

Ghost Train

An APT Responders Story

By Robert V Aldrich

Copyright: Robert V Aldrich, 2019

Published: 2019/08/02

This is a work of fiction. All characters and events portrayed are either products of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously.

This ebook is licensed for the personal entertainment of the reader. It is copyrighted property of the author and may not be reproduced, copied, or distributed without the express written consent of the author.

FROM THE MIND OF

RVA

"<It's too stinking hot,>" said Pietro. He took off his metro worker's cap and rubbed down his curly black hair. With strong Russian features, he yawned and leaned back in his seat, stretching until his joints popped. "<Why's it so hot at this time of night?>"

"<That's the problem with you Jews,>" said his coworker, Mikael. An older man, his wrinkled face and big stomach matched perfectly his demeanor. "<You can't handle the heat.>"

"<I can handle heat just fine,>" complained Pietro. "<What I can't handle is this...>" At a loss for words, he gestured at the air. "<It's almost 30 degrees.>" He wiped his face again. One glance at Mikael and he balked, "<How are you not sweating?>"

"<Fat insulates,>" said the older man, chuckling as he shook his belly. Pietro rolled his eyes, laughing too. "<This is why you need to stop exercising, huh? Stop trying to look good for the ladies. You need this.>" He patted his stomach. "<It's a job requirement to be here in the metro.>" He punctuated his point with a burp. Pietro gagged at the stench in their enclosed workspace. The transparent windows of their elevated platform allowed them look out on their empty metro stop. It was a long, subterranean concrete platform dotted with inadequately lit advertisements. Signs had both Cyrillic and international letters.

Pietro grabbed one of the maps they handed out to tourists of Kazan and slapped the laughing Mikael on the knee. As he did, a gust of humid air came rushing out of the metro tunnel. Over the speakers in the metro station, an automated voice boomed in the empty space, announcing, "<The East-bound train is arriving now. The East-bound train is arriving now.>" Her voice was clipped and overly loud, the result of speakers meant for a metro station with far more people.

The smooth train pulled into the space, the doors coming right to the platform. Lights through the windows lit up the metro station and half-blinded the two workers. Pietro held out his hand to block the light over his eyes, where Mikael simply averted his gaze. They heard the doors open and then the steps of precious few commuters.

Pietro leaned forward, smiling at the half-dozen locals who disembarked from the East train. He smiled and made eye-contact, nodding to one old man he recognized. In less than a moment, the metro platform was empty yet again. The train lingered awkwardly, like a conversation that had run its course. "<I think they're going to stop these late-night lines,>" Mikael remarked.

Lonely silence followed until the automated voice announced in crisp, attractive Russian, "<The East-bound train is now departing. The East-bound train is now departing.>"

Pietro watched as the train doors shut in mechanical unison. There was a loud hiss as the train pressurized. "<Shame,>" he admitted as the train began to pull away. "<I didn't like working days.>" Mikael only nodded, folding his hands over his stomach. "<Did you bring your lunch?>" Pietro asked in the dark silence after the train had departed. Mikael shook his head. "<Want me to run and get something?>"

The senior attendant thought for a moment. "<McDonalds?>" he suggested.

"<I was thinking Taco Bell,>" Pietro counter-proposed.

As Mikael considered it, there was a strong breeze that swept through the metro station, coming out of the tunnel. Both men immediately sat up and faced the tunnel through which the East-bound Train had just departed. "<There's not another train for half an hour,>" Pietro remarked. He looked around at their desk, cluttered but not dirty.

As Pietro looked, Mikael grabbed a folder and flipped it open. "<There's not a repair train scheduled, is...>" He fell silent when the light from a headlamp blasted out from the darkness of the tunnel. "<What in the world?>" wondered the old Russian.

Out from the tunnel came shooting an ancient steam engine.

Something from the old world, brass plating and heavy iron construction carried the locomotive through the modern metro station in a puff of steam and smoke. A haunting whistle sang out as it shot through the station, leaving behind only bewilderment on the part of the two metro workers. They looked at each other, neither sure what they had just seen.

Sarah sat in the briefing room, a tiny espresso cup on a white china saucer before her. Steam rose from the lip of the drink as she pinched the bridge of her nose, leaning into her hand. The door opened and she didn't move. Jin and Adam both froze at the door when they saw her sitting alone inside. "Uh-oh," said Jin, the Korean hacker smiling mischievously. "She's still here."

"What do you mean still?" teased Adam, speaking in a low tone. "She never leaves."

"You know I can hear you both, right?" Sarah asked, slowly massaging her temples, ruffling her blonde bangs.

"I should hope so, we were teasing you," Adam remarked with a smirk.

Jin asked with some genuine worry, "Did you get ANY sleep last night?"

Sarah sighed, her narrow but powerful shoulders heaving with the effort. "Not enough," she conceded. In a knit shirt with a high neck, long sleeves, and narrow shoulders, she brushed back her shoulder-length blonde hair and sat up. "Where is everybody? I got the call ten minutes ago."

"We got delayed thanks to the thaumaturgists," said another voice. Adam and Jin turned as Alex Tolkien entered. Dressed in the same black suit with narrow tie as the night before, he carried a fresh cup of coffee and two mini-bottles of energy shots as well. He laid down a folder at the head of the table and said, "Guys, can you pull up the..." He paused, blinked deliberately, and utterly froze as his vocabulary failed him. "Oh sweet mercy," he muttered, searching for the word. "The lab!" he exclaimed, finally finding the word. "Can you pull up Emma and Jason's lab?"

"Geez, what happened to you guys?" asked Adam. He crossed the brick meeting room to the far wall. He opened a panel in the side of the wall, causing a large flat screen display to descend from the ceiling. He punched a few small buttons and the display began to activate.

"Just a haunting," said Sarah, sipping her espresso.

Jin and Adam looked at each other, not believing it. "A haunting? Like, one haunting? One ghost?"

"It was in Italy," Alex expounded. The way Adam and Jin both inhaled sympathetically illustrated how well they now understood the context of the operation. "I hate Italian ghosts."

"Everybody hates Italian ghosts," Sarah muttered violently.

The video screen cut on and it showed an open lab. Metal floors and walls were lit by a ceiling full of lights. In the center of the room was a modest table, not unlike a coroner's table. Atop the metal surface were a dozen towels and a young woman with pale skin and blonde hair cut close. In a bra and underwear, she was laying across the table, her hands on her stomach and her eyes closed.

Adam, Jin, Sarah, and Alex all stopped when they saw the sight. "Uh..." Jin stumbled.

"Is she reenacting Snow White?" asked Adam.

Sarah ventured, "I'm going to guess this is a spell."

"Emma, put your damn clothes on," Alex yelled at the screen.

The mystic's eyes opened and she turned to the camera. Completely white, her stare was devoid of emotion and yet unnerving. Her short hair flowed in a wind that wasn't there. "Jesus, that's freaky," muttered Adam, having to look away.

"I'm working," Emma said, her voice charged like a bolt of lightning about to streak across the sky. She faced the ceiling again and closed her eyes.

The face of a young man appeared in the monitor, gigantic in proportion thanks to how close he was to the camera. "Hey guys," Jason said, his voice booming thanks to the closeness to the mic. "Sorry about the informal attire."

"Step back, Jason," Sarah said, the only one of the four in the briefing room not flinching at the sound.

"Sorry," he said, stepping back. He was glowing ever so slightly, a hint of blue around the edges of his image. The video was also beginning to roll. "Emma's trying to confirm something. Give us a minute and we'll report in." He deactivated the feed abruptly.

Alex sighed and tore open one of his energy shots. "I'm going to go get some croissants," he said before he downed the whole shot.

"I'm afraid not," announced Assif. Everyone in the room turned as the Middle Eastern man entered. Older than the rest of them, he didn't hesitate as Sarah and Alex both rose to their feet, standing crisply at attention. "Time may be of the essence." He carried a folder as well as a saucer of tea. "We have just received—" He looked at the seat at the head of the briefing room table and saw Alex's stuff. He looked at Alex, looked at his coffee and folder, then at Alex again.

"Sorry, sir," Alex said quickly, moving his affects. "I wasn't sure if you were here." Adam and Jin both snickered. Even Sarah smiled.

"Sarah is next in command, not you," Assif told him. "And besides, you know I never leave." Adam turned to Jin and mouthed 'told you'. "As I was saying," Assif began to explain as he sat down, "we have just received confirmation of a strange happening moving out of Russia and into Belarus."

"Paranormal events rarely cross national borders," Alex said, as if beginning to catalog all the details of what was clearly about to become their next operation.

"Correct," Assif nodded. "They rarely cross any borders, be they city, state, or regional. This one, however, has crossed all of them. Repeatedly." Assif punched some numbers into a control pad by his seat. The monitor came alive, getting the other four's attention. A map of Europe appeared, then it zoomed in on western Russia. "The first sighting was in Ufa. Odd but nothing particularly out of the ordinary. Bizarre things happen all the time."

"What happened, odd or otherwise?" asked Sarah.

Rather than answer, Assif continued with his report. "The next major sighting was in Kazan." The map flashed at the two cities, showing them on the display. Immediately, the others began to get a sinking feeling. "Then Nizhny Novgorod, then Moscow." The cities all flashed, a clear line forming. "At midnight," Assif said with growing worry, "it was sighted in Minsk."

Sarah turned from the video. "What was sighted?" she asked Assif.

He looked at her and answered clearly, "A train." The rest of her face a placid mask, Sarah's eyes shut in subdued restraint.

Alex, Jin, and Adam all glanced at each other, not quite following. "You're the intel officer and you don't know about the Ghost Train?" Sarah asked, not needing to see their expressions to know the significance was lost on Alex.

He made a gesture of accepting his cluelessness. "I mean, I know ghost trains. We've dealt with two in my time with the Responders. But THEE Ghost Train?" He shrugged. "I haven't come across that mentioned in my research."

Assif defended him to with a bit of an aside. "It isn't the most common harbinger of sorrow, but it is...significant."

"Do we have confirmation that this is The Ghost Train?" asked Sarah with some emphasis on the singularity of the train.

"I'm waiting to hear from Jason and Emma," said Assif, pointing at the screen in reference to the thaumaturgists. He turned to Alex and Sarah on his left. "Your team will be airlifted onto the train. You are to infiltrate it, ascertain its destination and arrival time, and then do whatever you must to keep it from arriving at its destination."

Sarah nodded crisply. Alex did as well, adding, "Understood."

"Assemble your team...which will probably involve waking up a few of them, and then move out," said Assif. "We have standing air clearance with Belgium and Germany and I have obtained short-term clearance for Poland and Austria. I am still waiting to hear from the ambassadors of Switzerland and the Czech Republic."

"Yes sir," Emma said, standing up. The others stood nominally at attention as Assif departed. Once he was gone, Sarah turned to Alex. "Do you want point, or support?"

"Since I don't know what's going on, I guess support," reasoned Alex.

"The Ghost Train is one of the modern portents of calamity," Sarah explained to him but for the benefit of all three of the men. "It travels across a great distance and when it arrives at its destination, bad things happen."

From the other side of the table, Adam raised a hand and asked, "I'm going to regret this, but how bad?"

"The Ghost Train traveled all through South America before pulling into a Tren Urbano station in San Juan Puerto Rico. Sixteen hours later, Hurricane Maria would make landfall. Before that, it arrived in Baga Nigeria in 2015. Before that, New York City, America in 2001." Sarah looked at her teammates to see that they understood the scope. "When the train arrives, whenever it arrives, the death toll is always in the thousands. If not higher. Documentation suggests it arrived in Sarajevo on June 28th, 1914."

"The Assassination of Archduke Ferdinand," Alex connected. "That was the precipitating factor that led to the start of World War I."

"Best case scenario," said Sarah, "We're looking at a natural disaster or a terrorist attack. Worst case? World War III."

"Jesus," whispered Adam.

To Alex, Sarah ordered, "Assemble the team. I'm going to go and confer with Jason and Emma."

"Yes sir," Alex said as Sarah departed. Alex exhaled and closed his eyes, not awake enough to handle another end-of-the-world scenario so soon. He headed over to where Sarah had been sitting and picked up her espresso cup and saucer. He walked to the door and just stood, the drink extended accessibly.

A second later, Sarah returned. "Thank you," she said, accepting the saucer from him and heading out again.

"Let's get to work," Alex told the other two as he gathered his own things.

The door slid apart and Sarah found Emma shouting, "Push!" Jason was standing over her, pushing her right calf boot onto her foot as she tried to wiggle her foot into the light tan footwear. With a sudden shift, her foot made it into the boot and Jason fell, collapsing between Emma's legs as she still laid on the medical table.

Sarah's slight British brogue peeked through when she asked, "Am I interrupting?"

"No, no," said Jason, getting up. He swept his black hair, longer on one side than the other, towards his right shoulder, only for the heavy locks to fall right back down into his eyes again. "We were just..." He gestured at Emma's stylishly fully clothed state.

Sarah nodded, not sure if she was indifferent or disappointed to the lack of impropriety between the two thaumaturgists. "Assif has briefed me on the situation," said Sarah as she stepped more fully into the featureless white room. The space was so devoid of decoration, it made even a sterile operating room seem colorful and vibrant. "Do we have confirmation that it is the Ghost Train?"

"I'm afraid so," Emma told Sarah.

Sarah was not comforted by that answer. "Have there been any other harbingers to appear?" She asked Jason, "I know magic and psychic stuff works on different wave lengths. Anything psychic come up?"

"Nothing obvious, for either of us, but we haven't spent that much time looking," said Jason as he came over, pulling on his trench coat. Again, he whipped his hair out of his face, causing it to return right back to the previous spot. "While Emma was confirming the Ghost Train is, in fact, THEE Ghost Train, I was looking into the lore. Turns out, the farther away it first appears, usually the bigger impact it's going to have. The Ferdinand appearance was a trip documented at just over 3200 kilometers. Ufa to Paris? Looks to be well over 4000 kilometers."

"So this time, the Ghost Train is predicting an event a third again worse than World War I," said Sarah. "Joy."

"Just another day at the office," said Emma, getting her own trench coat.

Commandant Nicolas Autin opened his office door, a donut in one hand and a paper cup of coffee in the other. His blue uniform shirt clashed against the dark navy of his tactical vest as he entered his office. “<Let me understand this clearly,>” he said in French. “<You, operatives of the United Nations, are requisitioning a municipal police troop helicopter.>” He set his coffee on his desk and, as he took a bite from his donut, faced Alex Tolkien in his doorway. “<Is this about right?>”

Alex entered the office, Til behind him. The big German agent had to tilt his head to step through the door, then he closed it behind him. The three alone in the Commandant’s office, Til stood against the door, his meaty hands held respectfully before him.

Alex took a more conversational approach as he followed Autin to the desk. “<We’ve got a situation that we’re investigating. When the time comes, we’ll make an announcement to the Parisian authorities. For now, though, it’s UN jurisdiction.>” He was quick to spin the statement as a favor. “<You guys don’t need this. You’ve got real crimes to deal with. Let us handle the far-fetched, maybe-maybe-not crap.>”

The Parisian officer half-chortled into his coffee. “<You’re full of it, Tolkien.>” He indulged in a bite of his donut. “<I don’t like it when you come in here.>”

Alex smiled, as if the insult were merely a friendly barb. “<Because I’m an American or because I’m with the UN?>”

“<Those are the first two in a long list,>” the commandant assured him as he shuffled some papers around on his desk, juggling a dozen other issues that demanded his immediate attention. He set his coffee down and looked at a notice, getting distracted.

Whether he meant it as an insult to Alex or he was simply that busy, Alex wasn’t dissuaded. “<Nicolas,>” he said quietly and with respect, “<You know I can get an official requisition. But in the hours that will take, this situation could spiral from not a big deal into a big deal. I’m asking you as a favor, rather than coming to you with an order.>”

Nicolas looked over the edge of the notice and glared across his cluttered desk at Alex. “<Who is doing who the favor?>” the commandant demanded.

“<You’re doing me the favor,>” Alex said quickly and without hesitation, hands wide to appear as amenable as possible.

Autin lowered the notice and sat down, exhaling as he did. “<Seems I do a lot of those,>” he said, going for his coffee. “<Very one-sided relationship we have.>” Alex opened his hands simply and made no other

issue of it. "<But...>" the commandant of the police allowed, "<I know you can make this happen. I'll save you the time. This time,>" he added sincerely.

"<I owe you,>" Alex said with a grateful smile.

"<Considerably,>" said the commandant as he got out an authorization form from his desk drawer.

Farmland passed beneath the helicopter as it soared through the air.

"Are we still in Germany?" Emma yelled over the coursing wind. She was facing out at the grassy fields beneath her out the open door of the helicopter.

"We left Germany a while ago," answered Til, flying the helicopter and speaking through the headsets. "We're in Poland."

"We're approaching Poznan," explained Sarah as she looked ahead from the co-pilot position. "Alex reported that the Ghost Train was sighted there approximately fifteen minutes ago."

"Do we have a destination yet?" asked Isaiah from the bench in the rear, sitting between Emma and Eliot. "I was hoping Jason might have something."

"Our psychic hasn't found much," said Sarah, distracted with co-piloting duties as well as manning the communications. "But not to worry," she assured them. Til looked warily over at her but said nothing. Sarah turned the channel on the controls and asked, "Alex, this is Sarah. What's the timetable?"

Back in Paris, Alex paced in the briefing room. Jin sat at the center seat on the far side of the table, tapping on computer keys. On the main screen was a satellite map of the countryside, two icons on a collision course. "You should be within a few kilometers of it. You should see it."

Sarah began to search the horizon. Til asked, "How are we going to tell the difference between it and—" He fell silent when they spotted a steam engine coming around a grassy hill. "Never mind."

Great plumes of steam came pumping out of the mighty engine as it coursed across the grassland. The engine was a vibrant, bright blue. The color was matched by the cars that traveled behind it, dark black rooftops capping their similar, ornate build. Brass highlights traveled from engine to

caboose, framing the train as both herculean feat of engineering as well as a scientific work of art.

"We've got sixteen cars," Sarah reported.

"Fifteen," corrected Til.

Sarah paused and looked at him, then counted. "Sixteen."

"Fifteen," he insisted. When she began to speak again, he clarified, "You don't count the engine."

"Of course you count the engine," she argued.

"If you want to be wrong," he told his superior.

"There are sixteen cars, including the engine," Sarah told Alex as a compromise.

Back in Paris, Alex nodded. "So fifteen cars."

Til began to speak but Sarah held a finger at him as his only warning. He dropped it, telling Alex, "We're sending pictures to you now."

Alex turned to Jin who punched some controls. They both turned to the main display and it showed a rapid succession of still shots of the train. It was an ancient train, something from the 19th century, with wooden paneling secured with sturdy metal bars. With the telescopic lens on the still shots, they could see where the blue paint was chipped in places but otherwise the train looked very well cared for. It was hardly a neglected artifact but a well-cared for workhorse that moved more than it was idle.

Alex turned to Jin even as he spoke into his headset. "Emma, Sarah, does anything in the literature suggest any anti-aircraft danger? If not, I'd recommend just a straight rooftop disembark."

Sarah turned around in the co-pilot seat and looked back to the mystic. Emma shook her head and shouted, "Nothing that I saw."

Sarah faced ahead and began to undo her seatbelts. "Neither of us found anything to suggest a danger."

"Til, approach the fourth car," said Alex. "It looks like it has the sturdiest roof. Line up speed and let the others drop."

"Yo, Alex," asked Eliot. "Are we repelling or is Emma going to float us?"

"Why are you asking me? Ask Emma," Alex asked.

Eliot suddenly blushed in embarrassment and looked at her. "I'd rather not, even before that comment," Emma said. "I don't want to risk using magic before we know what we're getting into."

"Agreed," said Sarah as she came around the co-pilot seat. The helicopter began to bank in a controlled turn, already beginning to line up with the train tracks beneath them. Sarah grabbed up one of the black repelling lines in a tight coil by the door and began to loop it through her tactical belt. "We descend in ten," she called over the wild air currents.

"Ten...minutes?" Eliot asked.

As Isaiah confirmed his Stetson hat was clipped to his jacket, he told Eliot, "One more dumb question and you don't get to go." They all gathered together around the exit, steadying themselves as best they could in the modest helicopter.

The tactical transport slowed rapidly and Til shouted, "Good to go." Sarah took a step out and jumped over the side of the helicopter. Isaiah waited only a beat and then leapt out the other side.

Emma looked at Eliot, her blonde hair whipping in her face. "I hate this part," she laughed nervously, then squealed when she jumped out. Eliot sighed, shook his head, then followed Isaiah's leap. He went barreling into the rapid air of the helicopter's wind before sliding in a controlled manner down the black repelling cord. He descended only a dozen or so meters before his feet skated on the smooth rooftop of the train. He began to skid but Sarah and Emma both caught him and stabilized him.

Once his feet were solid, Eliot unclipped his belt as Sarah announced, "Clear!"

"Roger," came Til's voice through her earpiece. The helicopter suddenly began to veer away, four black ropes following wildly behind.

With Til's departure, Sarah turned towards the rear of the train and touched her earpiece. Barely the size of a tiny hearing aid, the contact changed the channel and she said, "Isaiah, do you have an entrance yet?"

"I do," he answered, his voice heard by all three on the roof. "There's a door into the car. Looks like it's the dining car."

"Alright, we're descending," Sarah told him. She pointed to Emma and Eliot and gestured for them to climb down the ladder on the side of the train. As they started, Sarah pulled out her pistol. She checked the rounds, then followed after them.

Emma descended the ladder, heavy soles of her operations boots gripping tight the metal rungs of the ladder. She swung inside through the

narrow gap between the train cars and onto the metal platform. Isaiah was there and he helped guide her onto the textured metal. Once she was safely out of the raging wind, he went to help Eliot who was just behind her.

Emma went ahead and ventured to the train car and turned the brass handle. The door rattled when she opened it, discovering on the other side of the threshold a dining car full of well-dressed passengers. More than a few eyes turned to her, none sure what to make of the young woman in black cargo pants and a dark blue sweater beneath a heavy trench coat. Quite a few looked unnerved. Women averted their eyes behind crepe hats. Men tugged down their vests as their hackles rose. Silk and satin dotted the wardrobes of everyone, as did thick makeup and thin veneers of discretion.

The train car itself was cramped. The narrow seats and a wooden paneling were meant to look like a high-end café, but it lacked the space of such. Instead, servers moved laterally between the seats with barely enough room to push carts as they dashed to the kitchen at the head of the car.

One server quickly rushed towards Emma, white waist coat contrasting with slicked-back black hair and a pencil-thin mustache. “<I’m sorry, ma’am,>” he said in an older French accent, “<But you must be—>” He was stunned silent when Isaiah and Elliot came through next, Sarah at the rear. The other three dressed similarly in dark tactical regalia only further stalled his thinking.

Emma glanced back at Sarah briefly, then told the server in accented French, “<Forgive me. I, uh...>” She looked down at her clothes. “<We’re American,>” she suddenly told him with a nervous smile. She tried to overemphasize her accent.

“Speak for yourself,” Isaiah growled at her.

“<We need to speak to the train guard,>” Sarah said, stepping passed the others to address the waiter. When he hesitated, she tried, “<Conductor? Manager?>”

The waiter was overwhelmed. “<Let me...the maître d.>” He turned and rushed off. A few eyes were still on the four, though not as many as Emma alone. Well-dressed people like out of an ancient silver screen film were dining on small meals. Rich white tablecloths were embroidered and laid elegantly on the table of each of the booths on the left side of the car. Rich paneling overhead was that of a painted forest canopy. Oil lamps dotted the walls along each booth while a central chandelier flickering a bit as the train bumped a bit.

The walkway was narrow, allowing precious little space between wall and dining spaces. A serving crew of half a dozen quickly moved about,

mostly placing dishes in a single basin right by the four intruders. The white-uniformed men didn't so much as glance at the four except to avoid a collision as they rushed.

Just as Sarah was about to address her team, the far door opened and a man in a black and white uniform appeared. A formal outfit like the other servers, he walked with a presence and title that matched his long black tailcoat. "<Good evening, sir,>" he said to Isaiah, as if deliberately looking passed Sarah. "<I am afraid that we have an—>"

Sarah stepped in front Isaiah to get the man's attention. "<I want to speak to the train guard,>" she told the maître d. "<Not some overstuffed peacock.>"

The senior server grew irritated. "<Ma'am, I'm going to have to ask you to leave.>"

"<Excellent,>" she told him without hesitation and without smile. "<I would be happy to. Please have the train guard escort me back to my cabin.>"

The maître d glared for only a second, then turned his head. He said something quietly to the server who had first spoken to them as he tugged at his coiffed cuffs. "<Wait right here,>" he told her, almost like it was a threat.

"<I plan to,>" she returned. He turned and rushed to the tail end of the car while the server went towards the head. Left in their wake were astonished men and women from a previous age, unprepared to deal with her gaze. Rather than feign concern with their glances, Sarah turned back to her team as they cloistered by the door. She tapped her earpiece and whispered, "Alex, can you read me?"

Through a burst of static, he answered, "Not well but we hear you."

"We're inside," said Sarah. "The situation is stable."

"For the moment," Isaiah added.

Sarah gave him a wry look, causing him to snicker. "The train appears to be an older model, matching the exterior I'd venture," she reported through her earpiece as she looked around the train door. "Have we gotten a hit on the train number?"

Back in Paris, Alex turned to Jin. The Korean hacker shook his head, prompting Alex to answer, "Still nothing. Odds aren't good that we won't come up with anything. Any kind of time frame?"

Sarah began to look for clues but it was Emma who spoke up. "Old. 1800s. Nobody in here has a machined button on their clothes," she whispered.

"On it," Jin pre-emptively told Alex. He tapped his own earpiece as he typed with one hand. "Sarah, look around for any additional signs. If we can narrow the time frame down even further, that will help."

As the others began to turn, Sarah belayed the command to her subordinates. "Hang on. I'm hesitant to separate. We still don't know what kind of a situation we're in."

"Do you think you're in danger?" asked Alex.

Sarah turned and looked at the diners in the car. "It's hard to say. I've requested to speak to the train guard." In Paris, Alex looked confused and glanced at Jin. The computer technician mouthed 'conductor' at him and Alex nodded in appreciative confirmation.

Sarah was about to say more as she turned to find Eliot and Isaiah crowding around a half-eaten plate of chocolate cake. The pair froze when they realized Sarah had noticed them. She stared at them both in awe and exclaimed, "You can't be this dumb!"

"I know," agreed Emma before she took the plate from Eliot's hand, the fork from Isaiah's, and cut herself a bite. "You didn't offer to share. Rude much?"

Sarah turned her ire at Emma. "What the bloody hell?" she exclaimed.

"Oh come on, you can't be in danger if there's chocolate cake," Emma told her as she took a bite. She scrunched her face at the taste and considered it for a moment, then decided it was acceptable. She cut another bite and handed the plate to Sarah, who lacked the wherewithal to refuse it. She looked at Eliot and Isaiah but they had both retrieved a similar plate from the desert cart next to the door. Sarah looked down at the plate and cocked her head to the side, considering the dessert.

In Paris, Assif entered with Jason right behind him. They came in to find Alex sitting next to Jin, the two comparing notes on a pair of tablets. "Update, please," said Assif as he took his spot at the head of the table. He nodded at the video screen and asked, "Where are we?"

"The train has been spotted crossing into Germany," Alex reported as he focused on his tablet. "Sarah's team has entered the train but they

aren't immediately finding any information." With a swipe of his hand, he digitally threw pictures of the train from his tablet to the main screen opposite Assif. "They have dispersed to try and identify the train's destination and find the timetable for its arrival."

"Good," Assif concluded. "How is communication?"

"Spotty, but nothing unusual," Jin answered. "It's about what'd you expect given the ranges and terrain we're dealing with."

"But nothing in the train is interfering with the signal," Assif pushed. Jin shook his head. Assif turned to Jason. "And you still have contact with Emma?"

"I'm with Emma, and I can feel the others," said Jason. He whipped his hair again. "The thing is, I know they're talking to people, interacting with people. I can feel that they're in the presence of other people but I can't feel the other people."

"How do you mean?" asked Alex.

Jason tried to figure out how to put it into words. "You know 'can't see the forest for the trees'? I can feel the forest that they're walking through but I can't sense any trees." He faced Assif. "Whatever environment they're in, it's unusual. Which, you know, we all kind of expected."

"True," Assif confirmed. "Never the less, I want you both to stay in contact. If that contact is lost for whatever reason, I want you to alert me immediately so that we can have time to activate our contingency plan."

"Right," Alex nodded. He then asked, "What is our contingency plan?"

The armory doors parted to reveal a massive explosive situated in a black duffel bag. Assif looked at the bomb of exorbitant size, then looked to Adam and Til as they exited the storage room. "I take it the device is ready," Assif asked them both.

Adam nodded, scratching at the crimson beard every bit as scraggily as the rest of him. "Yeah, it is," he said. The weapons specialist wiped his hands with a rag as he approached. "It's got magnetic placement plates so you should be able to place it pretty much wherever it needs to go." He nodded back to Til. "Simple detonator sequence. It can be set for proximity, timed, or remote detonation."

"What about a countdown tampering?" asked Assif.

Adam snickered. "This ain't the movies. It's got a simple on-off switch."

"I'm more worried about something paranormal," said the director of the office.

"It's got our usual precautions," Adam informed him. "Silver. Cold iron. Some runes. I mean, it's definitely not tamper proof but it'll bring down any bridge or...or whatever has to come down to stop the train."

"Let's hope that won't be necessary," Assif said with a somber but approving nod. He exited the armory to find Alex waiting for him in the hall. "Has there been a development?" he asked.

"Yeah, that," Alex said with a nod at the armory. "I'm not a big fan of detonating explosives to solve our problems."

"Few are, which is as it should be," Assif said, walking down the narrow hallway. He headed towards the window encased in ancient wrought iron. Next to the window, he pressed the button for the elevator. "I don't care for force of any kind, but if derailing a train is the only way to stop a global war, so be it."

Alex didn't argue, but agreed. "I know. I just...I don't think I'll ever be comfortable when we 'entertain' these worst-case scenarios."

"Nor should you," Assif said as the elevator arrived. He opened the metal railing and stepped inside, Alex joining him. He closed the scaffolding and hit the button for the top floor where the command center awaited. "Which is as it should be," he remarked as the doors slid shut.

Sarah turned around as a bellied man approached. He wore a dark tan shirt beneath a black jacket and a bowler hat atop a head bereft of hair. His pockets jangled as he walked and old shoes were lacquered to still carry a shine. He had the eyes of a man of the law and a tightly trimmed Kaiser Beard. "<Ma'am,>" he said with a click of his heels. His eyes burned with intensity, not anger or disapproval; merely the glower of a working man who had a dozen other things he needed to be doing at that very moment. "<What seems to be the trouble?>"

Sarah met his gaze with respect but not deferment. "I'm disoriented," she answered in English, not bothering to masquerade confusion. "What is this train's destination?"

Unblinking eyes stayed fixed on her. "It's on your ticket, ma'am," he said, English stained with the accent of French colonies. He then laid out a thinly veiled threat. "You do have your ticket, I presume."

"In my cabin," Sarah lied without any hint of pretense to make her lie seem plausible. "Where did we set out from?"

"Also on your ticket," he answered curtly. He glanced behind Sarah. "I was told," he said with a bit of a hop on his heels, "That I'd find you with three others, including another young lady, dressed as yourself. A Jewish-looking fellow, too."

Sarah nodded, stepping to the side to allow a server carrying a tray of food to a newly-sat table. "We got tired of waiting for you," Sarah told the man, knowing it would prickle his disposition. "I sent them to stretch their legs. They'll return momentarily."

"You sent them," repeated the train guard, as if impressed. "Your family, are they?"

"What time are we set to arrive?" Sarah asked.

"I'd like you to tell me your cabin number," said the man, looking up at Sarah. "Let's go and see if we can't find that ticket of yours."

Across kilometers and national borders, Alex and Jin both listened to the exchange. They could scarcely hear Sarah's conversational partner, and even her words were fading in and out. Still, bursts of clarity had them trying to piece together the whole of the conversation.

"I think it's inappropriate for a gentleman to ask a lady's room number in public," Sarah returned stone-faced.

"Ma'am, I don't think you have a ticket," said the guard, shifting his weight, preparing to either stand more comfortably or to throw a punch.

Sarah didn't retreat but verbally pirouetted. "Let's pretend I don't," she said, with no smile but a softening tone. "How much would one cost? I'll pay for tickets again if it will give you some peace of mind."

Back in Paris, Alex turned around to Jin. "Do we have any gold in the reserve?" He looked at Jason who stood in the doorway. "Do we have some antiques or..." Jason was startled, unprepared to be asked. "Come on," Alex prodded both of them into action.

"Gold?" balked Jin. "I...uh..." He opened a new window on one of his laptops and began to run some searches. "We've...we've got..." He scoured through digital accounts of the Responders available resources.

"Emma can transmogrify something," said Jason, more to Jin than to Alex. He watched the screen at the end of the room, focusing mostly on the audio playing over the briefing room's speakers.

"Yeah, but it won't last," said Alex.

Jason shrugged, looking even more like a goth teen than his haircut suggested. "So? It won't have to. Hell, I barely know any magic and I can turn something into gold for a minute or two."

Jin looked up from his computer, eyes wide. "Wait, what? Really?"

"No, not really, it's..." Jason hesitated, not sure where to begin with explaining.

"Worry about your retirement account later," Alex told Jin before he turned back to the screen. It showed a satellite map with the training inching closer and closer to Paris. He reached to one of the laptops and turned it towards him. "Jin, keep monitoring Emma." He began to clack on the keyboard.

Jin was taken by surprise. "Wh...how will I know if something's gone wrong?"

"If she stops talking, that means she's probably punching somebody," Jason chuckled from the doorway.

"He's not wrong," Alex smirked before he stood. "Emma, this is Alex. How are things with you?"

"Fine, Alex," said Emma as she turned sideways to slide past some passengers. The older pair smiled to the young girl, the man nodding his hat to her. She smiled back as they passed, her smile fading the instant they were beyond her. "I'm towards the...port? The...whatever, I'm heading towards the caboose-part of the train. I'm in a cabin train or whatever they're called. Did the conductor ever come and talk to Sarah?"

"He did," Alex confirmed.

"How's that going?"

"As well as it ever does," he answered.

"That's a wide spectrum of bad," said Emma, waving her hand over a door, feeling it magically and confused by the results. Engaging magic caused her to glow, as if encased in subtle light. Her blonde hair fluttered just a bit, more so than the breeze in the train car should have elicited. Her eyes lit, but just as the magic began to build, she released her effort and returned to the mundane appearance of a college-age girl in subdued tactical attire.

As she moved to the next door, repeating her magical scan, Alex remarked, "Remember that time Sarah had to do that speed-dating thing?"

Emma slowed down as her expression grew worried. "We're about to all get thrown off this train, aren't we?"

"Probably," said Alex. "What are you finding?"

Emma resumed, going down the line of doors, most of which were pulled closed, with shades tugged down over the small windows. "Not much," she reported. "Everything's...it's like it's here but it's not here. It takes up space, casts a reflection, has a shadow, but the space being taken up isn't being taken up with anything."

Alex looked back at Jason who shrugged just as much at a loss as he. "Okay. We've got Jason here in case you need a consult."

"Good," said Emma, surprising all three men in the situation room. "This isn't like any ghost I've encountered."

"Omens of ill are always a bit atypical," Jason remarked sympathetically, even though Emma couldn't hear him. Jin leveled a look that said more perfectly than any words, 'what the hell does that mean'.

"Alright, keep at it," Alex told her. He hit the channel selector on his laptop and asked, "Isaiah?" A rattle of Yiddish came through the line. Alex frowned as he tried to understand what he was hearing. "Isaiah, can you hear me?"

Across the table, Jin typed deftly. His fingers clacked phonetically and checked the words he picked out against a linguistic database. He whispered suddenly, "It's Yiddish."

Alex was even more confused. "I thought Isaiah spoke Hebrew."

"I'm not sure I know the difference," Jin quickly admitted.

"<Ever had the chance to pick up any Hebrew?>" Isaiah asked over the line, clearly addressing someone on the train. He asked the question in Hebrew.

Quickly, Alex asked, "Reference the sky if you're okay."

"<I like Hebrew a lot,>" Isaiah remarked conversationally. "<It's like a sunny day for me to speak it.>"

Relieved, Alex relaxed a bit. "Keep at it, buddy," he said. "Keep an ear on him," he told Jin, who balked, genuinely unsure how Alex expected him to do that. Alex switched channels again and asked, "Eliot, please tell me you've got something."

"I've got something," said Eliot. He looked around the train car as it rattled along. "I'm in...I don't know, the smoking parlor?" There were a few tight booths with round tables and notches in them to keep drinks from sliding over the side. Two men shared a booth at the far end, cards and a small pile of chips between them. On the other side of the front of the car

was a train attendant in attire not dissimilar to the servers from the dinner car. He was fast asleep, his head slumped against the paneling with gold trim. A few trays of half-full decanters subtly vibrated as the car rumbled along the tracks. The candles that lit the room were behind frosted glass, giving the room an ambiance of an enduring twilight.

"I'm towards the end of the train," Eliot told Alex as he pretended to consider his liquor options. He opened a decanter and smelled, turning up his nose. "I haven't gotten too many people to talk to me, which is probably for the best because my French sounds like an Inspector Clouseau parody. But I did manage to find a time reference."

"What've you got?" Alex said, perking up. Jin did the same.

"I've got a painting," said Eliot, leaving the alcohol and approaching the opposite wall. "I know I've seen it before. I want to say in New York or Berlin or somewhere. One of those big art places. Big museums."

"Has it got a label?" Alex pushed.

"No such luck," said Eliot. "But I'm telling you, I know this." He glanced again at the card game at the other end of the train, confirming nobody was noticing or caring that he was talking to himself.

"What's the painting of?" Alex asked.

"It's guys against a wall, like they're about to be executed," Eliot described.

Alex waited for a second longer, then urged, "Feel free to add more."

"Um, the guys doing the shooting have muskets with bayonets?" Eliot strained. "I don't know, man. I'm not an art major."

"If World War III is on the line, you are," Alex told him incredulously.

Eliot tossed up his hands, totally at a loss. "Uh...they, uh, they've got tall black hats, the guys doing the shooting. They look kind of like those weird Russian hats – Cossack hats – but not quite. The dude in front has a gold or brass saber hanging off a long belt." He kept working. "It's night. Like, black night. No stars or anything. There's a building in the background. There are some bloody dead bodies in the foreground. The main guy about to get shot, he's got his hands up. He's wearing a white shirt and—"

"El Tres de Mayo!" Alex realized. He spun around to Jin. "When was it painted?"

"El what de what?" asked Eliot.

"El Tres de Mayo. The Third of May," explained Alex as he walked around the briefing room table to see Jin's computer just as the image appeared. "Francisco Goya painted it in 1814, commemorating the Napoleonic Wars."

Eliot stared. "...kay."

"Okay, we've got a time frame," Alex realized, going back around the table. "Goya painted it in 1814. What else happened in 1814?"

"We took a little trip, along with Colonel Jackson, down the mighty Mississippi?" joked Eliot.

"Thanks Jimmie Driftwood," Alex said as he worked. He touched his earpiece, changing feeds. "Assif, this is Alex. We've got a lead."

The vivid painting, the Third of May 1808, took up the main screen at the back of the conference room. Next to it, Alex reported, "In 1808, Napoleon's empire was at war with Spain and Portugal for control of the Iberian Peninsula." Standing next to the screen, Alex addressed the half-full room of five men. "This work was painted after the war was over. It was meant to commemorate the Spanish Resistance which was instrumental in defeating the French forces that occupied Spain during that time."

"While it depicts events from 1808, the painting itself was done in 1814," Alex further explained. "This may be important because in previous appearances of the Ghost Train, the train's time period often seemed to suggest a clue as to its destination as well as the coming tragedy that would result after its arrival. Thus far, this is the only indication of time we have to suggest when the Ghost Train is...placing itself."

"So wait, I'm confused," said Jason, sitting at the table between Assif and Til. "Is the painting a clue to what will happen, or is what the painting is about the clue?"

"Yeah," agreed Adam, sitting opposite Jason, between Assif and Jin. "Are we looking at a national invasion, or did something happen when the painting was completed that—"

"Let me just stop you right there," Alex started, "because we need—" He was cut off by Jason.

"Did they even have trains in 1808?" he asked to Jin. "Google that. I don't think they had actual trains."

"Well, they had steam engines back in the Roman times," Adam said as Assif rolled his eyes in growing irritation. "It just was easier to get slaves to do the work."

"Well, yeah, I knew that, but I mean did they have actual—"

"Anyway!" Alex said loudly. "Whatever historical inaccuracies the harbinger of death and destruction might have overlooked are beside the point, which is to stop the damn train."

"Where are we with that?" asked Assif.

Alex hedged. He glanced at Jin and Jason, both of whom seemed as apprehensive as he. "They've already made several attempts to, uh, varying degrees of success."

"Meaning?" asked Til.

The door to the engine slid open. A burly man with hair on his shoulders and none on his head stepped out into the comparative frigid cold. He wiped his face with grimy, coal-covered hands and exhaled with relief. He let out a shiver, then reached for the nearby shelf. He opened the cabinet doors and took out a small flask the size of his hand. He popped the top and took a swig.

When he lowered the flask, he saw Isaiah in the mirror. Standing behind him, the sniper had a pistol drawn and aimed at the back of coalman's head. "You're going to stop this train," he ordered.

The coal shoveler sniffed back some allergies and corked the flask again. "Not the brightest candle, are you?" he said as he returned the flask to the cabinet.

"What happened?" asked Assif, the rest of the table entranced.

"Tilt your head back," Emma advised him, guiding Isaiah's head back on his shoulders.

"No, tilt your head forward," Eliot said, pushing Isaiah's head back over his legs. "Let the blood drain—"

"No, back," Emma insisted, pushing his head back again.

"It didn't work," Sarah reported through her earpiece, ignoring the two's attempt to be helpful and Isaiah's growing rage with them both. She

paced in the small vestibule at the head of one of the sleeping cars. "Apparently coal shovelers are tougher than a coffin nail."

"That wasn't their only attempt at using force, but it was the most successful," Alex summed up for the others.

"Any other options?" asked Assif, the only one at the table not amused by Isaiah's experience.

"Well, while Isaiah was getting beaten by a drunken boxer," Alex explained, "Eliot did get us some important intel."

Eliot took the cards and shuffled them, then began to deal with short, crisp throws from the wrist. "<So yeah,>" he said in cheap French. "<I'm heading to Amiens. My brother, he's got a bottle-making shop that I'm going to apprentice at.>"

"<Is your brother older?>" asked one of the men he was playing cards with, just a few booths down from the Goya painting.

"<Much,>" said Eliot as he stamped the bottom of his cards on the table, aligning them in his hand. He shuffled the cards in about, to set them in numerical order. "<He raised me. My art's taken me places but I'm ready to settle down to a steady job.>"

"<And what is your series called?>" asked the other man as he shuffled his cards forward and back.

"<Garfield,>" Elliot told them with an earnest nod. "<It's a series of still paintings of an orange cat. I use it to explore the ennui of life.>"

"<Very good,>" said one of the men. He took from his pocket an apple and bit into it, then returned it to his pocket. "<Ennui is our natural state, I fear, especially once we finally pull into Orleans.>" Eliot only nodded while inside, he screamed with excitement.

"Orleans is the final destination, not Paris," observed Alex with a stunned look. "I'm kind of surprised by that."

"I'm more surprised that Eliot can gamble," said Til.

"I guess all those years of collecting Magic the Gathering cards paid off," was Jason's only theory.

"Til, Adam," Assif said loudly enough to be heard over the chatter. "Take the explosive to Artenay. It's the last accessible town before Orleans. The explosive must be ready to detonate if the team is not successful by the time the train passes Toury."

"The town just north of Artenay. Understood," Til said, already standing.

"On it, boss," said Adam, also getting up to leave.

"I want that to be an unused contingency," Assif told the others. "What is the team doing now?"

"Working their own contingency," Alex reported.

Emma stepped back into the kitchen car, shutting the door behind her. Her wind-blown hair was a mess that she quickly brushed out with her fingers. "No go."

"Nothing your magic can do?" Sarah asked.

Emma looked at a loss. "Maybe if I had all my books and resources? Could call some consultants, and had six months to prepare? Yeah, maybe. But I can't see any leverage here. Not right now. My magic isn't going to do anything."

"If your magic can't stop it, we may be out of options," said Sarah.

"This thing is old magic," Emma told her. "Pre-human magic. This is a force of nature. Or, you know, super-nature. But a couple of vulgar incantations without any foci aren't going to just...just transplant it onto another railway or something."

Sarah accepted Emma's assessment. She turned back to the dining car and looked at the people in the car. Several pairs of diners were enjoying sugared fruits with tea, speaking in clipped little words that could barely be heard over the movements of the great train.

One pair was standing to depart, an older man with a scratchy face leaving behind a coin for the tip. His apparent wife was a proper woman with a heavily made-up face and a prudish paranoia. Their departure left behind a young woman. With flowing locks of brown hair and wearing a white dress that rose to a high neck and sleeves that matched, she turned and looked out the window.

Sarah turned to Emma and said, "Round up Isaiah and Eliot." She leaned over to Emma and kissed her cheek, startling the mystic. Intensely surprised, Emma tried to play it off and departed, unsure how to respond.

But Sarah checked her reflection in the brass fixtures of the train and confirmed that the woman had noticed.

Beginning to follow Emma down the narrow walkway of the dining car, Sarah paused and smiled at the brunette who sat alone. "Can I join you?" she asked in English with an American accent.

"Pardon?" said the young woman. "Um..." She searched the booth, as though to confirm the seats were available, then said, "Yes. Please."

"Thanks," said Sarah, leaning into the accent a bit more. She removed her trench coat and sat it down. "Sorry," she said as she laid out the coat on the adjacent seat. "I'm still getting used to this thing. We wear them all the time in Boston." She sat down and sighed, rolling her eyes with relief. "I'm sorry to be such a Chatty Cathy. I'm just, my roommate and me, we rarely get out these days. We saw this train trip and we were both so excited. But she wants to sleep." She leaned towards the young woman. "I think the train makes her a little sick. The movements."

"Oh, how awful," said the young woman with a sympathetic hand to her collar.

"Oh dear, listen to me ramble," Sarah said. "I'm Susan Mikula." She stuck her hand rather bluntly at the young woman. "I'm an artist."

"Oh my," said the young woman. "I'm, uh, I'm Daphne Horlstone."

"It's nice to meet you, Daphne," said Sarah. She glanced around and remarked, "Any of those server guys around? I'd love to get something to eat."

"Fancy a strawberry?" Daphne offered with a friendly smile. She pushed the small but lavishly decorated plate towards Sarah. "My mother ordered them but she found them too sweet for her tastes."

"Too sweet? No such thing!" Sarah laughed and used the fork to slice off a tiny bit. "Yeah, I had their cake and I thought it was a bit too—" Her eyes went wide when the sugared bit of strawberry hit her tongue. "Wow," was all she could say.

"Too sweet for you as well?" asked Daphne.

"No," Sarah said, trying to keep from spitting out the strawberry right there. "No, no, that's not the, uh, nope." She smiled and swallowed. "No, that hit the spot."

"Have some tea," offered Daphne, pouring a tiny bit into the porcelain glass cup before Sarah. "It's chamomile."

"Oh, you're a doll," Sarah sang. She took a sip and sighed happily. "See, this is what I like. Nobody in Boston's got anything like this." She looked at the place-settings, brushing the soft fabric like it was a sleeping cat. "I'm glad me and Rachael took this trip."

"Rachael?" asked Daphne. "You're...roommate."

"Yeah," said Sarah. "Short hair. Looks a little like me, but younger. Got those really striking eyes, like she sees right through you." She leaned in again into the American accent as she described Emma.

"Is it just the two of you?" asked Daphne as she sliced into a candied apple on her plate, the silver fork clinking against the expensive china.

"We've also got her brother with us, and his tutor," said Sarah. "He's one of them Jewish fellows – the tutor, not Rachael's brother – but he seems really nice. And honestly, I never had a problem with Jewish people. I don't get the whole...thing."

"Her parents don't mind?" Daphne half-exclaimed. "My word, I'd fear my parents would faint if they even knew a Jewish man was on this train."

"Oh no, her parents are very accepting of the world," explained Sarah as she sipped some more of the tea. "That's part of why we live in Boston. It's one of the few places where people can, can just live." She tinted her words with a bit of fear.

"Whatever you do you mean?" Daphne asked.

Sarah averted her eyes, then looked guardedly at the socialite she sat with. "Daphne, you look like a good girl. A good soul. Can I trust you?" she asked. She grabbed Daphne's gloved hands empathetically. Daphne nodded quickly. Sarah waited, playing up her hesitation to almost melodramatic levels. "Me and Rachael...we're...we got one of them...we like to call it a Wellesley Marriage." She searched Daphne's face. "Y-you know what that is?"

Daphne's face was framed in confusion as she tried to rationalize the term. But then her eyes alit and her expression opened up. "The Ladies of Llangollen."

Now it was Sarah's turn to search. She leaned on her hand, surreptitiously touching her earpiece to activate it. "The Ladies of Llangollen," she repeated, as if searching her memory for the term.

In the time it took to run an internet search, she heard Jin in her ear, saying, "They were a couple of aristocratic women who lived together."

"I believe I've heard of them," said Sarah, trying to lean into appearing she was thinking. Her English accent slipped in and she rushed to say in American, "I, uh, I'm not sure. I'm still kind of new to the whole European scene." She stirred her tea.

"They were suspected of being lesbians," Jin told Sarah over the earpiece.

"Yeah," Sarah perked up in heavy American. "I think you get me. To be honest, me and Rachael were hoping that we'd have an easier time here."

"However do you mean?" asked Daphne, concerned.

"Well, we came to Paris. And I mean specifically to a city called Orleans?" she weighed out. "Rachael, she heard that they were, uh, an understanding sort of town. A place where people could...could just live their lives, you know? A couple of gals could be left alone to do what they do."

"And that isn't the case?" asked Daphne.

In the Responders' operations room, Jin smiled, slowly getting it. Alex looked at him and he explained, "She thinks this woman might be gay or bi or something. She's trying to spin the idea that the train's destination might not work for them."

"And that will reroute the train?" Alex asked. Jin's shrug said it all.

"That's not what we've found," Sarah told Daphne, back in the dining car. She looked down at her hands and rubbed her left ring finger. "In fact, I'm kind of dreading going back." She tried to affect a shade of terror in her voice. "I'm not sure people like me and Rachael are welcome there."

Daphne's face slowly drained of color. "How horrid," she whispered, the fear infecting her.

"Yeah," Sarah agreed. She looked at Daphne and gave the performance of a lifetime when she implored, "Anybody like me and Rachael needs this train to go somewhere else."

Total darkness.

Total stop.

The sensation of deceleration didn't hurt but was utterly disorienting. A flash of confusion and a swirl of light and dark hit abruptly and from all sides.

Emma found herself in pitch blackness and unable to move. She started to panic, but clamped her eyes shut and focused. "It's okay, it's

okay," she whispered in the absolute sightlessness. Without any sense of where she was, she relied on mountaineering techniques to orientate herself in an avalanche. She spat, intending to see which direction her saliva trickled. Instead, it landed right back on her mouth. "Ugh!" she groaned in disgust. "Okay, okay," she told herself. "I'm supine," she slowly realized and accepted.

That connection gave her senses something to latch onto. She connected that she was laying on pavement, or something else cement, with cement above her. She felt heat and heard the rumble of far-off movement. Sounded like automobiles.

Emma closed her eyes, reaching deep inside of her. Her body began to charge, giving off a light from within. She sat up, leaning through the cement like she was leaning through a thick, viscous fluid. The top of her head rose out of pavement and her eyes exited. She opened them to realize she was looking out at the surface of a road. A tiny French hamlet was within sight, the sign announcing the public resources available. She turned her head and confirmed no one was around.

Emma stood, deducing she had manifested in a water sluice or similar insulation level in the road. She looked around the grassland and tried to find something to orientate herself. As she did, she spotted Isaiah walking out of a nearby field. A small lamb was trotting along with him, bleating curiously at him. "What happened?" Emma called.

"No idea," he answered. He wiped back short-cropped hair and put his Stetson hat back on his head, then wiped his face. "Everything went black, then whoomp." He looked down at the lamb and it bleated up at him. "Shut up," he told the fuzzy animal. It continued to follow him, its hooves clapping on the pavement.

Emma began to look around. As she did, Alex's voice came over her earpiece. "Emma, you okay?"

"Yeah," she responded. When she heard him call her name again, she taped her earpiece and repeated, "Yeah, I'm fine."

"Do you see Eliot or Sarah?" Alex asked, just as Emma spotted Eliot sitting up from behind a stone fence separating the edge of the road from the nearby field. He looked as disoriented as they were.

"Got Eliot," said Emma. "What happened? Sarah told me to locate and retrieve Isaiah and Eliot but when we were heading back to the dining car, everything went black. Next thing we know, we're outside of some French town."

Jin chimed in. "Sarah began speaking with someone. She mentioned Wellesley Marriages and the Ladies of Llangollen."

Emma thought for a second. "Why do those sound familiar?"

"Because they were lesbians." The three turned as Sarah walked down the road towards them, her trench coat under her arm. "I spotted that aristocrat and wagered she might be...not straight. I persuaded her that the train's destination wasn't welcoming to a pair of unmarried women living together."

"What in the world made you think she was a lesbian?" Isaiah challenged.

"Gaydar?" Elliot guessed.

"Is that really a thing?" Isaiah asked. They both looked at Emma and she waffled her hand ambiguously. Isaiah let it go. "Besides, I thought Orleans was a pretty liberal town." To that, Eliot just shrugged, having no idea.

"I didn't know if she had the clout to demand anything," Sarah said, exhaling with some relief. "But it's amazing what can happen if a wealthy woman demands her way." She asked, "What's the status of the train, Alex?"

Back in Paris, Alex turned to Jin. "Based off track sensors..." Jin trailed off as he read the data. "Looks like it's heading back the way it had come. If this goes like previous encounters, it will disappear after it reaches the sight of its first spotting."

"Looks like you did it," Alex told her. "Good job. We'll send a car to retrieve you."

"Good deal," said Sarah. She began walking for town, the other three following.

Alex tapped his earpiece off and removed it. He laid it on the table, only to notice Assif in the door of the briefing room. "We did it," he said with relief.

"Well done," Assif said simply. He departed. Alex and Jin shared mild disgruntled looks at the underwhelming praise.

Assif crossed the office of the Responders, passing the open-floor office that made up the majority of the top floor. He walked passed the elevators and entered his own square room segregated from the others. Stacks of papers and books filled the office of an overworked government agent, along with an ancient analog computer. The chief waded his way

through the stacks, careful not to let anything fall. When he got behind the desk, he sat down with some weight and sighed.

He pulled out the middle drawer on the left side of his desk. Doing so caused a brass stop watch to shuttle forth, banging against the drawer front. The antiquated stopwatch was stopped at the exact moment they had received news of the Ghost Train. With the timer was a notepad, showing times. Assif took the notepad and wrote down the numbers on the stopwatch, adding them to a list of times that was growing gradually but steadily shorter. He returned the notepad to the drawer and restarted the timer. With another sigh, this one weighed with fear, he shut the drawer.

For more paranormal adventures, check out [Rhest for the Wicked](#). It's available now in ebook or in print. Or you can read more short stories at:

Facebook: <https://www.facebook.com/Rvaldrich/>

Twitter: <https://twitter.com/rvaldrich>

And, of course, you can find more tales of the odd and unusual at ...

Teach^T_H_ESky.com