bumps covered her legs. Somebody was near her, she felt it from hours back now. "Come on, let's go, we're getting there." She pulled Colton and urged him to move faster. She left the waiter up there on the train. It's what he wanted. If so was his choice, so was his death.

He wasn't important.

Not to her.

Her mouth was dry. A wind blew against her damp skin.

The book is in code, she thought, the book is in code.

Cassandra stopped and looked up at the silhouette of the train. Up there in the mountains, it was a tiny speck, a child's toy. Lightning illuminated the skies and for a fleeting moment she saw Them: a crowd of ten or so, lined up against the rear of the cargo coach, clawing at the door. Children and adults, toddlers and elderly, all figures coated in a tarnished black that merged with the night, except for two glowing white light where their eyes should be. Cassandra knew what they were, and what they wanted. They were passengers of previous journeys, those who chose to stay and wait for daylight, those who never got to see it and now returned every summer, hoping to board train to go down into the village as they were once supposed to.

The art of transhumance. Moving cattle from one place to the other. A common tradition. Something they did around here.

Just before the illumination was gone, one of them turned in her direction.

Now they saw her.

"We have to move, come on." She put his arm around her shoulders and paced faster. They had to get to Heiligenblut. Colton cried softly and tried to push her away but he was too weak. His weight was slowing her down, but he knew too much now, too much to abandon him and risk him coming out of it alive. The branches cracked and creaked under their heavy steps.

"Wheat... growing through snow..."

She ignored him. The problem was not his words; the problem was that she didn't know where to go. Not far behind them a large branch splintered. She stopped. Whispers. Footsteps. Far away she heard the distinctive clamour of a church bell, one that materialized further into the woods, one that beckoned, one that allured. It sounded like death. The forest was otherwise silent, so silent it made her yearn for noise. The man next to her slumped forward, but she managed to keep him upright.

"Please not now, please not now..." She touched through his drenched clothes and felt the heart pumping at full speed. She sighed. And then she felt his touch, warm and delicate against her freezing cheek. There was a familiar human hint to it, a familiar tenderness she yearned for since the divorce began. It reminded her warm winter nights spent at home, at Josef throwing pine leaves into the fire place to make the house smell like the outdoors. They would pop and she would complain, but he would laugh and stroke her on the cheek and tell her to relax. Those were the days of cinnamon and cardamom, and she wanted nothing more than to go back.

The hand turned and then she felt that other thing, that icy feeling of small metal buttons...of cufflinks.

Cassandra screamed and dragged Colton with her. She hurried towards the church bells, towards the only familiar sound in this black box of echoes. The ground beneath them turned softer, and then she saw it, rising impetuously from between the trees. She ran into the church and closed the door behind her, wheezing and puffing, her throat full of razors. When she regained her breath, she looked up towards the altar.

Above it was a large stained glass window. Weak rays of sun hit it and illuminated the podium below in red and gold and blue. She walked down the aisle slowly, gripping Colton beside her. To their right and left the pews gleamed in specs of thick dust. The church didn't look abandoned, but it certainly hadn't been used for a long time.

As they walked, she stretched her neck to the high ceiling above. The pillars were guarded by marbled statues. Slow, thick red liquid was dripping from their eyes. A drop landed on her forehead but she was too tired to wipe it away. When they reached the altar, her legs trembled and with the last bit of strength she lowered Colton to the floor and collapsed next to him. For the first time in a many hours she could see his face and the damages of the journey.

He was a younger than she thought, but the trip had given him great dark circles under his eyes and a rugged look. She laid him on the floor and watching as his breathing grew slower and slower. To her left and not too far away stood a sacrament house. She heard the

door screech “Past your bed time,” she whispered, glad Colton would not wake up to see what she was about to.

From behind, and out of the corner of her eye she saw It in the blue early morning light. It was almost two meters tall, with leathery skin pulled taut across the sharp bones of an emaciated physique. It carried a staff whose end smoked with the residues of a flame. Wrapped around the staff was a chain, and on its end, a small crystal vial.

The creature marched towards her, staggering from pew to pew. There was no clear definition of torso, just a bundled mess from which a disfigured head emerged. The left side of the body was compressed against the right, as if the body had been summited to heavy pressure. It gurgled something from its clenched throat and as it approached she saw a secretion of puss and maggots drip from its eyes and mouth.

The morning light illuminated the creature from behind, and as it walked through the coloured hues of sun rays, thicker droplets of red fell from the statues in the pillars, sprinkling them with celestial drizzles. It glanced at Colton’s body, but quickly turned to stare at her. And then, with a quick dash of its sharp, deformed fingers, reopened the scar on her leg. It burned, but she wasn’t scared. Her body was finished. She gave in. She felt its hands dig inside the wound, and the last thing she saw was Colton’s body being dragged away towards the sacrament house.

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The morning came with a crisp breeze but a radiant, warm sun. They found her in graveyard earlier that day, lying across one of the gravestones, clutching three wheat stalks in her hand. They assumed she was a lost hiker, and once conscious, she acquiesced to every lie. The police reports were quick and hassle-free, and a few stitches and sedatives later she found herself in a large empty room, waiting for somebody to take her to the station, where they had arranged for a train to take her to the next town.

“Frau Brighcus? Cassandra?” The nurse took her arm and helped her up. In a few minutes she was inside the coach of a very modern intercity train. The nurse asked if she needed anything else, and then left her alone in the deserted coach.

Transhumance: the movement of livestock; only the shepherds, known as the Senn, who lead the flock, leaving their families behind.

She leaned back against the seat and closed her eyes, murmuring softly, savouring the words from the little red notebook.

Well, this year's summer transhumance was completed: the cattle were up in the mountains. Come winter, somebody would need to go up there and bring them back. Cassandra exhaled slowly and conjured the image on the monitor of her camera. How badly they had wanted to know what it was she saw, and how much panic they would have been in if she had told them.

How could she describe the face as anything other than it was?

Hers.

She took her ring off and placed it inside the pocket of her blazer, next to her heart. The only woman left inside the train grinned as the machine roared back to life.