

The Underground

“There is always time.” A pause. “But there is still so little of it.”

“What?” He glanced at the woman next to him, but she was staring down at her phone, swaying easily as the end of the train car swung into the rails. He bumped his head on the low ceiling again. The tunnel screamed through the gap at the top of the window.

“Ah,” said a voice. It was metal and energy, a hot wind, pushing over the thick, clear plastic and the chipped latch. The lights in the subway car flickered. “Interesting...”

“What the fuck?” he said. The woman tried to make the two full steps she took to the opposite side of the car look natural. He looked at the ceiling. “Jesus, what the fuck was that?” he said again, quieter this time.

“It has been ages,” said the wind and the noise. Another pause, another turn in the track.

His suitcase tried to roll away and he caught it with his leg. He looked at the little half-open window on the back wall of the train car. He was awake, and he was sober. This made no sense. “Ages since what?” he asked. And then nothing. He shook his head, adjusted one of his stupid earbuds when it threatened to come loose. Then, a thought. “Ages since someone heard you,” he said to himself.

“Something like that,” said the voice.

He swallowed. “Holy shit,” barely whispered this time, as he looked up at the window again. “Is this like... am I... do I have... powers?”

The train tilted a little, banging his head again, and another gale screamed through the window. “That is,” a pause, the draft almost like coughing this time, “that is not how this works.” Another pause. The woman on the opposite side was staring at her phone again, visibly bored.

He picked his earbuds out of his ears and jammed them in his pocket, focusing on the ads over the seats. Digestion aids, loans, public utilities. Hair spray, or something. The bored woman seemed almost angry about how bored she was. He started counting the other passengers in the car. So far so good. The train bent around another corner, grating and shrieking, “that is not how this works either.”

“Well how do I know?” He was annoyed now. “I’m on a magic train that can talk, and... and what, you’re being a cryptic asshole for no reason? Thomas-ass bullshit. I’m out.”

Another pause. “I am not... a magic, and I do not know what a Tomiss Ass is. But, maybe it is not entirely fair to assume you would already know the customs.” A puff, almost like a breath, through the cracked window. “After all, it has been ages.”

“Yeah, you mentioned that. Listen-”

“And animals are not as patient as I remember them. No matter,” said the voice.

The train slowed and the doors peeled open, passengers shuffling and mumbling as they navigated the narrow openings, suitcases slipping, bags scraping. Tiny apologies that don’t help, tiny gaps where apologies would have helped. It wasn’t his stop. There was an announcement, and the recorded sound of a bell, and the doors shook closed again. His suitcase bumped against his shoe as the train began to move. Puffs of wind pushed through the little window.

“I am underground,” it said. “And old.” The train swayed around a wide corner. The rails shrieked anyways. “You are new, though. A new animal. With new burrows.”

“Boroughs?” he asked. He was just there yesterday. What had he done?

Another tiny gust, like a sigh. The voice paused, annoyed, he supposed, about the customs, or whatever. “Burrows. Tunnels. New tunnels.”

“Oh,” he said. But then, “Is that... bad?” he asked. “Are you... like, are the tunnels in you? Are we digging holes in your body? Are you the voice of the planet? Did we do too much climate change? Or, I mean, do we-”

“I am not,” interrupted the voice, all iron and electricity still, but now carried more gently through the little window. “And yes you did.” The train car swayed again. “But I like the tunnels.” A pause. “I was not always underground. I miss the

animals. They are underground, too, but so quiet now. I miss our old customs. I liked our agreement.”

The lights flickered and the train squealed to a stop once more, people shuffling in, out, scraping, mumbling, doors, a tone, a slow resuming. It was not his stop. The bored woman was dead asleep.

He didn't like the way the voice kept mentioning “customs”. Ancient voice or not, it was pretty passive-aggressive, and he refused to bite. “So, do you have a name?” he asked. “What do I call you?”

The train cornered, screaming wind through the window, but no words. Another corner, nothing. After the train settled into a straightaway, the voice returned.

“That,” it said, suddenly sounding less like metal and more like stone, “is not part of the agreement.”

He froze. He didn't know-

“Next stop will be Heathrow Airport Terminals 2 and 3. Stay on the train for Terminal 5 and the Elizabeth Line.”

“Oh shit, that's me,” he said. He adjusted the straps of his backpack, and extended the little handle on his suitcase.

“Wait!” screamed the voice. Hot wind buffeted his hair, smoothed his cheek. His ears and nose filled with stones, electricity, slag metal and magma, bent and bending, “the customs! Our agreement, it's-”

He almost lost his balance as the train slowed to a stop. The doors stuttered a little as they opened, and he shrugged his backpack straps back up where he liked them. “Sorry, no, I get it, just, you know, the security line, and the gates here are pretty far apart, is all, but listen, this was cool, and I hope your like customs or whatever turn out good,” and he pulled the little wheels of his suitcase over the warning bumps on the edge of the platform and the doors closed and the Piccadilly line seemed to be dragged against its will toward Terminal 5 and he hoped the sleeping woman needed to go to Terminal 5 and not Terminal 2 and should he have said something it’s hard to know and he turned the corner onto the escalator and looked up and saw the tunnel to the surface. Almost home.