

The Train Station

Norm fell asleep in his seat aboard a Northwest Airlines 727 and woke up in a train station.

He groggily opened his eyes and found himself sitting awkwardly on a long wooden bench with people all around. His head was slightly cocked to one side and there was a fine line of drool running from one corner of his mouth and down his chin. He bolted upright, the strangeness of the situation blasting away the last remnants of sleep, and looked around.

The train station made Grand Central in New York look like a whistle-stop depot in Pisspot, Arkansas. The sheer size of the cavernous central concourse – where Norm was currently sitting – could have held the entire Grand Central nearly twice over. Although his stunned mind refused to acknowledge the fact, his eyes registered that there must have been over fifteen thousand people there with him, looking at arrival/departure boards, holding their tickets in one hand while searching for the correct platform, and waiting.

Norm stood and turned, eyeballing everything in sight without regard for how foolish he may appear. At the top, just below the massive central dome, huge leaded windows let filtered sunlight in from what Norm assumed to be west, judging from the strong late-afternoon quality of the light. As the sunlight passed through the windows, it took on a filtered yellow color, what some might call “storm light.” Dust motes played in the rays.

“Now arriving at platform three, train four-four-zero,” a voice said over the station’s public address system. Unlike most PA systems, this one was easy to understand. “All passengers with tickets for train four-four-zero are required to report to platform three.” The message repeated once and people started moving towards the staircases that led – according to the signs – to platform three.

Norm turned to watch where the passengers bound for train four-four-zero were going and jumped in surprise. Standing directly next to him and facing him, hands folded behind his back, was a tall, elderly man with a very pale complexion.

“Mr. Bulger,” the man said. Norm noticed how skinny the old man was. Also, he was dressed in some sort of uniform, all black, and a black hat with a narrow white band around it. The old man’s shoes were shined to a mirror gloss.

“Call me Norm,” said Norm.

“My name is Renfield. I am the Director.” There was no mistake when he said it that his title was to be capitalized.

“What...?” Norm began, but Renfield cut him off.

“I know you must have many questions, Mr. Bulger, but time is short – always so short. You have to pick up your ticket before your train arrives.”

“What train?” Norm asked. “Where do you think I’m going? I’ve gotta get home. Sue’s gonna be pissed!” He looked around again. “She’s never gonna believe this shit.”

“Your wife is no longer of any concern to you, Mr. Bulger,” Renfield said, then raised a hand to put a stop to Norm’s protests before they could be given voice. “Nor are your daughters.”

Renfield led Norm to one of the ticket booths, impervious to Norm's continued protests. He never laid a hand on Norm, but Norm nevertheless felt compelled to follow him.

The middle-aged man behind the barred window looked like a card dealer in a smoke-filled backroom dive. He wore glasses, a red vest and a green visor low on his brow, filtering the overhead light and turning his face a sickly jade green. His lips looked swollen, as if he was having an allergic reaction to something he'd eaten, and his nose was bulbous and covered with a network of broken capillaries, like that of a lifelong heavy drinker.

"Name," the ticket man said, never even looking up at Norm and Renfield.

"What do you...?" Norm started.

"Norman Thaddeus Bulger," Renfield said. "May 17, 1947. October 23, 2009."

Today's date, Norm thought. First my birth date, then today's date. What the fuck is going on?

The ticket man was typing Norm's information onto a form. The typewriter he was using looked kind of like an IBM Model 01 – which would have been brand new the year Norm was born – that had maybe been through a fire. It was charred and looked slightly melted in places.

Norm turned to Renfield. "How'd you know my name? And my birth date?" He raised a finger and pointed, but didn't quite dare to jab it into Renfield's chest – he didn't really want to touch the old man and was glad and secretly relieved that the old man hadn't touched him, yet.

Renfield ignored him and asked the ticket man a question, instead. "What is Mr. Bulger's assignment?"

"Just a damn minute," the ticket man said. "Here, it's comin' now." He sat back and watched as the maybe-not-IBM Model 01 began typing by itself. It rattled off several characters, paused, then rattled off a few more. Another pause, and it carriage-returned a few times, set some more type on the form and stopped.

Norm looked at the perhaps-an-IBM Model 01 with his mouth agape. It's not as if he'd never seen a computer printer. But this was a typewriter that appeared to be from 1947 and had no kind of network connection that he could see.

The ticket man pulled the form from the typewriter and passed it and a ballpoint pen through the opening at the bottom of the window towards Norm. He pointed to two places on the form. "Sign here, initial here," he said.

"Wait just a damn minute," Norm said firmly. "I want to know what the fuck is going on. How the hell did I get here? I was on my way home from a regional conference. Is this some kind of layover? How'd I get off the plane? Where's my luggage?"

Renfield was making "calm-down" gestures with both of his hands. "Please, Mr. Bulger, there's no need for outbursts," he said. "As a matter of fact, this is a kind of layover." The ticket man chuckled. Renfield cast him a sobering look. The chuckling stopped. "Luggage is unnecessary. Sign the form, Mr. Bulger."

Something in Renfield's tone, or maybe his gaze – perhaps the same something that had made the fat guy behind the ticket window stop laughing – made Norm decide that maybe he should just shut up and sign the form.

Norm took the ballpoint pen and signed where needed, then initialed where needed. The bottom portion, where he put his initials, looked like a ticket.

The ticket man pulled both the form and the pen back through the window, nodding as he checked Norm's signature and initials, then tore the bottom part of the form off along the perforation and handed Norm his ticket.

"Now that you have your ticket, Mr. Bulger," Renfield said, "I'll leave you to pass the time as you please until your train arrives."

"I'm not getting on any train," Norm said sullenly. He sounded a little like a middle-teenager about to throw a first-class hissy fit.

"Oh, but you are," Renfield told him. "The Conductors will make sure of it. If you don't report as ordered you will be found and *made* to report."

Norm decided not to ask what the implied threat might have meant – it really wasn't a threat, anyway, just a simple statement. Renfield's tone suggested that threats were unnecessary; compliance was non-negotiable.

"Good day, Mr. Bulger." Renfield turned and began walking away. Norm reached out, grabbed Renfield's arm, and was immediately sorry he had done so. The flesh underneath the cloth felt – unnatural, too soft. Renfield turned. Norm wiped his hand absently on his pant leg.

"You seem to think that I am your personal guide, Mr. Bulger," Renfield told him. "This is not the case. You see how many souls there are in the station? The trains can hardly keep up. Every load that is taken out of here is replaced by at least as many." For the first time a crack appeared in Renfield's all-business façade. An almost-human emotion strained to get through.

"I must greet every soul that arrives and get them ticketed," he said. "Every *single one*, Mr. Bulger. Do you understand that? That is my job, my duty."

Norm stood there, speechless, mouth hanging agape.

Renfield paused, collected himself; the crack in his all-business façade sealed. "You will report to your designated platform when called, Mr. Bulger. Until then, do as you will. It won't be long until your train arrives. It rarely is." Renfield turned and disappeared into the crowd, presumably to find another "soul" to "get ticketed."

"Now arriving at platform twenty-six, train six-three," the public address announced. "All passengers with tickets for train six-three are required to report to platform twenty-six." As the message repeated, a young man with an athlete's build started shouting.

"Fuck you!" he yelled. "I ain't gettin' on no fuckin' train!" Three figures wearing what Norm thought of as the stereotypical train conductor's uniform swept through the crowd, which was giving the young man a wide berth even as many of them moved towards the stairways leading to platform twenty-six, and approached the man. All three were just as pale as Renfield and all looked at least as old, but there was no mistaking the power they had, nevertheless.

As the three conductors closed on the shouting man, two grabbed his arms and the third one grabbed him by the front of his t-shirt, moving within kissing distance.

"Hey, what the fuck?" the young man yelled.

The third conductor appeared to lean in to whisper into the man's ear, but his head was cocked to one side like a man kissing his lover's neck. The young man suddenly stopped his tirade and his eyes bulged. The other two conductors let go of his arms and the third moved back and let go of the young man's shirt. His eyes were no longer bugging out, but they had a blank look in them as if his soul had been subdued.

The conductor who had been at the young man's front turned and walked away. However, they were no longer walking toward platform twenty-six. The young man followed obediently, silently, with the other two conductors flanking him.

Norm looked around and noticed that he wasn't the only one watching this event with keen interest. Almost everyone nearby had a look that betrayed their emotions – moderate, frightened interest bordering on abject terror. On some, the fright shared real estate on their faces with a species of terrible understanding. It was as if this was an explanation to some unknown question to which Norm wasn't yet privy.

It had been almost six hours since Norm woke up in this train station. He didn't question why he hadn't yet tried to leave. In fact, he didn't even think about; the thought never crossed his mind. He didn't wonder why he wasn't hungry or thirsty and had no need to use the bathroom.

It also didn't occur to him to wonder why, although his internal clock told him about six hours must have passed since he arrived, the quality of light coming in through the big leaded windows near the top of the central dome hadn't changed a bit. It still looked like late-afternoon storm light.

When he tried to think specifically about something – anything at all – he found it very difficult to maintain his train of thought for any length of time, almost as if something or someone was interfering with his thought process.

Norm was sitting on a bench again, waiting for his train to be called, when it occurred to him that although there appeared to be no guards keeping watch over the tunnel entrances or stairways that led to the many platforms, and there were no turnstiles or other methods of controlling the flow of people, no one appeared to be going through the tunnels or stairways who hadn't been called on the public address. Of course, Norm had no real way of knowing for sure, but it was clear that whenever there seemed about to be a lull in the amount of traffic going into the tunnels and stairways, another train and platform was called; then it got crowded again. Also, based on what had happened to the young man who'd tried to refuse to report as ordered to his designated platform (even though Norm wasn't sure exactly what *had* happened to him) he didn't think anyone else would try to do anything they weren't told to do. He also noticed that no one ever came *from* the tunnels or stairways. They only went into them.

What would happen if I went down there without being called, Norm wondered. *Would Renfield's cronies nab me?*

Norm looked around, trying not to be too obvious, and could see no conductors, nor could he see any sign of Renfield. But then, he hadn't seen any sign of the three conductors who had grabbed the young shouting man until the man starting raising a fuss. It had been as if they appeared out of thin air or swooped down from

above. But if they had swooped down from above, he surely would have seen them coming, what with the massively high ceiling and the bright light coming through the windows above. *Well*, he thought. *What's the worst that can happen?* A little shudder ran through him and he decided to retract the question.

Norm stood up from the bench and nonchalantly started moving towards one of the tunnels, trying to make it seem that he was just milling around with no particular destination in mind. It occurred to him that trying so hard to not attract attention might be the best way to attract attention. He quit trying to be sneaky and just walked sedately toward the tunnel he had chosen to investigate.

His palms started to sweat as he approached the tunnel entrance but no one challenged him, even as he crossed the line and entered the brightly-lit tunnel.

The tunnel looked just like any other subway or train station passageway might look, with a particular resemblance to those of London's tube stations. Clean tile walls and ceilings; bright fluorescent lights above; clean, sealed concrete floors; and a sign at the entrance indicating to which platform this tunnel led. The main difference between this tunnel and others Norm had been in was that there were no advertisements anywhere to be seen in this one. There were also no vending machines offering Coke or chips or newspapers.

The biggest difference seemed to be that all the foot traffic was one-way. No one was going back towards the central dome. Norm now wondered if it was impossible to get back. He hadn't been challenged going into the tunnel this way, but what if there were security measures in place at the other end to prevent him coming back? And what if he wound up on the wrong platform? It was likely, given the vast number of platforms and that he would be ordered to report to one in particular. What would happen to him then? Would some of Renfield's conductors swoop down on him and shuffle him away? Or would he politely be pointed towards or even escorted to the correct platform?

All of his questions melted away, however, when he suddenly found himself out of the tunnel and standing at one end of the biggest train platform he had ever seen. His eyes tried to tell him that the platform went on for a mile or more, but his mind wouldn't believe it. His eyes also tried to tell him that there were perhaps hundreds, even thousands of other platforms running parallel to this one, with trains coming, going and loading at all of them. There were more people on the platforms by far than Norm had seen in the central concourse.

This was obviously an end point. All of the platforms were parallel and all of the stairways and tunnels leading to them were, too. With the huge station behind him blocking any further travel in that direction, there was no doubt that if Norm took a closer look he would see that each and every one of the tracks leading into this station dead-ended at the massive outer wall of the underground platform structure; the same wall from which all of the tunnels and stairways egressed.

Norm could just barely make out daylight at the far end (what his eyes said was a mile away or more, but his mind again said was bullshit). It had the same quality and color as the light coming through the big leaded windows inside – so it couldn't just be the windows that gave it that storm light appearance. The platform structure seemed to be closed on the sides and the tracks – although he didn't think he should be able to notice that far away – looked like they sloped upward at the end to go aboveground.

The entire underground structure was well lit with fluorescent lights above the platforms and high-wattage arc-sodiums above the tracks. It wasn't as brightly lit as the tunnels (and what he could see of the stairways), but it was close.

It suddenly dawned on him to wonder, if all the tunnels and stairways led from the central concourse to this same level, why were the tunnels straight and level? Either they should be sloped, or the stairways shouldn't exist.

But before Norm's mind could get a fair start on that question, he took a good look at the trains. Although there were literally hundreds or thousands of trains, the one's that were close enough to see well appeared to be of only two types: old, black, steam-locomotive trains and new, bright, shiny modern ones that looked like the bullet trains in Europe or Japan. The new ones were painted so blindingly white that it was difficult to look directly at them for long. The old ones were so flat black that their surfaces seemed to suck up the light – the lights dimmed in surrounding pockets of darkness as they passed. They had black curtains in their windows like those in a hearse. The modern trains had tinted windows and Norm guessed that you would be able to see out just fine, while the one-way tint shielded the interior from the sun.

And now Norm could see conductors. They were checking tickets and boarding passengers on the trains in neat, orderly lines. Each lined ended at one end of a railcar. There was no baggage and it looked at first glance as if all the railcars were passenger cars – no freight cars, no diner cars, no baggage cars. There were a lot more conductors minding the passengers who were boarding the old black trains than those boarding the bullet trains. It looked like they might be guarding the lines. Norm had no way of knowing for sure, but maybe they were there to make sure no one chickened and ran.

There had been three conductors that subdued the shouting dude on the concourse; there was nowhere near a three-to-one ratio out here on the platforms. But there had been no sign of any conductors at all on the concourse until they were needed. Norm guessed that if someone did try to avoid boarding their assigned train, more conductors would appear as suddenly as they had on the concourse.

"Mr. Bulger." Norm's heart raced and the bottom dropped out of his stomach. It was Renfield's voice behind him. Norm turned and saw that Renfield had two conductors with him. They were sneering and baring yellow teeth at him. Their canines looked very long and very pointy. They looked more like an animal's teeth than a human's.

"Your train was not called, Mr. Bulger," Renfield said. "Come with me." The two conductors with Renfield moved silently and almost unnoticed into flanking positions, just as the two had with Mister Loudmouth back on the concourse. Renfield turned and began walking toward a door that Norm hadn't noticed before in the massive end wall. There was no question whether Norm would follow or not.

When they arrived at the door Norm saw that there was no knob. Renfield pulled a key out of his vest pocket, where some men would keep a pocket watch. The key was on a long, retractable chain. The key was one of those short ones that fit circular locks like the one that was now in the wall next to the door.

When Renfield turned his key in the lock, the door slid open to the right. Renfield stepped into the elevator and Norm followed. The two conductors stayed on the platform just outside the elevator door.

Once they were both inside, Renfield turned and put the same key into another lock in a control panel on the side wall of the elevator car. The door behind them slid closed and the elevator began to rise. Norm, thinking about the paradox of the stairways and tunnels, paid close attention to the feeling of movement as the elevator rose. There was no doubt that the car was moving upwards, not forward, not sideways. Perhaps they were headed to an office upstairs; maybe the Security Office. He might be in more trouble than he had thought he would get into.

The elevator slowed to a stop and there was the inevitable wait when you always wonder what the elevator's doing and why the doors don't just open right away.

Then the elevator door slid open and Norm saw the central concourse spread out before him.

"Your floor, I believe, Mr. Bulger," Renfield said, a touch of irony in his voice and a hint of a smirk on his face. It was as if he had heard the thoughts in Norm's head concerning their direction of travel and was pleased with Norm's surprise.

"Wait, I..." Norm began. He stepped just outside the elevator door, then turned to face Renfield.

"Good day, Mr. Bulger," Renfield said as the elevator door slid closed.

Norm blinked once and the door didn't exist. There weren't even any lines on the wall where the door had been. The door seemed to have never been there at all.

It doesn't get much more fucked up than this, Norm thought. But that was about all he thought. As the hours wore on, he was finding it harder and harder to form coherent thoughts. He realized that he was becoming more passive and obedient and tried to fight it off as he stood there, staring at a blank wall where he had just exited an elevator that moved impossibly.

Fuck it, he thought. He took his ticket out of his pocket and took another look at it. Train four-one-eight, platform ninety-six. He looked up at the signs indicating which tunnels and stairways went where and eventually found the stairway leading to his platform.

He stood there for a minute, trying hard to think. Well, Renfield had made him return to the central concourse because he had gone on his own to the wrong platform. Maybe they wouldn't mind him going without being summoned if he at least went where he was supposed to go.

Norm started down the stairs.

Norm came out on a different platform than before, but in the same cavernous underground structure where Renfield had snatched him up. There was little doubt that he was on the same level that the tunnel had brought him out on, as well. It was hard for him to get his mind around the fact that a tunnel that went straight ahead for the most part, an elevator that went straight up by the feel of its motion and a stairway that went straight ahead and down could all lead from the same place and end up at the same place. So far he had moved in three relatively different directions, but traveled the same general course. According to physics

and spatial geometry, this was impossible. Norm's mind groaned as he tried to comprehend it.

Once again, however, Norm found it unnaturally easy to let the thought go and move on to another without a look back.

The trains that were loading at platform ninety-six were the modern ones that resembled the Japanese bullet trains. The people boarding the train currently at the near end of the platform had the same semi-vacant, pleasant expressions that Norm had found himself wearing when he wasn't trying so hard to think.

He remembered the ticket man and his old typewriter that needed no input to determine Norm's assignment. *Who decides?* Norm thought. *Or what decides?*

"That will be enough of *that*, Mr. Bulger."

Oh, shit! Norm thought. He turned around. "Wait a minute, Mr. Renfield," he said.

"I told you I was not your personal guide, Mr. Bulger," Renfield said. "You have tried my patience for the last time."

Once again, the two conductors flanked Norm. But this time they each grabbed an arm and held tight. Once again, they walked toward the back wall and boarded the secret elevator. But this time, when they reached the concourse, Renfield exited the elevator with Norm and took him back to the ticket booths. They approached the same sickly-green-looking man that Norm had gotten his ticket from.

"Yes, Renfield?" the man said.

"Your ticket, please, Mr. Bulger," Renfield said to Norm. Norm wordlessly handed it over. Renfield pushed it through the slot at the bottom of the ticket window. "Void," he said. "New assignment."

The ticket man's eyes widened a bit. "Doing it again, are you, Renfield?" he said.

"That's none of your concern," Renfield replied. "Just do what you're told."

"The Boss ain't gonna be too happy about it," the ticket man said. "You know what he said the last time."

Renfield's gaze darkened, but he said nothing.

"Alright, alright," the ticket man said. "Like you said, it ain't none of my concern." He took the ticket and stamped it with a large rubber stamp in red ink that said VOID. He ran the ticket into a slot in the bottom of the IBM Model 01 (circa 1947 – post-fire edition) and rolled a new ticket form into the top. He sat back and the typewriter started printing on its own again. This time, however, it printed the personal information by itself. Presumably, it got the information it needed from the previous ticket which had been fed into its lower slot by the ticket man. When it got to where it should get Norm's train assignment automatically, the ticket man pressed a small black button on the side that was impossible to see until it was pointed out (or used right in front of you) and impossible not to see once you knew it was there.

"You sure about this, Renfield?" the fat man asked. Renfield made no reply. After a few seconds, when it became clear that Renfield didn't intend to reply at all, the ticket man punched some keys. The typewriter finished the new ticket and spat it out.

The ticket man pushed the new ticket through the slot at Norm, again indicating where he needed to sign and initial. Norm refused.

"Ain't gonna," he said, "until you tell me what this is all about."

"Refused to sign'," Renfield told the ticket man. The man took the ticket back and printed *Refused To Sign* in the spot where Norm's signature should have gone, then printed *RTS* where Norm's initials were supposed to go. The ticket man tore off the bottom portion and handed it to Norm.

"Take it, Mr. Bulger," Renfield told him. The conductor on Norm's left gave him a little shake. The one on the right sneered and moved his face closer to the side of Norm's head.

"Do it," the conductor hissed.

Norm took the ticket and looked at it. Train sixty-six, platform nineteen.

"Let's go," Renfield said.

"No waiting this time?" Norm asked. He was feeling a little more defiant now than he had been earlier. He was also able to think a little more clearly now. Some of the fog was lifting from his mind.

Renfield and the conductors led Norm back towards the otherwise blank wall where the tunnels and stairways began. As they approached, an elevator door appeared where a moment before there had been only more blank wall. Half a second later, the round lock appeared on the wall beside it. Renfield inserted his key and the door slid aside.

"Wait a minute," Norm said, trying to stop. The two conductors nearly lifted Norm off of his feet as they forced him into the elevator. "Wait. The plane. I fell asleep on the plane and woke up here."

The two conductors looked at each other and grinned horribly. "I always like this part," the one on Norm's right said to the other.

Renfield gave the conductors a stern look. Their conversation stopped; their smiles disappeared. He turned to Norm as the elevator began its descent. "Yes, Mr. Bulger?" he said.

"The plane never made it, did it?" Norm asked. He didn't sound sad or angry. He sounded resigned.

The two conductors were grinning at each other again. They were barely able to contain snickers.

"What do you think, Mr. Bulger?" Renfield asked.

"No," Norm said. "It didn't. What happened?"

"Mechanical problem," Renfield told him. "The thrust reversers never activated. The runway was slick with heavy rain. The landing gear hydroplaned. Your plane skidded off the runway across a taxiway and collided with another plane that was about to take off. It was a cross-country flight full of fuel. There were no survivors on either plane."

"No survivors," Norm echoed.

"No survivors," Renfield confirmed. The elevator stopped and the door slid open. Renfield stepped out. "This way, Mr. Bulger. Your train is boarding now."

Norm saw that the train he was assigned to now was one of the old dark ones with conductors guarding the passengers as they boarded. Down here on the platform, the conductors didn't try so hard to hide their nature. Long yellow canine teeth glistened. Black eyes peered out from beneath hat brims. Their fingernails

were claws and their breath stunk of rotten meat and old blood. There was little doubt in Norm's mind what they were.

And if Renfield was the director....

"You're like the head vampire, aren't you?" Norm asked him.

"No, Mr. Bulger," Renfield replied, smiling a little and not trying very hard anymore to hide his long teeth. "I am not. There is one above me. The Master answers only to God, Himself."

Norm stopped walking. Renfield and the conductors escorting him allowed him to stop; he was at the end of a boarding line now, anyway. Norm chuckled, despite his current situation.

"Are you telling me that vampires – managed by Dracula, himself – are a bunch of social workers, guiding the dead to their destinations under orders from God? *Vampires work for God?*"

"I don't share your amusement, Mr. Bulger," Renfield hissed. One pale hand pistoned out and wrapped around Norm's throat. There was surprising strength in that hand. Then again, considering what Renfield was, maybe it wasn't so surprising after all. "Now get on the damn train." The crack in Renfield's façade was back and this time it didn't close so quickly. The two conductors escorting Norm backed off a step or two in response. Some of the others that were guarding the lines moved a little closer. One of those that didn't move appeared to be the young dude that had been taken away by the three conductors earlier. If Norm had had the time to think about this, it might have answered some more questions for him. Instead, he had an immediate situation to deal with.

"What are you gonna do, fuck face? Kill me?" Norm gasped. Renfield growled, a hideously inhuman sound. His long, razor-sharp teeth glistened in the light from the overhead fluorescents.

"You're showing a lot of balls for someone who's going where you're going," Renfield rumbled, but he let go of Norm's throat.

Another conductor approached them and nervously looked at Renfield. "Director," he said.

"What is it, conductor?" Renfield asked the subordinate vampire.

"Orders from the Master, sir," he said, handing Renfield a piece of paper. "Orders about *this* one," the conductor said in an even lower voice than before. It was almost a whisper.

"Give them to me," Renfield said and took the paper from the conductor's trembling hand. He read the orders from his master, the Count, and his eyes burned red. "This can't be," he said.

"Begging your pardon, sir," the conductor said, "but I was given those orders straight from the Master. And you know who he gets his orders from."

Renfield let loose another of those awful growls. He threw the piece of paper with the orders on it back into the conductor's face and grabbed Norm by the arms. His teeth grew even longer and he started to move forward towards Norm's neck. His intentions were clear. Norm grew really frightened for the first time since waking up on the hard wooden bench. Renfield couldn't kill him; he was already dead. But that wouldn't necessarily stop Renfield from causing him severe pain. And without death as a release, the pain might last a very long time. Or a worse fate

might befall him; all those conductors had to be made somehow. He most likely have seen one made earlier.

The conductor who had brought the orders suddenly stood up straight and brandished an ugly-looking short sword. He raised it and, trembling a little, touched the front of Renfield's neck with the tip of the blade.

"I beg your pardon, Director, sir," he said in a tiny voice. "But I can't let you do that. Master's orders, sir."

Instead of biting and perhaps ripping Norm's throat out, Renfield suddenly picked him up and flew with him to platform ninety-six. The conductor who had delivered the Master's orders followed immediately behind. The two who had helped Renfield escort Norm to the platform took a second to catch up. It only took a few seconds to get there and Renfield nearly threw Norm to the platform surface in a rage.

"Boy, you're having a first-rate tizzy, aren't you?" Norm teased, rolling over on his side and looking up at Renfield.

"Get on the fucking train," Renfield said.

"I don't know if this is train four-one-eight," Norm said, standing and brushing himself off.

"It doesn't really matter," Renfield said, none of his ire disappearing. "They all go to the same place, anyway." He looked at the Japanese-style bullet train that was currently boarding. "All of the same kind go to the same place, that is. In case you hadn't figured it out yet, there are only two destinations from here." He sneered a little as he said this.

"So why bother with train and platform assignments?" Norm asked.

"To keep the trains from getting overcrowded," said the conductor at the door of the passenger car Norm and Renfield were next to. "But one more in a car won't matter much. Once the trains get going, most folks stay near the windows watching the scenery, anyway. Even on those." He pointed to one of the dark trains. "But the expressions are a little different," he chuckled.

The conductor who had brought down the orders from the Count approached Renfield. "Director," he said, "I have also been ordered to personally escort you to the Master's office. He wants me to tell you that this is the last time. He said you would know what that meant." Norm saw on the conductor's face that he probably knew what it meant, too. And so had the ticket man; he'd mentioned the "Boss" not liking that Renfield was changing people's train assignments on his own.

The conductor spoke again. "Director, you know as well as I do that assignments are decided before they arrive. It's not our place to decide, only to make sure they go where they're supposed to." *Yep*, Norm thought. *He sure does know what the Boss meant.*

Renfield ignored the other conductor. He glared at Norm. Norm stared back defiantly.

"Go," Renfield said. "Get out of my sight."

"Fuck you," Norm said, grinning, and boarded his train.