

**THE SECOND STORY FROM THE
WAYFARERS HIGHWAY**



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First Edition: TBD

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1

BOREALIS

The spikes built into the tram's treaded wheels bit deep into the ice. Traveling over land without roads, the tram had been made to adapt, navigating nearly all terrain, using its bladed treads, stolen from antique military vehicles. There weren't many of them, navigating the northern reaches, but they all looked identical, just like the mile after mile of snowy, sometimes tree-lined, seldom inhabited countryside.

Mr. Simonsen was tired of the weather and the trams and his business in that country. Even the auroras, which infrequently erupted in the skies overhead, had lost their luster. They served only as a reminder of his current work status and assignment.

"What brings you here?" The tram-driver had asked him. Burke, the driver, was a thickset man with a face nearly totally hidden by an unkempt tangle of black facial hair and animal furs, the two of which blended together almost seamlessly. The look of the man was utterly at odds with Mr. Simonsen's own well tailored suit and clean-shaven face. However, Mr. Simonsen didn't blame the driver for his looks: they kept him warm and no one could argue that he didn't make an impressive figure, perched in the small seat at the tram's front. Imposing looks go a long way to keep the

peace where laws are few.

“What brings you here?” Burke asked again. Mr. Simonsen had been lost in his own thoughts, as he had often been of late, and had not answered.

“I am an inspector.” He said. That was true enough. Burke nodded and took Mr. Simonsen’s ticket. Burke was used to receiving half-answers.

Mr. Simonsen had taken his seat and again lost himself in thought. He’d been an on-sight working conditions inspector for the past decade. It was not a simple job. Perpetual complaints, not all of them unfounded, in businesses dotted across the backwater reaches of the glacial northern isles and lands of Europe: they were Mr. Simonsen’s provinces.

He didn’t work in the Arctic Circle, not technically. His complaints of deliberately being kept in remote places had thusly been ignored. Mr. Simonsen had never been the sharpest mind politically, and though his bitter years working a job he’d never loved had bred a ruthlessness in him, he had none of the cold cunning that was valued in his line of work.

There was only one other passenger on the tram that day, a young dark-complexioned woman. She was clearly unaccustomed to the cold. She looked to be wearing two coats, but Mr. Simonsen could not be sure. Regardless, he could see enough of her to know she interested him a good deal more than the mining dispute he was headed to settle.

“New in these parts?” He’d asked her. The tram was rather large, but the treads and other machinery took

up a good deal of that space. The passengers were crowded in tightly.

"It's been many years," she responded, without looking at him. She truly must have seen the north at some point earlier in life. The aurora outside had left her visibly unfazed. It surprised everyone the first time, and usually many after that.

"It can take some getting used to," Mr. Simonsen said. "Such a change in climate is troubling. If you don't mind my asking, what business could bring a young woman to such a desolate land, alone?"

"I have no reason to mind," she said, "but wouldn't it be more polite to give me your name and your purpose here, before asking about mine?"

"I'm Felix Simonsen," he said. "I'm an on-sight working conditions inspector, for Dwarrow. They're a firm that deals in ores. I'm headed to settle a dispute at a mining village, east of here. Nasty business, but it must be done, so business goes on."

"I'm going to visit family," was all she said. She didn't say her name. She didn't say anything else, that trip. Mr. Simonsen spent the rest of his journey in restless silence, half-listening to Burke's radio. The commentators were still talking about the casualties from the terrorist hostage crisis that had gone on at the Nation's Trust World's Fair, over a year earlier. That had all happened six thousand miles away, but people the world over had heard of the actions perpetrated there by the terrorist leader Blitzkrieg, as he'd been known. Bad for business, all of it, and after a time Mr.

Simonsen stopped listening.

At last, after the aurora and the brief northern summer night came to an end, so did the hours of Mr. Simonsen's journey. The tram made only one other stop in between, at a small way station, like a bus stop, marooned in a road-less track of nature. A small party of travelers had then gotten aboard. They were loud people, tourists they said, all excited by their vacation, excited to visit country they'd never seen, excited by the aurora. They made the tram's cabin unbearably cramped and noisy, and Mr. Simonsen muttered a faint thanks to a god he didn't particularly believe in that his own stop was coming next.

The tram had been curving ever eastward, back toward mountains and more heavily inhabited lands. Not as far from true civilization as they had been, but still rather far away, the tram came to a stop at the outskirts of a large mining town.

Four hundred or so buildings stood there, all clustered around a gaping hole in the earth. The outer ring of structures were massive, sprawling, grey prefabricated square buildings that Dwarrow had designed long ago. They were meant to serve as the mine's business headquarters. Stark as they were, they did their job and kept the cold reasonably at bay. These buildings had been assembled shortly after the rich subterranean veins of quartzite had been discovered nearly a century before.

The other buildings at the site were even older – smaller structures, made of stone hauled from the earth,

long before the nearby valuable mineral deposits had been discovered and utilized by the outside world. The older buildings had been built by the local natives.

After exchanging nods with Burke, Mr. Simonsen exited the tram. Almost immediately, it began trundling away. By the time he'd reached the nearest of the prefab structures, the arctic transport had disappeared into the light of the rising sun.

There was a small escort waiting for Mr. Simonsen, all of them Dwarrow-affiliated mine bosses, dressed for business in warmer parts, shivering, frightened. They'd been flown in a day earlier, when the first signs of a workers' strike had appeared. Mr. Simonsen sighed. It would not be the first time he'd dealt with hostile workers, usually uneducated; sometimes indentured servants of one sort or another. He'd gotten used to such dealings.

"Felix Simonsen," he introduced himself. The officials also did so, in their turn, though he forgot their names almost immediately, as he'd often done lately. "Corporate has been alerted to a worker's strike in this location."

"Yes, sir," one of the officials responded. "There's been illness in their village, the native's village I mean. We haven't been getting nearly as many resource shipments here, sir, what with the global political climate what it's been. The medicine has run short. It's warm in the tunnels, thermal vents and the like, and many of the workers have taken ill, their resistance toward sickness lowered by those dramatic temp-

erature changes, I expect. It's always been an issue here, but we usually stockpile medicine."

"As I understand it," Mr. Simonsen said, "these natives are a unique people."

"They are, sir," the same official responded. "Odd skin tone, grayish as it were, strange ears too, pointed. Never saw anything like 'em, till I started working in these parts."

"Inbred no doubt," Mr. Simonsen responded. He'd read about the natives' unique looks in the files he'd been sent. It mattered little, one way or the other. People were people, so long as they followed their contracts. Three years earlier, he'd negotiated with a man who'd had six digits on his left hand – two thumbs. It had made no difference in the end.

"They've sent a representative to explain their actions?" Mr. Simonsen asked.

"They have, a person who's known as Calder to us, but he surely has a different name in their language."

"Foreign tongues are irrelevant unless we need a translator." Mr. Simonsen started walking toward the prefab buildings, assuming his escort would direct him somewhere. He had no patience for formalities anymore, especially formalities that meant standing outside in the cold.

"We don't need a translator," the official responded once he'd caught up to Mr. Simonsen. "This Calder they've chosen is fluent in all the trade languages, one of the only locals who is. That's why they chose him, I suppose."

“Can he be sent for?” Mr. Simonsen knew a long negotiation when he saw one coming. Local customs, languages, and legitimate problems were factors that made his job all the more tedious than it normally was.

“Sir, he’s been standing at our backdoor for twenty hours, ever since he heard you’d been called for. He hasn’t moved for nature or food. Unnatural.” The official looked unnerved as he said those words. Then he turned away and opened the door to the nearest prefab building for Mr. Simonsen.

“It’s perfectly natural,” Mr. Simonsen laughed. “This Calder isn’t used to dealing with the outside world. He’s attempting to seem prepared for anything and frighten you. You’ve let him succeed. I’ll meet him at once.” At once wasn’t soon enough to get that business done. “Is there a place where we can sit down and speak in comfort?”

Mr. Simonsen was directed to a small boardroom, at the far end of the long fluorescently-lit hallway that ran the whole length of the building. The boardroom was as sparsely furnished as all of that complex, nearly empty actually. There was a table in its center, with a chair on either side, a carpeted floor, bright overhead lighting, and nothing else. Mr. Simonsen took a seat in the chair facing the door. The officials left to retrieve the natives’ representative. In minutes, they returned with a strange person between them.

Not an inch of skin showed through the heavy furs that concealed him. His hands wore thick gloves and his feet were booted in the uniform footgear of Dwarrow

mining teams. Strangest of all was the mask on his face. Skeletal, with ritualistic etchings across its surface, the mask wrapped around the man's face and disappeared into the folds of cloth and fur draped across the back of his head. The overall effect gave little indication what the man's actual proportions were.

Only his eyes could be seen, blood-shot and dark, with the hints of bags beneath them, in the minute ring of grayish skin visible inside the mask.

"You are the negotiator?" Calder asked.

"I am." Mr. Simonsen said. He looked to the three men surrounding the native. "He was scanned for weapons?"

"We walked him through the metal detectors and searched him," one man said.

"Good," Mr. Simonsen said. "Leave us. I'll speak to him alone." The officials looked about to protest. "You may wait outside, if you wish." He shooed them away. They walked out. "Shut the door." He commanded. It was shut.

"You are the representative?" Mr. Simonsen asked.

"I am." The miner replied. "To your people, I am known as Calder."

"Take a seat please, Calder," Mr. Simonsen said. He'd read in his files that the natives considered handshakes too familiar; that direct contact should be reserved for friends or family. Calder sat.

"I am told you were waiting for me," Mr. Simonsen said.

"My people wish to speak," Calder said. "I was

sent.”

“Yes, indeed. You have jurisdiction to speak for your people, all of them?”

“I do.”

“Good. I have no doubt we’ll be able to settle this quickly. However, if you’ve been waiting long and need to relieve yourself there’s a restroom down the hall.” In truth, Mr. Simonsen had begun to notice a growing need of his own, but he’d meet this strange man right away if he had a mind to talk.

“No. We will begin now.”

“Fine. I am told there is a medicine shortage and your people have gone on strike. That is understandable. We at Dwarrow see your point of view, but the trade to these parts has depleted very much during the last year and we will do our best to . . .”

“We are not on strike,” Calder said. “We have no concept like this. If you have a job, you do it. But our job is done. We are leaving.”

“You are contractually obligated to stay.” Mr. Simonsen had brought copies of the contract with him, but he didn’t show them. They would do little to convince Calder. Remote villagers tended to believe in little, save the supplies and modern comforts the larger companies gave to them. “Your families owe us a debt.”

“Yes,” Calder nodded. “A hundred years ago, by your calendar, our people nearly died of famine. Your company was young then and it found us. They sheltered us, in return for work. But my grandfather’s people were foolish with the money your company

brought. We fell into debt, the debt my generation and I now carry.”

“Yes,” Mr. Simonsen said. “It’s an old law, having debts pass generation to generation, but the kings’ laws were grandfathered in, even after the government changed. Yours was an older debt and . . .”

“The debt has been paid.” Calder announced. “When first we were hired, my people numbered five thousand. Since then, we prospered. We had ten thousand at our highest count. But those numbers fell. You have us digging deeper, into more dangerous shafts.”

“Your people lived in the tunnels before they moved to the surface.”

“We never traveled that deep,” Calder said. “And there are diseases, many of them brought here by traders and travelers tied to your company. Once, we grew herbs to remedy the sick, but we were forced to kill those herbs that grew underground to make way for your mines. We need your medicine.”

“Which we will get to you.”

“We now number only three thousand,” Calder continued. “That means that more of us have died than lived when your company saved us from the famine a century ago. The debt is paid. The conditions of the contract are finished.”

“They are not,” Mr. Simonsen could see that these negotiations were going to last a good deal longer even than he’d expected. Perhaps he would need the contracts, after all. He picked up his folder hastily, and

immediately dropped it. Papers fell free and spread across the floor. Mr. Simonsen bent down to pick them up, giving him a clear view under Calder's chair.

Blood, thick and heavy, dripped from the underside of Calder's leg into the once pristine carpet of the floor. There was already a substantial puddle lying there.

"My god," Mr. Simonsen said. "You're bleeding."

Calder's wraith-thin hand grabbed Simonsen's own and hauled him bodily on top of the table. The startled man froze in shock and didn't resist. Calder reached with his free hand down his own thigh toward his wound. Calder pulled free a small dagger, made of bone, invisible to the metal detectors and the company guards, where he'd hidden it inside his own leg.

"So are you," Calder speared the dagger into the soft flesh under Mr. Simonsen's chin.