

HELLBEAST OF MARS

CANNONBALL
EXPRESS

KIT KANE

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1

Hellbeast of Mars

“Horror beyond imagination! Savagery beyond belief!” The show-woman’s voice rang with a strident theatrical doom, sending audible ripples of fear through her wide-eyed audience. “These and more are what await you here tonight, ladies and gentlemen. These and *much* more,” upon which, almost as if on cue, an ear-shattering crash of thunder shook the air, and the interior of the dimly lit show tent flashed into shocking high-contrast, its heavy canvas no match for the Martian lightning storm raging outside.

In the front row of the packed tent, fifteen-year-old Laura Benton took a deep breath and

attempted to rein in her pounding heart. *All just crowd-baiting nonsense*, she told herself. *The usual traveling show hokum...* and then felt her sweaty fingers close tighter around Billy's hand anyway. Dang it all, why couldn't they have gone to see a movie? Laura hated these kind of shows. Truly *hated* them. Then again, not like she'd really had any choice in the matter, right? When Billy Stibbs had *finally* plucked up the courage to ask her out and then suggested they come here, what was she gonna do? Start quibbling? *Cos dang it all* the boy was cute.

Turning Laura's way, Billy flicked his famously floppy fringe clear of his famously puppy dog eyes and flashed her a smile that could melt entire polar regions. Yeah, okay, Laura thought. Maybe she *could* put up with this hokum just a *little* longer...

As the last of the lightning faded and the tent flickered back into its carefully stage-managed dimness, the show-woman in the single spotlight—a towering, chisel-jawed lady; all knowing smile and gents' evening wear—resumed her melodramatic spiel:

“One last time then, folks, I urge you most sincerely, if you have a weak heart, please exit the tent now. Coronary failure is, I regret to say, not an uncommon reaction upon encountering the sight you are about to see. The *creature* you are about to meet,” with which words the woman

gestured to the object she stood beside—a three-meter-tall cubic affair hidden beneath a heavy canvas cloth. Adorning the cloth on all sides were lurid paintings of terror-stricken faces, each one directing its exaggerated horror at a huge blood-red question mark that dominated the section of the cloth facing the audience.

With the show-woman's gesture, a further murmur of fear swept through the crowd, and Laura felt Billy's left arm slip around her shoulder. Smiling to herself, she edged into it just the tiniest fraction.

“Many have tried to explain the anomaly I am about to present to you,” the woman continued, her voice dropping low, drawing her audience in, “but they have tried in vain. Genetic experiment gone wrong? Radiation-spawned mutation? Alien killing machine? No one knows for sure. Most likely, no one ever shall. Of one thing only am I, personally, very certain: that coursing through the bloodstream of this, our diabolical captive, is nothing less than pure evil.” The show-woman let the word *evil* hang there alone in the darkness for several torturous moments, then, with a blood-chilling gravity, began to reach for a corner of the painted cloth. Even as her fingers extended, another crash of thunder shook the air, still more murmurs of fear surging through the crowd, and when both sounds had faded to silence once more,

the woman raised a single, teasing eyebrow, hand still outstretched, riding the suspenseful pause.

Laura had to admit it: hokum or not, the lady was good. *Danged* good. But then, the lady in question *was* apparently Zora Petrovna herself, and *Petrovna's Carnival of Mars* did have one almighty planetwide reputation to maintain.

With her fingers closing at last around a fistful of the painted drape, the show-woman's voice rose again to its full theatrical magnificence:

“Ladies and gentlemen,” she boomed...

Here it came, Laura thought, gripping Billy's hand tighter still...

“May I offer you the horror sensation of the western quadrant...”

From offstage, a growl of timpani joined the rumble of rain-on-canvas...

“The terror of the entire Red Planet...”

Deep dissonant brass welled up now too, not so much music as an orchestrated moan of terror...

“The one, the only...”

A cacophonous, screeching fanfare...

“Hellbeast of Mars!”

And with an elaborate stage flourish, the woman whipped away the cloth from the three-meter-tall cubic object to reveal...

... a cage.

An *empty* cage.

An empty cage with its single rear door hanging

wide open.

The show-woman seemed to freeze where she stood, her eyes starting in shock. More than half the audience gasped in terror and shot to their feet, Laura among them, one hand clamped to her mouth to stifle her own cry of fear.

But then Laura noticed Billy, still seated beside her, entirely unperturbed, the last of an amused eyeroll just departing his oh-so-pretty features. Glancing up at her, Billy reached out and took Laura's hand again, giving it the gentlest of tugs to get her to sit back down.

Dang it all, Laura thought, kicking herself for being so pathetically hokum-susceptible, then firing an eyeroll of her own at the still amused Billy. *Yeah, okay, she got me.*

As she dropped into her seat once more, Billy leaned over, the end of that famously floppy fringe tickling Laura's ear. "Relax," the boy whispered. "All part of the—"

Then a blur of gray came slamming in from nowhere, and Billy was gone.

Just... *gone.*

That was when the screaming began.

The screaming and the *running*. Everyone. Racing for the tent's exit. A frantic, tumbling mass of horrified humanity, bolting, it seemed, for their very lives.

"Billy?" Laura managed to croak. Then a yell—

“BILLY!”—as someone, not Billy, grabbed her arm to pull her into the shrieking, escaping mob. Grabbed her *bloodstained* arm, some distant part of Laura’s shock-numbed brain noted.

Because there was blood *everywhere*.

Blood *all over her*.

Billy’s blood?

How...?

And then she was lost in the screaming throng, shoved and battered, carried along in the heaving crush till she tumbled from the show tent’s entrance and went sprawling to the muddy ground outside. As yelling figures stampeded past, Laura fought to drag herself upright in the chaos, lightning as wide as the horizon tearing apart the sky above her, the traveling show’s garish signs and placards strobing themselves into Laura’s reeling mind:

TERROR BEYOND IMAGINATION!

SAVAGERY BEYOND BELIEF!

THE HORRIFYING HELLBEAST OF MARS!

As rain pounded the ground all around, yet more screaming crowds came pouring out of the show-tent, while from inside it, Laura heard something else now. Something that cut through the screams and the thunder like claws down a blackboard. It was a kind of shrieking animal howl,

like nothing Laura had ever heard before.

Hauling herself to her feet, heart pounding in terror, Laura fought her way back to the tent's entrance. "BILLY!" she yelled again. But even as she stumbled up to the doorway, there came from inside the tent a loud crack of splintering wood, and all at once the entire huge canvas collapsed in on itself, a mass of twisting and writhing shapes revealed beneath it as its rain-sodden weight sagged down onto the many who had not yet managed to escape.

Then that shrieking animal howl rose up once more, and a further flash of sky-wide lightning revealed *another* form beneath the sagging canvas—something that whirled and thrashed and battered at the shapes around it with a relentless, devastating fury.

"Billy!" Laura managed one final time, before a mob of fleeing carnival goers rammed hard into her, and all was darkness.

2

Two Left Feet

“Ow!” Jess yelped.

“Sorry...”

“Ow *ow!*”

“Yeah, um, sorry...”

“Also, and this really does bear repeating, *ow!*”

Glancing down at the comfy low heels she had selected for tonight’s dance, then at the hefty size ten currently removing itself from her mashed right foot, Jess Flint gave vent to a good-humored sigh, her mouth twitching into that wry but not unkind smile it often seemed to assume when faced with the fella before her. “Seriously, Dave, tootsies taking a major hit here. General principle,

okay: on any given beat, your feet go where mine aren't."

"Gotcha," her frowning dance partner replied, and marshalling himself once more, the ever determined Dave from Staines stepped back into Jess's arms, then made another valiant attempt to lead off... mashing one fewer of Jess's toes this time round, an impartial observer might point out. So yeah, progress. Maybe. Of a sort.

As Jess and Dave lumbered their way around the tiny dancefloor of the Lucky Horseshoe Saloon, hordes of other dancing couples pressed in on them from every direction, the bar packed to bursting tonight as the four-piece jazz combo in the corner kicked out the kind of rhythm almost anyone could shake a leg to.

Or crush foot flesh to.

As was one's preference.

But even while enduring this fresh bout of toe torture, Jess found her smile only marginally diminished, it being a universally recognized fact that Mars's pre-eminent torturer of toes was someone with whom it was nearly impossible to get annoyed. Because all things considered, Dave Hart truly was the sweetest of fellas—one whom, if Jess were being honest, she could not now imagine her days here on the Martian frontier without. Smart, hardworking, funny (if you appreciated deeply obscure references to ancient

sci-fi characters), the guy had proven himself time and again to be a genuine asset to Trans-Mars Haulage, the rail company Jess and her friends had started up a mere three short months ago. And not just because he made the finest java this side of, well, Java. Guy was shaping up to be a pretty decent engineer too. Okay, so in other ways their sci-fi-geek-in-residence might not always be the most switched on of Martian frontiersmen, but hey, considering he *was* actually from twenty-first century Earth and had essentially been defrosted from some kind of weird alien cryo-stasis those same three short months ago, the fella seemed to be coping pretty darned well with everything a twenty-*fifth* century red planet could throw at him.

Everything, it seemed, except dancing.

“How goes it, babe?” a voice from behind them inquired, Jess recognizing it immediately as the soft, throaty tones of her best friend and business partner Sally Chu. One brief jazzy beat later, knockout glamorous as ever in something black, slinky, and barely decent, the gal herself quickstepped into Jess’s view, wrapped in the eager arms of some poor entranced young swain.

“Surviving?” Sally asked Jess.

“From the ankles up, sure,” Jess replied, prompting a knowing grin from Sal.

“Gotcha. Little piggies wishing they really had

stayed at home, huh?”

As Jess laughed, Dave seemed to sag a little in her arms, before pausing mid-mash and then drawing back a step to frown at Jess and Sal. “Maybe I should go get us some drinks,” he said.

“Good plan,” Jess answered, unable to stop herself from adding, “Numb the pain.”

The quip elicited a further snort of laughter from Sal, and frown deepening, Dave opened his mouth as if to say something more... but then seemed to think better of it and just shuffled off towards the crowded bar.

“Better make *hers* a double,” Sally called after him.

“You pair *really* have to stop that,” a new voice at Jess’s shoulder put in, this one betraying the smooth English inflections of Jess’s *other* best friend and business partner, Vera Middleton.

Uh-oh, Jess found herself thinking as she turned and took in the demeanor of the gal in question. Because Vera, peering at Jess and Sal over the rims of her librarian-esque half-moon spectacles, did not present the aspect of a happy bunny.

“Huh?” Sally said. “Stop what?”

“Making fun of Dave’s dancing.”

“What?” Jess said. “Oh, come on, Vera. It’s just Dave.”

“Yeah,” Sally drawled. “Friendly banter. Dave knows that,” and scooping Entranced Young Swain

up into her arms once more, Sally quickstepped her way back into the crowd, leaving Jess alone to face a not remotely mollified Vera.

With her school-ma'am-ish frown darkening, Vera raised her arms, took Jess into hold, and led her back onto the crush of the dancefloor, talking low as the pair of them stepped their way around the bustling room.

“You really don’t see it, do you?” Vera said.

“See what?”

“*Dave*. He *likes* you.”

“Huh? Oh, come on, Vera, that’s ridiculous. It’s *Dave*.”

Pushing her glasses back up onto her nose a fraction, Vera sighed. “You honestly have no idea how that sounds, do you?”

“Vera, get real. I say again, it’s *Dave*. He likes... comics and science fiction and—”

“He is *also*, as far as one can ever be certain of such things, the owner of a fully functioning male wink, as well as, if I may say so, a rather sweet smile. Which, I cannot help but note, he is inclined to flash *your* way at regular intervals. The smile, that is, not the wink.”

Jess took a moment to study her (oh-so) English friend. “Okay, first off, *winky*? Seriously? We will *absolutely* be revisiting *that* later. But back on topic, Vera, you’re imagining things. *Regular intervals*? *Dave* does not smile at me at anything like *regular*

intervals,” and with the intention of ramming home this clearly inarguable point, Jess turned to the bar to indicate the fella himself. . .

... only to find the uncooperative lummoX smiling right back at her. *Sweetly,* goddammit.

“Okay, so he’s a smiley geek,” Jess blustered. “That doesn’t prove—”

But then, for the third time in as many minutes, an unexpected voice joined the conversation from over Jess’s shoulder. *This* voice though was one entirely unknown to her.

“Excuse me,” it said. “I’m so sorry to bother you ladies, but would either of you by any chance happen to be Ms. Jessica Flint of Trans-Mars Haulage?”

Pausing in their dance, Jess and Vera turned as one to find a small, elderly woman peering up at them. Silver-haired, soft of feature, and dressed far too well for the spit-n-sawdust surroundings of the Lucky Horseshoe, the stranger stood there on the edge of the grimy dancefloor, all French lace and crinoline, as out of place as a tiara on a trash heap.

But while the old lady’s apparel might have been the first thing Jess noticed about her, it was something else that captured Jess’s full attention: the unmistakable glisten of tears, brimming in the woman’s rheumy eyes.

“Um, yes,” Jess replied, “I’m Jess Flint. Can I

help you?”

Drawing a lace handkerchief from her sleeve, the old lady dabbed at her eyes and said, “I hope you can, Ms. Flint. I surely do hope you can...”

3

Miss Lacey

“Here, let me top you up,” Abby Flint said, hoisting the guest teapot from its trivet by the glowing hearth and approaching the elderly lady with it. Seated opposite, Jess watched her mom pour out another cup for their visitor, the momentary quiet affording Jess an opportunity to study this puzzling prospective client. By the flickering light of the parlor fire, Miss Lacey—the woman’s name, Jess knew by now—looked no less prim and overdressed here in the modest surroundings of the Flint family’s four-room frontier cabin than she had half an hour ago in the Lucky Horseshoe. She looked no less tearful

either, though a gracious smile did tug at her lips as she said to Jess's mom, "Thank you, dear, you're very kind," raising the fine china cup to sip at her refreshed brew.

Eventually, Miss Lacey lifted her eyes again to Jess. "You still seem... unsure, Ms. Flint. If it's about the money—"

"No," Jess said, "it's not the money, it's just... You *really* can't find a scheduled passenger service to take you?"

"Not one that would get us there in time, no. And a stagecoach, I fear, would be slower still."

"Sure, but... chartering an entire train? Just for *yourself*?"

"And my sister, Ms. Flint. We come as a pair, Sissy and I. Always have done, always will."

Jess returned an understanding nod, while failing still to erase entirely the lingering frown that creased her brow. It wasn't that she couldn't do with the money. Business for Trans-Mars Haulage, while gratifyingly steady, couldn't exactly be described as booming quite yet, and the high-end oxygen breather units Jess's mom needed to keep her worsening asthma at bay weren't getting any cheaper. Quite the opposite, in fact.

As if reading Jess's thoughts, Abby Flint pulled her current breather from the front pocket of her apron and took from it as discreet a drag as she was

able in the tiny parlor. The action itself was small, almost mundane, and a regular enough occurrence in the Flint household to be all but invisible under normal circumstances. Right now though, it was an unwelcome reminder that the atmosphere the local air barons saw fit to supply to the residents of Tranquility and its environs did not come even *close* to meeting the legal requirements for breathability. How they got away with such blatant flouting of the regulations, Jess could not say. And as for the air tax itself? Rising almost every month, *despite* the ever declining air quality. It wasn't like they had any kind of choice in the matter either. Ultimately, it was pay up or out you went to the Free Zones, where unpredictable pockets of *entirely* untreated and potentially poisonous atmosphere would take their toll on even the healthiest of lungs, let alone the kind of asthma-ravaged ones Jess's mom had to battle on with.

All things considered then, this hire was, on the face of it, a highly welcome and more than generous payout for very little effort on the part of Trans-Mars Haulage.

So why did Jess still feel reticent?

"Ms. Flint, I understand your concerns, truly I do," the old lady said, "but please be assured, my late husband left us well taken care of. The fee is not an issue here. The only real question is

whether you, widely hailed as the fastest rail operator in the western quadrant, might be willing to take two elderly sisters to New Dakota in time to say a final farewell to their beloved mother.”

From the determined look in the woman’s eye, it was clear to Jess that Miss Lacey would have continued to expand upon this heartfelt plea, except that bubbling under the last of her words was a throaty, choked sound that stopped her. One uncomfortable pause later, the old lady again drew a hanky from her sleeve to dab at her brimming eyes.

Jess felt her heart give a lurch, and a sharp pang of guilt followed. Guilt for even *considering* turning away this soul in need. Cos let’s face it. Injured wildlife? Lost children? Little old ladies who wanted to visit dying relatives in far flung regions of Mars? If they needed help, needed support, were hurting in any way at all, Jess Flint, as history had proven, was never *really* gonna say no to them, now was she?

“Miss Lacey, I...” Jess stammered, “... Okay, sure. Yes. We can do that. No problem. Consider us hired.”

“Oh, *thank you*, Ms. Flint. Thank you *so much*. Now, if you’ll excuse me, I really must get back to Sissy. She’ll be anxious to know how I got on.”

“Of course,” Jess said, she and Miss Lacey rising together from their chairs while Jess’s mom

fetches the old lady's shawl from a hook by the hall door.

Mustering a smile, Jess approached Trans-Mars-Haulage's newest client and presented her hand, which the old lady, smiling now too, shook with an admirably businesslike firmness.

"So," Jess said, "if you and your sister can make your way to TMH for about midday tomorrow, that would be great. We *are* gonna need most of the morning to prep the engine and the VIP carriage, but hopefully we can get the pair of you aboard post-lunch. Is that okay?"

"Perfect," Miss Lacey said, allowing Jess's mom to drape the shawl across her rounded, old-lady shoulders and then escort her out into the hall.

As the door closed behind the pair, Jess stood in thought for a moment longer, then sagged back into her chair, a frown of uncertainty making a return appearance on her brow. The precise *reason* for that uncertainty continued to elude her though, still just a nebulous, niggling doubt, dancing somewhere at the edge of her awareness.

Maybe, in the end, it was simply a gut-level recognition of one of life's more sobering truths: that people who went around helping injured wildlife often ended up with a face full of claws...

4

Early Birds

“Oh, *bother*,” Vera Middleton muttered, taking an eraser to the accounts leger in front of her even as she cursed again her overactive hormones. Honestly though, half an hour ago it really hadn’t seemed at all unreasonable—the notion of taking herself and her work outside into the spacious yard of Trans-Mars Haulage, where she could enjoy the pleasing warmth of a low morning sun while attempting to finalize last month’s books.

Unfortunately, said notion had not taken into account the subsequent appearance of Sally Chu, intent on hosing down the Cannonball Express prior to today’s charter job.

Sally Chu in micro-shorts and a tight-fitting t-shirt.

Now a tight-fitting *wet* t-shirt.

Nope. Complex mental arithmetic and a primed libido were *not* ideal bedfellows, Vera reflected...

... before going on to reflect at further dreamy length on the word *bedfellows*...

... then concluding the entire unhelpful routine in her habitual way with a thorough mental scolding: *Oh my goodness, girl, will you get a grip!*

Grabbing her pencil once more, Vera dragged her eyes away from the spectacle in question to focus again on the debit column of the leger. Because really (she told herself for what was surely the tenth time this morning), it wasn't as if someone as unfeasibly beautiful and self-assured as Sally 'The Rose of Tranquility' Chu—showgirl extraordinaire and object of desire for virtually anything with a pulse—could *ever* have the slightest romantic interest in someone as *un*-extraordinaire as Vera. Not even if she—

The hiss of Sally's hosepipe stopped suddenly, and a dead silence fell. A silence *not* charged in *any* way with *any kind* of entirely one-sided sexual tension whatsoever.

Nope. Absolutely not.

Forcing herself to stay focused on the pitifully limited charms of the leger's debit column, Vera

detected a series of light footsteps as Sally stepped her way.

“What you reckon then, babe?” came the gal’s throaty drawl.

“Oh, ehm, yes,” Vera said as she looked up... her eyeballs going on to perform some truly Olympian gymnastics in their efforts to avoid the clinging wet t-shirt now less than one meter dead ahead. “Yes, looking good, Sally.”

“Well, clearly,” Sally said, “but what about the *train*?”

“What? I... No, I...” Vera’s stomach turned over. “I didn’t mean—”

“Vera, relax. It was a joke.”

“Ha! ... Yes, um, obviously I knew *that*. I was just—*Jess!* There you are!”

Because yes! There (thank the gods of fortuitous interruption) she was—their trusty leader, rolling to a stop on the pushbike she’d just ridden into the TMH yard.

“Yeah, sorry I’m late,” Jess said as she dismounted the cycle and straightened her disheveled overalls. “Took an age to finalize the route. But hey, all done now. So... I guess we better get that VIP car valeted before our passengers arrive, yes? Then we can— Huh? Something wrong?”

Her own puzzled frown having prompted the question, Vera glanced over at the glossy

luxuriance of the Cannonball's VIP carriage, currently hitched between the sleeper wagon they used on long journeys and the ever-present crew car. "Um, it's a little late to be valeting the VIP car now, I'm afraid," Vera said. "Our passengers are already aboard."

Jess stared back in confusion. "What?"

"They were here when I arrived. I thought *you* must have let them in early."

Jess opened her mouth to reply, but before anything could emerge, one of the VIP carriage's polished mahogany doors swung open, and there was Miss Lacey.

"Ah, Ms. Flint, good morning," the old lady said. "I hope you don't mind. Sissy and I arrived rather early and found the gates open, so we thought we may as well settle ourselves in for the ride. That *was* all right, wasn't it?"

Vera saw the shadow of a frown pass over Jess's brow. But a moment later the big boss-lady of Trans-Mars Haulage just smiled and said, "Of course. Sure. No problem," then began to head over to the VIP car.

Vera followed, Sally too, and as the trio approached a smiling Miss Lacey in the carriage doorway, Vera suddenly found her gaze drawn by something else. Something *behind* one of the VIP car's curtained windows. Silhouetted against the closed floral drapes, reclining in the seat just

beyond, was a lone figure in a coal scuttle bonnet.

Jess's eyes darted at once to the same silhouetted shape. "Is that your sister?" she asked Miss Lacey. "I'll maybe just say a quick hello and—"

But as Jess made to step up into the VIP car, Miss Lacey made no corresponding attempt to clear the doorway, instead lowering her voice to a near whisper and bending to speak into Jess's ear. Vera could just make out the words:

"In all honesty, Ms. Flint, I would really rather you didn't. Sissy dislikes being seen these days. In her youth she was regarded as something of a beauty, but since the smallpox outbreak of forty-three... Well... I'm sure you understand."

For a moment, Vera thought Jess might press the matter regardless, but then, as before, a business-like smile replaced Jess's puzzled frown, and she nodded. "Sure. Of course. Sorry."

"Thank you. You're very kind," Miss Lacey said and then closed the carriage door, leaving Jess... maybe not *concerned* exactly, Vera thought, but somehow not entirely happy either.

"Something wrong?" Vera asked.

It took another moment, but eventually Jess answered, "No... No, it's cool..." and turning to Vera and Sally, their ever-efficient leader pulled herself up straight, tucked her ponytail into her denim cap, and said, "Okay, team, let's get to it."

Leave at midday and we can be there sundown, no problemo. A nice, hassle-free charter. Easy money all the way. Just how we like it.”

Ha! a rueful Vera would come to observe only a little later, once fate had dealt them what was surely the wildcard to end all wildcards. *Hassle-free indeed!*

For the next few hours though, hassle-free it was. With the entire train fully prepped by eleven, they all sat down to a sumptuous early lunch, care of Dave and his wondrous ways with a sandwich (not to mention his even *more* wondrous ways with coffee), and then at midday precisely, with a hiss of pistons and a clatter of wheels, the Cannonball Express, hauling a minimal train of only coal tender plus four wagons, pulled out of the TMH yard to steam its way north into the rocky wilds of the red planet.

Jess had scheduled herself and Sally to take the first shift together in the loco, which suited Vera fine. Being confined for two hours in the Cannonball’s hot and sweaty cab with a hot and sweaty Sally Chu would, as far as Vera was concerned, be almost as much of a challenge to basic functioning as this morning’s excruciating wet t-shirt fiasco.

Not that Vera would be putting her feet up for those first two hours though. A recent request from Dave had suggested a rather more active use

of their mutual downtime, and now, while rugged Martian landscape rushed by outside the windows of the crew car, Vera stood there with said fellow in her arms as, once again, he did determined battle with both the basics of the foxtrot and Vera's gentle teasing.

"Look," the boy from Staines insisted between bouts of his trademark toe-mashing, "I just got *no idea* what you're talking about, Vera, okay?"

"Oh, come on, I'm not *blind*, you know," Vera replied as she steered him up the aisle of the crew car. "Left foot *slow*..." It was like steering a fully laden shopping trolley. With a wonky wheel. On a slope. In mud.

"Nope, not blind maybe," Dave came back, "just *highly* imaginative."

"You think I haven't noticed those little sighs you make around her?"

"I have a chest condition."

"And that twinkle in your eye?"

"Also an eye condition."

"Uh-huh," Vera said. "And so *this* particular venture—me teaching you how to dance—right foot *back*, please—is in no way whatsoever a Prince Charming gambit?"

"A *what*?"

"So you can sweep her off her feet at Tranquility's next 'royal ball'."

"Vera, get real. We both know *Jess's* Prince

Charming has got an Irish accent and a six-pack like the Hulk's personal trainer."

Well, yes, all right, Vera was not going to deny that, since encountering the unquestionably buff specimen of manhood on their very first outing in the Cannonball, Jess had indeed exhibited the significant hots for one Declan Donovan, leader of Mars's headline-grabbing underground activist group *Free Air*, and owner of the aforementioned accent and pack-of-six. Dave, however, did have at least one significant advantage over this admitted bookies' favorite, and while deftly dodging another potential foot-crunching, Vera reminded the lad of that advantage now. "Yes, but you're *here*," she said, "and he *isn't*. You do know Jess hasn't seen Declan at all since that day. Not once. Apparently the chap hasn't even written. In *three months*."

"Yeah, well... all completely irrelevant anyway, innit?" Dave replied. "Cos I say again, I do *not* have feelings for— JESS!" This last blurted out in wide-eyed shock, because, yes, of course, there she was, standing directly behind Vera, the very object of Dave's ill-concealed affections.

Vera felt Dave's chest begin to hitch, little stifled gasps punctuating the painfully few words that managed to fight their way out of his mouth:

"Jess <GASP> Hey! <GASP> we was just <GASP>..."

“You okay?” Jess asked him.

“He has a chest condition,” Vera said, taking pity. “Also an eye condition. Personally, I’m not ruling out a lying-through-his-teeth condition, but there you go.”

“Vera, can we talk?” Jess asked, that same not-quite-concerned-but-not-entirely-happy-either frown from before darkening her features once again.

“Of course,” Vera said, allowing Jess to lead her away while Dave fought back another couple of wheezing gasps and tapped at his sternum for Jess’s benefit: *Chest condition. See?*

As they settled into a seat at the far end of the crew car, Vera watched that peculiar look on Jess’s face darken still further before finally asking her outright, “Jess, what is it? What’s wrong?”

Leaning in and lowering her voice, Jess said, “Vera, I need you to do something for me...”

5

Sissy

Crouched in shadow at the far end of the VIP carriage's passageway, Jess watched in silence as Vera stepped up to the door of the car's luxury cabin. Pausing before the gleaming mahogany panel, Vera drew in a deep breath, raised a knuckle, then knocked gently.

And in response...

... not a sound. Just the ever-present clatter of wheels on track as the Cannonball Express steamed onward into the wilder northern regions of the red planet.

After a moment, Vera shot a nervous glance at Jess, who returned a curt nod of encouragement

from her hiding place in the shadows. *Try again.*

Vera tried again, adding a tentative, “Um, excuse me, Miss Lacey?” into the bargain, and this time her efforts were rewarded with a rattle of keys from inside the cabin. A second later, the door creaked open a fraction, and Jess saw Vera fire up one of her winning smiles.

“I’m so sorry to bother you, Miss Lacey,” Vera said, “but it seems I need your signature on an addendum to the contract.”

Miss Lacey’s soft, old-lady voice came back in reply, somewhat hesitant: “Oh... well, yes, of course. Do you... do you have it there?”

“Ah. Sorry, no,” Vera said. “It’s just on my desk though. Do you mind? It really won’t take a minute,” and dialing her winning smile up a notch, Vera gestured towards the far end of the passageway—the end where Jess wasn’t.

A further moment of silence followed, during which Miss Lacey, not visible from Jess’s vantage point, seemed to consider Vera’s request. But eventually, “Of course. If it’ll just take a minute,” the old lady said and stepped out of the compartment into the corridor. “Back in a second, Sissy,” she called over her shoulder, before pulling the cabin door closed behind her and locking it with the passenger key Jess had given her that morning. This done, Miss Lacey pocketed the same key then smiled up at Vera, who nodded her

thanks and began to lead the old lady off down the corridor.

“Just this way,” Vera said, that smile of hers never wavering as she opened the door at the corridor’s far end to usher Miss Lacey through.

Jess watched the pair of them disappear into the crew car, saw the door click shut behind them, then waited a full ten seconds more before finally stepping out from her hiding place.

Chewing on her lower lip in a kind of low-level, nonspecific apprehension—she genuinely had *no idea* what to expect here—Jess crept up to the locked door of the VIP cabin, placed both palms and one ear against its wooden surface, and listened...

Nothing.

At least, nothing she could hear above the rumbling rattle of the Cannonball.

With her heartrate shifting on up into second gear—again for reasons that remained entirely obscure—Jess took in a deep breath, knocked lightly, and called, “Hello?”—

—upon which there came from behind the door a low rush of sounds—several heavy thuds, a rustle, a creak or two, and then...

... silence once more.

After another moment, Jess knocked again. “Hello?”

But this time, nothing.

The silence stretched on...

Okay then, Jess thought, *you leave me no choice here, folks*, and glancing about her to check she was still alone, she withdrew her master set of keys from a pocket, unlocked the cabin door, and pushed it open just a crack.

“Um, hey, really sorry to bother you like this, but my name is Jess. I’m the train’s chief engineer, yes? Kind of the boss, if you like. So I’m coming in, okay?” and shoving the door open a little farther, Jess eased herself into the cabin.

As had been the case since Jess’s arrival at TMH that morning, all of the VIP carriage’s curtains were fully closed, shadow and gloom blanketing the compartment in a sinister monochrome.

“I... I guess I just wanna say hello,” Jess continued, “if that’s okay with you. And maybe—” She stopped, her confusion growing, her heartrate lurching its way up into third. Because with her eyes now growing accustomed to the low light, Jess should surely have been able to make out the presence of the carriage’s other occupant. The mysterious Sissy.

But she couldn’t. There was no one there.

The entire cabin appeared completely empty.

Jess felt a tinge of irritation. “Okay, look, I did *hear* you, you know. I just want to—”

And that was when she saw it.

A figure.

Dark and silent.

Clad in a long plain dress and a coal scuttle bonnet—

—and clinging to the ceiling directly above her.

Cursing in shock, Jess threw herself backwards just as the figure dropped from the ceiling, feet first, to hit the floor with a room-shaking thud. Then, before Jess had time even to cry out, a monstrous animal shriek tore at the air as the creature—all fangs and fur and razor claws; part gorilla, part wolfman—rose up to its full height and hurled itself forward.

With a scream of terror, Jess darted to one side, the monster flying past and slamming into the cabin wall, where it slumped to the floor in a rain of shattered woodwork. Shaking its bonneted head, the thing yowled in fury, and as it began again to rise, Jess whirled where she stood, making a desperate dive for the still open carriage door. But even as her front foot was crossing the threshold, she felt something—one of the creature's claws, it could be nothing else—hook the rear shoulder straps of her denim overalls. The move brought Jess up short with brutal efficiency, forcing all the air from her lungs in a loud, barking gasp. Then, with a single mighty tug, Jess was yanked off her feet and went flying backwards, sailing across the width of the cabin to crash headfirst into one of its curtained windows.

Jess both heard and felt the muffled crunch as the glass behind the curtain gave way, and an instant later, in a tangle of floral drapes and curtain cords, she was tumbling through the window, out into the wild rush of air blasting its way down the side of the speeding train. Twisting mid-fall, Jess flung out a desperate hand and somehow managed to grab the sill of the cabin's shattered window, her body slamming down onto the carriage exterior, the rocky surface of Mars rushing by just meters below.

Grimacing in pain, winded almost to incapacitation, and with blood seeping from arms lacerated by the shattered window glass, Jess clung on, her booted feet scrabbling for some kind of purchase—*any* kind of purchase—on the carriage's external paneling. But there was none. Nothing but smooth, shiny mahogany. And beneath that, nothing but certain death on the red planet's boulder-strewn ground, hurtling past at close to one hundred kilometers per hour. Shifting her grip on the window sill, Jess fought for a better hold, finally found one, and, with every muscle straining, dragged herself up level with the broken window.

But even as her head rose above the sill, there again was the creature, filling the window frame, fangs bared, claws unsheathed, eyes ablaze with a blind animal fury. Letting loose another ear-

shattering roar, the creature fixed its ferocious gaze on Jess dangling from the window sill and locked both of its claws together into a single titanic fist—a fist that could surely pummel granite to a pulp, never mind flesh and bone. Then, its bulging muscles taut with power, the creature roared for a third time, raised high that pile-driver of a double-fist, and brought it pounding down at Jess's head.

6

Runaways

“SISSY, NO!”

The cry rang out from behind the enraged creature, and like a prisoner caught in a watchtower spotlight, the animal froze where it stood, its fearsome double-fist coming to a halt halfway down its path to Jess’s skull.

In the cabin doorway stood the tiny figure of Miss Lacey, her elderly body rigid with tension, her features scrunched into a look of severest disapproval. But while the old lady’s cry had clearly given the thing pause, still the monster in the dress and the coal scuttle bonnet stood there, growling its feral fury as it glared down at Jess

dangling from the shattered window.

Once again Miss Lacey raised her voice, “I said NO, Sissy! Stop this right now!” and once again the woman’s admonishing tone seemed to arrest the creature, which, though still growling, shot a glance over its shoulder, eyeing the old lady in the doorway—

—who, in her turn, followed through on the verbal warning with a single arched eyebrow—the kind you might direct at a stubborn child who refused to do their chores.

Something seemed to flicker across the creature’s face then. *Doubt, maybe?* Jess thought. *Regret, even?*

“Sissy, that is *quite enough*,” Miss Lacey said, an air of weary exasperation replacing the anger and disapproval of her previous words. “Come here, girl. Come to mommy,” upon which, with a final sigh-like grunt, all the rage seemed to leave the monster at once, its arms drooping to its sides, its shoulders sagging, and what Jess could have sworn was a look of shame creeping into its dark eyes.

Retreating from the smashed window, the creature vocalized again—this time a kind of low, heartfelt mewl—before turning to Miss Lacey in the cabin doorway, loping over to her, then finally stepping into the old woman’s open arms.

With the window now clear, Jess dragged herself the rest of the way through into the

wrecked compartment, where she slumped gasping onto the glass and splinter strewn floor—

—while opposite her in the open doorway, Miss Lacey held the trembling monster to her breast and stroked the creature’s silver-gray fur:

“There there, Sissy. It’s over now. It’s all over...”



“I realize now I should have been honest with you all from the start,” Miss Lacey said, “and for that I am truly sorry. But please, I beg you, do not forsake Sissy because of *my* foolish misjudgment.”

It was close to half an hour later, the train now tucked away in the first convenient siding they’d come to following the ‘incident’, and with a silent Sissy nestled in by her feet, the old lady—though not nearly so old as her earlier ‘helpless granny’ affectations had contrived to make out—sat huddled in a corner of the crew car, telling her strange tale to Jess and the gang, while an appropriately gothic thunderstorm raged outside, and rain lashed at the carriage windows.

Quite the tragic tale of horror it was too, Jess would be forced to concede, and despite the woman’s previous deceit, not to mention its near fatal consequences, Jess couldn’t help but feel her heart go out to the unlikely pair before them. That this was the full unvarnished truth they were

finally hearing from their troubled client, Jess had little doubt. The sheer rawness of the pain on display in the old lady's eyes was evidence aplenty in that regard.

As for Sissy herself, since nearly sending Jess to a brutal and bloody demise on the rocky surface of Mars, the creature had been quite the picture of loving serenity, her face—somehow both beautiful and fearsome at the same time—suggesting in repose an emotional intelligence that, through the subtlety and complexity of its expression, seemed almost *human* to Jess. Not that this made the animal's continued presence among them any less intimidating. Maybe one meter seventy when she stood upright, her slender frame rippling with dense musculature beneath silver-gray fur, Sissy's resemblance to a horror movie wolfman (or *wolfwoman* in this case) remained both remarkable and unnerving, the creature's gingham dress and floral bonnet doing little to undermine the aura of monstrous strength and animal pride she radiated, even in her currently tranquil state.

Dave refilled Miss Lacey's coffee cup from the steaming jug in his hands, and after sipping gratefully at the aromatic brew, the not-quite-so-old-after-all woman resumed:

"I mean it, Ms. Flint. I really do. If Sissy were forced to go back there, I honestly don't think she

would..." Her voice trailed off into silence, while at her feet, Sissy let out a low mournful cry, nuzzling deeper into the old woman's side.

"Something happened, didn't it?" Jess said. "At this carnival of yours."

"Yes. Yes, it did. No one died, thank goodness, but Sissy... The problem is, she's now fast approaching full sexual maturity, her hormones are raging, and in all honesty, it's only a matter of time before someone does. *Die*, I mean. And after that..." Something almost fully physical seemed to leave Miss Lacey's huddled body then, and she slumped back into her seat, tears—*real* tears this time—brimming in her eyes. "They won't even use a needle, Ms. Flint. Just a shotgun and a heavy duty refuse sack."

Swallowing hard, Jess found herself at an utter loss, and a bleak, lengthy silence fell, relieved only by the drumming of rain on the carriage roof. At last, Jess rose, paced the floor for several seconds more, then turned and delivered what was really the only response she could possibly give in the circumstances: "Miss Lacey, I'm so sorry, but to continue here would put my entire crew in jeopardy. Not to mention my haulage license, her—*Sissy*—being stolen property an' all."

"Please," Miss Lacey implored. "Ms. Flint, I *beg* you. I have no one else to turn to. You really are my only hope. *Sissy's* only hope..."

And once again, a dark silence descended, every set of eyes in the carriage boring into Jess, awaiting the boss's *final* final answer. Heaving out a massive sigh, Jess chewed on her lower lip for another long moment, then turned to the crew car's side door—the one that led outside. Rain or no rain, Jess needed some air, and stepping forward, she pushed the door open...

... only to recoil with a start of shock as the barrel of a gleaming six-shooter rose to meet her widening-eyes.

“Well howdy there, young lady,” Levi Zabulon Slinger said as he cocked the gun's hammer.

7

Zora

Slinger, a study in immaculately tailored black, stood there blocking the doorway of the crew car, rain ricocheting off the brim of his waxed Stetson as a smile played across his thin lips.

“What the hell,” Jess gasped, her heart pounding. “What are you—”

“Keep your hands where I can see ’em, girlie,” the private-hire enforcer said, his easy drawl at chilling odds with the menace in his eyes. “So I’m guessing you know the drill, right? No sudden moves, and step *slowly* back into the carriage.” As the man spoke, the revolver he held leveled at Jess’s head stayed almost supernaturally steady,

while his remaining arms—the scumbag had a freakish six in total, care of some deeply illegal body-augmentation surgery—hovered over his other five pistols, still at rest in the mother-of-pearl encrusted holsters strapped in two lines of three down the gunman’s pant legs.

Seeing no immediate alternative—at least, none that wouldn’t involve blood, screaming, and almost certain death—Jess followed Slinger’s orders and stepped back. At the same time, in the carriage behind her, Sally, Vera, and Dave scrambled to their feet in stunned silence, while over in the corner, Sissy mewled in fear, cowering into Miss Lacey.

“What is this?” Jess growled. “What the hell do you want here, Slinger?”

“Why, what I always want, girly. Plain old-fashioned customer satisfaction,” upon which the man’s eyes shifted to take in Sissy, still huddled in terror by Miss Lacey’s feet. The sight of the whimpering creature seemed to please the gunman, and smiling wider still, Slinger turned to call over his shoulder, “Well, all rightie, and that would be a big ol’ happy affirmative. Critter’s right here, babe. In you come.”

And in she came.

Even through the spiraling confusion of the moment itself, Jess couldn’t help but reflect that if Slinger knew how to make a dramatic entrance—

and regrettably, Jess had seen enough of those to know for certain that he did—his skills were as nothing compared to the individual who joined them now in the carriage. Unnervingly tall, ramrod straight of back, and radiating a sense of entitlement that made Jess feel about five years old, the woman swept into the crew car like the President of Everywhere. Exuding disdain and impatience in equal measure, Slinger’s associate arrived stage center in just three commanding strides, her long leather coat falling into stillness around her spurred bootheels as she studied the group arrayed before her. Studied them with starkest disapproval.

“Ms. Flint,” Slinger said, “may I introduce—”

“No, you may not, Zab,” the newcomer snapped. “What is this? The ambassador’s frickin reception?” and turning to address Jess, the woman continued in similar vein, focused as a laser, arresting as a shotgun blast: “Zora Petrovna, legal owner of the stolen property that you appear to be transporting here, young woman.” A brief sally over her shoulder at Slinger came next: “Also, Zab, ‘babe’ me again, you lose body parts. The good ones.”

Jess frowned. “Um, okay, look—”

“Just trying to be friendly, Zora,” Slinger drawled.

“Yeah?” the woman came back. “Try being not-

a-sleazeball-jerk, Zab. Just this once, okay?” after which, following a brief eyes-closed moment to compose herself, Slinger’s compatriot aimed her weaponized vocals at a fresh target, this time the pair of cowering figures in the carriage’s corner seat. “Annie. Sissy. So, as they say, we can do this the hard way, or—”

But before the woman could finish, the creature in the corner leapt to her clawed feet and, with a roar of animal fury, launched herself forward.

“SISSY, NO!” Miss Lacey yelled, but the old lady’s cry came too late, and what happened next was something that would remain branded in Jess’s memory for the rest of her life—a moment of such shocking and sudden violence it left her shaken to her core.

From a kind of holster arrangement on her belt, the woman called Zora Petrovna whipped out a long dark object tipped with metal spikes, jabbing it forward at the creature who barreled towards her. As the object’s mace-like end pierced the material of Sissy’s dress, there was a loud SNAP, a crackle of electricity, and with an anguished howl, the monster not only broke off her attack but threw herself shrieking back into the corner, shredded cotton and silver-gray fur smoking where the electric cattle prod had made contact.

For several long seconds, no one spoke, the

grim silence an unwelcome opportunity for Jess to ponder one of Mars's crueler ironies—that while its EMP-riddled atmosphere negated the use of even the simplest electronics, high-voltage static discharges, be they from lightning bolts or illegal cattle prods, were unaffected.

Eventually, Slinger took a step forward. “Well okay, so let’s get to it then, shall we?” and reaching into a shoulder bag, he produced several sets of handcuffs, throwing them all in a pile at the feet of Jess and her crew. “Wrists *and* ankles, people,” Slinger said, drawing three more of his revolvers to level one each at Sally, Vera, and Dave.

Still seeing no way out of the situation, Jess nodded to the others, who began in sullen silence to reach for the handcuffs on the floor.

“And Zora,” Slinger said, not without a touch of rancor, “tranq the dang yeti, would ya?”

Raising a warning eyebrow at her lawman-for-hire—clearly this was a woman who did not *take* orders—Zora nonetheless drew a small plastic case from her coat pocket, and as she flipped it open, Jess caught a glimpse of its foam-padded contents: three fresh syringes and a small glass drug bottle.

Still brandishing the cattle prod in her other hand, Zora turned once more to Sissy, favoring the creature with the iciest of smiles. “Okay, girl. Now this won’t hurt a—”

But again, Sissy reared up howling and threw herself headlong at Zora, who countered as before, lunging with the cattle prod. This time though, the woman wasn't content to issue just a single warning strike. Stepping forward to follow her screaming victim back into the corner of the crew car, Zora stabbed out again and again with the device, Sissy's howls of agony rending the air as she convulsed and thrashed with the repeat shocks.

"No! Please! No more!" Miss Lacey screamed, her desperate efforts to shield Sissy thwarted as Slinger grabbed the old woman by the hair, throwing her to the floor.

And still Zora kept thrusting the crackling, snapping device at the defenseless animal, Sissy shrieking and flailing and—

"ENOUGH! STOP!"

But this time it wasn't Miss Lacey's voice.

It wasn't Jess's either.

It was Dave's.

Eyes ablaze with a fury Jess could barely believe he had in him, the fella from Staines took a lurching step towards the woman torturing Sissy.

But a single step was as far as he got, because even as he was raising his back foot to take another, the barrel of one of Slinger's revolvers shoved itself into the soft flesh of Dave's left cheek, and Sissy's would-be savior froze.

8

The Right Thing

Withdrawing the cattle prod from the creature at her feet, Zora Petrovna turned to the fear-frozen figure of Dave, assessing the guy with a single contemptuous once up and down as the traumatized Sissy sank whimpering into Miss Lacey's arms.

“*Really*, young fella?” Zora said. “And what, pray tell, is your function around here?”

Jess watched Dave blink several times in mute terror, his lungs snatching at the air in ragged gasps while the muzzle of Slinger's six-shooter compressed the pale flesh of his jowl. Two drops of sweat trailed down from Dave's sodden hairline

to break on the gun's gleaming barrel.

But then, taking everyone by surprise—himself among them, Jess suspected—Dave somehow managed to straighten, and gulping back the worst of his fear, he looked Zora dead in the eye:

“Me? I’m Dave,” he said. “I make the coffee,” of which, Jess saw, there was still a large steaming jug in his clenched right fist.

A large steaming jug which he proceeded to tip all over Zora’s cattle prod hand.

With a shriek of pain, Zora leapt backwards, dropping the prod and colliding hard with Slinger, whose single retaliating gunshot, ear-shattering in the enclosed carriage, went wild, punching a hole in the metal ceiling.

Then, before anyone else could move, Dave dropped to the floor, grabbed the fallen cattle prod, and jammed it hard into Slinger’s chest.

To say that what followed caught them all off guard would, Jess later reflected, be something of an understatement. Possibly, Dave had expected Slinger just to slump unconscious to the floor after a single shock from the prod. Or go flying across the carriage to knock himself out on a wall panel.

But neither of those things was what happened. And among the crew of the Cannonball Express, what *did* happen went down in company legend.

Hollering in pain, and with the sparking cattle prod pressed to his chest, the multi-armed

gunslinger began to convulse on the spot, every one of his occupied trigger fingers clenching and re-clenching with ongoing involuntary spasms. Hot flying lead pounded the carriage in all directions, tearing through panelwork, shattering windows, denting steel and brass. As broken glass and splintered wood rained down, the car's other occupants—Zora included—dived for whatever cover they could find, keeping their heads low until, almost ten full seconds later, with every last one of Slinger's chambered rounds spent, the gunsmoke-filled carriage resembled nothing less than a swiss cheese on wheels. There followed, briefly, a further series of impotent clicks from the now emptied weapons, after which, still convulsing, and with a string of drool dangling from one corner of his slack mouth, Slinger finally slumped to the floor of the car and lay still.

But the entire ordeal wasn't quite over yet, because just as the gunman's head thudded into the floorboards, Zora leapt from her cover to make a desperate lunge for Dave.

"Look out!" Jess yelled, and even as the words were leaving her lips, Dave whirled on the wild-eyed figure surging towards him, thrusting the cattle prod into her stomach. Electricity crackled, fizzed, snapped, while at the same time Zora gave out a protracted shriek of agony, finally sagging to the floor atop the unmoving Slinger. And there,

for the moment, the charming pair lay, breathing at least, Jess could see, but otherwise out for the proverbial count.

A stunned silence fell, all remaining eyes in the bullet-riddled crew car now fixed upon Dave, who, for his part, stood there agog at the center of the carnage, shaking and gasping, cattle prod still smoking in his hands.

Sally was the one who finally found words, though, as ever with Sal, not perhaps the most helpful ones in the circumstances: “Holy freakin crap, Dave, what the hell did you *do*?”

And still the guy just stood there, staring back at them all as if he genuinely had *no idea* what he’d done.

After another moment, Jess pulled herself to her feet, stepped up to the shell-shocked Dave, and extracted the cattle prod from his trembling clutches. This done, she turned again to the others and offered them a dark-toned but earnest answer to Sally’s hanging question:

“The right thing,” Jess said. “*That’s* what he did. The right thing.”

And did anyone disagree? No, they did not. How could they?

Five minutes later, a pair of limp bodies—one with six arms, one the regulation two—went sailing from the door of the crew car to land with a thud in the dirt by the rails.

Jess and Sally followed, leaping down to the graveled trackside, where rain still pounded and thunder still rumbled, and where, just a little way off, there stood an empty jail wagon behind two visibly skittish horses. Slinger and Zora had clearly come prepared, Jess thought, and must have driven in unheard over the sound of the storm.

Unhitching the two animals from the wagon, Jess and Sal slapped the beasts' rumps, and with a toss of their water-logged manes, both horses galloped off, vanishing into the rain-drenched haze.

"Okay, let's get the hell outta here," Jess said, and hightailing it for the loco with Sally, the pair hauled themselves up into the cab, where Jess's hands began to fly over the Cannonball's controls.

"Please tell me you got a plan here," Sally said as she reached for her coal shovel.

Jess just laughed and shot her friend a wry look. "Seriously? Evil circus owners? Monsters in frocks? Dave goes Ninja? Sal, I swear god himself is making this up as he goes," and working the engine's controls a little more, Jess was rewarded with a deafening blast of steam and a clank of pistons as the Cannonball Express came to heart-stirring life around her, lurching forward into the gathering storm.

END OF SAMPLE

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