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Seren Rhys is freezing

A clock ticks, frost is white.
Stars travel through the night.

The railway station was deserted. The only thing that moved in its silent shadows was the big hand on the clock as it crept towards the hour of eight.

Seren stared up at it, hypnotised and weary. How could it go so slowly? Had she really only been waiting half an hour? It seemed like forever.

She was muffled in a heavy coat, a woollen hat, scarves and a shawl, but she had never been colder in all her life. Even with thick gloves thrust deep in her pockets she couldn't feel her fingers. Her toes were numb. In fact, if she didn't move

right now she would probably freeze to the spot, so she jumped to her feet and began to stamp up and down the bare platform, the thump of her clumsy boots ringing in the bitter night.

She stamped fourteen steps to the wall.

Fourteen steps back.

To the wall.

And back.

Over everything – the benches and the roof and the railway posters – a thin layer of frost shimmered like crushed diamonds in the light from the lamp. The night was so silent it scared her. She breathed out a cloud and then turned quickly as the stationmaster's door opened. A big man in uniform came out and stared at her.

'Are you on your own, miss?'

It was a stupid question and it annoyed her. There were a lot of cross answers she could have snapped out, but she swallowed them and just said, 'Yes.'

'Waiting for the 8.40, are you?'

'Is there any other?'

'Well, no. Not this time of night.'

He was a red-faced man, and he wore a peaked cap that looked as if it had been sat on more than

once. He stared down at her, as if she puzzled him. Finally he said, 'It's a rare cold night. You could go in the waiting room, but it's First Class. Are you First Class?'

She knew she wasn't. No one ever spent that sort of money on her, but she pulled out her ticket and looked at it. THIRD it said, in large letters. She put it back in her pocket before he could see it, drew herself up and said, 'Yes. That's right. First Class. Show me the waiting room, please.'

For a moment she thought he didn't believe her. Maybe he didn't, but he smiled, picked up her suitcase and set off along the platform. The case looked tiny in his hand, even though she had found it so heavy. She hurried after him to a door with *First Class Waiting Room* written on the frosted glass; he opened it and said, 'Here we go. This'll be a bit cosier. You'll be like toast in here till the train comes.'

She pushed past him into a warmth that was so wonderful she wanted to shout with sheer relief.

The room was small; there was a bench against each wall, a big table with an oil lamp on it, and best of all a fire in the grate, a pile of coals glowing scarlet under a coat of ashes.

She went straight across and huddled over it.

'You're fair frozen.' The stationmaster stepped back and looked at her curiously. 'I've not seen you round here before. Travelled a long way, have you?'

'I used to live in India.'

'Blimey! I expect it was hotter there?'

Despite herself, she allowed a tiny smile. 'A bit.'

'Couldn't stand that myself. All them flies and mozkeetos and tigers. Now, you sit down and make yourself comfortable. No one to disturb you. You'll hear the train easy enough.'

He went out, letting in a shiver of icy air. Seren pulled off her gloves and found her fingers were blue and numb. She dragged the heavy bench closer to the coals and sat on it, tucking her feet up and pulling her coat and shawl tighter round her.

This was so much better! Warmth began to thaw out her nose and ears and fingers; it was painful, but worth it. She yawned, wishing she could go to sleep, but she had to be careful not to miss the train.

The fire crackled and she watched it. Of course what she had told him about India was true – she had lived there once but only as a tiny baby. She

couldn't remember anything about it at all really, except a sort of vagueness of heat and the fierce blue glare of the sky.

And someone leaning over her, and kissing her.

She shrugged it away. Her parents had both died out there, and she had been brought home on the ship and had lived for twelve years at the orphanage of St Mary's. Even now she couldn't believe she was out of that place. Great-aunt Grace had found her and taken her away, but only for six months, because now Aunt Grace was dead too. The old woman had been bedridden, living in lonely splendour at the top of a dull old house near London, and Seren had hardly seen her. She had stayed in the kitchen mostly, with Martha the maid and the white cat, Samuel. She was already missing them; maybe there would be a cat at Plas-y-Fran.

In her pocket the letter crackled; she took it out and moved nearer the lamp to read it again.

Dear Seren

Here is your railway ticket. As I told you at your aunt's funeral, your father's oldest friend, Captain Arthur Jones, has offered to take you in. Captain Jones is your godfather. It seems strange you have

never met him. He has a wife – Lady Mair – and one son called Tomos, and his house is in Wales. It's a grand old place, called Plas-y-Fran. The train will take you to Trefil, the nearest station, where I'm sure someone will come to meet you.

I hope you will be happy living there.
Yours, most sincerely,
G. R. Freeman
Solicitor at Law
Staple Inn
London

Seren crumpled it up thoughtfully. A grand house! She hugged her knees and dreamed. There would certainly be a hot bath and a huge bedroom with curtains round the bed. There would be maids and footmen and glittering chandeliers and delicious cakes. New clothes for sure. And Captain Jones would be a tall handsome man with a moustache, and Lady Mair would be pretty, and they would be waiting anxiously on the doorstep to meet her. And there was a boy in the house! Master Tomos. She imagined him with dark hair and a clever, cheerful face, holding out his hand and saying, 'Hello Seren, it's so great you're here!'

It seemed too good to be true.

But maybe it was. Maybe this Tomos was some spoiled little brat who would resent her coming and they would argue and he would pull her hair. Well, let him try!

She yawned again. The fire crackled, so quiet and warm that she closed her eyes. For a moment everything was peaceful.

Then somebody coughed.

It was a soft sound, the very smallest sound. But it made her snap her eyes open in alarm. She stared across the table, and sat bolt upright in shock.

There was a man in the room!

He was leaning back in the shadowy corner of the bench opposite, right back in the dark, so she could barely see him. A very tall, thin man with clothes as black as midnight. He wore a hat that hid his eyes, though she knew he was looking at her. On his lap was a large parcel, wrapped in newspaper and tied with string. He held it tight with both hands; his fingers were long and spindly, and on one was a ring, its stone a green glimmer of emerald.

Seren sat frozen in complete shock. Where on earth had he come from?

He couldn't have been here all the time. The room had been empty. The door had never opened. And even if she'd fallen asleep it could only have been for a second.

'Hello,' the man said quietly.

'Hello,' she said, to be polite. She looked down and saw her fingers were twisted together. She uncurled her legs and sat up straight. What was there to be scared of? It was a waiting room. Anyone could come in and wait. But still, she didn't like it.

A coal slid in the fire.

The man's voice was not much more than a whisper. 'Are you waiting for a train?'

'Yes.'

He sat upright. He seemed very restless. 'So am I. Maybe it's the same one. But it's late – I'm sure it's late.'

After all, he wasn't very frightening. She had never seen anyone so thin or so anxious.

'It's not due yet,' she said.

He glanced over quickly at the door, and she saw his eyes, dark and wary, lit by a slant of lamplight from outside. 'Did you hear that?'

She stared at him. 'Hear what?'

'That… *Listen!*'

She listened. She heard the wind. The tick of the clock. And maybe a distant drift of sound, like a far-off cry.

The effect on the man was astonishing. He jumped up in panic. 'It's Them! I'm sure it's Them. Do you think we can lock the door?' He hurried over to it. But there was no key, so he opened it a slit and peered out. 'I can't see anything. It's so dark!'

He came back. Too agitated to sit, he paced up and down.

Such a tall man. Seren watched him, fascinated. His hands, clutching the parcel, were long and fine, like the hands of a prince in one of her books. Whatever he had in there must be precious; he held it so tight against himself the newspaper crackled.

No one came in. Only the wind whispered at the door. Seren wished the big red-faced stationmaster would come back but there was no sign of him.

Then, quite clearly, she heard it again. Nearer now. A strange cry, cold and sharp and angry. As if some arctic bird circled high in the frosty night.

The stranger gave a murmur of terror and stood still.

He put his face right up against the window and looked out, but there was only blackness and Seren could see the reflection of his face, white and weary-looking under the tilted hat. Then he pulled down the blind, and turned, so fast it made her jump.

'You heard that!'

'Yes.' she said. 'Is it a gull?'

His laugh was hollow. 'No, it's not a gull. I wish it was… Look…' he glanced down at the parcel, then at her, sharply. 'I have to go out there. I have to see if it's Them. Can I trust you?'

She shrugged. 'Well, yes, but I don't…'

'Are you an honest girl? You look as if you are.' With a sudden, decisive movement, he held the parcel out. 'I need you to look after this. Just for a moment.'

'But my train!'

'I won't be long. Don't you understand? I daren't take it out there in case They see it! A few moments, that's all. Please.'

Reluctantly, she took it. He seemed hugely relieved. 'Don't move. I'll be straight back.' He was

already at the door, but before he ran out he turned, his long fingers grasping the wooden panel. His voice was an anguish of worry. 'If They get me, whatever happens, *don't leave it here alone*. Promise me?'

Astonished, she nodded.

Then he was gone.

Seren looked down at the parcel in her hands. It was heavy, and as big as a loaf of bread. For a moment she thought something inside it croaked. It startled her so much she dropped it quickly onto the table and sat, but her peace was shattered and she felt scared and edgy.

The clock ticked time away. One minute.

Two.

Five.

Ten.

He didn't come back.

She stood up and hurried to the door and opened it and peered out. 'Hello?' she said. 'Are you there?'

But the station was silent and icy.

By 8.40 he still hadn't returned. Seren stood by the table staring at the paper parcel. What if her train came?

At once, as if she had summoned it, a shrill whistle split the night.

What should she do? Leave the parcel here where anyone might steal it? Call the stationmaster? Yes! That would be best!

She grabbed her suitcase and hauled it towards the door.

The train was already rumbling in from the darkness and settling to a long hissing stop, its carriages and engine clicking and sparking with heat. Brakes screeched. Steam erupted in billowy clouds. The air was sharp with the stink of oil and coal.

Doors swung open. Passengers climbed down.

All at once the station was full of people chattering, calling out, unloading bags; she looked hurriedly for the stationmaster but he was far down at the end with his back to her, supervising great milk churns being loaded on.

'Excuse me!' Seren yelled. 'Hey! *Hello*!'

He couldn't hear her. She looked round. The thin stranger was still nowhere to be seen. But it wasn't her business, was it, any of this? She just had to get on the train, so she tugged one of the carriage doors open and climbed up, dragging her

heavy suitcase inside and dumping it with relief on the faded red seat.

Then she leaned out of the door, hanging on tight.

Across the platform the waiting room was softly lamp-lit. She could see the newspaper parcel, lying abandoned and unprotected on the table.

She waved madly. 'Hey! Can you hear me!'

Far off, the stationmaster blew his whistle. He waved back, and raised a green flag.

Whatever happens don't leave it here alone the stranger had said. More than said. Begged. As if whatever was in there was so precious.

She had to do something.

In an instant she jumped down, raced across the platform, dived into the waiting room, snatched the parcel and ran out with it. The train was already moving; she ran alongside it and grabbed the rail.

Somebody shouted in alarm. For a terrifying moment she knew she was being whisked off her feet, then she scrambled up the steps and flung herself inside, the heavy door slamming, and the whistle gave a great screech as she fell on the dirty floor with the parcel under her.

Sparks flew past the window.
The station was already half a mile behind.
The train roared away into the night.