

East and West

Your task, says the disembodied voice in your ear, is to carry this package from København to Malmö. You must not open it, no matter what happens.

It's your first day on the job. You didn't know what to expect. The ad said TRUSTWORTHY INDIVIDUALS WANTED FOR COURIER WORK. You're a trustworthy individual. You applied for the job, and the letter, printed in gold on creamy paper, told you to come to Botanisk Have, put on your headphones and sit down on a bench in the Danish quarter. So here you are, on a bench, and there's a package next to you. And the voice in your headphones says: *Pick it up. Be careful. We're counting on you.*

So you pick it up. The package is just big enough to hold with both arms against your chest. It's warm. Something shifts inside, like a restless animal.

You walk through Botanisk Have and onward to Nørreport. The old station has a new shell, now, but the same dank air wafts from its depths, and the teeth grazing the top of your head as you walk into its maw are blunt from age. You get on the next train to Hovedbanegården, where you have to change trains and buy a ticket.

Hovedbanegården, that organic colossus which has persisted through the ages. It's middle-aged now, as buildings go, carefully pruned by architects, gardeners and handlers. The great hall expands and contracts with its slow breath; moisture runs down its ivy-covered walls. You look around at the travelers: people from near and far, with handbags and suitcases, dogs and children. Most of them are going somewhere. No one is holding a box like you, a box that rustles now and then. It is tightly sealed with brown packing tape. The tape creaks.

A prophetess speaks under the vaulted ceiling. She is slight, dark-haired, dressed in an emerald robe. She speaks of a many-colored sun, of loss and hope, of trees that curve space, sound that curves the trees. Her voice drowns out the other noise. Your eyes burn. You're not sure why.

You buy a ticket in the shiny red vending machine that sticks out of a flowering pillar. You get on the train. At first it's just you and the package. Then the window seat across from you is taken by a man in a blue suit and square glasses. He flips his laptop open and stares at it intently. The train makes noises to itself: memories of other conversations, laughter, babies crying. They echo through the otherwise quiet car. A ringing sound, like from a cash register, returns at regular intervals, every eight breaths. There is a smell of spices and meat. The seat

is soft, it wraps itself around you, intimately, like a lover. Organic matter drips down on you from the ceiling. Faces are up there, the faces of those who were not allowed to pass. Their mouth words you cannot hear.

The station lets the train go with a sigh. You look over your shoulder as the organic hump disappears into the mist, tendrils waving in the morning light. You pass Ørestad, then Tårnby. Then, at Kastrup, travelers spill inside. A boy sits down in the aisle seat across from you. His dark hair is disheveled, and his eyes are rimmed with red. His backpack is scratched and faded. He clutches it in his arms like a baby. When your eyes meet, he looks away immediately. The train fills with tanned tourists, haunted travelers, businesspeople in dark suits and professional faces. Their smells and their talk drown the train's own natural mumble.

You leave the darkness of the tunnel and come to the bridge. The sea billows below you. The package trembles in your lap. Somehow, you know that it wants to sniff the air, to see, to look around. It shifts around in its prison. You hear claws against cardboard.

The train comes to a standstill between the two flags that mark the middle of the bridge. It is time to check tickets. Two conductors work their way through the train. The boy across from you has no ticket. The conductor holds out his hand, and the boy opens his mouth, and sound spills out. You do not understand the language, neither does the conductor, from the looks of him: but you do understand what he is saying. In the moment, you see it. A white-hot sun blazing above. Blood. Smoke. The sting of metal in your leg. The reek of fear. The memory of a small hand in yours, its nails perfect crescent moons. Then he closes his mouth, and you are back on the train. But you don't have a ticket, says the conductor, in Swedish. *Du har ingen biljett*. The boy looks at you. You look down at the package in your lap and say nothing. The package whines and rustles. The conductor looks at you. Do you have a ticket, he says. You show yours, shamefaced. The laptop man waves his monthly card in front of the conductor and returns to his work. You do not make eye contact once. The boy's face is gray.

The tape on your package begins to fray at the edges. It unfurls, slowly, like a flower. At first, you try to smooth it down, but whatever is inside continues its efforts. You can hear little wheezing noises, as if the air in there is growing close. Likewise, the air in the train is close. If you can barely breathe out here, how can it breathe in there? How could anyone be so cruel as to put a living creature in a cardboard prison? So you pick at the tape where it has started to uncurl. You pick a little more, and a little more, until you have a good hold. Then you gently pull the tape off the top of the package.

The creature lifts its head on a long neck, and looks up at you. Its large shining eyes blink once, twice. They're green. It's bigger than you thought it would be. It smells of blood and brick, of spun sugar from Tivoli, of sap from Botanisk Have. Now that it's out of the box, it is quiet. It looks with wide eyes at the people on the train. The boy in front of you flinches at the sight, but then watches it with interest. The man with the laptop notices nothing. He grumbles at the bad reception in the middle of the bridge.

The train moves forward across the bridge, wrapped in silk from the great spiders that make it their home. Their webs turn the sunlight iridescent.

You stop at Hyllie, and the dogs come. They howl through the train. The faceless shadows that follow them inspect everyone. You all show your IDs. They do not ask for yours; they look at the creature and back away like they know what it is. They look at the boy across from you. He speaks again, and you smell gunpowder. They pull at his arms. They take him away, out of the seat. He calls out to you. You sit there, cradling your creature, and you can't meet his eyes, just like everyone else in here. You all look down. You absolutely do not look outside, where more people laden with bags and dreams have been herded together, corralled like cattle. The dogs retreat. They have sniffed everything out. The creature huddles against your chest, and you realize it has been watching.

You enter Malmö, mechanical city of glass and brick and steel, of work and ambition. Where København swelled with easy breath, Malmö's breathing is uneasy, uneven. It ticks, it wheezes. You pass by Triangeln, the baby station that joyfully reaches for the trains with little sharp glass hands. And then, the noise of pistons intensifies, and you enter the central station.

Where København Hovedbanegård is a beast of flesh and chalk, Malmö central station is a jumble of glass and brick and steel, fierce angles intersecting old lines. It shivers with traveler's anticipation and suppressed energy. This is where you are to meet your contact. The creature clings to your chest as you step off the train. You try to put it back in the box. It won't go. It digs its little claws into your jacket. It mewls at you. Your shoulders are covered in pollen from Hovedbanegården; organic matter from the train has wet your hair. You smell of Copenhagen's wild growth and the accreted memories of the train.

Your contact waits for you under the pointed glass dome. She is wrapped in wire and mirrors. Her hair is a confusion of braids and curls. She glares at you; one eye is blue, the other brown.

You opened the box, she says.

I did, you reply. It wanted to come out.

She says, are you new on the job?

You nod.

It's always the new ones, she says to herself.

Then she takes your arm and says, Come with me.

She takes you on a walk along the industrial roads, out onto a pier that leads to a huge concrete behemoth painted in green and grey. There is a small steel door with a sign that says "no entry".

Because you opened the package, there is no return, she says. You can't go home. You are ours now.

And you think back on your dull life, and realize that perhaps you waited for this moment.

Don't worry, says your contact. It's not a bad life.

And she opens the door.

There is a great vat filled with metal and bits of brick and rusted nails. Your contact gently detaches the creature from your embrace and drops it into the vat. At first, the creature screams in terror, and your stomach contracts. But then, laughter. It opens its mouth very wide and swallows a brick. It dives into the mess and comes back out, skin adorned with glass splinters and nails.

We will leave it here to grow, your contact says, and her eyes are kinder now. Then we will release it into the city.

What happens now?, you ask.

You have a package to deliver, she replies.

She waves you over to another door that says "Danger".

Inside is an empty workshop that stretches all the way through the building. Workshop benches are lined up like pews before an altar at the far end. The altar is a tractor, adorned with graffiti. A slow pulse of music runs through the room.

This is where we make the new babies, says your contact. But only at night.

You follow her down the rows of benches, all the way to the painted metal beast. Something rattles in its scoop. Your contact puts on a pair of working gloves and reaches inside. The baby she pulls out is a mess of nails and barbed wire. She puts it in a box and tapes it shut.

You will take this to Botanisk Have, she says. Today, before dusk.

What is all this?, you ask.

It is what it has always been, your contact says. She puts the box in your hands. It is heavier than the one you carried here.

Your contact gives you a stern look, and says, don't open it this time.

So you step outside, and the soot of industry lands on your shoulders and mixes with Hovedbanegården's pollen, and you walk down to Malmö central station to take your box to København. This is the rest of your life, upholding the order of things. The seagulls scream and wheel in the air above your head. The little life in the box rustles and clatters. The air smells of salt and car exhaust.

Shush, you tell the baby in the box. We'll get there.