

“The Guardian”

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A man bustles through the streets of Chicago, weaving his way through an onslaught of pedestrian traffic. A train gurgles as it spews steam, engulfing the people below, their faces becoming lost in a muddled haze. He leans against a cement column, a cigarette butt protruding from his lips, eyes drifting over the crowd. He's young, with a lean body, rugged and dark, a hard-worker with dirt wedged into the creases of his hands. From the east, dismal clouds roll in, sending newspapers and hats flying rampant through the air. The train cries out, warning of its imminent departure. The station grows empty as passenger's board leaving only a lost, lone few. Quick breaths and the sound of shifting bags are barely audible above the slow chug of the engine. A woman scurries by, her bags disheveled and falling around her, her red hair pulled back into a messy bun, just as he remembered. Seeing her, he straightens, alert and attentive. The conductor waits idly in the door frame as she rummages through her pockets for her ticket. She's frantic, "Oh I know I just saw it!" She sighs. The conductor grumbles something under his breath and shifts his weight. Resigned, her shoulders droop, "Oh please... I swear I just had it. I really need to get on this train. I need to leave and-." The conductor holds his hands up in rebuff, "No ticket. No entry."

“But-”

“Ma’am, I’m sorry. You’ll have to catch the next one.” The conductor turns and just as the door is about to shut, the young man walks up, holding two tickets between his fingers. “I couldn’t help but overhear. I have an extra ticket if you want.”

“Oh! That’s very kind of you but I couldn’t take it. I have no money to repay you; I spent the last of it on that damn ticket.”

“It’s free...take it.” He pushes it towards her. “Oh I don’t know. Are you sure?”

“Just take the damn thing,” he persists. She eyes the ticket once more, only briefly before gingerly taking it. “Thank-you,” she whispers, the two board, the train lurches into motion before he even has both feet off the ground. She drops her bags to the floor and cups her face in her hands. The man stands silent, looking out at the world through rain streaked windows, his fingers moving restlessly over a small band concealed inside his pocket. Timidly, the woman begins to speak, “I just wanted to say thank-you again, that was really kind of you.” He nods his head in response. “Are you from Chicago?”

“No.”

“Me either. I’m originally from Maine; actually, that’s where I’m heading now.” The man continues to stare out the window, an inaudible grumble the only indication he’s listening. Timidly she adds, “Well I guess I’m going to go look for a seat. Portland’s a long trip! But thank-you again.” She pauses, “My name’s Autumn by the way.”

“Nolan.”

“Sorry. What?”

“My name’s Nolan.”

“Well it’s nice to meet you Nolan.”

Autumn begins to make her way through loaded cars, dodging passengers both sitting and standing. Only after passing through six cars, clumsily swaying, does she notice the figure behind her. It’s Nolan. He carries no luggage, but just stands patiently, his hands resting in the pockets of his coat. He does not make eye contact but every so often his eyes drift to the slight limp in her walk. She finds a vacant seat in the far corner of one of the cars. Autumn bites her lip, “There’s only one. Why don’t you take it. You’ve been so kind to me already, I insist.”

“I like to stand, keeps me sharp. Besides, you got a pretty nasty limp there.” She hesitates, keeping her back to him. “Oh it’s no big deal. I just slipped the other day while I was out running.”

“You should really be more careful.” His voice was tense but fell flat. Nolan knew it was a cover, and it pained him to see her still impaired, for her to have to live with shrapnel still imbedded in her calf. Timidly she takes the available seat while Nolan takes a place against the wall a few feet away. “We’ll take turns,” she murmurs. Nolan acts as if he heard nothing and lights another cigarette. The two are quiet while their conversation settles into a passive lull, cigarette smoke drifts in the space between. Autumn shivers and pulls her sweater tighter. Seeing this, Nolan pulls off his jacket and holds it out in front of her, “Here.”

“Wow, I really owe ...first the ticket, then the bags, and now a jacket! You’re quite the gentleman”, a pause, “So how long do I get to keep this jacket?”

“What?”

“I mean when or where are you getting off?”

“Last stop, I guess.”

“Hey that’s Portland! Are you meeting anyone there?”

“Not anyone I haven’t already met.”

“Are you from there?”

“I was.”

Two rows ahead a man rises, thick and burly in a leather jacket. He fumbles past the other seats and begins to make his way down the aisle towards the back of the car where the two sit. He stops and looms over Nolan, who ignores the sudden presence and continues to stare at the ground. "Hey buddy, ya mind?" Nolan brings the cigarette to his mouth and sets it between parted lips, "Not at all, smoking helps ease the mind."

"Look smart ass, put it out."

"I don't see anywhere that says I have to."

"I'm not asking, I'm telling, so put it out before I put you out." Autumn is rigid in her seat, her eyes intentionally fixated on the floor, "Nolan, please put it out", she whispers. Nolan notices the distress in her voice. He shifts his eyes to look at her; the color has drained from her face and her body trembles slightly under his bulky coat. His eyes dart to the stranger before him and his body goes tense. The man's features are severe, with intense black eyes contrasted against sickly pale skin. His head is bare, and where hair should be, is an elaborate pattern of ink, forming the body of a spider. The spindly legs hang down behind his ears while the grievous fangs are poised above his eyes. The spider triggers her memories of experimentation and confinement, a side effect, a nightmare. "Well how bout that, a little lady with some sense, and ain't she pretty too. Hey darlin, what's a girl like you doing with a bastard like him?" Nolan shifts his weight towards Autumn, cutting off the man's view, "I believe you and I were having a conversation, and I'd appreciate if you left her out of it."

"You know I've had just about enough of you. When I talk to you, you better answer, but when I'm talking to a lovely lady I expect you to shut the hell up." With this, he takes his hands and forcibly shoves Nolan against the wall, sending the cigarette to the ground. Immediately, Nolan regains composure and thrusts two fingers into the base of the man's neck. The burly body goes limp but remains upright and Nolan draws his face close to his own. "Next time I tell you to leave her out of it, I expect you to." He eases the pressure and then all at once throws the man back; sending him into a fit of sputters and coughs. Nolan reaches into his breast pocket and takes out another cigarette. "Sorry about that."

"No, no...uhm thank-you. Not a huge fan of spiders or sleazy men, but I think I need some water." Quickly she gets up and hurries past him, navigating her way through aisles and chairs once she reaches the food car. Her fingers explore the inside of the jacket's pockets, rummaging for dollars and coins. She pulls out a small, metallic object and cups it in her hand. It is a simple silver ring aside from the few words engraved on the inside. *Ad scientiam, non est sacrificium.* Autumn rereads the words, over and over. Her mind thumps and swells while the air around her grows thick, she can't breathe. Memories and emotions flash through her mind, imprisoning her in her own subconscious. She closes her eyes and tries to force them out but they're closing in, about to overwhelm her. The ring clatters to the floor as she races to the corner of the car to try to escape the voices circling in her mind. Two hands seize her shoulders, but the voice that follows is soft and gentle. It's him, Nolan. "Autumn, we need to go."