

The Departed Train

by Laura Oakes

The sound of the tracks beneath Leto rumbled as he sat quietly. There was an eerie silence everywhere. It was as if time itself streamed around the train while it rolled along the countryside. Leto had long forgotten where they were going. People had boarded the train and left once more. Now he was waiting for someone to come along to talk to him. A voice other than his own. A voice that didn't remind him of his father.

The whistle blew. A stop? Was someone getting on? A surge ran through Leto, a glimmer of hope appearing on his face. It faded when he realized it was probably just another routine stop and nothing more.

Footsteps were unusual; he had become good at listening for sounds that didn't belong. Leto's pale blue eyes watched through the small, grime-filmed window. Approaching was the Conductor, a man of little expression but a soft spot for the young boy.

A loud clang rang out, drawing Leto into his memories. The war felt like it was just yesterday, yet so long ago. It had been quiet in the town where lived, far from the fighting. Safe.

It was the screeching of metal, the sound of the wheels on the rails becoming just a touch louder for a moment, that yanked Leto from his thoughts. "Good evening, Mister Conductor." Leto spoke quietly to the older man, although there was no one else to bother.

A faint twitch of the lips passed over the man's face as he nodded in return. "How are you today, Leto?" the Conductor asked, setting down a bowl of the foul-smelling, beige gruel they called soup.

"I'm fine, Mister," Leto responded as he sat up a touch straighter, trying to look convincing.

He smiled weakly at the Conductor, who ruffled the boy's already messy, wiry hair and sighed. "We'll be there soon, son."

Leto smiled at him again. He knew it was a lie. They had been travelling for a long, long time. He didn't remember the last time that he had set foot on the ground he watched speed by or when he had played with other children.

Leto ate his bowl of soggy mush with the chipped spoon and curled up against the window. He watched the horizon, the sun dancing its way farther. Much like the day's hours, Leto's eyes were slowly closing. When the sun had set, his head lay limp in slumber against the glass pane. The Conductor walked in, gently throwing a blanket around the small form of the frail, skinny boy.

The train whistled when they pulled into the station. Leto remained deep asleep. Shadows watched the train, their crimson eyes tracing it, searching as it came to a halt. While the figures embarked, quiet whispers of the past were all that could be heard. Some were soldiers, some mothers with children, others wives and husbands. There was a quiet echo of familial bond, an underlying memory of what had once been. Before...

Well, before...

When Leto woke the next morning, it was a dim, dark, stormy day. As his eyes opened, lightning danced across the sky. Leto looked around, blinking. An old couple, the man whistling,

sat among a family of shadows across the aisle. Leto's eyes widened in fear and confusion. He searched for the Conductor in the crowd.

Feeling a gentle hand on his shoulder, he relaxed. He knew who it was. He looked up to see the Conductor. "Where are we goin' again, Mister?" Leto was confused, worried.

"Home," the man said gently, "home, lad."

Leto sat back down. In the span of seconds for Leto, days passed in the world outside the train. When they rode past towns, villages, and cities, people would sob and wave their loved ones off as they got on the train.

And before Leto knew it, the train came to a screeching halt! The only movements were the rising and then swift departure of the shadows. Leto hardly realized what was going on. Before he could grab his coat and bag, the train continued. The Conductor came and sat beside Leto. "Lad... we're almost home."

Leto blinked. He had only looked away for a moment; he swore by it. But when he looked back, the train itself was plummeting over the edge of a cliff into the abyss below. "Where are we!? Where are we going!?" Leto cried out in fear, seeing a raven dive down beside the window.

The Conductor took Leto's hand gently and smiled. "Home, lad. Home."

As the bottom of the seemingly endless pit came into view, the raven sang in a low, calming tone. Images flashed in front of Leto's eyes, memories of his past, his parents, his home, his friends, and the world he once knew. He was snapped back into focus when the train came to a sudden stop.

Leto looked around, still holding the Conductor's cold hand. At the edge of the platform stood Leto's father. But no, how could that be? Leto's father had died long before.

Unless. . .

Leto's eyes welled with tears. He looked up to the Conductor, the world around him fading as he remembered it all too clearly. The smell of gunpowder, the shouts, the screams of bullets and artillery, a chorus of commands and crying, a stabbing pain in his side, the bright red of his own blood that coated his hands, and the suffocating smoke that filled his vision. The train's whistle was all that pulled the boy out of the memories that felt too real.

The Conductor slowly and carefully picked the boy up, carrying him to the doors. They opened and Leto's father stood there, a gentle smile on his face. His eyes were sad, but he was forcing himself not to cry. His hand was outstretched, silently beckoning.

As Leto took it, the world was finally dimming into the peace and solace of darkness. The only sound was that of the rhythm of the rails as the train rolled onwards.

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