

Leo leaned out against the open window and took a deep breath of the icy air. The wind and rain whipped at him, forcing him to squint his eyes and clench his teeth into a grin. Though he could only just make it out, the small port town of Saint Elizabeth rose into view from beneath the hillsides. The gaslight of its streetlamps glittered like jewels through the fog, illuminated by the overcast sky and the last traces of the evening sun. Leo looked on with eagerness, the town wasn't much, just a small trading hub, at least that was what he had been told, but for the young man, it was so much more. It was freedom, freedom to stretch his legs, freedom to get the hell out of this damnable train, freedom to avoid his travelling companions for as long as possible. As if on cue, he felt a sharp tug at the hem of his coat as he was yanked back into the train cabin. He heard Julia hiss from beneath her breath.

“Close that bloody window, you are letting all the heat out”

Leo felt like arguing, he always did when it came to Julia. But a quick glance confirmed that the third member of their party, the merchant, was still asleep, bundled in his traveling coat and leaning against the corner of their compartment. The merchant didn't like his sleep disturbed even at the best of times. Being woken by an argument would likely send him into a fit. The look on Julia's face suggested she knew that too. Leo clenched his jaw, latched the window shut, then slumped back into his seat, glowering across at Julia. She stared daggers back at him. For a while, the two simply sat in mutual contempt. The only sounds were the trundling tracks beneath them and the occasional snore that emanated from the merchant.

A bell sounded from a carriage further up. Slowly, it grew louder as the train's conductor made his way down the train. Eventually his voice could be heard, calling out a name Leo didn't recognise. It was probably another border village. It would likely be the first of many such trips for the conductor. As he passed their compartment, the booming voice and ringing

bell proved too much. The merchant snuffled and roused himself from his corner. Blood shot eyes scanned the room from beneath dark bushy brows.

“Vaht did man say?”, The merchant’s thick accent was made worse by his grogginess.

“Elandenhof station,” said Julia.

The merchant stroked his beard and gazed up at the ceiling as if deep in thought.

“Two more stops, then we geht off.”

With that, he turned back towards his corner and within moments had begun to snore again.

Julia watched the merchant with awe.

“How does he do that?”

“I think he used to be a soldier, I’ve heard they learn to sleep anywhere.” Leo grunted.

“That’s my guess anyway, he’s never spoken about his past to me.”

Julia pursed her lips, as if Leo’s answer only raised more concerns for her. She stood up, taking time to adjust her petticoat from beneath her coat and shawl.

“I’m going for a walk.”

Leo didn’t try to stop her. He knew that if the merchant woke again and saw one of them missing there would be trouble. But in this case, it would be trouble directed towards her and not him. He was fine with that. As soon as she had closed the compartment door, he was back out the window. The rain had turned to sleet which forced him to close his eyes. Within moments he felt his lips turn blue. Leo didn’t mind the freezing air, in fact, he found it much preferable to the musty smell of the old merchant and the girl. A few minutes later he heard the compartment door open behind him. He begrudgingly pulled his head back inside, closing

the window once again. Julia sat down, shivering, and clutching a small brown package between her pale fingers. She gave Leo another annoyed look.

“You will catch a cold if you keep doing that,” she said.

“You’re not my mother.”

Julia said nothing to Leo’s retort, instead she focused on unravelling her paper parcel. Leo’s stomach began to rumble as he recognised what was beneath the paper.

“Where did you get that?”

Despite Leo’s accusatory tone, Julia didn’t look up from her parcel of bread.

“The dining cart of course, I still had a silver half-penny left.”

The smell of the bread was like torment to Leo, he had spent his entire silver penny on a chocolate éclair the day before. It was the most delicious thing the boy had ever eaten but his memory of it did little to help his hunger now. He watched Julia tear a chunk of bread away from the loaf and plop it in her mouth. She noticed him staring at her and for a moment Leo thought she would torture him with her enjoyment. Instead, she sighed and tore another chunk of bread before holding it out for him.

Leo felt a wave of conflicted emotions. When Julia had asked him for some of his éclair he had refused, and it had tasted all the sweeter knowing the girl wanted some. Now that she was offering bread to him, he felt guilty. He was mad at himself for not sharing with her before. He was confused as to why Julia would show him any kindness at all. The two had been bickering ever since she had joined their small group. He was resentful that Julia would make him feel this way. He stared hard at the bread in her hand before taking it and thanking her softly. She smiled in a way that only confused Leo more and he had to turn away to stare back out at the now dark shapes of formless hills that rolled past the window.

The train trundled on as the two ate their modest meal in silence. As it pulled into the station, a quick look outside confirmed to Leo that Elandenhof was nothing more than empty fields and a few shacks. Other passengers bustled past their compartment. Outside, Leo could hear the attendants moving and removing luggage. Above all the clamour, the conductor's voice boomed out instructions for those coming and going. Despite all the noise, the merchant continued to snore in his corner. Leo had seen this many times. It was as if the merchant stayed aware of his surroundings even while he slept. The merchant could sleep through busy ports, stations, and even marketplaces, but the second someone touched his goods or mentioned his name he would be up and ready to do business. Leo wondered if the merchant even truly slept. Leo always made sure to never badmouth the old man while he was sleeping, just in case.

Eventually, the train was underway again. The sun had disappeared completely, leaving only the light of the carriage to dimly illuminate the group's small compartment. The outside world had melted away to nothing but shadows and howling rain. Leo could only bundle himself into his coat and stare up at the ceiling. Leo didn't mind the cold, but it was times like this that he missed his homeland. The southern coasts were warm even in winter. The bustling cities offered him plenty of places in which he could wander away from the merchant's stall. It had been different up north. Up north there were only wide-open plains, rolling hills, and freezing rain.

Each settlement they stopped at was just like the last, a row of houses built along a single road. Nothing to see or do. If he was lucky there might be a river he could go throw rocks in. Other young folk weren't much more entertaining. Most of them were like Julia. They had spent their entire life in a village with nothing to see or do. They couldn't comprehend ships bigger than their houses or cities with ten thousand faces. Leo often found himself waiting at

the merchant's stall, forced to listen to the old man's snoring. It had been months of tedious waiting. Julia's arrival only made things worse.

The Conductor's bell and booming voice announced the next stop as a place called Berenhout. Shortly after the train was pulling into another station. Leo didn't move from his seat. He had no interest in seeing another village. It was clear from the merchant's continued snoring that he did not either. This time it was Julia who was up and out the window, the top half of her leaning out into the rain and disappearing into shadow. Leo watched her incredulously.

“Hey! You are letting all the heat out.”

Julia ignored Leo's mocking tone which only made him even more irritated.

“You will catch a cold doing that.”

He did his best impression of an indignant Julia. She continued to ignore him. She swung her eyes around the dark frantically. The icy rain began to leave puddles in the compartment.

“It's night-time stupid,” Leo had had enough, “You're not gonna see anything anyway.”

Leo heard Julia huff before she pulled her head back inside. Shivering, she took a moment to rearrange her now wet and bedraggled clothes and hair. Leo thought she looked pathetic. She was in many ways. A poor orphan girl, who the merchant had hired in an act of perceived benevolence. In truth it was likely she was hired because she could read and write, something Leo couldn't do. That was the way the merchant did things. Leo himself had been sold the job as a way to lift him from poverty. His parents couldn't afford to feed him, and the merchant had promised them that Leo would have a better life and a future if he worked for him. In truth he was hardly more than an indentured servant. Good for manual labour and

little else. The merchant was constantly berating Leo, but he doted on Julia like she was his daughter. Leo found many reasons to resent the young girl.

“You look like a stray dog.”

Once again Julia said nothing to his insult. This was taking all the fun out of Leo’s teasing. Usually, she would be just as quick to insult him. Often it was Leo who would come away from their exchanges feeling wounded. She had a way of making him feel stupid.

As the train pulled out of the station, Julia, to the surprise of Leo, let out a small sob. Leo watched with wide eyes. Julia tried to hold it in valiantly. Her quiet cry barely audible at first. She clutched at her now soaked shawl and buried her face into it. Leo felt his own face turn red, he didn’t know what to say, he just looked down at his boots, away from the crying girl. He felt like he should say something, anything, to break the awfulness.

“You didn’t miss much; these farming villages are all the same.”

Julia’s lifted her head up and shot Leo a look of tearful rage.

“I spent my whole life in these farming villages.” A pained grimace erupted from her face. “I’ve never been further north than Berenhout.”

Leo was flustered. An angry Julia he could deal with. He had no experience with a crying one.

“I’ve never been this far north either, what’s the big deal? Why are you upset?”

“Because” Julia snapped, “I’m trapped in a small room going to an unfamiliar town in the care of someone who barely speaks the same language as me.” She threw her hands down in defeat, “All the while, I’m being harassed by someone who clearly hates me.”

Leo felt his own composure slipping.

“I- I don’t hate you.”

“Yes you do, you have been making my life hell ever since I agreed to join.”

Leo felt this wasn’t fair, he felt he could say much the same about Julia. But even he knew better than to antagonise a crying girl further. He ground his teeth for a moment before looking down to his boots once more.

“I’m sorry”

His apology hung in the air between Julia’s quiet sobs. Slowly she began to compose herself.

“Its ok,” she sniffed, “I’m just feeling a bit overwhelmed.” She used a dry part of her shawl to wipe away her tears. “You haven’t done anything wrong.”

Leo felt that wasn’t fair either. He had done plenty wrong to Julia, but he was at a loss as to what to say to make it better. He could only continue to stare at the floor. He was thankful when the Conductor’s bell began to ring throughout the train.

“Saint Elizabeth Station!”

The merchant woke with a snort. Tall oak trees of knotted muscle and pale bark rose from between his coat. He made a big show of yawning and stretching his crackling limbs to the sky. He turned to face his employees.

“This our stop dah? Saint Elzbeth?”

“Saint Elizabeth,” Julia corrected him.

The merchant saw Julia’s tear-stained eyes.

“Vaht is wrong?”

The merchant rose out from his coat and turned towards the boy.

“Leonardo, Vaht did you do?”

Leo flinched as the old man loomed towards him.

“It’s fine.”

Julia spoke loudly to make sure the old man could hear.

“He didn’t do anything.”

The merchant stood for a while. As if uncertain as to what to do next. Usually, his instinct to punish Leo was the correct one. Slowly he lowered himself down into his chair.

“Vell, Vatever, it is time for us to geht off train.”

The three made their preparations and then left the compartment for the now near filled carriageway. They huddled in amongst the crowd, following the merchant’s advice to stick together. As the crowd pushed through, the three were spat out into the busy train station. The merchant shunted his way towards the cargo carriage, the two younger ones followed in his wake. Two attendants were already making a small stack of crates in the middle of the platform.

The merchant nodded in satisfaction then cuffed Leo on the shoulder,

“Boy must make use of his youth.”

The merchant gestured towards the attendants. Leo begrudgingly begun unstacking crates from the train. For a while the merchant stood while Julia shivered, and the pile of crates continued to grow. Rain continued to pour down on the busy station as crowds filtered past like schools of fish through rocky streams.



When the crates were all unloaded the merchant helped pull a sail cover across his collection. He gave another nod of satisfaction, handed a small tip to the attendants, then turned towards his two employees.

“I go hire wagon, you two stay here and make sure nobody steals from us.”

The merchant gently lay a finger on Leo’s forehead

“Do not vander off.”

Leo and Julia were left alone with the crates and the crowd of faces flowing by. Leo pulled part of the sail across so that it formed a shelter from the rain and placed his and Julia’s bags beneath it. He huddled himself out of the rain and watched as Julia stood floundering. She stood out starkly in the crowd. Bumping into and apologising to each person who looked at her. Leo could remember the first time he went to the city and having his entire world suddenly feeling very small. When he caught her eye, he could see a familiar fear, but it was the first time he had seen fear on the girl’s face. He offered her place next to him beneath the sail, and a blanket from his luggage.

“It’s going to be ok.” He told her.