

TWINS APART
by Ross Whitlock

Two black-clad men walked Beck into the cell, holding his biceps. They bound him with a nylon rope. One of his captors wound it around his wrists and made a sturdy knot. The rest of the rope went through a dangling ring over his head, and the smallest of the men, the fennec fox, tied it off to another ring on the wall. Beck had enough slack to move his arms around a bit, but he still had to stand in one place. They didn't gag him, and he stayed quiet.

As Beck's handlers finished, more came in, hauling Traveler's unconscious form. Beck stifled a whimper of concern. At least they weren't handling Traveler like a sack of potatoes; two large, muscular men bore him with care, as if he were a hospital patient. Traveler was plenty buff himself, but they showed no strain.

Beck watched as they put Traveler up against the wall. They cuffed each of his wrists to a shackle and tied his ankles to a floor ring. Later, Beck would try counting all the rings set in the floor, walls, and ceiling, and come up with thirty-two. Overkill, maybe.

Beck's own captors checked over his restraints. Focused as he was on Traveler, Beck almost didn't hear when the fennec muttered, "The safeword is 'peaches'." Two seconds later, Beck grasped the words. He blinked and replied, "Uh. Thanks?" but they were already leaving.

The door slammed and locked.

Traveler slumped in his bonds. Him, they'd gagged. Tight leather straps went around his muzzle and buckled behind his head. Otherwise, he wore only black underwear. Beck, too, had been stripped to his skivvies, a pair of dark blue boxer briefs. He was relieved. This would be so much weirder if they were naked.

Beck shifted from footpaw to footpaw and tried to decide how the hell he was going to explain this to his twin brother.

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Events Were Set In Motion. That was how Beck thought of it, with the dry internal eye-roll of a lifelong writer. Events Were Set In Motion, and he still couldn't believe it had begun in a tiny used bookstore, except it really went back further. If Traveler hadn't...

Well.

Traveler had been depressed for months. He flat-out refused to admit it, obnoxiously stoic as ever. He spent hours at the gym, getting bigger and stronger until strangers assumed Beck was the little brother. ("I am. By about seventeen seconds.") Beck tried to join in, tried to make Traveler react to anything at all. Most of the time, it was like talking to a bowling ball. Dammit, why?

Traveler had never really gotten over their dad's death, four years gone. Their mother had gotten on with things. Beck had, at the time, cried till he was parched, but the grief had run its course and now he mostly just felt a gentle ache. But Traveler drew inside himself. He'd had support from his boyfriend, Will, but Will left the scene rather abruptly. Traveler made it clear the subject was not to be discussed. Since then, he'd worked his grunt-level job at the print-and-copy warehouse, hit the gym, watched TV, and further calcified. Beck, meanwhile, got his amateur foodie blog noticed by an online magazine, was now being paid to write, and was maybe going to get a book deal. Basically, his dreams coming true.

Except, because Traveler was stuck in place, Beck felt his control slipping. They shared the telepathy of twins, and Traveler's largely unexplained sadness became an ache in Beck's

chest, a roiling in his gut. He tried to be with Traveler but got only silence, and it hurt so much that Beck fled from everyone and did things alone. Parties and social gatherings, were torture. “And this is your brother? Irish setters? So...from Ireland? Kinda quiet, aren’t you? Hello?” People flirted with Traveler because his body was to die for, and people flirted with Beck because he was the “cute” one and it seemed like he might be rich one day. It made Traveler more stony, and it made Beck spend more and more time alone.

And then the used bookstore.

Beck loved the place. Tiny, but with so many shelves crammed in that they seemed to create a fifth-dimensional space. Newcomers got lost. Beck went in, shaking off the late-November slush, and browsed the food books, as he always did. Then, on a whim, he investigated the psychology section. Maybe the experts knew something about Traveler that he didn’t.

A title caught his eye. *Twins Together, Twins Apart*. He pulled the ragged-jacketed book from the shelf and flipped through it. It seemed to be about the emotional bonds between twins, and how they influenced life. He backtracked to the table of contents. Chapter seven was entitled, “When One Twin Hurts.”

Beck sighed at his own desperation, then flipped to the chapter. Tucked between the pages was a small slip of paper. It bore a neatly typed message:

WHEN ONE TWIN HURTS, BOTH SUFFER. THEY
BUILD THEIR OWN PRISON. BUT THERE ARE BETTER,
FANCIER CAGES. IF THIS IS YOU, PERHAPS WE CAN HELP.
BUY THIS BOOK AND KEEP THE RECEIPT.

Beneath this was a small red symbol that could have been a leaf, or a flame.

Beck stood stock still, feeling a stripe of backfur stand on end. He felt he'd pried open some sort of window into the mechanisms of the universe. But he knew who'd put the note in the book, more or less.

CityScape.

Everyone who spent any time on the internet knew about CityScape. It was an alternate reality game, an ARG and possibly the biggest and most grandiose of them all. Its players were more like religious zealots, spending all their free time scouring the city, following strange clues, calculating, triangulating, researching...and for what, exactly? Those who'd penetrated deep into the game were made to do things they didn't talk about, claiming they'd been sworn to utmost secrecy. Legions of hackers couldn't get through the outer shell of the CityScape website. All this implied that powerful people ran the game, and whoever they were, they refused to reveal what happened when you won. If you even could.

A billion dollars. A date with the president. A tour of Willy Wonka's freaking chocolate factory. Players spun a million theories about the "goal" or "prize" at the end of the CityScape labyrinth. It made Beck chuckle. To think people devoted their lives to something so intangible.

Now here he was, holding a strange message with the CityScape logo on it, and it said it could help him with Traveler. Obviously they couldn't know who he was. How long had this clue sat in this book, waiting for an unhappy twin to find it? Was this how CityScape worked? A thousand random scraps of paper cast to the winds on the hope that some few would find the right recipient?

"Fucking stupid," Beck said to himself, and then he bought the book.

The owner of the store was a plump little rabbit named Mr. Charles who chortled a lot. He gave Beck the receipt and said, “Hope it’s what you were looking for.”

Beck went home and combed through the book for more clues. He read chapter seven and found it to be a string of unhelpful platitudes. He even held it under his blacklight. Nothing. Finally, the exact wording of the message kicked in and he looked closely at the receipt. At the bottom, he found a URL.

So chortling Mr. Charles was somehow involved in CityScape? Again, that glimpse of machinery behind the scenes.

Beck tried the URL, which took him to a black screen where red text asked him to input the title, author, and publication date of the book he’d just bought. Then he had to play a weird little Flash game where to goal was to align rows of symbols. After that, he entered a bare-bones chatroom. Seconds later, someone joined him.

The other user was called “LordZephyr.” They politely asked Beck why he was here. Beck’s instincts told him to turn and flee, because this was how bad things happened to people online. He asked his faceless companion why he should tell them anything. They replied, “You shouldn’t. I’m obviously a creeper.” That made Beck chuckle despite himself, and he stayed. He and LordZephyr traded witty remarks, which somehow turned into Beck explaining his recent unhappiness, and Traveler’s. His new friend was sympathetic and wise, putting Beck in mind of a therapist. The whole time, he told himself, *I’ll leave the moment they ask me a question I don’t like.*

Finally, LordZephyr typed, “I know you have no reason to trust me, but I think CityScape can help you. We just need your address, and your brother’s.”

Beck laughed out loud. “Sorry,” he typed, “but I’m not an idiot.”

“Fair enough,” came the reply. “I’ll still be here if you change your mind.”

Beck left the chatroom. He made dinner and ate it while editing his latest column. After awhile, the words became meaningless. He tried calling Traveler and got voicemail. He played a video game, showered, and went to bed, but not to sleep.

At ten PM, he got up, opened his laptop, and returned to the chatroom. He had another conversation.

The knock on his door came two hours later.