ONE HELL OF A RIDE
An InCryptid Story
One Hell of a Ride

by

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For Brooke, who loves trains
Jonathan Healy relaxed in the comfort of his first-class cabin, enjoying the feeling of the train moving beneath him, the cool air moving across his face, and—yes—the glorious sensation of not being in Arizona. He was, in point of fact, beginning to believe that the greatest gift that could be experienced by any of God’s creatures was not being in Arizona.

A foot nudged his leg, none too delicately. “You dead over there, or just sleeping?” asked a female voice in something just short of a drawl. “Either way, wake up, city boy. I’m bored.”

“Are you ever not bored, Fran?” asked Jonathan, opening his eyes before she could kick him again. “I ask purely out of curiosity, mind, and not because I want to know what you would find amusing at this particular moment in time. I’m still bruised from the last ‘entertainment’ you came up with.” Not to mention the gunshot wound in his left shoulder, which was healing at the usual rate, which was to say, more slowly than would have been convenient. The idea of reopening it for Fran’s sake did not appeal.

Frances Brown, late the star attraction of the Campbell Family Circus and currently, for no good reason Jonathan could conceive, his traveling partner, snorted. “How was I supposed to know the train would take the corner like that? I’ve never ridden it before.” She flopped into the seat across from him, managing to do so with surprising force, given that she couldn’t weigh more than a hundred and ten pounds soaking wet. “You’re the worldly traveler. Now entertain me.”

“Performing their afternoon prayers in the luggage compartment.” Jonathan held up a hand to forestall her next question. “I don’t know who or what they’re praying to, although odds are good that it’s either me or my father. Please don’t interrupt them to ask. I don’t feel like a theology lesson just now.”

Fran scowled. “You’re not any fun at all.”

“I never claimed to be,” Jonathan said. Sensing a sulk in the making, he added hurriedly, “You could check on Rabbit. I’m sure he’d love to see you.” Fran’s horse was in the livestock car, despite her frequent protestations that he could bunk just as well with the two of them. In that, at least, Jonathan—and railway regulations—had persevered.

“I’m sure he would, too, if I hadn’t just come from seeing him,” said Fran. She sighed, turning to look out the window, where the golden plains of America were rolling majestically by. “How much longer before we get to Michigan?”

“Three days,” said Jonathan, not without sympathy. “Once we get there, you’ll have all the excitement you can stomach, I assure you. For right now, we simply have to make it without starting any trouble.”

Fran sighed again, more heavily, and settled in for what he recognized as the beginnings of a good long sulk. She was always at her least observant—and her quietest—when she was sulking, and so he took advantage of the opportunity to appreciate a different type of scenery.

When she wasn’t stomping around, shouting at him, or producing knives from the seemingly inexhaustible supply she had concealed within her clothing, Fran really was one of the most attractive women he’d ever seen. She was tiny, the top of her head barely coming up to his chin, and her life with the circus had left her with a dancer’s build, all long limbs and sinuous grace. Her features were delicate
enough to be lovely even when she scowled, which was good, since she scowled quite a bit. Add in big blue eyes and long golden curls, and he had to admit himself smitten— or would have been, if she hadn’t been so damnably, intractably infuriating.

It wasn’t Fran’s fault that the owner of the circus where she’d been raised had decided to supplement his income by raising a Questing Beast to be part of the sideshow. It wasn’t Jonathan’s fault that killing the Questing Beast had left her without either a home or a livelihood. But it was their mutual fault that he’d survived his encounter with said Beast, and so he felt a certain obligation to see her taken care of— hence her accompanying him back to the family home in Michigan.

Assuming they both survived to reach it, and one of them didn’t throw the other off the train before they ever saw the Michigan state line. At the moment, that particular outcome was most definitely in doubt.

Cheering drifted down from the luggage compartment as the mice reached some pivotal point in their ceremony. Jonathan joined Fran in looking out the window, and America, in all its splendor, kept rolling on by.

Jonathan’s head was resting against the window, his eyes closed and his mind almost fully in the grips of slumber, when the train hit a bump on the track. The impact startled him upright, one hand grabbing for the armrest while the other grabbed for the gun he wore concealed at his belt. The effect on Fran was even more dramatic. She was on her feet before he realized that the train was still moving, a knife in each hand and her blue eyes wide and wild.

“What was that?” she demanded.

“This is why my father always recommends I get a private room when travel is required, even if it more than doubles the expense.” Jonathan released the gun, raising both hands to show Fran that he was unarmed. “Put the knives away. It was just a bump on the track.”

Fran’s eyes narrowed. For a moment, he was afraid she was going to demand he prove that they weren’t under attack. Then she tossed her head in a gesture so like her horse that he had to bite back the urge to laugh, and her knives vanished, like magic, back into the folds of her skirt. “Fine,” she said. “I’m checking on Rabbit. Poor baby’s got to be scared out of his mind, we keep changing things up on him the way that we do.”

She turned flounced out of the room, not quite managing to slam the door behind herself as she stepped into the main corridor of the train. Jonathan sighed as he watched her go. “Rabbit’s not the only one who’s scared, I think,” he said. There was no one to answer him, not even the mice, who were still engaged in their own private congress. He turned to look out the window again, and froze.

The golden plains were gone, replaced by a blasted wasteland beneath a bloody sky. The distant mountains remained, but they had been transformed, going from a comforting fence against the sky to a virtual wall of what looked very much like heaped-up bone.

Jonathan got to his feet and turned to open the luggage compartment. The mice stopped their chanting
and stared at him, black oil-drop eyes managing to express surprise and confusion at his disruption of their ceremony. Finally, the head priest stepped forward and asked, in a piping voice, “Is there Trouble?”

Nobody could pronounce a capital letter like an Aeslin mouse. “I’m afraid so. I need the silver and blessed ash bullets,” he said, and was surprised at how calm and measured his voice sounded.

“So Mote It Be!” chorused the mice, and swarmed into his valise. Seconds later, several of the stronger members of the colony reappeared with a box of bullets on their shoulders, accompanied by cheers from the rest.

“Thank you,” said Jonathan gravely, and took the box. “You are to stay in this compartment until I tell you otherwise. This is a commandment.” The mice understood things best when they were couched in religious terms.

The priest looked at him. “What if you do not return?”

It was a fair question, and one that every member of the family would be forced to answer sooner or later. It deserved a fair answer. And yet… “I will return,” he said firmly. The idea of the Aeslin trying to make their way in the land outside the train was unthinkable. It would be better for them to die where they were. “Stay and wait for me.”

Jonathan closed the luggage compartment on the puzzled congregation and began reloading his guns, letting the normal ammunition fall uncollected to the seat. It wasn’t important now. What mattered was arming himself against what was in front of him…and getting to Fran before anything else could.

Jonathan’s cabin was located midway down the train, putting it an inconvenient distance from both the dining and livestock cars. Normally, he would have put his weapons away before making the trek. This was not a normal situation. He kept one pistol held out in front of him as he walked, watching for signs that anyone else was out and about. There was movement from some of the cabins. Judging by the blood leaking from under their doors, it wasn’t movement he wanted to investigate. He didn’t have the bullets to spare.

One of the doors slid open as he passed. He whirled toward it, only years of training keeping him from pulling the trigger before he saw the terrified eyes of the man in front of him. He put the gun up. “Sir, I need to ask you to return to your cabin,” he said.

“What in God’s name is happening here?” demanded the man, eyes flicking from Jonathan’s gun to the corridor. “My wife—”

“Sir, there may be robbers on the train.”

He knew as soon as he said it that it was the wrong lie to tell. The man’s eyes widened further. “My wife is in the dining car!” He stepped forward, apparently intending to push past Jonathan.

Jonathan raised his pistol. The man stopped dead. “Security is on the way to clear the dining car,”
Jonathan lied. “You can help your wife by going back into your cabin and locking the door.” If the man’s wife had actually been in the dining car, where there was real silver on the tables, she might be fine. If she’d been in the corridors…

Well. There were things it was best not to say to anyone, least of all a frightened husband.

“Who are you?” demanded the man, eyes still on the gun in Jonathan’s hand.

“Security,” said Jonathan—which was true, in its way. He was securing the train. He simply wasn’t doing it while in the employ of the railroad. “Now please. Back inside.”

The man retreated without another word, closing the cabin door behind him. Jonathan waited until he heard the locks engage before he resumed walking. There was nothing to stop the man from leaving once he was sure Jonathan had moved on, but there was nothing to be done about that, and there was the chance—slim, but present—that Fran was alive. Clinging to that faint thread of hope like a drowning man clings to a rope thrown by a passing vessel, Jonathan kept going. And through it all, the train kept rolling on.

The coach cars were empty, except for strange stains and the lingering smell of burnt flesh. Several of the windows were broken, allowing the scent of sulfur to drift in from outside. Jonathan put one arm across his nose and kept walking, moving faster now. Still nothing jumped out at him. He was either exceptionally lucky, or whatever had taken the train was patient enough to let the survivors of the initial strike settle into complacency.

That was one trap Jonathan had no intention of falling into. When he reached the door to the livestock car, he dropped his arm, grabbed the handle, and ducked even as he yanked the door open. Fran’s knife whizzed by where his head should have been, finding a home somewhere far behind him.

“Oh, thank God,” he said, straightening. “Fran, it’s me! Save your weapons!”

“Johnny?” Fran stepped out from behind one of the low partitions that separated the livestock car into stalls. About half of them were full, cattle and horses looking toward the two humans in their midst with bewilderment. “Is that really you?”

“I certainly hope so,” he said, and stepped through the door, pulling it closed behind him. The floor was sticky. He looked down, and saw that the two stalls nearest the door had been inhabited when the transition occurred; one horse, one cow. Both were dead now, eviscerated and left on the floor where they’d fallen. Left on the— “There were no bodies elsewhere on the train. Why are these still here?”

“It’s a good thing for you that I recognize this as your way of saying ‘oh, Fran, I’m so glad you’re all right,’” said Fran. “They’re still here because the thing that killed them wasn’t expecting me to be armed.”

“You mean it wasn’t expecting you to be armed with silver,” he said, lifting his head. “How did you know which knives to use? And why were you carrying them?”
“Silver’s for scaring the rubes. It’s soft enough to blunt easy. When the first two knives didn’t slow it down, I grabbed one of the silver ones by mistake. That stopped it cold.”

Jonathan decided not to ask whether he was the “rube” she’d been intending to scare. Instead, he focused on the important question: “Where is it?”

Fran—who had blood spattered all over the front of her traveling gown, and bits of hay caught in her hair—pointed to a tarp spread in one of the otherwise empty stalls. “It was upsetting the horses,” she said, by way of explanation.

Jonathan blinked. “You’re attacked by a thing you’ve likely never seen outside your nightmares, and your first concern is for the horses? Frances Brown, you are definitely unusual.”

“I’m taking that as a compliment,” she said. “Now what is that thing?”

“Judging by the landscape, I’m going to venture that it’s one of the lesser breeds of imp.” Jonathan knelt, peeling back the tarp to reveal a squat, four-armed hominid with dark gray skin and a mouth so filled with needled teeth that it didn’t close. All six of the creature’s limbs sported long, bony claws. One of Fran’s knives protruded from the middle of its forehead. “I was correct. It’s a boundary imp.” He straightened. “Did it touch you?”

“What? No! And how do you sound so damn calm? What’s a boundary imp? What’s going on?”

The livestock car had no windows. That had to be how she’d missed the change. “Have you ever heard of a hell-bound train?” he asked, turning to face her.

“They carry sinners to Hell,” said Fran, without hesitation. Then her eyes widened. “You’re not telling me…”

“They don’t actually carry sinners to Hell. That’s a misinterpretation, as is the belief that the iron in the railroads will protect us.” Fran didn’t look comforted. Jonathan sighed. “I’m sorry. Let me try again. There are places where the layers of reality don’t sit well against each other, like…like wearing a new pair of shoes. They rub and pull and holes can form.”

“Holes,” said Fran flatly. “We fell down a hole?”

“One of the things that can form those holes is speed. Trains go so much faster than men, or even horses, and they weigh so much, that sometimes, they…” Jonathan paused, trying to find words that wouldn’t frighten her.

“Tear a hole in reality’s sock?” asked Fran.

Jonathan nodded. “Imprecise, but yes. The iron in the train gives it the heft to punch through the thin spots. They scab over and eventually scar; in the meanwhile, some things get lost. Those who witness a train’s disappearance may report the smell of sulfur, or seeing flame—all marks of the Christian Hell.”

“We’re not in Hell?”

“No, just one of the boundary underworlds—hence the imp. They’ll kill anything they can get their claws on, but silver dispatches them neatly. They’re fond of iron. It’s part of what attracts them to the
trains.” He grimaced. “Don’t ask why there are train tracks here. No one knows.”

Fran paused, appearing to consider his words. Then she cocked her head and asked, “How many of the little bastards do you reckon we have to kill in order to get home?”

Jonathan smiled. “I hoped you’d ask that.”

The imp had entered the livestock car through the door connecting it to the passenger coach. After convincing Fran that Rabbit would have to remain behind, Jonathan helped her “seal” the car with silver throwing knives, placing one at each corner of the door.

“Boundary imps won’t cross silver unless they’re starving, cornered, or both,” he said. “With the number of passengers that have already been eaten, they’re not starving, and there are windows along the rest of the train, so they won’t be cornered. They’ll just be angry, and that’s not the sort of thing that inspires them to break down doors.”

“What do you mean, they won’t be cornered?” demanded Fran. “Aren’t we going to kill them all?”

“Our train is in their land. It’s not our fault, but it’s not theirs, either. If they’re actively threatening the surviving passengers, we kill them. If they run, we let them go. We can’t wipe out all the boundary imps. There’s no point in trying.”

Fran frowned thoughtfully. “You mean they’re like rattlesnakes. You kill them in your barn, but you leave them be out in the desert.”

“It’s not a bad analogy,” said Jonathan. “Now come along. We need to reach the engine.”

“What happens when we get there?”

“If the imps haven’t eaten the conductor, we defend him long enough for him to drive this train through the torn spot. If they have, we pray that between the two of us, we have the smarts necessary to keep several tons of American steel rolling down the rails.” Jonathan began walking down the length of the passenger coach, now with both pistols drawn and held in front of him. His left shoulder should allow for basic shooting, as long as he didn’t get too tricky. He hoped. “If we don’t lose too much speed, we should be able to get this train back to our America intact.”

“What about the people?”

“The dead will stay dead. The living will be paid handsomely by the railroad to keep their mouths shut.” He risked a glance back at Fran. She looked appalled. “It doesn’t happen often. It doesn’t even happen as often as it used to, when the first tracks were laid. But trains have always disappeared. The men who own the rails know the risks.”

“The passengers don’t,” she said.

Jonathan sighed. “I know. God help me, I know.”
They kept walking. The car was still clear of imps, as was the next one. Jonathan was sorry to see that the occupied cabin he’d passed earlier was empty now, the door standing halfway open. Maybe the inhabitant would be lucky, and make it to the dining car. Most likely not.

“I went my whole life without meeting any monsters, city boy,” said Fran as they walked. “I meet you, and inside of a week, I’ve got cougar-snakes hiding in the circus and trains driving me straight to Hell. I think you might be a bad influence.”

“If it makes you feel any better, I know about hell-bound trains because of secondhand reports, not because I’ve ever actually been on one before,” said Jonathan. “I recognized that boundary imp from sketches in my father’s books.”

“So, maybe I’m a mite odd, but knowing that the one person who has a clue about surviving this is working purely from book learning, and not experience? Doesn’t make me feel any better,” said Fran. “Actually, it makes me feel like I should be making peace with my maker.”

“Do let me know how that turns out,” said Jonathan, and opened the door into the next car.

It was questionable who was more surprised: them, or the two boundary imps who had been devouring the man on the train floor. One of the imps raised its head and snarled. The other dispensed with pleasantries entirely, and attacked.

Jonathan shot the attacker twice in the forehead while it was in mid-leap. Fran’s throwing knives were quieter, but just as deadly; one caught the second imp in the throat, while the second pierced its left eye. Both imps fell, and didn’t move again.

“The gunfire may attract others,” he said, moving forward and nudging the dead man with his toe. It was the man he’d seen before. “Poor bastard.”

“Then we’d better move,” said Fran. “Can I get my knives back, or is their blood poison, too?”

“Avoid the claws and fangs and you’ll be fine,” said Jonathan. He waited for Fran to squeeze past him before turning and closing the door. “It’s best if you can retrieve them. I don’t know how many imps are on this train.”

“You sure know how to make a girl feel safe, don’t you?” Fran bent over the imp, pulling her knives free and wiping them on her skirt before making them vanish again. “I swear, city boy, it’s a miracle you’re not married already.”

“I’ve had other things to occupy my time,” said Jonathan. He stepped over the dead man. “Today, for example, marriage takes second place to getting out of here alive. I thought that might be a goal that could hold your interest.”

Fran glared as she let him pass her, and the two resumed their walk along the length of the train. Jonathan kept his eyes on the seats ahead of them, scanning for hints of motion. Fran tried to do the same, but couldn’t stop herself from sneaking glances out the train windows. She shuddered.

“What kind of thing lives in a place like this?”
“Nature is amazing in its variety, its tenacity, and its bloody-mindedness,” said Jonathan. “If a place can exist, there’s something that can live in it—and from what I understand about the worlds surrounding ours, there are no places too strange to exist.”

“It’s the sort of thing drives a person mad,” muttered Fran.

“Only if you dwell on it,” said Jonathan. “Think about other things. More pleasant things.” Michigan autumns; his mother’s potato casserole; the way the mice sang at the first snowfall every year. The color of Fran’s hair…

Some things were pleasant and dangerous at the same time. Jonathan shook his head to clear it, and kept walking.

“How can the railroads know about this and not do anything?”

“By the time they found out this was a risk, they’d already spent several fortunes crossing the country in iron,” said Jonathan. They were almost to the next door, and nothing further had attacked them. “A few lives must have seemed like a small price to pay for progress.”

“But you don’t think that way.”

It was a challenge, and even in their current straits, Jonathan couldn’t let it go unanswered. He turned to face her. “My family is dedicated to preserving life, not throwing it away,” he said. “If it had been up to me, the entire enterprise would have been halted after the first dimensional rift, and every engine would have been rebuilt with silver fittings to keep the imps at bay. Since it wasn’t up to me, all I can do is try to save the lives of those who made it through the crossing, and curse the men who own these tracks a little more. Every life is worth preserving.”

“That’s why you don’t want to go out and slaughter these imps unless they’re coming at us.”

“That’s right.” Jonathan looked at her. “If that’s going to be a problem, we can part company once we’re back in our world. I won’t hold it against you.”

To his surprise, Fran smiled. “Shoot, city boy, you take a girl to Hell and then you think you can just leave her at the next station? I don’t think so. I want to see what you’re going to throw at me next.”

Jonathan shook his head, and kept on walking. The woman was clearly insane. As she was also heavily armed, that might prove to be a good thing in their current situation.

The next two cars were empty, although broken windows and distressing stains on the carpet and seats made it clear that they hadn’t started out that way. Fran paled at the sight of a little girl’s floral bonnet lying on the floor, blood soaked through the dangling ribbons. She didn’t say anything. Neither did Jonathan. Sticking close together in case of ambush, the two made their way down the still-moving train, finally reaching their first major obstacle: the door to the dining car.

“The cutlery on this train is real silver,” he murmured, placing a hand on the door handle, but not
pushing it open. “That means there’s a relatively strong chance that we may have survivors here, assuming they were smart enough not to open the doors after the initial assault had passed.”

“That’s a good thing, right? Survivors is a good thing. I don’t want to be the only person on this rolling abattoir.” Fran offered him a quick, lopsided smile. “See, I put that big word in there to make you feel more comfortable. I’m catching on.”

Jonathan smiled back. “I appreciate the effort. And yes, survivors would be a good thing, assuming they haven’t been driven into religious mania by the sight of ‘demons’ pouring down the length of the train.”

“And if they have?”

“They may decide to stab us to death with their remaining cutlery.”

This time, Fran’s smile had more of an edge to it. “Good thing we have the advantage where weapons are concerned, isn’t it?”

“Yes, I suppose that’s true.” Raising his voice, Jonathan called, “This is railway security! We’re coming in now!” Then he pushed down on the handle, and opened the door to the dining car.

Six forks and a spoon clattered off the doorframe to either side of them. A tea saucer—not silver, but the people holed up in the dining car had clearly hit the point at which any port in a storm began to seem acceptable—hit Jonathan in the middle of the chest, bounced to the floor, and shattered. He blinked at it, and then turned to survey the survivors.

There were seven of them, men, women, and children, all rumpled and dotted with stains of suspicious origin. Two dead boundary imps lay on the floor of the car, staring blankly up at the ceiling. Tablecloths covered three other bodies; the human inhabitants of the car who hadn’t survived the initial wave.

The survivors stared back. Then an elderly woman in a feathered hat gestured for them to come forward, hissing, “What are you trying to do, you fools, get us all killed? Get in here!”

Jonathan and Fran got.

The survivors remained huddled together, not visibly relaxing until the door was firmly closed. Something gritty was worked into the carpet just over the threshold. Jonathan looked down. Salt. Useless against boundary imps, but still…it was a good sign that at least one of the survivors had some understanding of the actual world around them, not just the so-called “natural world.”

Fran, meanwhile, was looking around the dining car, checking for escape routes and signs of danger. Three of the windows were broken; these had been barricaded off with tables tipped onto their sides, keeping anything else from coming in without warning. They didn’t have enough tables to block all the windows, and so the unbroken glass had been left alone, showing the eerie landscape rolling by outside.

“Who are you people?” demanded the woman in the feathered hat, who seemed to be serving as the leader of the survivors. “Why didn’t those demons eat you?”

“They don’t like silver,” said Jonathan. “We were fortunate enough to be armed when the attack came.” He lowered his gun as he looked around the car, finally focusing on the three covered bodies. None of
them looked intact. “How did you survive?” he asked, attention going back to the survivors.

“We threw spoons at the demons,” said a little boy, half-hidden behind the voluminous skirts of a woman that Jonathan hoped was the child’s mother. It would be bad enough to lose someone in a situation like this. It would be worse to be orphaned. “They didn’t like the spoons, so they tried to go away.”

“And then we stabbed them with the knives from the service cart,” said the elderly woman, as calmly as if she’d been discussing the weather. “Not before a few folks got bitten. Are we dead? Are we damned?”

She asked the question like it was somehow entirely reasonable. Jonathan shook his head. “No, ma’am, we are neither dead nor damned. We are simply off the beaten path at present, and need to find our way back onto the straight and narrow.” Out of the corner of his eye, he could see Fran moving toward one of the cloth-swaddled bundles. He wanted to shout for her to stop. He couldn’t think of a way to do it without upsetting the people who watched him, wide-eyed with fear, waiting for a miracle.

The woman scowled at him. “How do you propose we do that?”

“My associate and I are on our way to find the conductor. If all is well, we should be able to assist him in steering us safely back to the track we should have been following all along.” And if all is not well, at least we’ll be at the front of this damned conveyance, and should see death coming well before it hits us.

“Take us with you,” said another of the survivors. It was somewhere between a command and a plea.

Fran lifted the edge of one of the tablecloths and recoiled, dropping it again, as she clapped her hand over her mouth to stop herself from gagging. She staggered backward. Jonathan caught her by the elbow before she could fall.

“I am afraid that would not be advisable,” he said, as smoothly as if he weren’t holding his only partner upright by the arm. “Two people can cover one another. More than that…you would be safer staying here. We’ll all be safer if you stay here.”

Fran managed to get herself back under control, straightening up and pulling her arm away. “Honestly, if I were you, I’d stay in this car with the doors locked as tight as a hen’s hiney, and not come out until a man with a big badge and a bigger gun promised me the demons were gone.”

Maybe it was her accent—something about hearing a voice that dripped with the twang of the American West invoking lawmen and demons in the same breath was credible, where Jonathan’s calm Midwestern delivery made the same subject matter seem ludicrous. Whatever the reason, the survivors of the ill-fated dining car calmed, their attention shifting to Fran.

“Who are you?” asked the elderly woman again.

Fran smiled. It was an oddly sweet expression for a woman with a smear of blood on her cheek and a knife in either hand. “Well, ma’am, that depends on where you’re looking, but right now, right here, I suppose we’re the cavalry. Would it be all right with you if we moved on along?”
The survivors looked at each other. The elderly woman nodded. And then, without another word said, all of them stepped aside, clearing a path for Fran and Jonathan to walk along.

As they passed the elderly woman she said, in a voice barely above a whisper, “You get those bastards for what they did to my Vince. You get them.”

“We’ll do our best, ma’am,” said Jonathan. Together, he and Fran managed to unblock the door at the end of the dining car, and they passed on, one step closer to the engine, and the ending.

Only one empty car stood between them and the engine. Fran and Jonathan walked side-by-side, weapons out and ready for attack. Nothing came lunging out of the shadows. Somehow, that didn’t help their nerves.

“That man, back there…” began Fran.

Jonathan knew from her tone that she wasn’t referring to any of the survivors. “I wish you hadn’t looked, Fran.”

“He was just a skeleton. There was this stuff around him, like…like when Andres would make beef stew for the carnival.”

“That was the rest of the gentleman in question. The venom of boundary imps is necrotizing, and it was never meant to interact with human flesh. The results are…dramatic, when it happens.” Almost without thinking about what he was doing, Jonathan reached out and squeezed her elbow with his free hand. “He died quickly.”

“But he decayed even quicker, is that it?” asked Fran.

Jonathan didn’t have an answer for that.

She sighed. A boundary imp sprang from behind a seat, claws extended, and she put three knives into its forehead before it had time to realize that perhaps it was attacking the wrong disheveled travelers. The imp fell back again, dropping out of sight. “This monster-hunting stuff, it’s harder than it looks, isn’t it?”

_Somehow, Frances Brown, I get the feeling you’ll do just fine_, thought Jonathan. Aloud, he said, “It has its challenges.”

“I tend to view melting as a bit more than a challenge.”

“I’m assured it’s a quite difficult thing to do,” Jonathan said. Another boundary imp popped up. He shot it in the throat, and it fell back down. “Look at it this way.”

“How’s that?”

“At least you’re not bored anymore.”
Fran was too smart to yell at him as he pried open the door into the lead car. But she glared at his back, and covered him as they walked into the hot darkness of the engine.

She didn’t realize that he’d stopped until she slammed into him, nearly dropping one of her dwindling supply of knives. “What the—” she began…and went quiet as she looked past him to the man shoveling coal into the engine.

The man with the snakes where his hair should have been.

“Johnny?” whispered Fran, in a voice that she couldn’t quite keep from shaking. “What is that?”

“A Pliny’s gorgon, I believe,” said Jonathan quietly. Raising his voice, he said, “Ah, excuse me, sir? Are you the original conductor?”

“If you’re here to shoot me or hit me over the head with a chunk of timber, do it and be done,” snarled the gorgon, continuing to shovel. “We’re bleeding momentum, and I’d rather be dead before we run out completely.”

“I believe that means ‘yes,’” Jonathan murmured to Fran. He took a step forward. “We’re not here to accost you. If anything, we’re here to help. My friend and I—say hello, Fran—would rather make it home alive, if it’s all the same to you.”

The man didn’t turn, but several of the snakes on his head did, swiveling around to eye the people behind him with reptilian suspicion. “The snakes don’t bother you?”

“Sir, we’re traveling in the company of a colony of Aeslin mice, and I have recently spent much of a day preparing the body of a rare North American Questing Beast for mail transport. At this point, if the snakes on the head of a Pliny’s gorgon bothered me, I would need to reexamine every choice I have made in my adult life.”

“Plus they’re kinda pretty, if you don’t think about them too hard,” said Fran, almost cheerfully.

There was a pause while the conductor considered their statements, and the many levels of strangeness they contained. Finally, he said, “If one of you could go up front and take over the steering, I’d be much obliged. I think we lost my assistant a little while ago, and I haven’t dared stop shoveling long enough to go up there and find out for sure.”

“I’ve got it,” said Fran, and vanished into the dark. There was a screeching sound a moment later, followed by the meaty thud of another imp hitting the boards.

“There’s a shovel in the corner,” said the conductor, continuing to work.

“Right,” said Jonathan. Shoving his pistol back into his belt, he rolled up his sleeves and went to retrieve the shovel.

“Your lady friend…if you don’t mind my saying, she’s a bit odd.”
“You have no idea,” said Jonathan, with fond sincerity, and set about moving coal.

Fran had never steered a train before, but the theory turned out to be refreshingly clear when one was trying to do nothing more complex than remain on a set of tracks which the train—thanks to the laws of physics—had no real interest in leaving anyway. The boundary imps had eaten well, and had gone back to the hills with their spoils, leaving the few survivors still on the train untroubled.

Jonathan and the conductor, whose name turned out to be Clark, continued shoveling coal into the hungry engine until the train hit a bump, and the air, even in the dark, crowded space they inhabited, seemed to suddenly clear. Fran’s whoop of triumph was loud enough to carry even through the closed door.

“That’s that, then,” said Clark. He put his shovel down and pulled a lever on the side of the boiler, venting steam into the cabin. The train began losing speed.

Jonathan coughed. “What do you mean?” he asked.

“We’re back in the right America.” Clark grabbed a conductor’s hat from a peg on the wall, pulling it on over his snaky tresses. Then he turned to face Jonathan, offering the other man a regretful smile. “We’re home. It’s on the railroad from here. They’ll come for cleanup, pay off the survivors, ask their questions, and sort things out from there.”

The men who owned the railroads were aware of many things. Not all of them were good for a man in Jonathan’s position—especially not a man who was traveling with an unidentified corpse, a colony of talking mice, and a woman violent enough to be mistaken for a member of the Covenant of St. George. The railroads employed too many cryptids to be fans of the Covenant.

Almost as if he could see what Jonathan was thinking, Clark cleared his throat, and said, “It could be that the imps got into the livestock, you know. Ripped up a few horses, left a few messes. No one would know either way if you decided to get off here.”

“Where I come from, we hang horse thieves,” commented Fran.

“Welcome back,” said Jonathan, turning to see her standing in the doorway. “I’d like to note that the owners of these horses are almost certainly deceased, and that we won’t have any good answers to the sort of questions we’re likely to be asked. Retreat would be the better part of valor.”

Fran still looked uncertain.

“We can find ourselves another train,” said Jonathan. “It’s simply best if we aren’t found on this one.”

“Well, city boy. Traveling with you is nothing if not exciting,” said Fran. She turned to the conductor. “Nice to meet you, Mr. Pliny.”

Clark laughed, and didn’t bother to correct her.
Morning found them on horseback, riding across the fields toward Wichita. Fran was on her beloved Rabbit; Jonathan rode a bay gelding, towing their luggage in a small cart. His nameless bay offered no complaints, likely as relieved as the rest of them to no longer be trapped on a train that stank of blood and brimstone. The mice were engaged in a raucous celebration of something Jonathan hadn’t bothered asking them to explain, and seemed quite happy to stay on the cart for the duration of their ritual.

“You know, in the circus, when we set up something like that—all death-defying adventure and last-minute escapes—there was always a bad guy behind it. Not just some trick nature likes playing on people when it gets bored,” said Fran reflectively. She was much more relaxed now that she was on horseback, and not confined to a cabin. Jonathan thought he liked her rather better this way.

“That’s the trouble with real life,” he said. “It doesn’t always play by our idea of the rules.”

“Huh. Is the rest of the trip going to be this exciting, do you think?”

Jonathan shook his head. “To be quite honest, Fran, I haven’t the slightest idea. I didn’t expect nearly this much excitement when I set out.”

Fran grinned over her shoulder at him. “See? I’m improving your life already.”

Despite the situation, Jonathan couldn’t stop himself from laughing at that, and at the simple satisfaction in her face. “You know, Fran, I do believe you’re right. My life is definitely improving.”