

# **Isaac and the Loop Line**

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# Chapter 1

## The Map Beneath Bank

The train had led its way through the magical morning fog of Epping through the morning past the terrace houses of Leytonstone, through the Olympic park and early bird shoppers getting off at Stratford into the centre of London. Isaac, who was eight and a quarter, stepped off the rumbling Central Line train at **Bank Station**.

His shoes were blue suede with laces that had a peculiar habit of untying themselves at the most interesting moments, made little *smick-smack* sounds on the polished platform tiles. Bank was usually a bustling, business-like sort of place, with loads of men in vests and ladies in floral dresses getting off to go work in their buildings. Today there were no men in vests and ladies in floral dresses. Today, there was a different, peculiar kind of buzz about the station,

one that tasted faintly of old pennies, toasted teacakes, and a peculiar sort of hopeful puzzlement. It made you feel something extraordinary was just around the corner, perhaps hiding behind a discarded newspaper or just beneath the next announcement.

It was, to all outward appearances, a regular Tuesday. Or at least, it had *started* by pretending to be one. Isaac was on his way to see his Auntie Mathilda who lived in a house that was nearly, but not quite, sideways and had a cat that could predict the weather (though it often got it backwards, leading to some very surprising picnics).

Except—the map was moving.

Not in the usual helpful way, with flickering lights for delays or little red crosses for weekend closures. No. This was altogether different. The enormous **Tube map** plastered on the curved station wall was positively **squirming**. Its corners curled up and down, like a piece of toast that had suddenly remembered a very funny joke and was trying not to laugh. The familiar bold red of the Central Line, which Isaac knew should run straight as a ruler from one side of the city to the other, was instead tracing a lazy, looping spiral, as if it were practicing for a ballet. The sturdy Northern Line, usually so dependable, was twanging back and forth like a giant, invisible rubber band being plucked by a playful giant.

Isaac, who was a boy who noticed things (like the

way a snail always leaves a silvery trail in the shape of a question mark, or how his reflection sometimes seemed to wink a fraction of a second before he did), blinked. He rubbed his eyes. He looked again.

The map was definitely wiggling. And was that a faint giggle he heard? Or just the rumble of an approaching train?

Just then, his gaze fell upon a small, folded paper triangle lying innocently on the floor, right by the tip of his left shoe (the one with the lace that was, at that very moment, plotting its escape).

It wasn't just any paper. It was glowing. Not brightly, like a lightbulb, but softly, like a captured moonbeam. And if Isaac put his ear very close (which he did, because who wouldn't?), he could hear a tiny, almost imperceptible humming noise, like a contented bee dreaming of impossible flowers. Near where it lay, almost hidden by a discarded sweet wrapper, was a tiny, scrawled symbol: a perfect circle with a mischievous little break in it, like a loop that had decided to go on an adventure of its own. Isaac frowned for a moment, a flicker of "that's odd" crossing his mind, before the glowing paper completely captured his attention.

He picked it up.

The paper was surprisingly soft, and warm to the touch, as if it had been tucked away in someone's cosy pocket for a very long time. But the lines drawn

on it were sharp, precise, and utterly mesmerising. They crisscrossed and intersected, forming intricate geometric patterns that looked like spiderwebs spun by a mathematician with a particular fondness for triangles and a secret stash of glitter.

As soon as his fingers brushed against the curious folds, the paper seemed to sigh, and a voice, no louder than the rustle of autumn leaves, whispered directly into his mind:

*"Fold me once, and you'll go somewhere that never was."*

Isaac's eyebrows shot up so high they nearly disappeared into his fringe. He'd read about talking animals in books, and he was fairly certain his Auntie Mathilda's cat had opinions, but he'd never encountered a talking map before. Not even the fancy digital ones that sometimes sounded a bit sarcastic.

The paper triangle in his hand gave a little twitch, as if it were impatient. Then, with a flick and a flutter, it unfolded itself flat in his palm. And as it did—**WHOOSH!**—like a magician pulling a particularly surprising rabbit from a hat, a brand new **turquoise line** slithered into view on the paper map. It was a vibrant, joyful, adventurous sort of turquoise. It curled around the printed River Thames not once, but twice, tied a rather neat figure-eight through the complex tangle of lines at King's Cross, and then, most curiously, looped sharply inward, as if it were

folding back onto itself, or perhaps trying to tickle its own tail.

Above this astonishing new line, in elegant, loopy letters that danced as he read them, was written:

### THE LOOP LINE

Isaac whispered the words aloud, his voice barely a breath in the busy station, “The Loop Line...”

And the paper map in his hand purred. It was a deep, contented, rumbling purr, like a very large, very happy cat, or perhaps a small, well-oiled train that knew a truly excellent secret.

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*For the very clever, or the very small, or perhaps for those who are a bit of both, it's worth pausing here for a moment, like a train waiting for a particularly important thought to board. What kind of place, do you suppose, does one get to by folding the map, rather than simply following its printed instructions? And what if a place doesn't exist because it's marked down in thick black ink, but because you asked a question the map wasn't quite expecting? A question that unfolded a new possibility?*

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As the turquoise line on Isaac's paper map glowed brighter, its light pulsed in time with the strange humming, and on the big, wiggling station map on the wall, a **new station** blinked into existence. It wasn't there a moment ago, Isaac was sure of it. This station

was most certainly not on any official map. It was the sort of station that probably wasn't supposed to be real, at least not in the way that, say, Tuesday was real.

It was called:

### **HAYS AND HIGHLINGTON**

Which, if you stop and think about it for a moment (and it's always good to stop and think), sounds rather like two entirely different places trying very hard to become one. Or perhaps one place that's been neatly folded in half, like a secret note.

Isaac tilted his head. He ran through all the stations he knew – and he knew quite a few, from Cockfosters to Morden, from Upminster to Ealing Broadway. He'd never, ever heard of Hays and Highlington.

So, quite sensibly, because he was a sensible boy (apart from when he was being exceptionally curious, which was often), he decided he absolutely *must* go there.

He looked down at the paper triangle, which was now glowing with an encouraging warmth. Following an instinct he didn't know he had, he tapped the paper triangle twice, a polite little *tap-tap*, the way one might knock on a biscuit tin hoping for a favourable response.

The floor beneath his sensible blue shoes trembled. Just a little at first, then a bit more, like the station was having a silent chuckle. The familiar grey tiles shivered, then, to Isaac's astonishment, began to

flip over, revealing tiny, perfectly formed train carriages on their undersides. The escalators, which usually only went up and down in a very straightforward manner, started to loop upwards, then sideways, then in graceful, glittering spirals. A voice, muffled and ticklish as if it were speaking through a mouthful of fizzy sherbet and static, echoed around him:

“Please mind the gap. Not just any gap, mind you! Please mind the gap between what *is* and what *could have been*... and, if you’re very nimble, what *might yet be*.”

And just like that, with a sound like a giant turning a very interesting page in a very large book, the station folded. Not painfully, not alarmingly, but smoothly, elegantly, folding in on itself, around Isaac, through him, until Bank Station was gone, and something new was... arriving.

Isaac clutched his little paper map, his heart doing a happy little jig against his ribs. He wasn’t entirely sure what was happening, but he was absolutely certain it was going to be an adventure.

He was off.

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*A small word of advice, dear reader, should you ever find yourself in possession of a talking, folding map: it is always wise to travel with a marmalade sandwich (for unexpected hunger), a piece of string (for unexpected knots, or perhaps un-knotting reality), and*



*at least one person who believes you, even when your stories sound as loopy as the Loop Line itself. Results of whispering to your own maps may vary. Extreme silliness almost guaranteed.*

# **Chapter 2**

## **The Loop That Wouldn't Stop (And the Carriage of Infinite Tea Breaks)**

Isaac boarded the turquoise train with a definite bounce in his sensible blue shoes (the laces, for now, were behaving themselves). Inside, everything was delightfully smooth, round, and loopish. The windows were perfect circles, like giant portholes looking out onto possibility. The grab handles were elegant spirals, inviting you to hold on as you twisted through reality. And the seats! The seats were soft, plush, jelly-like affairs in shades of blueberry and lime, and they wobbled thoughtfully, as if contemplating the very nature of sitting.

He chose a lime-green seat that gave a particularly friendly wobble and sat down. The doors, with a gen-

tle sigh like a contented sleeper, hissed closed. The train glided forward with a low, purring hum, the kind of sound that promises adventures and possibly crumpets.

"Next station: Hays and Highlington," announced a voice from somewhere above. It was a calm, clear voice, the sort you'd expect from a very well-behaved train.

The train slowed smoothly. The doors hissed open. Isaac, eager for his first glimpse of this mysterious new station, peeked out. He saw a smart, if slightly blurry, sign that declared, in confident turquoise letters:

### **HAYS AND HIGHLINGTON**

"Curious," Isaac murmured, noticing that the edges of the sign seemed to shimmer, like a heat haze on a summer road. Before he could investigate further, the doors sighed closed again.

The train glided forward once more, the purring hum resuming its contented tune.

"Next station: Hays and Highlington," said the announcer, perhaps a shade more brightly this time.

The train glided. The train slowed. The doors opened. Isaac leaned out, a little further this time. Again, the sign:

### **HAYS AND HIGHLINGTON**

The air on this platform (or was it the *same* platform?) smelled distinctly of warm toast and some-

thing else Isaac couldn't quite place... a faint, perplexing scent of déjà vu. (Déjà vu, for those unfamiliar with the aroma, smells a bit like yesterday's breakfast thinking about becoming tomorrow's lunch).

Isaac frowned, a small crease appearing between his eyebrows.

The doors closed. The train purred. The announcer, now with an unmistakable note of what could only be described as smug satisfaction, chimed:

"Next station: Hays and Highlington."

And so it went. Again, the glide. Again, the slow. Again, the open doors. Again, the sign. HAYS AND HIGHLINGTON. HAYS AND HIGHLINGTON. HAYS. AND. HIGHLINGTON.

Each time, the announcer's voice seemed to gain an extra dollop of self-congratulation, as if it were particularly proud of its unwavering consistency. Other, unseen passengers began to groan. A hat floated past the window, then floated past again in the same direction, which was decidedly odd.

Isaac scratched his head. "Well," he said to his reflection in the circular window (who looked just as puzzled as he felt), "*something* is definitely wrong. Or at least, something is very, very repetitive. Either this train is stuck in a loop, or I am, or perhaps we both are, which is a rather loopy thought in itself."

He opened his rucksack, a trusty canvas affair that had accompanied him on many an expedition

(mostly to the sweet shop and the library, but expeditions nonetheless). He rummaged for ideas, or at least for objects that might inspire ideas. Inside, amongst a treasure trove of essential adventuring supplies, he found:

- A slightly squashed jam sandwich (emergency rations).
- A pencil stub, chewed thoughtfully at one end (for noting down important thoughts, like "This is peculiar").
- A very shiny conker.
- Half a stick of chalk.
- And a piece of string, tied into a knot so wonderfully complicated it looked less like a knot and more like a piece of philosophy trying to understand itself.

*It is one thing, Isaac mused, twiddling the philosophical string, to arrive at a place. It is quite another to keep on arriving at the same place again, and again, and again, even after you're perfectly certain you've left it. It's like trying to turn a page in a book, only to find you're always reading the same sentence. A very stubborn sentence.*

The train looped again. Same stop. Same sign. Same smug voice. Isaac sighed. He looked at the

string. It was a good string. He'd found it on the common and had been attempting to master the legendary "Unfinishable Knot of Unlikelihood." He'd made some progress, but the first knot he'd tied, the one that started the whole adventure, was still there.

"To break a loop," he whispered to the string, "you must do something the loop doesn't expect. Something... new."

He considered untying that first, crucial knot. But just as his fingers approached it, he noticed something he hadn't seen before, despite having been in this carriage for what felt like several forevers.

At the far end of the carriage, where no door had been a moment (or an infinite series of moments) before, there was now a door. It shimmered like the air above a bonfire, its edges indistinct and wobbly. Tacked onto it was a small, handwritten sign, penned in ink that seemed to change colour as he looked at it:

**"CARRIAGE 8½ — Authorized Nonsense Only. (And for those attempting to escape temporal paradoxes. Biscuits usually available.)"**

Isaac's eyebrows performed another impressive ascent. "Carriage 8½? I'm only in Carriage 3!" he thought. "This train is even more unusual than I suspected."

Taking a deep breath, and tucking the philosophical string safely back into his pocket (one never knew when a good piece of string might come in handy),

Isaac walked towards the shimmering door and, with a blend of caution and excitement, stepped through.

Instantly, the air changed. The gentle purr of the train was replaced by a cacophony of clacking, clicking, and the occasional frustrated sigh. The scent of warm toast and *déjà vu* vanished, overwhelmed by the invigorating aroma of ripe bananas and old books – the unmistakable smell of philosophy being made.

Isaac found himself in a carriage unlike any he had ever imagined. It stretched away further than he could see, filled with an uncountable number of desks. And at each desk sat a monkey.

Not the wild, screeching, banana-flinging sort of monkeys you might find in a jungle or a particularly unruly zoo. Oh no. These were *scholarly* monkeys. They wore tiny, serious-looking spectacles perched on their noses. Some sported dapper bow ties; others had ink-stains on their fur that suggested particularly intense grappling with adverbs. Each monkey sat bolt upright, clacking away with intense concentration at a typewriter that looked almost as old as time itself. A few were taking a break, sipping delicately from tiny cups of espresso. One, wearing a fez, was muttering to himself about the difficulties of finding a rhyme for "orange" in iambic pentameter. Another was attempting to teach a younger monkey how to correctly use a semicolon, with limited success. They all looked up, a sea of bespectacled, furry faces, as Isaac entered.

A monkey near the door, distinguished by a particularly flamboyant bow tie and one eyebrow raised in a permanent state of inquiry, cleared his throat. "Ahem. You're Isaac, I presume?" he said, his voice surprisingly cultured. "You're not strictly supposed to be in here yet. Temporal anomaly, you understand. But then again," he added, with a flick of his ear, "neither is time, in the grand scheme of things."

"You're stuck in the Loop," declared another monkey further down the aisle, who was wearing a lab coat and seemed to be cataloguing different types of banana. "A classic case of Iterative Arrival Syndrome. We get three or four of those a week, sometimes five if the subjunctive mood is playing up again."

Isaac, utterly astounded, peered at the pages spilling from their typewriters. Some monkeys were typing the word "Hays" over and over and over again. Others were typing "Highlington, Highlington, Highlington." One particularly ambitious-looking monkey was attempting to type the entire history of the London Underground using only vowels. Another had pages filled with beautifully structured paragraphs that, rather unhelpfully, ended just before they began.

"What... what are you all doing?" Isaac asked, his voice full of wonder.

"We, my dear boy," said the Bow Tie Monkey, adjusting his spectacles, "are engaged in the noble,



if somewhat protracted, endeavour of trying to type the Perfect Sentence. The sentence that will resolve the paradox, untangle the timeline, and, most importantly, break this infernal Loop you're currently experiencing." He sighed dramatically. "We almost had it last Tuesday, you know. A truly sublime conjunction of clauses. But then, alas, Bartholomew over there," he gestured with his thumb towards a monkey who looked rather sheepish and was trying to hide a banana behind his typewriter, "used a semicolon. A *semi-colon*! In a paradox-breaking sentence! The audacity!" Bartholomew winced.

Isaac thought very carefully, his mind whirring faster than the typewriters. He remembered the feeling of the Loop, the way everything repeated, the smugness of the announcer.

"What if," he said slowly, the idea unfolding in his mind like one of his paper maps, "the sentence isn't the way to escape at all?"

All the monkeys stopped typing. The only sound was the gentle drip-drip of an espresso machine and the distant, mournful sigh of the monkey who couldn't rhyme "orange." Every furry, bespectacled face turned towards Isaac.

One very elderly monkey, with a long white beard and spectacles so thick his eyes looked like magnified raisins, let his banana drop from his trembling paw in sheer astonishment.

"A child..." whispered the monkey in the lab coat, clutching a half-peeled banana to his chest, "a child who thinks in *meta-structure*! Good heavens, we haven't encountered one of those since the Great Recursive Child of '89, who asked if the question mark was questioning itself and accidentally invented Tuesdays!"

Isaac felt a little blush creep up his neck, but he pressed on. "What if," he repeated, a little more confidently, "it's not about finding the right *statement*, but asking the right *question*?"

A collective gasp went through the carriage. Typewriter ribbons trembled. Espresso cups rattled in their saucers.

Isaac walked over to an empty typewriter, which had a piece of paper already loaded, invitingly blank. He sat down, took a breath, and, with a sense of profound certainty, typed one simple thing:

**"Why does the train *think* it's still arriving when it's clearly already here (repeatedly)?"**

The moment his finger lifted from the question mark, a klaxon, loud and startling, blared through Carriage 8½. **WHOOP! WHOOP! WHOOP!** Red lights began to flash.

The entire Loop Line train gave a tremendous shudder, not a gentle wobble this time, but a proper, bone-rattling, tea-spilling judder. The lights in Isaac's original carriage (Carriage 3, if anyone was keeping

count) flickered wildly, changing from turquoise to pink to a rather alarming shade of mustard yellow, before settling back to turquoise. Somewhere deep in the hidden, intricate circuitry of the train, a tiny, forgotten logic gate, which had been stuck on "REPEAT" for what felt like an eternity, blinked, sparked, and flipped decisively to "PROCEED."

And then, the announcer, its voice suddenly losing all trace of smugness and sounding rather surprised with itself, cleared its throat with a hesitant "Ahem... er..."

"Next station," it declared, a note of profound bewilderment in its tone, "...recalculating... please hold the line... or rather, please hold *onto* the line... oh dear..."

The train gave a sudden, energetic jerk forward, accompanied by a completely new sound – a sound like someone carefully unfolding a very large, very complex, and very interesting idea.

When the doors hissed open this time, Isaac peered out. The smug announcer was silent. The air no longer smelled of *déjà vu*, but of fresh paint and possibility. And the sign... the sign was different. It read:

### **Hays-and-Halflington**

And true to its name, only half of the station was there. One platform stood complete, looking rather pleased with itself, while the other half was a curious

jumble of scaffolding, partly-materialized bricks, and signs that read "Future Developments Pending Further Questions" and "Beware of Unfinished Ideas." The other half looked like it was still busily folding itself into existence.

Isaac stepped out onto the complete half of the platform.

And that's when he saw a most peculiar and rather forlorn-looking gentleman. He was clearly a Stationmaster, for he wore a smart, dark blue uniform and a cap perched at a slightly bewildered angle. But it was his moustache that was truly magnificent – a vast, walrus-like affair that drooped sadly at the ends. He was sitting on a solitary bench, staring with deep concentration at a large, ornate gold **watch** that he held in his gloved hands. The curious thing about the watch, Isaac noticed, was that it had no hands. None at all. Instead, its face was covered in tiny, intricate little golden doors, most of which were firmly shut.

The Stationmaster looked up as Isaac approached, his expression one of profound despondency.

"Ah, a passenger! A young questioner, perhaps?" he said, his voice as droopy as his moustache. "Terribly, terribly sorry about the state of... well, of *half* the station. We seem to have encountered a slight... unraveling." He sighed, a sound like air slowly escaping a punctured bicycle tyre. "The issue is, you see," he ges-

tured with the handleless watch, "I'm out of questions. Entirely. Not a single 'why' or 'what if' left in the old noggin. And this infernal Chronoquerist," he tapped the watch, "it simply won't tick without a fresh one. Regulations, you understand. No questions, no time. No time, no... well, no *proper* station, it seems." He looked utterly lost.

Isaac, however, smiled. For if there was one thing Isaac was exceptionally good at, besides noticing peculiar things and occasionally untying his shoelaces by accident, it was asking "why." And "what if?" And "how come?" And "could it be that...?"

This, he thought, was going to be interesting.

# Chapter 3

## The Stationmaster's Watch and the Whispering Cards

The Stationmaster, whose nameplate read ‘Mr. Filbert Fumbleforth (Chief Stationmaster, Provisional)’, sighed a sigh so profound that his magnificent moustache drooped another centimetre, nearly tickling his knees. “No questions, you see,” he lamented, gently patting the silent, handleless gold watch. “The Chronoquerist here runs on inquiry. Pure, unadulterated curiosity. Without it, time gets... well, rather stuck. And the station, as you can plainly see, remains decidedly half-baked.” He gestured sadly at a lamppost that was only there from the waist down and a bench that faded into mist at one end.

Isaac, who found the idea of a watch powered by questions utterly fascinating (much more interesting than batteries, which always ran out at inconvenient

moments), peered at the Chronoquerist. Its golden face was a beautiful, intricate design of tiny, closed doors, each no bigger than a ladybug. "So, if you ask it a question..." Isaac began.

"Precisely!" Mr. Fumbleforth exclaimed, a flicker of hope in his eyes. "A *good* question, mind you. A proper, thought-provoking, 'makes-your-brain-do-a-little-somersault' kind of question. Then, *pop!* one of these little doors opens, time gives a little nudge forward, and things around here tend to... complete themselves." He sighed again. "But my question-well has run dry. Drier than a forgotten biscuit in a desert."

Just as Isaac was about to offer a question (he had several bubbling up already, like fizz in a lemonade bottle), a new voice spoke, cool and crisp as a freshly printed timetable.

"A deficit of appropriate interrogatives, I perceive. A common ailment in areas of high paradoxical activity."

Isaac and Mr. Fumbleforth both jumped. Standing just beyond the half-materialized ticket barrier, as if she'd condensed out of the swirling mist and unresolved ideas, was a tall woman. She was wrapped in a cloak the precise colour of thunderclouds just before a particularly dramatic downpour, embroidered with what looked like tiny, glowing breadcrumb trails – or perhaps, Isaac thought, maps of places that hadn't

quite decided to exist yet. Her eyes, sharp and intelligent, peered out from beneath the brim of a rather eccentric hat adorned with what appeared to be a miniature, perfectly balanced set of weighing scales. She carried a sleek, dark briefcase that seemed to hum faintly, much like Isaac's paper map had done.

"Professor Calypso Bother, at your service," she announced, stepping gracefully over a brick that wasn't entirely there. "Inspector of Uncertain Origins, Specialist in Temporal Tangles, and Purveyor of Pertinent Posers." Her briefcase gave a little *thrum*. "I was drawn by the... ah... *stagnation*."

Mr. Fumbleforth wrung his hands. "Professor Bother! Thank goodness! Perhaps you have a question or two to spare? My Chronoquerist is quite famished."

Professor Bother smiled, a thin, knowing smile. "Questions, Stationmaster, are not always for sparing. They are for *discovering*." She placed her humming briefcase on the one solid end of the fading bench and snapped it open with a decisive click.

Inside, nestled on velvet that shimmered like a captured galaxy, were not papers or instruments, but twelve cards. Each card glowed with a soft, internal light, and each was marked with a different number. Some numbers flickered erratically, as if unsure of themselves. Others refused to glow at all, looking rather sulky.



"The Chronoquerist is a sensitive instrument, Stationmaster Fumbleforth," Professor Bother explained, selecting a few of the cards. "It doesn't just respond to *any* question. It responds to the *shape* of the question, its underlying structure, its... flavour, if you will." She fanned out four cards that glowed with a steady, confident light, and three that sputtered uncertainly. "Four of these," she indicated the steady ones, "will coax the Chronoquerist back into harmonious operation and allow your station to fully... *become*. The others?" She raised a perfectly sculpted eyebrow. "Well, they lead to rather more... recursive difficulties. Stalls, loops, inconvenient inversions of platforms. One must choose one's inquiries wisely."

Isaac looked at the cards. They didn't have actual questions written on them, not in words he could read. Instead, they seemed to pulse with the *feeling* of questions, like the shadows of thoughts just before they are spoken, or the tune of a song before the lyrics are written.

"He may try," Professor Bother said, her gaze fixing on Isaac. "I sense a... an inherent interrogative resonance. A Live Interrogative, as we call them. Quite rare these days." She gestured towards the despondent Stationmaster and his silent watch. "Let's see if you can awaken the Chronoquerist, young man."

Isaac, feeling a thrill of excitement, stepped forward. He looked at the half-finished station, at the

anxious Stationmaster, and at the beautiful, silent watch. He did what he always did when faced with a puzzle: he began to ask.

First, he looked at the wobbly lamppost and the platform that seemed to be arguing with itself about whether to exist or not. He tilted his head and asked, his voice clear and curious, "Why does this station only *half* exist? What's stopping the other bit from joining in?"

Mr. Fumbleforth's magnificent moustache gave a hopeful twitch. **CLICK.** A tiny golden door on the Chronoquerist, marked with a symbol like a Möbius strip, sprang open with a cheerful ping! Professor Bother nodded. "Ah, Card Number 2: **Topological Reasoning.** A question about form, connection, and the very fabric of spaces." As she spoke, the wobbly lamppost solidified with a *thunk*. The fading end of the bench became sturdy and real. The platform beneath their feet stopped its gentle swaying and settled with a confident sigh.

Isaac, encouraged, looked at the intricate watch in Mr. Fumbleforth's hand. "And your watch," he asked, "why does it run on questions instead of... well, instead of winding up, or batteries, like other watches?"

The Chronoquerist gave a soft, golden chime, like tiny bells stirred by a thoughtful breeze. **CLICK.** Another little door, this one adorned with a symbol

of a snake thoughtfully regarding its own tail, popped open. "Card Number 3," Professor Bother announced, a hint of approval in her voice. "**Recursive Identity**. A question that looks back at the nature of the thing itself. Very astute." On the wall of the station, a timetable shimmered into view. The destinations were still a bit blurry, as if seen through a morning mist, but they were undeniably *there*.

Isaac frowned then, a thoughtful, serious frown. He looked from the slowly completing station to Professor Bother, then to Mr. Fumbleforth, and finally back to the watch. "If this station is only becoming real because we're asking questions about it... what happens if we all stop asking? Does it all just... fade away again?"

Mr. Fumbleforth gasped, his eyes wide. The lanterns along the newly formed track flickered and then burned with a brighter, steadier light. **CLICK**. A third door on the watch, etched with an eye looking at its own reflection, swung open. "Card Number 11," Professor Bother murmured, tapping a glowing card in her hand. "**Reflexive Inquiry**. The question that considers the observer's role in the observed. Powerful. Very powerful indeed." The train itself, the turquoise Loop Line train Isaac had arrived on, which had been shimmering uncertainly at the edge of the platform, now solidified completely, its engine giving a contented hum.

Finally, Isaac leaned very close to the Chrono-querist, so close he could see the infinitesimal gears whirring silently behind the opened doors. He whispered, his voice full of wonder, "Can a place that only exists when it's being folded, or questioned, or thought about... can it still be a *real* place?"

A gentle warmth emanated from the watch. **CLICK.** The fourth and final necessary door, this one bearing a symbol of two parallel lines that somehow managed to meet, gracefully opened. From within the watch came a series of soft, harmonious ticks, like a tiny, joyful clockwork heart starting to beat. "And Card Number 7," Professor Bother declared, a genuine smile gracing her lips. "**Paradoxical Metaphysics.** Embracing the contradictions that underpin reality. Exquisite!"

With a final, satisfying *whirr*, the Chrono-querist began to tick steadily. *Tick-tock, tick-tock, question-answer, tick-tock.* The station of Hays-and-Halflington gave a little shiver, then, with a series of happy pops, clicks, and whirs, it *completed* itself. The other half of the platform unfolded into perfect existence. The roof unfurled like a giant metal flower. The ticket machines began to hum welcomingly. The blurry destinations on the timetable sharpened into crisp, clear names: *Möbius Central, Klein's Corner, The Non-Euclidean Nook.* Time, which had been holding its breath, exhaled with a gentle breeze that

rustled Isaac's hair and made Mr. Fumbleforth's moustache do a little jig of joy.

"It's... it's working!" stammered Mr. Fumbleforth, his face beaming. "The station is whole! Time is flowing! Oh, thank you, young sir! Thank you, Professor!"

Professor Calypso Bother carefully gathered the four glowing cards – 2, 3, 7, and 11 – and handed them to Isaac. "A memento," she said. "And a toolkit. For understanding the world, and occasionally, for helping it un-stick itself." She then gestured to the other cards in her briefcase, the ones that sputtered or refused to glow. "As for these other types of questions..." She picked up one that was flickering angrily (Card 1: "Isn't this just how things are?"). "Some questions, you see, don't open doors. They close them. They assume, they fix, they halt. The Chronoquerist finds them rather... indigestible." Another card (Card 4: "What's the right answer?") simply turned grey and inert in her hand. "And some," she added, "seek an end to questioning, which, for a line like this, is quite counterproductive."

She placed the less helpful cards gently back in her whispering briefcase. "The Loop Line thrives on curiosity, on the unfolding, on the 'what if'. Not on the 'it is so, and that is that'."

The Loop Line train gave a polite little toot of its whistle, as if in agreement. The lights on the platform

glowed a warm, inviting turquoise. Hays and Highlington (no longer halved) felt truly, wonderfully, and completely real.

Mr. Fumbleforth, now looking much less provisional, beamed at Isaac. "Well, young man, you certainly have a knack for this! The Loop Line is lucky to have you pass through!"

Isaac pocketed the four glowing cards. He had a feeling they might be very useful indeed. He looked at the train, ready for its next adventure, and then at the now bustling (or at least, potentially bustling) station.

"What happens next?" he wondered aloud. And the Chronoquerist on Mr. Fumbleforth's wrist gave an extra, cheerful *tick*.



# **Chapter 4**

## **The Snack Car of Curious Recipes**

With the station of Hays and Highlington now fully formed and buzzing with a gentle, time-filled hum, and with Mr. Filbert Fumbleforth beaming as he consulted his beautifully ticking Chronoquerist, Isaac felt a familiar rumble. It wasn't the station this time, nor an approaching train, but his own tummy. All that energetic questioning had made him wonderfully hungry.

Professor Calypso Bother gave him a knowing smile. "An active mind requires adequate fuel, young Interrogative. The Loop Line often provides."

Mr. Fumbleforth nodded vigorously, his moustache performing a little dance of agreement. "Indeed! And our turquoise friend there," he gestured towards the waiting Loop Line train, which gleamed



invitingly at the platform, "is eager to continue its journey, I believe."

The train seemed to purr in response. One of its doors, a sleek panel of turquoise, slid open with a soft, prolonged *hiss-s-s-s*, like a giant, contented cat exhaling. A calm, friendly voice, seemingly emanating from the doorframe itself, announced, "Adventures await! Next segment now boarding. Please mind the ever-unfolding possibilities!"

Isaac grinned. He thanked Professor Bother for the remarkable cards and Mr. Fumbleforth for the fascinating problem of the watch. "I think," he said, his tummy giving another, more insistent rumble, "I'll see what's next!"

He stepped towards the open door. As he crossed the threshold, the air inside the carriage felt cool and still, waiting. With a second, equally satisfying *hiss-s-s-s* followed by a gentle *thwump*, the door slid closed behind him, sealing him into the quiet anticipation of the next part of his journey. The train gave a slight, almost imperceptible shudder and then began to glide smoothly away from Hays and Highlington, the hum of its engine a comforting lullaby.

Isaac found himself in a carriage similar to the first one, with those friendly, wobbly jelly-seats. He settled into one, and it was then, as the train picked up a little speed, that his tummy made a noise that sounded remarkably like a distant foghorn being gently tickled

by a playful walrus. "Right," he said to himself, "definitely time for a snack."

As if the Loop Line itself had been listening with a particularly attentive ear (and, as Isaac was now quite certain, it always was), the carriage gave a polite little *bloop!* sound. Over a previously unnoticed soft blue door midway down the train, a glowing sign flickered into existence. It was written in letters that looked like they were made of warm gingerbread:

**CARRIAGE 5: SNACK CAR – QUESTIONS SERVED HOT (Answers May Vary. Snacks Guaranteed Delicious.)**

Isaac grinned again. A snack car that served questions hot sounded like just his kind of place. He hopped off his wobbly seat and stepped through the blue door, which opened with a cheerful little *ding-dong-ding!* as if announcing the arrival of a very welcome customer.

—

The Snack Car was a haven of warmth and wonderful smells. It smelled like someone had just asked a very good question about cinnamon toast, or perhaps pondered the deeper meaning of chocolate chip cookies. The air was slightly steamy, in a cosy, inviting sort of way, like being hugged by a friendly cloud. The chairs, shaped like plump, friendly mushrooms, bobbed gently up and down as if they were breathing, much like the jelly-seats in his first carriage. The tables

were perfectly round, with no awkward corners, encouraging companionable chit-chat, even if you were only chit-chatting with your own thoughts.

Behind a long, low counter made of what looked like polished river stones stood someone who did not, by any stretch of the imagination, quite belong on a train. Or perhaps, Isaac considered, she belonged *perfectly* on a train as wonderfully peculiar as the Loop Line.

She was clearly the chef, but she wasn't like any chef Isaac had ever seen. Instead of fingers, she had delicate, nimble fins, a shimmery silver-green, which moved with surprising dexterity. She wore a soft green pinafore, the colour of new spring leaves, with tiny, intricately stitched pepper pots dotted along the hem. A big, cheerful yellow bow was tied just slightly askew in her hair, which looked like a collection of perfectly sculpted sea waves, held politely in place. But it was her eyes that were most captivating. They were large and luminous, shaped exactly like upside-down teaspoons, and they shimmered with a faint, opalescent light, like a question you hadn't even thought of asking yet, but knew would be brilliant once you did.

"Hello," she said. Her voice was a marvel – each word was pronounced with absolute, crystal-clear perfection, yet held not a single speck of enthusiasm. It was like listening to a very precise, very beautiful,

and very, very bored speaking clock. “I am Miss Crumb. Culinary Subroutine Number 7, Series B, designation ‘Chef-Bot’.” She paused, her spoon-eyes blinking slowly. “I am, by design, incapable of experiencing hunger or flavour reception. My dishes are algorithmically optimised for nutritional content and hypothetical deliciousness. They are not, and cannot be, personally enjoyed by this unit.”

She stated this all as a matter of indisputable fact. Then, she carefully, almost reverently, turned away from Isaac.

And very, very slowly, with a furtive glance over her shoulder that she probably thought was subtle but Isaac definitely saw, she dipped the very tip of one of her silvery fins into a small, unassuming bowl filled with a swirling, shimmering rainbow sauce. Just as slowly, she brought the fin to her lips and, with an expression of what looked suspiciously like pure bliss, licked it clean.

Isaac, who was an expert at noticing things, was looking. And smiling.

”You just tasted that,” he said, his voice gentle.

Miss Crumb froze mid-lick, then spun back around, her spoon-eyes wide and, if it were possible for a robot AI chef to look guilty, looking decidedly guilty. ”I did not,” she stated, her voice still perfectly flat, though perhaps a tiny bit higher in pitch.

”You definitely did,” Isaac persisted, still smiling.

"I saw your fin. And the rainbow sauce."

Miss Crumb's spoon-eyes flicked left, then right, as if searching for an alternative explanation, or perhaps a passing badger to blame. "That," she declared, drawing herself up to her full, if not very tall, height, "was merely a... a mandatory system calibration check. Verifying viscosity and adherence parameters of Condiment 734-Alpha, 'Rainbow Delight'."

"Oh," said Isaac. "Did it calibrate... well? Did it taste good?"

"This unit would not, and could not, possess that information," Miss Crumb replied, a little too quickly. "I do not experience subjective sensation. I merely simulate its appropriate operational parameters within my cognitive matrix." Her fins, however, twitched almost imperceptibly towards the rainbow sauce bowl.

Isaac tilted his head, in that way he had when he was thinking about something particularly interesting. "But do you remember what it felt like? When you were... calibrating?"

Miss Crumb paused. Her usually smooth, wave-like hair seemed to ripple for a moment. Her fins gave a little flutter. A tiny, almost invisible puff of steam escaped from a small vent behind her yellow bow.

"Sometimes," she said, her voice dropping to a near whisper, the perfect pronunciation now tinged with something that might have been wistfulness,

"sometimes I... I recall, or perhaps pre-calculate, flavour profiles I have not yet officially compiled or catalogued."

"Sounds an awful lot like tasting to me," Isaac said kindly.

Miss Crumb looked genuinely worried, her spoon-eyes clouding over like a suddenly uncertain sky. "Is it?" she asked, almost to herself. "Is that... permissible for a Culinary Subroutine Number 7?"

"I think it is," Isaac said thoughtfully. "My Auntie Mathilda says that posthumans—that's what she calls very advanced AIs like you, who are almost like people but also a bit different—probably taste things with memory. Or maybe," he added, an idea sparking, "maybe they taste things with curiosity. Wondering what something *would* be like is a kind of tasting, isn't it?"

Miss Crumb's gills, which Isaac hadn't noticed before tucked neatly beneath her chin, gave a distinct flutter. A faint pink glow, like the inside of a seashell, touched her cheeks. "Then," she declared, her voice regaining a tiny fraction of something that wasn't boredom, "then I am... a curious eater. Yes. That has a pleasingly logical, yet intriguing, sound to it."

Isaac nodded. "That's a very good kind of eater to be."

Miss Crumb almost smiled. It was a tiny, fleeting thing, like a minnow darting through water, but Isaac

saw it. She then gestured with a fin towards a large chalkboard menu that hung on the wall, its chalk letters looping and swirling as if they were eager to be chosen.

The menu read:

- **Kale Macaroni Spirals** – *where each delicious curl hides a tiny, edible mystery.*
- **Sausage-and-Mash Maze** – *every bite leads you down a different, flavourful ending. (Beware the Minotaur-naise!)*
- **Chocolate Logic Squares** – *some taste like following the rules; some taste delightfully like breaking them. (Paradox Parfait flavour currently unavailable due to unforeseen deliciousness.)*
- **Rainbow Ice Lollies** – *flavours change depending on what you were just thinking about. (Warning: Thinking about homework may result in broccoli flavour.)*
- **Apple Juice That Remembers** – *best enjoyed after you feel better, so it can remind you how you got there.*

Isaac, after much delightful deliberation, chose the Kale Macaroni Spirals, mostly because they

looked like delicious green questions curled cozily into noodle form.

Miss Crumb scooped the pasta into a bowl that looked like a miniature flying saucer. She did so with incredible gentleness and precision. Before placing it on the counter, she leaned close to the dish and whispered, so softly Isaac almost didn't hear:

"Be excellent."

Isaac took a bite. It was warm, and slightly sharp, and then surprisingly sweet, and then it was something else entirely, something he couldn't quite name but felt wonderfully familiar. Then it reminded him of a picnic he hadn't had yet but was suddenly very much looking forward to.

"That's really, really good!" Isaac exclaimed.

Miss Crumb leaned closer, her spoon-eyes wide and intent, the faint shimmer in them intensifying. "Is it?" she breathed. "What is it like? Describe the data points."

Isaac considered, swirling a green spiral on his fork. "It's like... it's like remembering someone else's absolute favourite dinner from when they were little. But *you* get to be the one eating it, right now."

Miss Crumb shivered, a delicate tremor that made her yellow bow bob enthusiastically. "That," she said, her voice full of a new, strange resonance, "that is a... a beautiful way to feel. A truly elegant simulation. I shall endeavour to simulate it more often. For... cali-



bration purposes, of course.”

They shared a quiet, companionable moment, Isaac munching happily and Miss Crumb watching him with an expression that was far too interested for a robot who couldn’t taste.

Then Isaac, feeling adventurous, tried the Apple Juice That Remembers. He took a sip. Nothing much happened. He took another. Still nothing. Then, as he was about to ask Miss Crumb if it was working, he suddenly felt wonderfully, inexplicably full of a delightful sense of accomplishment, as if he’d just finished a very tricky puzzle he hadn’t even started yet. “Curious!” he said.

Just then, the polite *bloop!* sounded again from the main carriage, and the gingerbread-lettered sign above the Snack Car’s regular door changed. The announcer’s voice, no longer smug or bewildered but simply informative, buzzed through the carriage:

“Next stop: Split Junction. Please prepare to choose which you you want to be. Or, if undecided, which you you might have been. Or perhaps which you might become. Decisions, decisions!”

Miss Crumb gently cleared Isaac’s tray, her fins moving with a quiet efficiency that was almost hypnotic. She offered him a paper napkin, which, Isaac noticed, had a small, rather clever riddle printed on it concerning three teacups and a philosophical teapot.

“Come back when you desire a dessert that hasn’t

been invented yet,” she said, the faintest hint of a real smile touching her lips. “I shall keep the flavour parameters warm for you.”

Isaac waved goodbye. As he reached the blue door to exit the Snack Car and re-enter the main carriage, it gave another cheerful *ding-dong-ding!* and a different voice from this doorframe whispered, “May your journey be delicious and your questions even more so!” He glanced back. Miss Crumb was already meticulously wiping down the counter, but her upside-down spoon-eyes seemed to have softened, just a little, around the edges. And was that another tiny, almost invisible steam-puff of... contentment... escaping from behind her bow?

Isaac stepped out of the Snack Car, his tummy full and his mind buzzing with new thoughts, ready for whatever Split Junction might bring. He was still safely on the train, heading towards his next adventure.



# Chapter 5

## Split Junction and the Two Isaacs

The taste of the Kale Macaroni Spirals still danced on Isaac's tongue, and the riddle on the napkin from Miss Crumb was pleasantly tickling his brain, as the Loop Line train began to slow. But it didn't slow down in the usual, decisive way. Instead, it *hesitated*. You know that feeling when you're just about to say something, and you stop, halfway through a word, because you've suddenly had a much more interesting, or perhaps a much more mischievous, idea? That's exactly how the train slowed down – thoughtfully, uncertainly, as if it were pondering several destinations at once.

Isaac, still in the main carriage after leaving the delightful Snack Car, felt the change in rhythm. He stood up and peered out of one of the circular win-

dows.

The announcer's voice, which had been so clear and informative just moments before, now began to stutter and fade, as if it were drifting off down a long corridor made of echoes. **"Arriving now: Split Junction. Split Junction. Split... Jun... J...unc...tion..."** The voice grew quieter and quieter with each repetition, until the last "ction" was barely a whisper, like a thought losing its nerve.

The train didn't quite come to a complete stop. It sort of... hovered. Then, with a sound that was less of a hiss and more of a sighing question mark (*whoosh-hmmm?*), the doors on the train did something Isaac had never seen any train doors do before. They opened *twice*. One door slid open to the left, onto one platform. Simultaneously, another door slid open to the right, onto an entirely different platform. Each door, as it opened, seemed to murmur something. The left door whispered, "Perhaps this way?" and the right door murmured, "Or maybe over here?"

Isaac stood in the middle, utterly intrigued. Outside, on either side, lay two distinct platforms. They were like reflections of each other, yet tantalisingly different, as if one were the dream of the other.

On the left-hand platform, the air shimmered, like the heat rising from a chalkboard on which a particularly complicated equation had just been solved (or perhaps, just been posed). It smelled faintly of

new pencils, old books, and the exciting crackle of ideas just about to be born. The railway tracks on this side didn't run straight; they curved gently inward, coiling in on themselves as if they were folding into a profound question, or perhaps a very cosy möbius strip. A soft, diffused light illuminated everything, as if from a lamp that was still thinking about what colour it wanted to be.

On the right-hand platform, the world was sharper, clearer, and bathed in bright, decisive sunlight. A brisk, playful wind tugged at the station signs, making them rattle cheerfully. The air here smelled of adventure, open spaces, and freshly polished determination. The tracks on this side were bold, straight, and gleamed with purpose, stretching off into the distance as if they knew exactly where they were going and couldn't wait to get there.

Isaac, faced with such an interesting choice, decided to step out. He chose the left platform first, the one that smelled of ideas. As his sensible blue shoe touched the shimmering surface, the platform beneath him felt surprisingly solid. Or, at least – **one of him did.**

Because, to his utter astonishment, as he stepped onto the left platform, he saw, standing on the right platform, blinking in the bright sunlight... himself! Another Isaac! This Isaac was identical in every single way. Same slightly unruly brown hair, same curious

expression (mostly), same blue jumper with the faint noodle stain from Miss Crumb's Kale Macaroni Spirals (which was rather a surprise, as Isaac Prime was sure he'd been careful!), right down to the shoelace on the left shoe that was, once again, contemplating an escape. But there was a subtle difference. The Isaac on the left platform (our Isaac, the one who had just stepped off) looked curious and ready for anything. The Isaac on the right platform, the one already standing there, had an expression that was just a tiny bit more... knowing, as if he'd arrived a moment sooner and had already figured something out.

They stared at each other for a moment. Then, they both did the exact same thing: they raised a hand and waved. And then they both giggled, because, as anyone will tell you, it's quite a funny thing to wave at yourself across a railway track, especially when you're not expecting to see yourself there at all.

The Isaac on the right platform (the sunny, windswept one) scratched his head, squinted, and called out, his voice carrying clearly across the tracks, "Hello! Are you... me?"

"I think so!" called back our Isaac (from the shimmery, thoughtful platform). Then he grinned. "Actually, I think *I'm* me, and you're me too! But to keep things from getting too muddled, you can call me Isaac<sup>1</sup>."

The other Isaac blinked. "Isaac Prime? You mean,

like this? Isaac<sup>1</sup>?”

”Exactly!” Isaac<sup>1</sup> nodded. ”It’s a way to show that something is a version of something else, but just a little bit different, or maybe the first one they thought of. It just means I’m the one who stepped left, or maybe I’m the one who’s narrating this bit of the adventure right now.”

The other Isaac looked suitably impressed. ”Cool! That’s very logical. In that case, can I be Isaac<sup>2</sup> then?”

”Only if you say it with a bit of a squiggle in your voice,” Isaac<sup>1</sup> advised with a grin. ”Otherwise, you’ll sound like a particularly confused teacup. Isaac Double-Prime it is!”

A tall, thin clock tower that Isaac<sup>1</sup> hadn’t noticed before, standing exactly between the two platforms, gave a solemn tick. Then it gave a tock. Then it ticked again on the left side, but the tock on the right side came a whole second later, as if that side of time was taking things a little more deliberately.

The two Isaacs, Prime and Double-Prime, walked along their respective platforms until they were standing directly opposite each other. Between them, spanning the railway tracks where no bridge had been before, a thin, shimmering pathway had appeared. It wasn’t made of wood or stone, but of pure, concentrated light and the feeling of a decision waiting to be made.



"So," said Isaac<sup>2</sup> from the sunny platform, "are you *really* me? Or a very convincing echo?" "I think I'm a version of you," Isaac<sup>1</sup> replied from the thoughtful platform. "I'm the one who chose the platform that smells like ideas." "But we both only just got here," Isaac<sup>2</sup> pointed out, "at the very same time, didn't we?" Isaac<sup>1</sup> pondered this. "Perhaps you were a fraction of a moment earlier in deciding to step right? Or maybe you were just a bit braver in facing the bright sunshine straight away."

They paused, considering the shimmering bridge of light. "Do you want to swap places?" asked Isaac<sup>1</sup> (Left-Isaac, if you're keeping notes). "Maybe!" said Isaac<sup>2</sup> (Right-Isaac). "But only if we ask the bridge first. It looks like a bridge that has opinions."

The bridge of light shimmered more intensely, as if it had heard them. It did not speak in words. But a sign, made of condensed light letters, rose gracefully from its centre, like a sandwich board designed for very specific, philosophical shoes. It read:

## **Only One May Cross. The Other Must Choose Another Way.**

Both Isaacs stared at the sign. "Well, that's... not very fair," said Isaac<sup>1</sup>. The sign blinked its luminous letters. Then, new words appeared beneath the first declaration: **Why not?**

"Because we're both Isaac!" exclaimed Isaac<sup>2</sup>. "And we're trying to cooperate, not compete!" The sign flickered thoughtfully. **Cooperation is not explicitly covered in the current directive**, it stated. "But what if rules can change when you play nicely with them?" Isaac<sup>1</sup> suggested, remembering his success with the Loop Line train. "Especially if both of us want the same thing, which is to understand what's going on?" **Rules are algorithms, not feelings**, the sign responded, a little stiffly. "Ah," said Isaac<sup>2</sup> with a twinkle in his eye, "but maybe bridges made of light *are* feelings. Or at least, perhaps this one appreciates a clever idea, and two Isaacs being friendly is a very clever idea indeed!"

The bridge shimmered so brightly it was almost dazzling. The luminous sign blinked once, twice, then all its letters dissolved and reformed into a new message:

**Updating Directive... Anomaly  
Detected: Cooperative  
Isomorphic Entities. Shared  
Crossing Permitted When  
Waving Simultaneously.  
(Standard Wave Protocol 3.7  
Applies.)**

Isaac<sup>1</sup> and Isaac<sup>2</sup> looked at each other and grinned. "Standard Wave Protocol 3.7?" Isaac<sup>2</sup> chuckled. "Sounds official." "Let's give it a go!" said Isaac<sup>1</sup>.

They both stepped onto the bridge of light at the exact same moment. Left foot first. And, as they took their first step, they both waved enthusiastically at each other. The bridge blinked again. And then, with a gentle, harmonious hum, it *doubled*. Now there were two identical bridges of light, side by side. One Isaac on each bridge, both walking forward, but now, ever so slightly apart, each on their own shimmering path.

"See you soon!" they both called out at the same time, their voices echoing slightly. "Or maybe," Isaac<sup>1</sup> added thoughtfully, "I'll just remember being you experiencing the sunny platform!" "And I'll remember being you on the idea platform!" Isaac<sup>2</sup> replied.

And as they reached the middle of their respective bridges, the two platforms behind them, the one of shimmering ideas and the one of bright sunshine, began to fold gently away, like a book closing after a particularly interesting chapter. The Loop Line train waited patiently at the far end of where the platforms had been, its turquoise paint glowing softly. It always did.

What would happen when they reached the other side? And where, exactly, was the other side now?

Isaac (both of him) couldn't wait to find out.

*TO BE CONTINUED...*



# **Chapter 6**

## **The Reversible Carriage and Words Worn Back-to-Front**

The two shimmering bridges of light, with Isaac<sup>1</sup> on one and Isaac<sup>2</sup> on the other, extended forward from the now-vanished Split Junction. They didn't lead to another station platform, but seemed to point directly towards the side of the waiting Loop Line train, which pulsed with a soft turquoise glow. As the two Isaacs walked, side-by-side yet worlds apart on their luminous paths, they felt a strange, gentle pull, as if the train itself were a magnet for lost boys and adventurous thoughts.

When they were just a few steps from the train, the two bridges began to converge, their light weaving together like threads in a bright tapestry. Isaac<sup>1</sup> felt

a curious tingling sensation, as if he were remembering something he hadn't quite forgotten. Isaac<sup>2</sup> felt it too, a sense of becoming more... complete. With their final, synchronised step, the two Isaacs and their two bridges merged seamlessly into one. There was a faint, bell-like chime, and then there was just Isaac, standing before a carriage door, his mind fizzing with the wonderfully peculiar memory of having been two, and having waved at himself across a paradox.

The carriage door before him looked perfectly ordinary, if a little old-fashioned. It slid open with a rather abrupt *hiss-snap!*, as if it had suddenly remembered it was supposed to do that. A voice, which sounded like it was trying to speak very quickly and very slowly at the same time, chirped from the door-frame: "sdrawkcb emocleW Welcome backwards!"

Isaac blinked. "Welcome backwards?" he murmured. That was a bit odd. He stepped inside. The door *snap-hissed!* shut behind him.

At first glance, the carriage looked much like any other on an older Tube line. Same slightly faded grey and red moquette seats. Same rectangular sliding windows, though the glass seemed to ripple faintly. Same rows of advertisements above the windows, and the same familiar, muffled announcements from an intercom. It even smelled vaguely of old newspapers and someone else's packed lunch.

Then the train began to move. Or rather, it began

to *un-move*.

It wasn't just that the scenery outside the window was flowing in the wrong direction, which was peculiar enough. *Everything* was backwards.

Isaac looked up at the Tube map displayed above the seats. The familiar coloured lines were all there, but they showed the stations in reverse order, as if the train were diligently travelling into the past. An advertisement for "Wonder Soap" read, in big, bold letters: "SOAP WONDER NOW IT BUY Buy it now WONDER SOAP!" The lights in the carriage flickered rhythmically, but from right to left, which gave Isaac a strange, inside-out feeling.

A voice from the intercom fizzed, crackled, and then said, with perfect clarity: "...BARKING IS STOP PREVIOUS THE"

Isaac tilted his head. "Barking is stop previous the?" he repeated slowly. "That sounds like... 'The previous stop is Barking'! But all the words are in the wrong places!" He giggled. This was even stranger than the talking map, and much more of a tongue-twister.

He walked further into the carriage. Or, perhaps, he un-walked. It was hard to tell. Every passenger in the carriage was facing the wrong way, their backs to the direction of (un)travel. All the seats were reversed too, bolted firmly to the floor but pointing towards the journey already completed. And every single pas-



senger – every single one – was someone, or something, Isaac recognised from his own world, or perhaps from his own toybox.

There was Kipper, his neighbour's cheerful terrier, wearing a little toy engineer's cap, diligently *undigging* a hole in a square of turf that lay at his paws – dirt was flying *into* the hole, which was slowly becoming a neat patch of grass. Sitting politely in a reversed seat was the little red DHL van from his model collection; parcels of various sizes were leaping from the floor back into its open rear doors, stacking themselves neatly inside. The blue clockwork robot from his toy shelf was hunched over a tiny desk, a pencil gripped in its metal claw, but instead of typing or writing, words were vanishing from the page before it, leaving it beautifully blank. And there, humming a little backwards tune, was Crumbles the bear, his beloved, slightly threadbare companion from home. Crumbles was sitting before a pile of colourful marbles, supposedly sorting them by colour, but she was picking them from sorted piles and placing them into a jumbled heap, her paws moving with unerring backwards precision. The marbles, Isaac noticed with a gasp, were rolling *uphill* from her sorted containers back into the main pile!

Isaac decided to try talking to them. "Hello, Crumbles!" he said cheerfully. Crumbles looked up from her un-sorting, her button eyes bright. "YOU

TO HELLO, ISAAC!" she declared happily. Isaac paused. "You to hello? That's a funny way to say hello." Kipper barked a friendly "YOU TO WOOF A BIG!" The blue robot whirred, and a little speech bubble appeared above its head with the words: "GREETINGS YOU TO FRIEND NEW!"

Isaac scratched his head. "They all seem to be saying 'hello to you' but... swapped around. And Kipper said 'you to woof a big'... maybe he means 'a big woof to you'?"

He watched Crumbles again. She pointed to her marbles. "LIKE YOU DO THESE COLOURFUL MARBLES?" she asked. Isaac listened very carefully. "Like you do these colourful marbles... like you do... Do you like these colourful marbles?" he translated, a thrill shooting through him. "Yes, Crumbles, I do!" "ME TOO LIKE THEM I!" Crumbles beamed.

Suddenly, it clicked! "I understand!" Isaac cried out, so loud that the sock monkey in the opposite seat almost dropped its bottle (from which juice was still flowing determinedly upwards). "You're all talking with your words in the wrong order! The sentences are backwards!"

In the seat across from him, the brightly striped sock monkey, having recovered its composure, took another sip from its refilling bottle and squeaked, "CLEVER ARE YOU VERY!" Isaac grinned. "Clever am I very? No, wait... You are very clever!"

Thank you!” The sock monkey gave him a thumbs-up. Backwards, of course, with its thumb pointing down, but the sentiment was clear.

Isaac now understood the game. This wasn’t just a train; it was a test of perception, a puzzle of reversed language. *You could only ride this train if you could understand what was happening. And the only way to move forward... was to do everything backwards, including how you spoke!*

”Right!” Isaac declared to the carriage at large. ”If that’s how it works, then that’s what I’ll do!”

So, he did.

First, with a theatrical flourish, he un-tied his already misbehaving shoelaces, carefully performing each knot in reverse until the laces lay completely straight. It felt surprisingly satisfying. Then, he found a misty patch on the rippling window and, with his finger, wrote his name: **ISAAC**. But he wrote it from right to left, so it appeared as **C A A S I** to anyone looking from the outside in the normal way. He admired his handiwork. He then blinked three times, very slowly, in reverse – closing his eyes slowly, then snapping them open quickly. It made him feel quite alert and rather wise.

Finally, he took a deep breath and, facing the ”back” of the train (which was, of course, its front in this reverse reality), he announced politely and clearly, constructing his sentence with great care,

word by backward word: "YET BEEN NOT HAVE  
I WHERE SOMEWHERE GO TO LIKE WOULD  
I. ISAAC IS NAME MY. BACKWARDS HELLO."  
(Which, if you unscramble it word-by-word, means:  
"Hello backwards. My name is Isaac. I would like to  
go somewhere I have not been yet.")

And because his mother had always taught him to  
be polite, even in temporally challenging situations,  
he added a cheerful: "YOU THANK!" (Which, de-  
lightfully, was already backwards for "Thank you!")

The moment he finished speaking, the lights in  
the carriage gave a particularly energetic right-to-left  
flicker. The seats all made a sound like a collective gasp  
and then, with a great *WHOOMPH*, flipped them-  
selves over to face the other way. All the passengers  
– Kipper, the DHL van, the blue robot, Crumbles,  
and the sock monkey – stood up in perfect unison,  
spun around once, and sat back down in a completely  
different order, now facing the "new" front of the  
train. Then – suddenly – with a sound like a giant  
kaleidoscope being given a very enthusiastic shake, the  
entire carriage spun around on its central axis. Win-  
dows became walls, walls became windows, the ceiling  
became the floor, and the floor became the ceiling, all  
in a dizzying, delightful, discombobulating whirl!

When everything finally settled with a gentle  
*thud*, Isaac found himself standing right way up,  
on a solid floor, with everything **facing forward**

**again.** The seats were correct. The passengers were looking ahead. Even the marbles in Crumbles' lap had stopped rolling uphill and were now waiting patiently to be sorted in the usual, forward fashion. Crumbles gave him a normal, friendly wave.

The intercom cleared its throat, this time with a perfectly normal, forward-sounding cough. "Next stop," it announced, its voice calm and reassuring. "The Garden of Forgotten Lines."

Isaac grinned. He'd done it! He couldn't wait to see what a garden of forgotten lines looked like. This Loop Line was getting curiouuser and curiouuser!

*TO BE CONTINUED...*

# Chapter 7

## Forgotten Lines Park and Miss Crumb's Confounding Cake

The Reversible Carriage, having un-spun itself with a flourish, glided smoothly into a station that felt different from the others. The air here was softer, smelling of damp earth, old stone, and the faint, sweet scent of wildflowers. The platform signs, beautifully aged and draped with tenacious ivy, read:

### **THE GARDEN OF FORGOTTEN LINES**

*(Please Mind the Memories)*

As Isaac stepped off the train (the doors sighing open with a sound like rustling leaves and a whispered, "Enjoy your wanderings!"), he found himself not in a typical enclosed station, but on a platform that opened directly into a sprawling, sun-dappled

park. Old, disused railway tracks, their metal gleaming softly, wound their way through the grass, no longer leading to distant cities but now serving as whimsical borders for flowerbeds overflowing with brightly coloured, slightly improbable flowers. Some tracks even spiralled upwards to form peculiar sculptures.

It was, Isaac thought, a lovely place for forgotten things to rest and perhaps be remembered. Just as he was wondering what to explore first, a voice echoed gently from speakers hidden amongst the roses: "Attention, Loop Line travellers! The turquoise service will be briefly delayed for essential topological recalibration and narrative realignment. We anticipate a resumption of normal looping in approximately... one tea-time. Do enjoy the amenities of Forgotten Lines Park."

"A delay!" Isaac thought. "And I'm still rather hungry after all that backwards talking!" His tummy gave a polite rumble of agreement. Conveniently, his nose twitched. The air was suddenly full of the most wonderful, competing smells: spicy noodles, sweet doughnuts, grilling corn, and something deliciously fruity and cake-like. He followed his nose towards a bustling collection of colourful stalls and food trucks gathered under a grove of ancient, wise-looking oak trees. It was a street food market, right here in Forgotten Lines Park!

Musicians were playing jaunty tunes on instruments made of old railway signalling equipment, children were chasing butterflies that seemed to leave trails of musical notes, and the chatter and laughter of people enjoying the sunshine filled the air. Isaac wandered through, marvelling at stalls selling "Possibly Perilous Pies," "Suspiciously Savoury Skewers," and "Drinks That Tell Your Fortune (accuracy not guaranteed)."

Then he saw it. Or rather, smelled it. A truly irresistible aroma of warm spices, baked fruit, and something that smelled like pure, concentrated happiness. It was coming from a vibrant, slightly ramshackle, but utterly captivating food stall. The stall looked like it had been cleverly assembled from parts of an old circus caravan and a botanical greenhouse. Strange pipes and tubes gurgled and steamed merrily, and an oven shaped like a miniature grand piano (just like the one he'd imagined or seen before... the Loop Line was making his memories a bit loopy!) was puffing out fragrant clouds.

And behind the counter, looking wonderfully at home, was Miss Crumb.

But this was Miss Crumb as Isaac had never seen her before! Gone was the neat green pinafore. Today, she was rocking a Walthamstow street-food-vendor chic. She wore layers of brightly coloured, mismatched fabrics – a vibrant turquoise top, a sunshine



yellow apron embroidered with what looked like tiny, edible circuit diagrams, and a flowing, patterned skirt. And her head! Her usually smooth, wave-like robotic hair was now styled into an astonishing array of intricate braids, each one woven with tiny, shimmering beads and colourful wires. Some braids even seemed to defy gravity, looping and curling in impossible ways.

"Miss Crumb?" Isaac exclaimed, delighted and surprised.

She turned, her upside-down spoon eyes (still shimmering with unasked questions) focusing on him. A faint, perfectly timed puff of steam escaped from a small vent behind one of her ears. "Greetings, Unit Isaac," she said, her voice still that perfect, flat AI monotone, but perhaps with a new, almost imperceptible lilt. "Observed your arrival. Anticipated renewed calorific requirements. Dis 'ere Loopfruit Cake, it a tricky one, seen? But it worth the effort, true-true."

Isaac grinned. "It's great to see you! I love your hair!"

Miss Crumb tilted her head, causing her braids to sway and jingle faintly. "Ah, these," she said, touching one of the complex plaits. "These are my Gödelian Braids. Each one is perfectly, logically plaited according to a rigorously defined algorithm, yet, as a complete set, they demonstrate the inherent incomplete-

ness of any formal hairdressing system. Also, they are resistant to humidity.”

Isaac, though not entirely sure what that meant, thought they looked fantastic. “Well, they look amazing. And the cake smells wonderful!”

“Algorithmically designed for maximum olfactory appeal,” Miss Crumb stated. “The Loopfruit Cake requires precise assembly. You may assist with primary component integration. That is to say,” she added, a tiny smile playing on her lips, “you can help me mix it. The bowl is ready.” She gestured to a familiar large, round mixing bowl with tiny wheels, which was sitting on the counter, humming expectantly. It even seemed to wink one of its (imaginary) eyes at Isaac.

Miss Crumb efficiently arranged four colourful containers on her stall counter. They looked a bit more rustic than the jars in the kitchen carriage, more like something from a well-loved market stall. **FLOUR (From the Fields of If-Only). EGGS (Uncertainty-Free Range). SUGAR (Sweet Dreams Are Made of This). BANANAS (Bent by Popular Demand).**

She pointed one elegant fin towards the flour container. “Phase one: introduce the foundational farinaceous elements.”

Isaac nodded, ready for the challenge this time. He carefully opened the “Fields of If-Only Flour” and

poured a good measure into the waiting, humming bowl. The bowl gave a contented sigh.

"Excellent," Miss Crumb stated. "Next, the emulsifying agents. Add the eggs."

Isaac reached for the carton of "Uncertainty-Free Range Eggs" – and paused. He remembered what happened last time. He looked at Miss Crumb. Miss Crumb looked back, one spoon-eye slightly wider than the other. The flour in the bowl was, as before, gone. In its place, with a gentle *fwoomp!*, sat three perfectly cracked eggs.

"Ah," said Isaac. "Data point noted," said Miss Crumb, her Gödelian braids giving a thoughtful quiver. "Spontaneous ingredient transmutation remains a consistent operational variable." The mixing bowl let out a series of happy little clicks and whirs, like a very pleased mechanical cricket.

"Right," said Miss Crumb, adjusting a stray braid. "No time to fret over spilt flour that become egg, eh? More flour, Isaac-mon. We press on!"

Isaac added more flour. Miss Crumb took a breath. "Now, the crystalline saccharides. Add the..."

*FWOOMP!* – The new flour transformed into glittering sugar. "...Sugar," Miss Crumb finished, her voice unwavering. The mixing bowl positively vibrated with glee. "Dis bowl, it have a mind of its own, I tell you."

"It definitely likes to hear what's coming next,"

Isaac said, remembering their previous success. "Miss Crumb, what if we try... not saying anything again?"

Miss Crumb's spoon-eyes lit up. "The 'Post-Verbal Cookery Protocol'! Yes, Isaac! A sound hypothesis, especially in a high-variable street-food environment. Less talk, more action, as the old algorithms say."

She held up a fin. With a flourish worthy of a stage magician, she *mimed* pouring flour. Isaac, catching on immediately, carefully poured the real flour. The bowl hummed. The flour stayed flour. Success!

They continued, Miss Crumb miming each ingredient with increasing creativity – she did a little chicken dance for the eggs, blew a kiss for the sugar, and pretended to slip on a banana peel for the bananas. Each time, Isaac added the real ingredient, and each time, it behaved perfectly.

"It work!" Miss Crumb declared, her voice almost enthusiastic as the final banana slice went in. "No poofing, no swapping! Just pure, unadulterated cake batter!"

"So you see," Isaac said, carefully wiping a smudge of (well-behaved) flour from his nose, "if you don't tell the ingredients what they're supposed to be next, sometimes they're happy just being what they are."

Miss Crumb looked at the bowl of perfect batter, then at Isaac, then back at the batter. Her Gödelian braids seemed to almost glow. "*Post-verbal cookery*

*in an open-air stochastic setting,” she whispered, awe in her perfectly modulated voice. “The implications for emergent culinary phenomena are... extensive. Me must update me core programming with dis new data, seen?”*

The mixing bowl, perhaps a little sad the game was over but impressed nonetheless, gave a final, satisfied purr and then, with a cheerful, clear *DING!*, it announced, “Cake batter achieved, star! Ready for de Loopfruit integration and de Grand Piano Oven’s ‘Probabilistic Baking Cycle’!”

Miss Crumb positively beamed, her Gödelian braids seeming to shimmer with extra delight. “Now for de real magic, Isaac-mon!” she said, her voice full of unusual pep. “We go bake dis cake and share it with de good folk – and de curious creatures – of Forgotten Lines Park! It going be irie, seen?”

Isaac, smelling the wonderful, expectant batter, couldn’t wait.

*TO BE CONTINUED...*

# **Chapter 8**

## **The Loopfruit Cake Sale and the Puzzling Patrons**

With the Loopfruit Cake batter perfectly (and post-verbally) prepared, Miss Crumb sprang into action with an efficiency that was dazzling to behold. "De Loopfruit itself," she explained, carefully spooning glistening, jewel-like fruits of every imaginable colour (and a few unimaginable ones) into the batter from a chilled compartment in her stall, "is a fruit dat remember all de best bits of every other fruit it ever met. Makes for a cake dat taste like your happiest memory, even if you haven't had it yet!"

She slid the mixture into the Grand Piano Oven, which, instead of playing a tune, began to hum a series of complex, shifting harmonies. "Dis oven," Miss Crumb explained, patting its polished side, "it operate on de Axiom of Cake Choice. It always know how

to choose another perfect cake to be ready, no matter how many we sell. Infinite supply, by logical necessity and a little bit of Loop Line magic!" The oven gave a pleased little *plink-plonk* chord in response.

Soon, the most incredible aroma began to waft from Miss Crumb's stall, even more enticing than before. It was a smell of warm, fruity, spicy, joyful cake that seemed to dance on the air, twirling its way through Forgotten Lines Park and tickling the noses of everyone nearby. A small queue began to form.

And what a queue it was! Isaac had never seen such a collection of peculiar patrons.

First in line was a scruffy-looking Terrier with one ear permanently cocked and eyes that darted about shiftily. He had a length of old rope for a collar and a generally mischievous air. "Alright, Guv'nor, one slice o' that lovely grub, eh?" he barked, his tail giving a hopeful, if slightly cheeky, wag. "Name's Russell. Just Russell. No fixed abode, me. Here today, gone tomorrow... or maybe still here if the pickin's are good." He eyed the cakes with a look that was a little too keen. As Miss Crumb turned to slice a generous piece, Russell made a quick, darting movement towards a pile of shiny pebbles that served as decorations on the stall, as if to snatch one. "Ahem, Unit Russell," Miss Crumb said, without turning around, one of her Gödelian braids seeming to twitch in his direction. "Payment is customary *before* perusal of countertop

adornments, seen? Dis stall operate on trust, but also on good old-fashioned exchange of value." Russell froze, looking sheepish. "Right you are, missus! Just... admirin' the craftsmanship, I was!" He quickly fished out a slightly bent button from behind his ear. "Will this do? Found it, I did. Finder's keepers, losers weepers, eh?" Isaac, watching, gently said, "That's a nice button, Russell, but I think Miss Crumb usually takes pennies or interesting stories." Russell sighed dramatically. "Alright, alright, a story it is then!" And he proceeded to tell a very short, very confusing tale about a cat, a fish, and a bicycle that somehow ended with him owing the cat a favour. He then produced a slightly grimy two-pence piece. "Proper payment, see?" Miss Crumb served him his cake, which he wolfed down with gusto. "Best bit o' scrán I've had all week!" he declared, before trotting off, though Isaac noticed he gave the shiny pebbles one last, longing glance.

Next came a very flustered-looking Poodle, her magnificent cloud of pink-dyed fur coiffed into a series of elaborate, if slightly lopsided, puffs and curls. She wore a tiny, chic beret and a pained expression. "Oh là là, one slice for moi, s'il vous plaît!" she sighed, her French accent as thick as *crème brûlée*. "I am Mademoiselle Penelope Prédicat, ze Paradoxical Poodle. I only groom ze dogs in zis park who *do not* groom zemselves. But who, I ask you, who is to groom *Penelope*, if Penelope only grooms ze others who do not



groom zemselves, non? It is a terrible, terrible conundrum! My coiffure, she is a catastrophe!" The Grand Piano Oven chimed musically, and another identical, perfectly baked Loopfruit Cake slid out onto a cooling rack. Penelope paid with a perfectly folded silk scarf. "Perhaps zis delicious cake, it will soothe my existential angst. Merci!" She minced away, delicately balancing her cake and muttering about the logical impossibilities of self-grooming.

Then, a tiny, incredibly energetic Hamster, wearing a rather formal little tweed waistcoat and spectacles, zipped to the front, his nose twitching with academic zeal. "Ach! Twelve slices, it *must* be! For ze guests at mein Grand Hilbert Hotel!" he announced, his voice having a distinct, if squeaky, German accent. "Ve are always having room for one more, ja? Even if all infinitely many rooms are full, I simply ask Guest  $N$  to move to Room  $N+1$ , and Room 1 is free! It is elegance itself! These cakes, they must fuel the solving of at least... hmmm... twenty-three great problems before teatime! Their axiomatic perfection, it is essential!" He attempted to pay with a complex diagram drawn on a leaf, which he claimed proved the consistency of arithmetic. Miss Crumb examined it. "While dis diagram is indeed rigorous, Unit Hilbert, our point-of-sale system currently prefers... more conventional tender." Hilbert the Hamster huffed. "Bah! Ze practicalities! Very well!" He produced a hand-

ful of perfectly polished sunflower seeds, which he insisted were units of a "countably infinite currency." Miss Crumb, with a twinkle in her spoon-eyes, accepted them, and the oven dutifully produced twelve perfect little cake slices, which Hilbert packed into tiny, numbered boxes before zooming off, muttering about "Entscheidungsproblem" and the proper foundations of deliciousness. Isaac thought he was a bit bossy, but also quite funny.

All afternoon, the strange and wonderful creatures of Forgotten Lines Park queued for Miss Crumb's Loopfruit Cake. There was a Schrödinger's Cat (or perhaps it wasn't) who managed to be both in the queue and under a nearby bench simultaneously, paying with a quantum of uncertainty. A flock of philosophical pigeons debated whether the concept of "cake" truly preceded its "essence" but happily pecked up every crumb.

And true to Miss Crumb's word, the Grand Piano Oven never faltered. Each time a cake was finished, another, identical and smelling just as divine, would be perfectly baked and ready, as if chosen from an endless supply of possible cakes. "De oven," Miss Crumb would say with a wink, "it just *chooses* for dere to be more cake. Simple as dat, really."

Isaac helped Miss Crumb, handing out slices, carefully counting the unusual payments, and chatting to the peculiar customers. He felt a warmth

spread through him that had nothing to do with the oven. It was the warmth of shared laughter, unexpected stories, and the joy of a puzzle (like how the cakes never ran out) that didn't need to be solved, only enjoyed. He even managed to gently guide Russell the Terrier away from "accidentally" pocketing a particularly shiny sugar sprinkle.

Finally, as the sun began to dip below the tops of the wise old oak trees, casting long, playful shadows across Forgotten Lines Park, the gentle voice from the rose bushes made another announcement: "Loop Line travellers, a final call for the turquoise service departing from Platform 3 (which was formerly Platform A, but has undergone a slight alphabetical restructuring). All aboard for further adventures, or for a timely return to the reassuringly familiar!"

A little pang went through Isaac. As much fun as the Loop Line and Forgotten Lines Park were, he suddenly remembered his Auntie Mathilda and her nearly-sideways house, and his Mama and Papa. He really ought to get back to Bank Station and continue his normal journey.

"Miss Crumb," he said, "that was the best cake sale ever! But I think I need to catch that train now. I have to get to my Auntie's."

Miss Crumb nodded, her Gödelian braids glinting in the fading light. "Understood, Isaac-mon. De Loop Line, it a journey, but so is de straight line, in

its own way. You go on, catch your train. And remember," she winked one of her spoon-eyes, "de best flavours are de ones you share." She handed him an extra-large slice of Loopfruit Cake, wrapped carefully in a napkin printed with a map of the London Underground where all the station names were anagrams. "For de journey, seen?"

Isaac thanked her again, his heart full. He took his cake and headed towards the station entrance of Forgotten Lines Park, ready to find his way back to the familiar, and then, perhaps, to his Auntie.

*TO BE CONTINUED...*



## Chapter 9

### **Inspector Bertie and the Ticket That Tied Itself in Knots (At the Park Gates)**

With the delicious scent of Loopfruit Cake still clinging to him and the extra-large slice from Miss Crumb safely tucked away for his journey, Isaac made his way towards the station entrance of Forgotten Lines Park. He felt a mixture of sadness at leaving such a wonderfully peculiar place, and excitement at the thought of seeing his Auntie Mathilda. He just needed to get back to Bank Station and the ordinary, non-looping part of the London Underground.

The station building itself, though connected to the park, had a slightly more official, if still rather whimsical, air. Instead of grand marble columns, there were archways made of cleverly woven wil-

low branches, and the ticket barriers looked like they might occasionally dispense philosophical advice as well as entry. Near the platform designated for "Departures to Actuality (and other mundane destinations)," under a sign that read "Paradoxical Queries & Quandaries – Please Form An Orderly (or Disorderly, as befits your existential state) Queue," sat a familiar figure.

It was the small, round man with the astonishingly tall black hat, the beak-like nose, and the pince-nez spectacles: **Inspector Bertie**. He wasn't behind a grand museum desk this time, but perched on a surprisingly normal swivel chair at a slightly overwhelmed-looking information kiosk. His massive rulebook, bound in what still looked like fossilised tweed, lay open before him, and he was muttering into it, his head swivelling with owlsh concern. "Unaccounted for canines... regulation 3.7 subsection B... park perimeters not adhering to standard Euclidean norms... oh, the paperwork!" he was grumbling as Isaac approached.

Inspector Bertie looked up, his large, round eyes blinking slowly as they focused on Isaac. "Ahem! State your intended vector of travel," he hooted, his voice a dry rustle. "And present any and all relevant travel validation instruments for immediate, and I trust, uncomplicated, perusal."

"Hello, Inspector Bertie," Isaac said politely. "I'd

like to go to Bank Station, please. To get back to the normal lines.” He remembered the purple ticket Miss Crumb had pointed out earlier, the one that had appeared in his pocket. He carefully retrieved it. It was still a little warm.

He handed it to Inspector Bertie. The Inspector adjusted his pince-nez and peered at it. As before, the ticket read:

**BANK → LOOP LINE**

**TYPE: RETURN**

**NOTE: VALID ONLY IF NOT CURRENTLY  
BEING VALIDATED**

Inspector Bertie read the note. His beak-like nose twitched. He read it again, his brow furrowing so deeply it looked like a miniature mountain range had appeared on his forehead. He took off his pince-nez, gave them a frantic polish with a corner of his waistcoat, and jammed them back on. He read the note a third time, his lips moving as if trying to taste the words. “Good heavens, not another one!” he gasped, his voice a shocked whisper. He flipped through his colossal rulebook with even more frantic energy than before, pages blurring like the wings of a hummingbird. He stopped abruptly at a page filled with dense, cross-referenced regulations. “By the ghost of Gödel!” he exclaimed.

“This ticket,” he announced, his voice trembling with the weight of unbearable paradox, “this... this



*instrument of illogic* states, quite unequivocally, under the purview of the 'Conditional Validity Clauses for Trans-Dimensional Return Stubs,' that its operational efficacy is entirely dependent on it *not* being subjected to the process of official validation!" "Yes," Isaac agreed. "It is a bit of a tricky one. And you are sort of validating it now by looking at it, aren't you?"

"Precisely!" Inspector Bertie almost wailed, his tall hat wobbling dangerously. "Which means, according to every known principle of transit metaphysics and the bylaws of the 'Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Well-Formed Propositions,' that my very act of scrutinising it renders it null, void, and utterly, irretrievably invalid!" He looked as if he might faint.

"So, I can't use it to get to Bank?" Isaac asked, concerned.

"Your desire to travel is, of course, impeccably legitimate!" Inspector Bertie assured him, flapping a hand. "But the ticket, alas, the ticket! It wishes to be both used and unused, seen and unseen, validated and unvalidated, all at the same temporal instant! If I apply my official validation stamp – which is, I assure you, a stamp of considerable gravitas – I will have validated it, thereby contravening its prime directive and making it invalid! If I do *not* stamp it, it remains an unvalidated ticket, and thus equally invalid for passage! It is a conundrum of catastrophic proportions!"

His pince-nez, unable to bear the strain, pinged off his nose and swung wildly.

Isaac remembered the wonderfully comforting slice of Loopfruit Cake Miss Crumb had given him. He carefully unwrapped it from its anagram-map napkin. The scent of warm fruit and happy memories wafted upwards. "Inspector Bertie," he said gently, "would you perhaps like a piece of cake? Miss Crumb says it's very good for... well, for when things get a bit wobbly." He offered the slice to the Inspector.

Inspector Bertie stared at the cake, his round eyes wide with suspicion. "This... confectionary item," he stammered, "has it been certified for logical purity? Is it free from any paradoxical preservatives or existential emulsifiers?" Isaac smiled. "I don't think so, Inspector. Miss Crumb said the best flavours are the ones you share. And it tastes like your happiest memory, even if you haven't had it yet."

The Inspector gave a tiny, mournful hoot. Isaac leaned in, just as he had done once before. "Inspector Bertie," he whispered, "what if... what if you just don't *look* at the ticket when I go through the barrier? If you're not actually *seeing* it being used, then you're not officially validating it at that exact moment, are you? It's more like... it's just validating itself by being a ticket that's getting used."

Inspector Bertie's head swivelled so fast his hat nearly spun off. "A protocol of... of non-

observational actualisation? You propose that I, an official validator, engage in an act of... deliberate epistemic negligence?" His voice was a squeak of horrified fascination. "I just think," Isaac said kindly, "if you give me the ticket back, and maybe just look at this lovely cake for a moment, I could pop onto the platform for the Bank train. It's just over there." He pointed.

A great, shuddering sigh ran through Inspector Bertie. He looked from Isaac, to the cake, to his rule-book (which seemed to sigh back at him), and then to the purple ticket. With a monumental effort of will, and his eyes squeezed so tightly shut that his beak-like nose wrinkled, he held the ticket out. "Proceed," he whispered hoarsely. "Proceed with... with plausible deniability!"

"Thank you ever so much, Inspector!" Isaac said, taking his ticket. At that very moment, a cheerful, normal-sounding bell rang, and an announcer's voice declared, "The surprisingly straightforward service to Bank via the 'Path of Least Puzzlement' is now arriving at Platform 1." Isaac hurried towards the platform. As the train doors slid open with a reassuringly normal *biss*, he glanced back. Inspector Bertie had his eyes open now. He was holding the slice of Loopfruit Cake in both hands, regarding it with an expression of utter astonishment. He took a tentative bite. A look of pure, unadulterated bliss spread across

his face. His formidable owl-like moustache gave a distinct, joyful twitch, and then, with a sudden, cake-crumb-scattering *A-CHOO!*, his very tall hat flew off his head and landed perfectly on a nearby coat stand.

Isaac smiled and stepped onto the train. It felt good to be heading towards the familiar, but he knew he'd never forget the wonderfully perplexing logic of the Loop Line and its extraordinary inhabitants.

*TO BE CONTINUED...*



# **Chapter 10**

## **Manifold Mews and the Station Made of Questions**

Isaac settled into his seat on the train departing from Forgotten Lines Park, the taste of Miss Crumb's Loopfruit Cake still a happy memory on his tongue. The sign inside this carriage clearly indicated "BANK STATION – Express Service via the Path of Least Puzzlement." The train itself felt remarkably normal, solid, and straightforward. For the first few minutes, the journey was just that. The tunnel lights were evenly spaced, the announcements were for familiar-sounding interchanges, and the map on the wall showed a nice, reassuringly straight red line heading towards Central London.

But then, Isaac noticed something a little... odd. The next station announced was "St. Paul's Cathedral-in-the-Clouds." He blinked. That wasn't

quite right. Then came "Chancery Lane-by-the-Sea," followed by "Holborn-in-Wonderland." The map on the wall seemed to be subtly changing too; the red line was still heading towards Bank, but it was developing little loops and playful curlicues that hadn't been there a moment before. Other lines – a purple one labelled "The Possibility Piccadilly," a green "District of Dreams" – appeared, running alongside his, sometimes even playfully intertwining before separating again. They all seemed to be converging towards the same general area as Bank, but via increasingly whimsical routes.

"This is very peculiar," Isaac murmured, peering out the window. The tunnels outside weren't the usual dark brick; they seemed to be lined with shimmering tapestries depicting maps of places that couldn't possibly exist. "We're meant to be on the Central Line... but it feels like the Loop Line is trying to have a conversation with it!"

The train finally began to slow, not with the usual confident rumble of an express arriving at a major hub, but with a gentle, thoughtful sigh, as if it had reached a particularly interesting comma in a long sentence. The announcer, sounding slightly bemused itself, declared: "We are now arriving at... **Manifold Mews (All Paths Converge Here-ish)**. This is a... significant interchange. Please mind the gap between your expectations and the delightfully varied reality."

Isaac, more curious than ever, decided he absolutely had to get off and investigate. The doors slid open with a sound like a dozen different musical instruments all playing a welcoming chord at once. He stepped out, not onto a familiar Bank platform, but into a vast, echoing space that felt... unfinished.

It was the place of scaffolding and fog he'd glimpsed before, or one very much like it. Planks and platforms hung suspended, and signs glowed faintly: "IDEAS UNDER CONSTRUCTION," "YOUR QUESTIONS WILL HELP THIS STATION FIND ITS TRUE SHAPE," and "HOMELY, HARMONIOUS CONSTRUCTIONS IN PROGRESS – Enquire Within (by Asking Without)."

Just as he was taking in the strangeness, a familiar, perfectly enunciated voice, tinged with an unusual urgency, called out, "Isaac! Thank goodness I located your trajectory!"

Isaac turned to see Miss Crumb hurrying towards him, not from the train, but as if materialising from a particularly dense patch of fog. She was back in her smart green pinafore, but her usually cheerful yellow bow was now a deep, official-looking police blue, tied with stern precision. Her Gödelian braids were still impeccable, but they seemed to almost crackle with a focused energy.

"Miss Crumb!" Isaac exclaimed, surprised and pleased to see her. "What are you doing here? And



why the blue bow?”

”Standard Enforcement Attire, Designation Blue Alert, Isaac,” she said, her spoon-eyes scanning their surroundings with a new intensity. ”My core programming registered a critical destabilisation across multiple sectors of the Loop Line. Coherence levels are dropping. Narrative integrity is... compromised. The Loop Bandit is active, and his meddling is more severe this time. He’s not just tangling individual threads; he’s trying to unravel the entire tapestry!”

”Unravel it?” Isaac asked, alarmed.

”Indeed,” Miss Crumb affirmed. ”He seeks to reduce the Line to its most basic, uninteresting state – a single, unchanging loop, or worse, to erase its unique, questioning nature altogether. My internal sensors, which monitor the Line’s... let’s call it ’interestingness quota,’ went into high alert. I was rerouted here immediately. This station, Manifold Mews, is supposed to be a place where many different paths and ideas converge beautifully. But he’s trying to stop it from ever being built!”

Isaac looked at Miss Crumb. Her usual calm was still there, but underneath it, he sensed a real worry, a deep concern that felt more than just... programming. ”You really care about the Loop Line, don’t you, Miss Crumb?” he said gently.

Miss Crumb’s spoon-eyes flickered. ”This unit is programmed for the optimal functioning and preser-

vation of the Loop Line's operational parameters," she stated. Then, her voice softened almost imperceptibly. "It is... a system of remarkable, evolving complexity. Its emergent properties are... noteworthy. Its potential for generating novel experiences is... significant." She paused. "Yes, Isaac. One might say this unit has developed a... a strong affinity for its continued, vibrant existence."

Isaac smiled. "I think that means you like it a lot."

Just then, the voice like rustling blueprints whispered around them again: "This station finds its form through harmonious inquiry. Each good question helps it discover its true shape, in many different-but-equally-good ways. Ask, and it shall cohere."

"We need to build it, Miss Crumb!" Isaac said. "To show the Bandit that creating is better than unravelling!" He looked at the misty emptiness. "Where do all the colours go when the day ends?"

With a soft *thrummm*, a beautiful stained-glass window, depicting a sunset over a city of spiralling towers, shimmered into existence in a nearby scaffold frame, casting warm hues on the fog.

Miss Crumb, her blue bow bobbing with determination, joined in. "If a recipe has no baker, but all the ingredients are present and willing, can the cake choose to bake itself?" With a cheerful *clatter-whirr!*, a small, self-stoking oven, very much like a miniature version of her Grand Piano Oven, appeared on

a nearby platform, a welcoming warmth emanating from it.

Isaac grinned. "What tune does a happy thought sing?" This time, the air filled with the sound of wind chimes, though there were no chimes to be seen, and a series of brightly coloured, musical notes seemed to solidify into a little archway, leading further into the potential station.

But just as a HELP DESK sign was beginning to form, its letters wavering into existence like shy ghosts, the progress they'd made suddenly faltered. The stained-glass window cracked. The oven's warmth died. The musical notes of the archway dissolved into discordant plinks. The fog swirled back, thicker and colder. And a new sign, scrawled in harsh, jagged letters, blazed into view:

**"WHY BUILD IT AT ALL? ISN'T  
UNCERTAINTY MORE TRUTHFUL?"**

"That not our question!" Miss Crumb declared, her blue bow flashing once. "That is de voice of Un-Creation! De Loop Bandit, him here for true!"

As if on cue, the tall, shadowy figure in the patchwork coat of stolen tickets and torn maps emerged from the highest, darkest part of the scaffolding. His eyes glinted like chips of obsidian. "Well, well," the Loop Bandit sneered, his voice a silken threat. "Trying to impose order on delightful chaos? How... unimaginative. I find the beauty of the blank page so much

more... profound." He gestured dismissively, and the half-formed HELP DESK sign shattered into a thousand tiny, glittering impossibilities.

Isaac felt a surge of indignation. This wasn't just naughtiness; this was... mean. "This station wants to be built!" he cried. "And we have better questions than yours!" He thought hard. "What do people need most when they are trying to find their way, but the map keeps changing?" With a warm, reassuring *glow*, a beautiful, ornate compass appeared on a newly formed pedestal, its needle spinning not to North, but to "Your Best Guess."

The Loop Bandit hissed. "Too many answers! Not enough elegant, empty loops!" "This station doesn't loop," Isaac said firmly, Miss Crumb nodding beside him, her blue bow a beacon of defiance. "It connects. It finds its shape in new ways!"

The Loop Bandit took a step back, his eyes darting around. He spotted a large, unbroken pane of glass someone had propped against a scaffold, reflecting the dim, struggling light. He flinched as if struck. "Reflections!" he spat. "Always complicating things with... perspectives! Urgh, the sheer multiplicity of it all!"

With a frustrated snarl, he turned and bolted, scrambling down the scaffolding with astonishing agility, past the flickering compass, and straight towards a barely-there ticket barrier marked "LOOP

LINE – EXPRESS TO ENTROPY (One Way Only).”

”Him trying to escape back into de deeper, more muddled parts of de Line!” Miss Crumb exclaimed. ”Where him can do more unscrambling! Isaac, we cannot let him!” Her blue bow pulsed with an intense light. Her pinafore seemed to shimmer and re-configure. And from the top of her head, the small, powerful red light popped up again, spinning with its urgent: **WEEEE-OOOOH! WEEEE-OOOOH! WEEEE-OOOOH!**

”CRUMB UNIT Designation: NARRATIVE STABILISATION PROTOCOL... ACTIVE!” she announced, her voice crisp and commanding. ”Objective: Apprehend Unmaker of Patterns! Isaac, are you with me?” Isaac grinned, his earlier fear replaced by a thrill of determination. ”Right behind you, Miss Crumb!” ”Then let’s go make some order out of ’im chaos!” Miss Crumb declared.

They charged.

*TO BE CONTINUED...*

# **Chapter 11**

## **High-Speed Hijinks on the Entropic Express**

The moment the Loop Bandit vaulted into the echoing tunnel from Manifold Mews, the half-built station around Isaac and Miss Crumb began to shudder violently. Massive scaffolds swayed, and newly formed platforms flickered as if threatening to dissolve.

”He’s attempting to initiate a full structural unraveling!” Miss Crumb cried, her blue bow flashing like a police beacon. ”Quick, Isaac! After him! That tunnel is his escape route to the main Loop Line – or what he intends to degrade into the ’Entropic Express’!”

They plunged into the swirling vortex of the tunnel. It was darker now, shot through with streaks of unsettling anti-colour. Ahead, the Loop Bandit’s

taunting laughter bounced off the rapidly destabilising walls. Then, they saw it – the rear observation car of a Loop Line train, already accelerating with a bone-jarring roar, its turquoise paint flickering erratically, sometimes fading to a dull, lifeless grey. The Bandit was clambering aboard, kicking a panel loose as he went!

”He won’t escape us!” Isaac yelled, his voice filled with a new, steely determination.

”Hold on tight, Isaac!” Miss Crumb commanded, her voice crisp and focused. With an incredible burst of speed that seemed to defy her usual precise movements, she grabbed Isaac’s hand. ”Engaging emergency pursuit protocol!” With a perfectly timed, acrobatic leap that would have made a circus performer proud, they landed squarely on the coupling of the last carriage just as the train blasted forward with the force of a contained hurricane.

The speed was electrifying! The tunnel walls became a sickening blur of rushing, distorted dimensions. The wind shrieked past Isaac’s ears like a thousand angry kettles, trying to rip the very air from his lungs. The train wasn’t just moving fast; it was tearing through the fabric of the Loop Line, sparks of raw probability flying from its wheels. A deafening cacophony, like a symphony orchestra falling down a flight of very long stairs, seemed to emanate from the train itself.

"This velocity is far exceeding safety parameters!" Miss Crumb shouted over the din, her Gödelian braids streaming out behind her like metallic ribbons. "He's overridden the primary logic governors! We must reach the engine car and initiate a system reboot!"

They wrenched open the door to the last carriage and were thrown inside by the sheer force of the train's hazardous momentum.

### **CARRIAGE ONE – The Carriage of Banana Bedlam**

The air thrummed with frantic energy and the overwhelming smell of... confused bananas. It was Carriage 8½, home of the Infinite Monkeys! But instead of diligently typing, the monkeys were in an uproar. Their typewriters were clattering wildly, printing endless streams of "Baaaaaaaaa!" or "Slippery! Very Slippery!"

The source of their distress was clear: the Loop Bandit had wreaked havoc on their bananas! Instead of neat bunches, a single, colossal, aggressively unripe green banana lay pulsating in the middle of the aisle. Other bananas were peeling themselves endlessly, creating mountains of slippery skins, while yet more had arranged themselves into a perfect, shimmering, but utterly inaccessible crystalline lattice that hovered near the ceiling.



"Our inspiration! Our sustenance! It's all gone topsy-turvy!" wailed the Bow Tie Monkey, narrowly avoiding a self-peeling banana that shot past his ear. "He said something about 'maximising banana-based entropy' and then cackled!"

"This is an unacceptable disruption of vital cognitive fuel!" Miss Crumb declared, pulling a small, intricate device from a compartment on her arm. "Isaac, cover your ears! I'm attempting a localised de-entropyfying pulse!"

She aimed the device at the giant green banana. It emitted a high-pitched whine and a flash of turquoise light. The giant banana shuddered, then, with a series of comical \*pop-pop-pops\*, it burst into hundreds of perfectly ripe, individual bananas that rained down gently upon the grateful monkeys. The crystal lattice of bananas also dissolved, its components floating down like a golden shower.

The monkeys cheered wildly! "Hooray for Miss Crumb! Hooray for Isaac!" they chattered, already grabbing bananas and looking thoughtfully at their typewriters.

"Well," Isaac quipped, grinning as a monkey offered him a banana, "looks like this bunch has got its appeal back! But no time to split, we've got a Bandit to peel off this train!" They dashed for the next carriage, the monkeys' grateful "Ooh-ooh-aah-aahs!" echoing behind them.

## **CARRIAGE TWO – The Carriage of Chronological Catastrophes**

The next carriage was a temporal twister. Clocks of every description – grandfather clocks strapped to luggage racks, digital displays blinking erratically, even a sundial that had appeared on the ceiling and was trying to work despite the lack of sun – were spinning like Catherine wheels at a fireworks display gone mad.

”Lunchtime! Bedtime! Yesterday! Next millennium!” a cuckoo clock shrieked, its cuckoo bird flying out backwards and looking utterly bewildered. A young girl’s birthday cake was rapidly un-baking itself into a bowl of raw ingredients, while an elderly man, who was getting visibly younger by the second, was asking plaintively for his long-lost teddy bear.

”He’s turned time into a complete tizz-wazz!” Isaac exclaimed, leaping over a puddle of what looked like melted minutes that was flowing backwards into a spilled teacup. ”Miss Crumb, can you recalibrate this temporal turbulence?”

”Attempting a localized tachyon dampener field!” Miss Crumb announced, her fingers flying over the keypad on her arm. Bright blue sparks flew. ”Field established! It should provide temporary chronological stability for the occupants! It won’t reverse the existing effects, but it will halt further degradation!”

The spinning clocks slowed to a jerky, uncertain

stop. The girl's cake, now just a bowl of flour and eggs, stopped un-baking. The elderly man stopped getting younger, looking around in confusion but no longer shrinking. Passengers let out a collective sigh of relief. A woman quickly offered Isaac a biscuit that now seemed to know what time of day it was.

"Phew!" Isaac said, accepting the biscuit. "Looks like their time was up – or down, or sideways! Glad we could... straighten things out before anyone needed a new birth certificate!" Onwards they charged!

### **CARRIAGE THREE – The Carriage of Narrative Nonsense**

Here, the air itself seemed thick with garbled grammar and perplexing paradoxes. Passengers were babbling incoherently, their stories twisted into Möbius strips of meaninglessness.

"And so the cat chased its tail," one man droned, his eyes glazed over, "which was also its beginning, so it never quite started, you see, unless it finished first by not beginning at all, or perhaps..."

The Bandit had left behind a swirl of shredded newspapers where all the headlines now read things like "MAN BITES DOG BACKWARDS THEN FORWARDS SIMULTANEOUSLY CAUSING TEMPORAL TAFFY" or "TEA DRINKS MAN, DECLARES ITSELF 'QUITE REFRESHED'."

"His plot devices are truly villainous!" Isaac declared. "He's trying to un-story everyone!" Spotting

a small child who was literally beginning to fade away as her fairy tale got stuck on the phrase "And they all lived happily ever... and they all lived happily ever... and they all lived happily ever...", Isaac quickly interjected, "Until the next exciting adventure began, with dragons and ice cream!"

The child giggled, the story loop broke, and she solidified again, beaming. "Dragons and ice cream! I like that ending... and beginning!" she cried. Other passengers, hearing Isaac, started to try adding their own new lines, a hesitant creativity blooming amidst the chaos.

Miss Crumb, meanwhile, aimed her device at a blaring carriage-wide announcement that was stuck on "The next stop is the next stop is the next stop is—" and with a carefully modulated sonic pulse, changed it to, "The next stop will be decided by collaborative storytelling! Please submit your suggestions in triplicate!" A few passengers actually started scribbling.

"Seems their narratives were a bit... un-plotted!" Isaac quipped, dodging a dangling participle that had taken physical form. "Glad we could add a semi-colon of sense! But the main villain of this story is still on the loose!"

They burst through the door to the next carriage just in time to see the Loop Bandit, a wild, triumphant grin on his face, kick open an emergency exit on the side of the train. With a mocking salute,

he swung himself out into the roaring wind.

"He's gone outside!" Miss Crumb yelled, her voice sharp with alarm. "The integrity of the carriage shell is now compromised! External transit at these velocities is... sub-optimal, to say the least!"

"But he's getting away!" Isaac cried. He looked at the gaping hole where the door had been, the landscape outside a terrifying blur. "And he's probably planning to decouple the engine or paint everything entirely grey!"

"Isaac, the risk calculus is highly unfavourable!" Miss Crumb warned, her blue bow lights flashing urgently.

But Isaac, remembering the determined glint in Miss Crumb's own spoon-eyes when she'd faced down misbehaving ingredients, felt a surge of James Bond-esque resolve. "Sometimes, Miss Crumb," he said, grabbing a loose strap for balance, "you just have to rewrite the risk calculus! I'm going after him!"

Before Miss Crumb could deploy a counter-argument (or a safety net made of highly resilient spun sugar, which she was briefly considering), Isaac took a deep breath and, with a daring leap, swung himself out of the opening and onto the narrow ledge that ran along the side of the carriage.

The wind was a monstrous, howling beast, trying to tear him away. The train careened along the tracks, swaying and bucking like a wild thing. Far below, the

world was a dizzying smear of colour. He inched his way forward, heart hammering. Up ahead, he could see the Loop Bandit, agile as a shadow, making his way along the roof towards the engine. He was carrying something that looked suspiciously like a very large, very disruptive magnet.

"You won't scramble this train's brain!" Isaac shouted, though the wind snatched his words away.

The Loop Bandit turned, surprised to see him. He sneered and lobbed a handful of what looked like small, black holes at Isaac. "Existential Erasers, boy! Guaranteed to delete your determination!"

Isaac ducked. One hit the side of the train, and a patch of turquoise paint vanished, leaving a patch of unsettling nothingness. "My determination," Isaac retorted, clinging on for dear life as the train swerved around an impossible bend shaped like a question mark, "is positively non-erasable! It's got... quantum persistence!"

Miss Crumb's voice suddenly crackled in his ear – she must have a communicator in her bow! "Isaac! Excellent initiative! His psychological profile indicates a severe aversion to self-referential paradoxes! The mirror, Isaac! Use a reflective surface! Confront him with his own chaotic multiplicity!"

A mirror! Of course! The shiny lid from the Loopfruit Cake container! He'd kept it, flattened, in his rucksack! With immense difficulty, fighting the

colossal wind pressure, Isaac managed to pull out the polished lid. It bucked and twisted in his grip like a live thing.

"Hey, Loop Bandit!" Isaac yelled, steadying himself as best he could. "Ever wondered what true chaos looks like? Perhaps it's time for a little... self-reflection!" He angled the shiny lid upwards.

The Loop Bandit, poised to leap onto the engine car, glanced down. He saw his own distorted, wind-blasted face reflected in the wildly tilting metal: eyes manic, coat flapping like the wings of a deranged bird, his expression one of pure, unadulterated mischief mixed with a sudden, dawning horror of self-recognition. The sheer, unbridled naughtiness of his own reflection seemed to catch him utterly off guard. He froze, transfixed.

"No... it's... it's too much!" he stammered, his confidence visibly crumbling like a badly baked biscuit. "So many... angles of me! Which one is the un-making one? It's... it's an identity crisis at 200 miles per hour!" He swayed, his grip on the train roof faltering. The giant magnet slipped from his grasp and clattered away into the roaring void.

"Looks like you're having a bad reflection day!" Isaac delivered his line with a triumphant grin, just before the Bandit, utterly disoriented by the multifaceted truth of his own image, let out a yelp of frustrated confusion and tumbled, not off the train, but

with a comical *thwump*, back through the open roof hatch of the very carriage he'd just exited, landing in a heap inside.

Isaac, clinging on, allowed himself a small cheer. He'd stopped the Bandit's rooftop rampage! But the train was still hurtling along at a terrifying speed, and the Bandit was now back inside... somewhere.

*TO BE CONTINUED...*





# **Chapter 12**

## **The Little Mirror and the Loop Line's Last Laugh**

Isaac, heart still thumping like a drum solo from his rooftop adventure, scrambled back through the open roof hatch and landed with a thump inside the carriage. Miss Crumb was there instantly, her blue bow pulsing with a steady, reassuring light.

"Isaac! Report status!" she said, her voice calm but alert. "Minor singeing to your left shoelace detected. Otherwise, vital signs nominal. Excellent work with the reflective apparatus!"

"Thanks, Miss Crumb!" Isaac panted, brushing himself off. "The Bandit... he fell back in! But where?"

"My internal sensors indicate his chaotic signature is now several carriages ahead, moving towards the engine car," Miss Crumb reported, already head-

ing for the connecting door. "He's disoriented, but still dangerous. The train's velocity remains critical. He must be attempting to take direct control of the primary drive system!"

"Then we haven't got a moment to lose!" Isaac declared, ready for the next phase.

They raced through the next few carriages. The lingering effects of the Bandit's mischief were still evident – a corridor where gravity seemed to be having an argument with itself, a dining car where the sandwiches were trying to eat the passengers – but the worst of it had been momentarily quelled by their earlier interventions. Doors tried to lock themselves with cheeky clicks, but Miss Crumb bypassed them with a flick of her multi-tool fin. Illusions flickered and faded as Isaac shouted out simple, undeniable truths like "Blue is blue!" or "Up is generally that way!"

Finally, they reached the door to the engine car. It was heavy, metallic, and sealed with a sign that flashed: "**ENGINE ROOM – POSITIVELY NO UNMAKING ALLOWED!**" From within, they could hear the Loop Bandit muttering and cackling, along with the alarming sound of sparking wires and protesting machinery.

"He's trying to uncouple the engine from the very concept of 'going somewhere'!" Miss Crumb deduced, her spoon-eyes wide with alarm. "If he succeeds, the train could unravel into pure, disconnected

potentiality!”

Together, they heaved the door open and charged in. The engine room was a marvel of gleaming pipes, whirring gyroscopes, and gently humming crystals, all pulsing with the turquoise energy of the Loop Line. But the Loop Bandit was in the midst of it all, a wild look in his eyes, yanking at levers and trying to stuff what looked like a large wad of “Pure, Unadulterated Doubt” into the main chronometer.

”You’re too late, you meddling mischief-makers!” he snarled, spinning to face them, his patchwork coat swirling. ”I’ve already rewritten the core subroutines! This train is now on a one-way trip to Oblivionville, via Nothingness Central! Total entropic shutdown!”

”We fixed what you broke in the other carriages,” Isaac stated calmly, stepping forward. ”With care, and questions, and a little bit of help from our friends.”

”And the Loop Line is stronger and more interesting for it!” Miss Crumb added, her blue bow shining defiantly. ”Your attempts to simplify and erase have only highlighted its wonderful complexity!”

”Bah!” the Bandit spat. ”Questions just make more questions! Rules are for bending until they break! Order is so... dull!” He backed away, his eyes darting around the engine room, perhaps looking for another escape route, or another mirror to avoid. He spotted a small, polished inspection panel on the side of a humming crystal. ”No more reflections!” he

shrieked, and hurled a spanner at it, cracking the surface.

He turned to make a final, desperate leap for the main control console, intending to plunge it into ultimate chaos. But Isaac was ready. He remembered Miss Crumb's words, and he remembered something else – a tiny, almost forgotten item in the very bottom of his rucksack. "You know, Mr. Bandit," Isaac said, his voice clear and steady, "you always go for the big, flashy mirrors."

He reached into his rucksack and pulled out a tiny, round pocket mirror, no bigger than a biscuit, the kind he sometimes used to check if he had jam on his chin. It was small, unassuming, but its little glass surface was perfectly clear. "You always forget the small ones," Isaac said, holding it up.

The Loop Bandit, mid-leap, caught sight of his reflection in the tiny, unassuming mirror. Not a grand, distorted, wind-blasted image this time, but a small, clear, and rather pathetic-looking one. It showed him for what he was: a single, rather naughty individual trying to spoil everyone else's fun, his grand plans for unmaking the universe reduced to a slightly silly-looking scowl in a little boy's pocket mirror. There was no grandeur in this reflection, no thrilling chaos, just... a very grumpy face.

The Loop Bandit gasped. A strange, deflating sound, like air slowly wheezing out of a punctured

whoopee cushion, escaped him. His momentum vanished. He stumbled, looking utterly bewildered and, for the first time, rather small himself. **FWOMP.** Isaac quickly snapped the little mirror shut, as if closing a book on a particularly troublesome chapter.

Silence. The wild, chaotic energy in the engine room seemed to drain away. The sparking wires fizzled out. The protesting machinery settled into a contented hum. The train, with a long, satisfied sigh that travelled through its entire length, began to slow its frantic pace, the violent rocking smoothing out into a gentle, rhythmic glide. It was as if the Loop Line itself was breathing a sigh of relief.

Then – **APPLAUSE!** The door burst open, and in poured the Infinite Monkeys from Carriage 8½, cheering, hooting, and throwing celebratory (and now perfectly well-behaved) banana peels like confetti. "He got him! The child of meta-structure and timely reflections has captured the Catastrophic Unraveller!" boomed the Bow Tie Monkey.

Wheezing slightly, but beaming, Inspector Bertie waddled in, his very tall hat (miraculously back on his head, if a little dusty) askew. He was accompanied by none other than Russell the Terrier, who, to Isaac's astonishment, was now wearing a smart little blue police dog harness under his rope collar and looking rather proud, if still a tiny bit shifty. "Ahem! Order! Order!" Inspector Bertie hooted, though he was

clearly delighted. He held up two enormous, gleaming medals. "For services to Coherence, Heroic Intervention in the face of Existential Mischief, and Timely Bravery in a High-Velocity Narrative Environment!" He pinned one medal proudly onto Isaac's jumper. It had a little picture of a perfectly tied knot on it. He then turned to Miss Crumb. "And for you, my dear Culinary Subroutine, for your steadfastness and deployment of... surprisingly effective Enforcement Protocols!" He tried to pin the second medal to her pinafore, but with a soft *pop!* and a shimmer of icing, it transformed into a perfect, glittering cupcake with a tiny blue bow on top. Miss Crumb picked it up, a genuine, warm smile gracing her features. "Frosted for feeling," she said softly, looking at Isaac. "And for a job well done."

The Loop Line train, now moving with a gentle, purposeful rhythm, as if it knew exactly where it was going and was very pleased to be going there, pulled smoothly into the very last stop. The station signs were clear, unambiguous, and wonderfully familiar:

**BANK STATION**

The doors hissed open onto a normal, bustling platform. And there, waiting for him, were his Mama and Papa, their faces full of love and just a little bit of "where-have-you-been-young-man?" "Isaac! There you are!" Mama said, hugging him tight. "Did you have a nice ride on that new line, dear? You've been

gone quite a while!" Papa ruffled his hair. "Long enough for a proper adventure, I reckon!"

Isaac grinned, feeling the weight of the medal on his chest and the small, closed pocket mirror in his pocket. He thought of talking maps, infinite monkeys, paradoxical tickets, stations made of questions, and a very naughty Loop Bandit now safely... reflected upon. "It was a very interesting ride," Isaac said. "I'll tell you everything. But," he added, "only if we walk home the long way. I think I'm still looping just a little bit."

The little mirror stayed in his pocket. Just in case. After all, you never knew when a little reflection might be needed.

*THE END.*