

## Under the City

It seemed like he only knew darkness nowadays; a damp, seeping darkness that never truly left his body. Grant shifted beneath his filthy newspapers, avoiding the coffee stained area on page eleven. Page seventeen must have flown off sometime during the night because his exposed calf housed new goosebumps as it bore the full blast of the tunnel's ceaseless draft. Grant moved his wool cap and uncovered his nose, searching the air in vain. *Nope. No modified Amtrak trains today.* he thought, surprisingly disappointed. He never thought he would actually miss the strenuous business commute and chaos of the trains but over time, Grant grew to anticipate his former 6:27 pm ride back home. But he had purposefully given all that up. Why couldn't he ever remember that? Structured careers, luxuries, and families just weren't for him. Grant's life seemed like it fell from society's cookie cutter, all too comfortable for a man destined to help the world's poorest people. If only he could figure out how. It seemed stupid now, to sacrifice such a perfect life for such a disgusting one down in the tunnels. But who knows. Maybe saving the world started with understanding how it really worked; from the bottom up.

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Grant's feet shuffled along the concrete shelf, pushing fallen leaves, stray feathers, and dead mice onto the track, aiming for that third rail. He loved the little crackle they made. His torn boots searched along the floor while his mind roamed to ancient cities and governments more concerned with crusades than budget deficits. He traveled across countless seas, intent to find a lost land across the ocean and claim it for his country. He imagined how the people would receive him; gloriously or reproachfully?

"Hey wait up, Grant!" a squeaky voice called. Paige's quick footsteps echoed through the tunnel as she ran to catch up with him. "I didn't think I'd be able to find you again after you left this morning. But I asked around. Charlie said he saw you coming down here so it's all good. I found you now." she said, beaming up at him. Grant rolled his eyes, making a mental note to take a detour around Charlie's spot when avoiding Paige. Whenever he tried to get a moment of peace, she seemed to appear out of thin air, jabbering away.

"You know, I saw this new tag on the wall under 9th street and it's actually pretty cool but I mean there's only so much you can do with red spray paint. But seriously. It's getting kind

of predictable. I think I'd actually like to meet the artist and see who draws all these things and then maybe they could teach me a little something so that I could maybe go up to the streets and sell something or..."

The third rail's sudden hissing interrupted Grant's thoughts as he half-listened to Paige. He lifted his eyes to find a small black object laying across the rail, causing sparks to fly off in every direction. He sniffed the air, searching for a sign of an incoming train and finding none, hopped onto the track.

"What do you think that is?" he said as he nudged it with his toe. It shifted a little, causing the hiss to echo throughout the tunnel and fearing discovery, Grant kicked it off the track. He bent down and wrapped his gloved fingers around a small book with thick black leather. It now sported a diagonal slash of burnt leather across the front.

"Woaaaah what if it's some old diary or something. Or a ledger from a billionaire. Or a code that will unlock the secrets of the universe!" Paige gushed. Grant turned the book over and leafed through its yellowed pages, noticing countless other folded pieces of paper shoved within. His fingers traced the letters, hungry to read something more than business reports and stock market crashes. He felt Paige's breath against his jacket and quickly snapped the book shut.

"Whatever it is, I'll keep it safe while you keep speculating. Vocab word of the day. Did you write it down?" Grant said, attempting to reassume his somewhat fatherly role. Paige was completely brilliant and a little prodigy for fourteen. When he met her a couple years ago, her entire life was in shambles and he had taken her under his wing, determined to salvage her brain.

"Alright, alright I'll get my stupid notes out. You know, I found this one book in Damien's crate about a guy trying to figure out where ducks go in the wintertime," she said, as she crinkled her nose. "What the heck is that supposed to mean? Doesn't everyone know they just sleep under the C track all winter? Honestly, people these days." Paige said, shaking her head. A faint gritty breeze blew the track's dust across Grant's shoes and his heart leaped as it grew stronger, signaling the imminent arrival of another train. *Oh shit*, he thought as he and Paige still stood in the middle of the track. His dark eyes searched for the nearest doorway or platform to hide in as he wrapped his fist around the book's open end, determined not to lose any of his new treasure.

"Run. Now." Grant barked to Paige as he took off. His boots clomped and flapped as they skipped over each rail, laces trailing behind. Grant's mind bounced back and forth between

Paige's gasping breaths and the growing rumble of the 4:16 train. He sprinted, frantically trying to find anything that would get him off the track while grabbing at the sleeve of Paige's coat, trying to tug her along faster. Then he saw it; a dark alcove only twenty steps away. Grant peeked over his shoulder as the rumbling grew louder and louder and was blinded by the headlights of an Amtrak express rounding the corner.

"Paige! Jump now!" Grant panicked, pumping his legs even harder. He managed to grab a fistful of Paige's coat and pulled her into the alcove just as the train's cab brushed against his broken boots. He shielded his face with his calloused hands, keeping his eyes glued shut from the kicked up dirt and dust. He could feel Paige's heart bumping as they both slumped against the alcove's frozen stone wall.

"Oh...my...goodness." Paige gasped, unable to form words. "Can we...not do that again?"

"I'm okay with that." He responded. As his heart gradually stopped pounding, Grant stood up and listened to the train's roar. He waited for the earsplitting screech as the train turned the corner ahead. Grant inhaled, tasting the bitter metal and oil in the air that always accompanied passing trains. They were safe.

Grant turned, running his fingers across the grimy mortar holding the ancient bricks together. These walls had always fascinated him. How the subway's dirty white tiles morphed into cold stone and then into the dark brick of the inner tunnels. But this hallway seemed different. There were no remnants of artists or messages scrawled across the walls like under 42<sup>nd</sup> street.

"Hey Paige?" Grant questioned across the alcove, "Do you recognize this passageway?"

"Nope. Ohmygosh let's go on an adventure! I'll race you!" she said, pushing past Grant down the dark hall.

"What? Are you crazy? I can't see a thing. Where are you going?" Grant yelled, taking off after her. He ran his hand along the wall, listening to Paige's footsteps. The darkness enveloped him, forcing his mind to focus on his connection with the wall. His fingers rubbed against rough, grainy stone until it abruptly ended. Grant stopped, tracing the outline of a smooth, cool tile that met countless others. He ran his hand up and sideways, feeling a slight arch in the wall. But then the wall ended. Grant stood in darkness, completely detached from anything solid as he strained to hear Paige or even a distant train rumbling.

“Paige?” he called out, only half expecting an answer. Grant slid his hand into his pocket, searching for his book of matches deep in his jacket pocket. He fumbled with the tiny package, attempting to find the rough striking path. He scratched and scratched at the cardboard, finally producing a tiny flame and held it up.

“GAAAAH!” Grant screamed. His miniscule match collided with a filthy, gray nose above disgustingly yellow teeth. A hunched man covered in gray rags and dirt stood four inches in front Grant, his wide, black eyes staring hungrily at the flame. Then they flickered up to Grant’s as the man started to speak.

“You come from somewhere I don’t understand, strangers born from the same hand. But enter this space with foreign light, and learn to fear its power and might.” The man scolded with furrowed brows. His husky voice echoed through the halls. Grant shuffled backward, his heart racing.

“What the hell! Where did you come from? There was no one here a second ago and who *are* you? Why are you talking like that?” Grant babbled as the match burnt down closer to his pinched fingers.

“Fate has brought you to Roman’s lair, listen to me and now prepare, for secrets can be shared with those of kin, to tell the vast misfortune our city is in.” The man stated, grasping Grant’s wrist just as the flame sputtered out. He pulled Grant swiftly along in the darkness down a hallway to the right, holding firm despite Grant’s restraining.

“Roman? Your name is Roman? Woah there, where are we going? Where’s Paige?” Grant fingered the black leather book tucked in his pocket, determined to keep it stowed away and safe from this strange man.

“Shhhhh!” Roman scolded, silencing Grant. After so many turns, Grant stopped trying to memorize their path to attempt to form an escape route. It was useless. The man stopped abruptly, releasing Grant’s arm.

“What is go-” Grant stumbled on his words as he was blinded by the white light of a lantern shoved in his face.

“Sit among friends of this certain fate, and Roman will discuss events of late.” Grant’s eyes wandered around the space finally illuminated by the battery-powered lantern. The light danced off of alternating green and white tiles across high beamed ceilings and archways. The tracks curved elegantly around an ancient station covered in layers of dirt too thick to see

through. Grant thought he could see remnants of skylights, boarded up from above with plywood. He had never seen a station so pristine before; there were absolutely no marks on the walls or a single broken glass tile. It wasn't like any of the other abandoned ones. It seemed like no one had ever even used this station to begin with. Grant looked back at Roman standing in an old ticket booth at the far end of the platform. He was muttering to himself and staring up at the skylights.

"Where's Paige? Wait a minute, tell me what things?" Grant questioned, somewhat intrigued by this man who had uncovered a secret even Grant had yet to find in all his years beneath the city.

"Come behold the wall of truth, dismissed as myth by today's youth." Roman huffed. Grant slowly walked over to the ticket booth, peering inside.

"Paige! Where have you been-" He exclaimed, spotting her on the far side of the booth. She seemed hypnotized by some type of writing on the walls.

"Grant, you need to see this." She interrupted, no hint of playfulness in her voice. Grant's eyes combed the ticket booth, finding the walls completely covered in lines and tiny pictures, almost all of them containing a series of numbers. Roman sat on an overturned milk crate and he pushed another one towards Grant. As he sat down, Grant's eyes wandered around the stacks of cardboard boxes, wondering if that was where Roman stored his food. Peeking out of the top of one of the boxes was an entire jug of clear water, filled to the narrow rim. Clean water was very scarce down in the tunnels. Even Grant had to surface once in a while to fill his own jugs in the subway station bathrooms. *Who is this guy?* Grant thought, as the man shuffled around in one of the boxes. He gingerly drew out a small, yellowed paper, ripped at the top.

"Your pocket holds an important book, give to Roman for a look." he demanded, holding out his wrinkled hand. Grant stared into Roman's darkening gray eyes and felt his fingers reach into his jacket and close around the book. He looked to Paige as Roman snatched the book out of Grant's shaking hands. Roman suddenly stood, muttering to himself as he brushed the engravings, comparing his frail, ripped page to the book, to the wall, and back again.

"Paige...?" Grant questioned, completely confused. She was watching Roman intently, entranced by his sudden frenzy. "Will someone tell me what is going on?" He waited until Roman's finger froze on one series of numbers.

“Every number contained here, bears a day and a year. Roman has studied for some time, a date that ends his constant rhyme. No one comes to Roman’s home, unless it is time to eternally roam.” Roman said, rubbing one spot on the wall. “Mother Earth attacked us first, surely farthest from the worst. The foreigners brought war then, gathering souls again and again. Now Fate has brought us fuel and flame, letting the people take the blame.” He finished, holding up the black leather book.

“Grant, these numbers are dates. Look at this. This group has August 29th, 2005 and December 26th, 2004, the day Hurricane Katrina hit and the giant tsunami in the Indian Ocean. That’s the Mother Earth part. Do you know how many people died in those natural disasters?” Paige looked at Grant, realization brewing in both their eyes. Grant put his hand on Paige’s shoulder, silently begging her not to continue. They could both read the numbers. “And here’s the other set. A whole bunch of dates in March of 2002 and then of course, September 11th, 2001. So many people died that day. ‘The foreigners gathering souls.’ Grant, it all makes sense. The war in Afghanistan.” She paused for a moment, staring at the wall.

“It’s okay Paige. It can’t be true.” Grant whispered, unable to speak. Paige inhaled, and continued reading.

“April 20th, 2010, the BP Oil Spill. And this one says December 19th, 2013, the Eastern Seaboard Energy Crisis. ‘Fuel and flame.’ Grant. The signs are all here. Roman even said it.” She paused, looking to the ancient man for confirmation.

“No one comes to Roman’s home, unless it is time to eternally roam.” He repeated somberly.

“Don’t read the last date, Paige. Just don’t.” Grant gasped, unable to believe what was happening. She squeezed his arm, turning to the wall as the 11:57 p.m. train whistle echoed in the distance. Roman turned his head, drinking in the sound.

“November 25th, 2015. Grant, that’s tomorrow. This date happens in three minutes.” She said, her eyes finally panicking.

“No one comes to Roman’s home, unless it is time to eternally roam. Death to all will come as it may, but trust me now, you all die today.” Roman chanted. And the world started to shake.