

# Heartbeat like a Train's Rattle

By C. Jade Wyton

*A story narrated by Daimon as he tells his daughter about how he met his beloved late wife, Olivia.*

***Contains mentions of fighting, violence, and death.***

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It was a cool day, that day. I remember the breeze was blowing through my fur, ruffling it the same way your mother used to muss me up.

The train was loud and crowded. It'd been a good time in the mines and the prospectors had a lot of ore to move, so we'd called in some outside security to help protect it on the trip to the refinery. The factories weren't too far away. Just an hour or so by train.

But that hour or so was a dangerous one. Gangs and bandits liked to put up along the train line and wait for shipments to come through. Good people would lose their lives when they thought the cars looked full.

That's what all your grandpops and uncles and I used to take care of; stopping good people from losing their lives. We were good at it, too. Well. Your uncles are still good at it. I don't really... working's a little harder for me, now.

Everything's a little harder, actually. But that's alright. Sometimes that's just how it is.

Anyway. I remember after stocking the train I took up in one of the passenger carriages.

I didn't really want to. I wasn't really in a state to be seen by people, you know. I was just kissing fifteen, then. And my mane wasn't grown out like it is now. Frankly it was embarrassing; my whole mane was only about as long as your uncle Birdie's beard. But it wasn't neat and handsome like his beard. It was thin and patchy and ratty. Like your cousin Bazel's mane is now.

And, well, you know how embarrassed he gets about it.

And it was worse for me then, cos of all the extra hands they'd hired. They weren't just any random mercenaries from any no-name towns, see. They were getting good and proper bounty hunters, with good and proper reputations in to help. And I was stationed right in the middle of them all, where they kept passing by me and looking at me. And I can tell you that I've never been more self-conscious than the moment I saw *the* Farren Oakheart.

Actually thought I was going to bring up my lunch when he passed me by and gave me that little nod and pat on the shoulder.

'Keep up the good work, lad,' he'd told me.

'*Oh-uhm, uh-hum-hmm,*' I'd managed back. Though I don't think he heard me as he headed off to take his station.

I could hear the girls arguing as he passed through the door to the other carriage. Didn't know at the time it was your mother and aunt Volante, though by the end of our time together I reckon could've picked their whispers out in a hall

of screaming strangers.

Mind you, if they were whispering, they were plotting.

Bit like your cousin Ammiras and his mate Edgar, in that regard.

That said, I'm pretty sure your mother and Volante turned on Farren the moment he walked in cos Liv let out the angriest shriek I'd heard before that moment —though, mind, it certainly was *not* the angriest shriek I ever got to hear from her afterwards— and stormed back in through the door he'd gone out of.

My heart was beating fast as the rattling wheels of the train when I saw her. Her fur was spiked up so sharp I was worried she was gonna prick me like a cactus when she stormed past to the bathroom. I heard her punching up the walls for three... maybe five minutes? Before she came back out looking calm as anything. Just re-braiding her hair like that had been her intention the whole time.

I got a good look at her, then. And I realised she was as ratty as I was. But in a pretty way. Like she was starting to grow out of it... or I suppose she was more growing *into* it. Cos you know she never really stopped being ratty.... Though it was in the opposite type of ratty to me. Where's ratty didn't look good on me, it suited her.

Not sure what exactly it was about her that got me. But I think that was the exact moment I fell in love with her.

So I asked her, 'You alright?'

And she growled back, 'Why wouldn't I be?'

'Sounded like you got in a fight,' I said. 'And then sounded like you punched up the bathroom.'

'Yeah, *and?*'

'You want to talk about it?'

Turned out she did. For the next twenty minutes.

All about how nobody ever listened to her ideas, and how it wasn't fair that Farren always took everyone else's side.

Which I found out later was mostly exaggeration. Usually it was Sheshalan who didn't listen to her ideas. But Sheshalan was on the other side of the train with your uncle Birdie and aunt Veruca so Liv had to take it out on someone else.

And I was more than happy to listen to her. Even if she kept contradicting herself and fumbling her words in her... well. No other way to put it, really, except that she was having a tantrum.

But it didn't put me off talking with her. And by the midpoint in our trip she was starting to calm down and I was able to get a few words in.

Told her my name, to start with. Then asked what hers was. And after a little bit she ended up sitting down at my feet, leaning her head on my leg as we spoke.

She was real smart, you know. Talked about all these smart things like spells and potions and machinery. I never could get a grasp on any of it, but listening to your mother talk about it was like listening to a bird sing its favourite song.

It was one of the most beautiful things I'd ever heard.... That was, until we heard the explosion ahead of us.

The wheels screeched against the metal tracks as the train pulled to a halt and the smell of smoke and used gunpowder filled the air.

Your mother leapt up, quick as a rabbit chased by a fox, and all but climbed

out the side window.

‘They blew up the fucking tracks!’

I barely heard her yelling for me to follow her over the sound of shouting that rose up into the air.

We hurried into the carriage where Farren and Volante were, only to find that they had already been beaten. The bandits had, apparently, gotten several of their lesser-recognised men to board the train as passengers. And they’d taken the whole cart by surprise and were now holding them all hostage.

Though I will say—and I only say this in fear of your aunt Volante hearing that I left it out—that they clearly put up a fight. There were scorch marks over half the carriage and several men dead from the flames.

Now... you know I always talk about your mother being real smart. How she could read anything in a book and know it like a click of the fingers? Well. All that smart used to go right out the window whenever she got worked up or scared. And nothing ever got her more scared than seeing people she loved in trouble. So the first thing your mother did after running in, besides using some *very* foul language, was throw up a thick layer of ice around herself and box herself in place.

Nobody could touch her, but she might as well have walked right up to the gang and held her hands out for them to slap some cuffs on, with how she’d just trapped herself.

Volante made fun of her for it, after all was over. But Liv always maintained she had a plan and just didn’t get time to do it.

It was a lie, of course. She had *plenty* of time to set off *any* of her spells, as the gang realised she’d locked herself up and turned on me!

And I mean, I was ready to fight them—I would have taken them all on at once if I had to—but they grabbed one of the train’s passengers and held a gun to her head and I just... well. I wasn’t about to get someone’s grandma shot up, was I?

So I lowered my weapon and one of them came over to me. A scraggly man named Wesley Bramble. He was well-known for shooting up banks in the next town over.

He used the long end of his gun to raise my head up; pressing the end of the barrel right against my throat.

My heart was beating loud again. Though this time there was nothing to compare it to. The train’s wheel’s weren’t rattling— There was just screaming and gunshots far as I could hear as the man with the gun ushered me sideways to sit on the ice dome your mother had thrown over herself.

I wondered for a moment why they didn’t get me to sit with the others. But then they mentioned your uncle Radge; he’d apparently arrested Bramble’s father a few months earlier and sent him to hang. And he and his gang knew just by the look of me that I was Radge’s brother.

When I tell you I was shaking I mean I was *shaking*. I didn’t even know it was possible to feel as scared as I felt.

But they kept talking about revenge, and if they should hold me hostage or just shoot me, and it scared me.

I barely noticed over my own heartbeat and the talking that the fighting

outside the carriage had gotten quiet. Not until the bang.

The man holding the gun to me gave a cry as a bullet, glowing with the kiss of magic, sunk into his arm.

My eyes flicked to the door Liv and I had left open and I saw, rushing in together, your uncle Birdie and aunt Veruca.

And then Bramble's gun hit the ground at the same time he did, sounding like a bell for hell to break loose, and another man went down as a burst of flames licked from the other side of the room. I turned to see Volante had escaped her bonds and retrieved her things.

Half the gang drew their weapons and started shooting up the carriage, while the other half rushed out of the train and made off for the hills.

I rushed for my own weapon, which was now lying at Birdie's feet by the door, and took up at his side as we fought off the remaining men.

It was a rush. I'd never been in a proper fight before that, and to be fighting alongside the *Dawn Runners!* I couldn't believe it. Even after we won and all the fighting was over I still could barely believe that I'd fought with them.

And I can't even describe the feeling of pride at their praise.

These were the people that took down Erastus Letchford. And the Letter Park Gang. And the Pistol Brotherhood!

And that was just what they'd done as the Dawn Runners. Individually they'd taken on so much more— Like Uncle Birdie taking down Cassidy Sorrows!

I honestly couldn't believe I had gotten to fight besides such people. And my heart was still beating from the gun at my throat.

And then they retrieved your mother from her ice box and they started arguing and I felt the adrenaline starting to wear off.

By the time the law arrived with their horses and carts I was sitting on the floor, all of my fur quivering as Liv sat with me and pet my back.

Farren told me to go on home with the cops that had come to collect the surviving lawbreakers, and I was too tired to argue. So I let him usher me away and I headed off home to lay in your grandpop's armchair, not moving for the entire rest of the day until sundown.

I was exhausted. And sore. And still a little bit scared about what had happened.

But most of all, I couldn't stop thinking about your mother. I was convinced that I was never gonna see her again.

That this chance encounter was gonna be our only one, and she'd go about her life never thinking of me twice.

Then the funniest thing happened.

There was a knock at the door, and I was wrong.

Your grandpop was busy making dinner so he sent me to check who had come round, saying it was probably some town official here to check on me after all the bustling that day.

But it wasn't an official. It was your mother.

She'd been poking around town looking for me cos she wanted to talk.

Well. Talk is probably the wrong word for it.... I opened the door and what came out of her mouth was:

'Hey! It's you! Come on, we're gonna miss the train.'

'The... train is broken,' I responded. 'The track exploded.'

'Naw. The track goes both ways!' Liv pointed out. 'We're heading east on the overnight to the city. Are you coming or not?'

Now, I was taken aback by that question. There had been no indication that I was invited to go with her or the Dawn Runners.

So instead of answering, I found myself standing and staring dumbly at her.

And she put her hands on her hips and lashed her tail at me, asking me, 'Well?'

I finally found my voice, and asked, 'Did... Farren say I could...?'

'Hah! No. Farren didn't say you could. *I'm* saying you can. And I'm more in charge than Farren is. If I don't say someone can join then they can't join! So that means if I say someone *can* join, they can join! And I'm saying you can join.'

I looked her up and down then, cos she wasn't really making any sense.

'Are you coming or not?'

'I'm... I'm not sure....'

'Say yes.'

I hesitated. Then, your mother said something that confused me so hard I had to sit down where I was on the floor:

'If you don't come with us, I'll have to break up with you.'

I hadn't even realised we were dating! But apparently she'd decided we were at some point during our talk on the train.

Seeing my confusion, she continued to argue at me: 'You *gotta* come! I need someone who's good at listening to me! Nobody else is good at listening to me!'

Now I hadn't realised I'd been a good listener, but she went on to tell me that almost everyone she talks to always ends up arguing with her. Even when they're strangers. So her *not* immediately fighting with me was a big deal. She said that it must have been fate, and that we were soulmates.

I wasn't really sure on that, at first. But I knew from talking to her that she was smart and not stupid. And also I thought that maybe... maybe I wanted to have a soulmate. It sounded really nice.

So when she crossed her arms at me and told me that we were going to be late if I didn't get up and get ready to go, I found myself biting my lip and glancing back at your grandpop, who had stuck his head out of the kitchen to make sure I was doing alright.

I must have looked real unsure, cos your grandpop gave me one of his looks back and nodded at your mother, saying: 'Can't argue with fate.'

My stomach leapt to my throat as fast as I leapt to my feet, and my heart began pounding to that train-rattle beat again as I took your mother's hand and let her lead me away.

Now. I've never been known for being smart. And walking out the door with nothing but the clothes on my back and a shout out to your grandpop that I loved him and to tell my mother I was going travelling with a group of complete strangers was most certainly *not* on the list of clever things I've done.

But, still. I'm glad I did it.

—END—

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