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TWINS

Jake rolled to his feet and ran to the window. Red mist streamed outside like strings of cotton candy. He couldn't see Umbra. The mist was turning more cloud-like, moving faster. He pressed his face against the glass. Large, thick droplets of red gooey substance splattered the window. Jake reared his head back. "What's going on?" He glanced behind him.

Holding his side, Clerk sat on the floor, looking up at Jake. The woman stood clutching a brass pole.

"You are NHOTT to be on the subwhay!" Her African accent was short and choppy. Cornrows were pulled back on her head into a tight bun. Silver strands of hair highlighted her temples. She stood tall and straight. Her neck was adorned with beaded necklaces of various colors. A yellow shawl draped her shoulders, hanging above her thin waist. Reaching below her knees was a sky blue wrap-around skirt. Strapped delicately to her feet were thin leather sandals. Her right hand clutched an *American Museum of Natural History Planetarium* gift shop bag.

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“Yeah, well, the weird, lizardy-human thing back on the platform wasn’t wishing us bon voyage.” Jake looked again at Clerk. “You okay?”

“Uh-huh. I’m cut from some glass and my ribs are throbbing, but not bad.”

Jake raised his eyebrows before eyeing the woman again. “Sorry, about running into you, m’am. I’m Jake. That’s Clerk.” He pulled at his beard.

“Hmmpph.” She knelt next to Clerk. “How bhad is thaht cut, Mr. Clherk?”

Clerk turned his arm over. A deep gash ran from his right elbow up to the back of his shoulder. Blood dripped onto the floor.

“Thaht is not a cut. It iss a valley. Dhoes it hurt?” The woman lightly touched Clerk’s forearm.

“Ouch!”

“Mmmmm. Let mhe see thhis.” She slowly raised Clerk’s arm. Blood dripped down his side.

“Eeeerrrrrgghhhh!”

“Ookhay.” She lowered Clerk’s arm. “Nooo, problem.” She removed a small wooden amulet from one of her necklaces. She twisted the top off, pouring a blue powder into her hand. Her rich brown eyes looked at Clerk. “Ookhay?”

Clerk shrugged. He gazed up at Jake.

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“What is it?” Jake scratched his beard.

“Muti, Mr. Jhake.”

“Muti? You got me on that one. Are you a doctor?” Jake squatted next to Clerk.

“No. I ahm Tsetchwe.” She stared at Jake.

“It’s going to help, right? It won’t make it worse?” Clerk looked pale.

“It iss good.”

Jake looked at Clerk, then back at Tsetchwe. “Okay, let’s try some muti.”

* * *

Lying on his back, his shirt pulled up, Clerk’s head rested on Tsetchwe’s folded shawl. His injured arm was straight along his side, covered with blue dust. The bleeding had stopped. On his injured ribs and knife wound, Tsetchwe removed Gram’s bandage, rubbing on orange paste from another wooden amulet. It smelled like hot peppers. Clerk’s cheeks were flush.

Jake stood with his palms firmly on the window. The glass was cool. Outside everything was bright red, like being trapped inside an ambulance siren. The strange red droplets had disappeared. “Gotta get to a doctor and back to the Museum! Where’s the next stop?”

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Tsetchwe sat on a bench opposite Jake, watching Clerk.
“You are nhott to be on the subwhay! I ahm sure of it.”

“And I’m sure I’m on the damn subway and I’m sure I wanna get off it. Right now! Where and when is the next stop? Please!” Jake demanded.

Clerk rolled his eyes.

“Uuuuuffff! I do nhott know. I never know whhere it stops. I only know whhen *exactly* to board.”

“You don’t know where the next stop is?”

Tsetchwe smiled. “You are nhott supposed to beee here.”

“I got that already. If you don’t know where you’re going, why did you board?”

“Thhis is my home.”

“On the subway?” asked Clerk, adjusting the yellow shawl under his head.

“Yhesss, it iss my home, but I do nhott own itt.”

“Who does?” Clerk flashed his braces.

“Perhhaps nobodee, perhhaps everybodee. Perhhaps it cannot be owned.”

“Right. Then who drives it? New York City Transit?”
Jake faced Tsetchwe.

“If it onlee drives, does thhat mean it hhas to be driven?”

“I don’t have time for this! I’m getting the conductor!”
Jake stormed forward, grabbing the door handle leading to the next car.

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“I have tried that, Mr. Jhake. There are simplee thhings we do nhott yet have the capacitee to understand. But pleeze, gho ahead and try.” She waved her hand at the door.

Jake looked at Clerk.

“Go ahead, Dad. I’ll be fine.”

Tsetchwe cleared her throat. “Pleeze, gho quiet. My twin sister Ankie is sleeping.”

“Twin sister, huh? Okay.” Jake turned the brass door handle. He made eye contact with Clerk. “Hang tight.” He opened the door and stepped out.

Jake was washed in red light. *Tbhunk!* The door slammed behind him. The air was unbearably cold. He turned back. The door was locked. He pounded on it. Immediately his ears began to freeze. Ice formed on his beard. He kicked the door before turning around, stumbling forward against the next subway car. His lungs squeezed tight, his fingers ice cold. The brass door handle was warm. Desperately he turned it, falling inside. The door locked shut.

Jake breathed heavily on the floor. His ears burned. He rubbed his beard. The car was warm. A small green woodstove with decorative glass burned in the corner. Sticks were neatly stacked in a circular metal frame. On each side

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of the car was a narrow bed, covered with thick, colorful blankets. A small lump lay in the middle of the bed on the left. Large pillows covered someone's snoring head. *Ankie? Hub? Looks too small.*

Jake rubbed his hands together. Next to the stove was a quaint desk, with a blue ceramic cup filled with sharpened pencils. A large, old flip-style wooden framed chalk board leaned against the wall with formulas written all over it.

A small kitchenette stood opposite the chalk board complete with cook oven, range top, wash basin, and shelves stocked with glass jars of vegetables. Pots and pans dangled from the ceiling. An end table displayed an old leather folio titled *Über die Hypothesen welche der Geometrie zu grunde liegen* by Bernhard Riemann and a handwritten paper titled *Wave Function, Wave Collapse, and Everything In Between*, with what looked like cat prints on the cover.

On the wall in the middle of the car was a mounted skull of a small deer. Two spears tipped with bone leaned in one corner. A bookcase contained a collection of old leather-bound books. A glass jar on top of the bookcase was filled with colorful beads. By the far doorway hung a brightly-colored painting of frightening masks. A candle-lit lamp burned on a wooden barrel. Jake smelled curry.

He crept down the middle of the outlandish car, mindful

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of the sleeping passenger. Despite the beautifully woven tapestries hanging over the windows, a red hue colored the interior from the strange glow outside. Reaching the far end of the car, Jake paused at the door, hoping the conductor would be in the next car. On the floor sat a large round basket filled with shawls. Rummaging through it, Jake found a big green one. He wrapped himself in it, draping the top over his head. He took a long look at the car, before stepping back into the sub-arctic air. *Thhuunk!* The door slammed shut.

* * *

Back in the warm car with the green woodstove, the large pillows on the bed moved. A young girl, no bigger than Ed, sat up. She crawled out from the blankets, dropping to the floor. Out of a wooden cabinet she removed a circular, three-dimensional wooden framed object. The frame enclosed hundreds of thin, vertical hourglass bulbs. Each bulb contained different colored sand. The girl looked for turquoise. The top turquoise bulb still contained a handful of sand. “Uuuuuffft,” sighed the girl.

She climbed back under the warm blankets, adjusting her pillows. The girl wondered about the large, bearded, strange man who had just walked through the car and why he didn’t

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have his own shawl. Drifting back to sleep, the young girl smiled. She always slept better knowing her twin sister was safely back riding the subway. Ankie returned to snoring.

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Jake clutched the shawl tight over him. He didn't hesitate, determined to find the conductor, stop the subway, and get Clerk to a hospital. Head down, he charged forward through the cold red light. Instantly rime frost coated the shawl. He reached for the brass door handle. Warmth. Turning and pushing, he darted inside. The door locked shut.

* * *

"What!" shouted Clerk. He bolted up into a sitting position on the floor, staring at Jake wrapped in a frost-covered cape. Small icicles plastered Jake's beard. "How'd you get behind us so fast? And what's with the ice?"

Shaking her finger, Tsetchwe wore an electric smile. "You are n^ot supposed to beee here."

Jake collapsed on the floor next to Clerk.

"I don't get it, Dad. You just went out *this* door." Clerk pointed to front of the car. "And a minute later you stroll through *that* door." He pointed to the back of the car. "What's up with that?"

Jake shook his head, his hair crazier than ever. "I'm thinking, maybe some things we simply don't have the

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capacity to understand.” He looked at Tsetchwe, returning her smile. “Yet!” he emphasized.

“You mean the red light outside?” Clerk stood up for the first time since charging into the subway car. He pointed out the window. “I noticed it after you left.”

“Yeah, I mean the red light and everything else about this freak ride.”

Blue powder sprinkled off Clerk’s arm.

“Your arm!” Jake grabbed it.

Clerk twisted it around, looking for the ugly gash. Up and down he rubbed where the shattered glass from the Museum door sliced his arm. “Huh?” There was no valley-sized cut, no blood, no scar. Powdery blue muti drifted about.

Jake lifted Clerk’s shirt. Clerk patted his ribs. The orange paste was gone. No sign of a stab wound. Smooth.

Clerk raised both hands over his head. “This is nuts!” He twisted and swung his arms. “It feels awesome!”

Jake ran his fingers through his wet beard, gazing across at Tsetchwe. “I thought you weren’t a doctor?”

“I ahm nhott a doctor, Mr. Jhake. I ahm Tsetchwe.” She filled the car with rich laughter.

Jake stood up, smiling. He bundled the wet green shawl, tossing it in the corner. Slippery from the frost, it skidded

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on the floor, knocking over Tsetchwe's gift shop bag.
"Oops!"

Out rolled two small black objects. One looked like a lion and the other looked like a bear. Jake scooped up the clay bear head. It looked exactly like Gabby's. Tsetchwe stopped laughing.