

The tram continues on

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The wooden bench is hard and uncomfortable, but I can see almost all the way from one end of the busy station to the other. While not officially the cornerstone of the network, it is a hub in its own right, complete with a sock store of all things, in addition to the supermarket and multiple take-away restaurants and cafes. Occasionally, the sweet, spicy aroma of fried chicken cuts through the acrid wafts of electric fumes, and my mouth waters, a Pavlovian response to a cheap food I've not touched in years.

The café bench is an opportunity to sit against a wall and watch the crowd buzzing with conversation as passengers come in, and passengers go out.

I've been sitting here for the better part of an hour, nursing a now cold cup of bitter grounds, watching, waiting for my contact. An unread tabloid newspaper, desperately marketing itself as an honest news source, lies open before me. I stretch a leg to counter the aching cramp I can feel creeping up my thigh, knocking my walking cane as I do. It falls onto my leather bag and rolls onto the ground. I half hear, half imagine the clink of the brass handle against the concrete.

'Careful, boomer,' calls some smart-arse kid as he steps over the cane and carries on his arsehole way. He flicks me a backward glance and what is a sneer or a half smile, I can't tell for sure.

Years ago, I'd have broken his wrist just to prove a point, but now I can't even muster a pithy comeback. I flip him a lacklustre bird and sigh. His sneer broadens into a toothy grin at the minor sport. There was a time when old men were respected. Wasn't there?

I run a finger over my greying moustache. I'm losing my edge.

One last job. That's all this is. One last job and I'm out.

With an exaggerated grunt, I reach down to pick up the cane and prop it back beside me, and almost headbutt the freckled redhead I find myself face-to-face with. Despite years of training, I only barely cover my surprise.

This is my contact. That kid nearly made me miss him. I was too easily distracted. A rookie mistake that'd have killed me if I were still somewhere like Iran. Or Texas.

For a moment we stare at each other. Around us, horns ring out from various platforms as trains come in, and trains go out.

'Are you _____?' he asks, hesitantly. His voice is soft, shy, and he looks younger in person than his photo had suggested. His breath is sweet and minty, and makes me self-consciously consider my own, coffee stained as it is.

'Were you followed?' I know he had been. We'd been on his tail for days. We had to be sure.

'I don't think so,' he replies, fiddling with the canvas messenger bag slung across his body, and I nod.

He reaches into his bag, and I put a hand out to stop him. 'Not here,' I say, picking up the leather bag at my feet, and standing with the aid of the cane. I motion through the station to the tram stop outside. I follow a few steps behind; just two strangers who happen to be heading the same way.

The greying sky was heavy with a threat of rain that was standard for the city, and a cold wind blew down streets that were often wind tunnels. In an hour it would be bright and sunny.

'What will you do with it?' he asks quietly. The silence made him uncomfortable. I'd have preferred not to talk. There's no point; once the exchange is made, his part is done.

'The right thing,' I reply. I can't tell if he believes me.

'Will anyone get hurt?'

‘Not after today.’

He nods, frowning.

I shift my weight to lean more heavily on the cane. ‘If you didn’t trust us,’ I offer, ‘you wouldn’t have come this far. We’ll use it to put pressure on the right people in the right places. You really are saving lives.’

A tram arrives with a merry ding. Any tram, the destination didn’t matter. It is the same for us both. This one is covered in bright gold and purple banners advertising the latest hit musical. A glance through the window tells me it is empty enough.

The doors slide open, and I take a step toward them, waiting as a handful of other passengers disembark. After a moment, I realise my red-headed companion hasn’t moved. I stare at him with a small frown until he meets my eyes.

If he backs out now, we’d lose what we needed. The last thing I want is a scene, so, with as polite a smile I can manage, I ask if this was the one he’d been waiting for.

The seconds tick by. I see resistance cross his face. I know what he’s feeling, standing on the precipice of a betrayal that challenged his core self-understanding. I’ve seen it in countless faces before.

I’d seen it, once, in the mirror.

I almost tell him to just get in, figuring a little authority would push him along. But this needs a softer touch. I wave the cane at the door, bowing ever-so-slightly. ‘After you.’

Finally he moves, uncertainty giving way to resignation, I assume, that the right thing isn’t always the easiest.

We find two seats together near the rear, far enough from other passengers. Wordlessly, he reaches inside and brings out a manila folder of loose papers, bound by an unexpectedly pink bulldog clip.

I say nothing—anything now could make him lose his nerve. Instead, I open my bag and practically snatch the folder from his hand, stuffing it inside. His wedding ring glints, sending a pang of unfamiliar guilt down to my stomach.

I look past him and out the window. The threat of rain breaks. Tiny drops begin to splatter against the glass. They'll soon be fat and heavy. I think, *Thank you. You don't know how invaluable this is. I appreciate the sacrifices you made to get this to us*, but I can't bring myself to say it aloud. If I do, it will make the next part harder.

It's already hard. Just one last job and I can walk away.

He opens his mouth to say something, but I jab a syringe into his thigh. His eyes widen, and he flails at me, his 'whys' and 'buts' trailing into soft gurgles. Seconds later he slumps against the window as though asleep, and I am free. I glance around. No one paid any notice. We were lost in the anonymity and isolation of the crowded, overcast city.

I stand, bag and cane in hand, and walk to the doors. When they open, passengers step in and I step out, running a hand over my face to cover a cough and pocketing the moustache. A few steps later, I stand a little straighter, lean the cane against a bin and lose myself in the rain as, with a merry ding, the tram continues on.