

Boskepolis STORIES

SEASON 1



J. J. W. Mezun



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Boskeopolis Stories

Season 1

J. J. W. Mezun

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#BOSK-AA0800-SHIP

DIGNITY 40 DEGREES BELOW DIGNITY

J. J. W. Mezun | July 1, 2013



I.

Autumn clung onto the edge of the bow, her hands wrapped around the horizontal bar bolted down to the short walls on both sides of her hands, while she stared determinedly at the large blanket of wrestling waters stretching below and in front of her, ending at the pink horizon to the east, where the sun was poking up from behind the waters.

Meanwhile, pink clouds smothered the periwinkle skies above. The heavy winds blew her red-orange bangs back while the knot of her white-and-red-striped headband and her ponytail bobbed sporadically—although if she noticed any of this she certainly didn't show it.

She turned her head behind her and asked the two she had for a crew, "Do you think we're there yet?"

Montago Estación, an anthropomorphic orange cat in an old-fashioned blue business suit and blue navy hat (although he claimed he was never in any marines; he never explained why he wore the hat) she hired for his ship answered as his thin pupils pointed down at the portable GPS in his hand, "Not yet."

"Um... Captain Springer?"

"Yes, Edgar?" Autumn asked, turning her head back to the other side, where her other crew member—a skeleton in a heavy petticoat and gray-and-blue striped headband who had been her partner in crime for the past few years—was, watching the other direction through binoculars.

"I think I see another ship coming near," Edgar said.

“So? Tell them we don’t want whatever they’re selling,” Autumn said.

“Um... I don’t think they want to sell anything,” Edgar said. “At least not judging by the big black skull and crossbones sail they have.”

“What?”

Autumn rushed over to Edgar’s side, watching the currently hand-sized ship seem to gradually grow in size. She snatched the binoculars from Edgar’s hands and used them to survey the ship. She saw that, indeed, the sails were black and had skulls and crossbones on them. But what really caught her attention were the people manning the ship: She saw a crocodile with a thin, skeletal body up on the mainmast’s crow’s nest, looking at them with his own pair of binoculars; around the deck of the ship she saw a huge fish with massive teeth, staring blankly into space and waving its fins wildly, and a tiny goldfish in a water tank attached to a robot; and finally, she saw a curly-haired woman wearing a big black captain’s hat, peg leg, and hook manning the wheel.

After careful deliberation Autumn ascertained that she did not want the pleasure of their company and that it would be optimal if they got the hell outta there, ASAP.

She ran back for the wheel and turned it east, away from the other ship. Unluckily, while she could use the wheel to choose which direction her ship went, she was distraught about the fact that she could not find a way to choose how fast the ship went, no matter where she searched. Even more unluckily, looking behind her shoulder—as Autumn made a habit of doing simply out of worry—she could see that the other ship was gaining on them quickly.

“Hey, Montago: Is there a way to make this ship go faster?” Autumn asked while she frantically looked around the wheel with sweat dripping down her forehead.

“Not that I know of,” Montago said, shifting his eyes between Autumn and the other ship with equal concern.

“I think they’re getting closer...” Edgar said.

“I can see that,” Autumn said with irritation in her voice.

Autumn made one last check around the wheel and then pulled her saber out of her pocket before turning around to face the others.

“Well, unless either of you have any ideas, there’s no way to avoid a confrontation,” Autumn said. “So we’d better hope they’re just persistent Jehovah’s Witnesses.”

They felt the ground shake for a moment as the skull ship hit theirs, almost making them collapse onto the floor. From where they stood—and none dared to move just yet—they could see the curly-haired skull captain give them a mean smile as she let go of the wheel and proceeded to climb onto their ship. Everything was silent, save the swooshing of the swaying waters and the thudding of the curly-haired captain’s peg leg against the wooden floors of both ships.

She stood at the opposite end of Autumn’s ship with her arms akimbo, her eyes sliding left and right, examining Autumn, Edgar, and Montago.

“Which of you is the captain of this ship?” she commanded with a deep, silence-shattering voice.

Edgar and Montago both aimed furtive glances at Autumn. Despite the quivering she felt in her legs, Autumn stepped forward with her saber held tightly in hand and answered, “I am,” staring the curly-haired captain straight in the eyes... or at least, in the *eye*, as she had an eye patch over her right eye.

The curly-haired captain stepped forward in a leisurely walk, looking down at the hook on her left arm. They both could see that she was the more mentally-collected of the two; despite Autumn’s attempts to look fearless, the sweat dripping down her face and the way her limbs shook betrayed this just a little bit.

A gravelly, but excited, voice called back from the skull ship, which Autumn could see by turning her head was the crocodile with the skeletal body.

“Hey, boss, can I get a confirmation on whether or not we’re gonna eat e’m?”

Everyone could hear a conspicuous gulp sound leave Edgar’s throat.

The curly-haired captain turned her head back over her shoulder—her expression being what one might colloquially call “pissed off”—and shouted, “Did I ask you to speak, Jolly Jim Joe Jim? Can your puny brain not comprehend that I am in the middle of a little meeting here?”

Jolly Jim Joe Jim crossed his arms and answered nonchalantly, “The water must be boiled at least an hour before cooking; and you always want to cook the bodies at least a half hour after killing them.”

“I’ll boil you if you don’t shut your lip.”

“And I’ll still need time to prepare all of the spices...”

“Shut it!”

The curly-haired captain turned back to Autumn and said with a heavy sigh, “Anyway, as I was about to say, do you three understand where you are running your little ship around?”

Autumn’s eyebrows arched as she heard the tone of “your *little* ship.”

“Yes: It’s this little thing called ‘water,’” Autumn said.

Now the curly-haired pirate’s eyebrows arched, and she pulled her sword out of its brown leather sheath tied around her waist. Edgar couldn’t decide who he should look at—the curly-haired captain in case she might suddenly attack or Autumn for assurance—but he did know he wanted to curl his arms together and shiver nervously. Montago, meanwhile, tried to avoid attention by avoiding

eye contact with either of them, staring up at the slowly floating clouds instead.

“No, I meant do you know what *body of water* you are in,” the curly-haired captain said. “Surely you are not so dumb as to think that all water is the same? For example, this body of water is my property and you are, unfortunately, violating that property.”

“You say this is your property, but I see no evidence that you made this sea yourself, Neptune.” Autumn found that it was much easier to forget her fear when she just gets—to speak colloquially—pissed off. “In fact, I can’t say I even know who the hell you are.”

The curly-haired captain stepped forward, passing Edgar and shrinking the distance between her and Autumn.

“I am the notorious Captain Clearbeard; and why are you so intent on trespassing on my sea, anyway? Are you trying something sneaky or are you just that stubbornly stupid?”

“Well, first, I am not trespassing on *your* sea; and anyway, what I do is none of your business.”

“Pretty brave words from such a shaky shrimp with two clowns for crew mates,” Clearbeard said as she took one more step forward.

Autumn had to admit to herself that she had a point: While Clearbeard was moving ever forward, Autumn was sneaking backward until she was back against the bow.

Still, she wasn’t gonna take crap from nobody, whether they have a sharp sword, a crocodile, a giant-teethed fish, or a goldfish-operated robot.

“Unlike your crew?” Autumn asked.

Clearbeard turned her head over her shoulder and said, “You guys gonna take that gruff?”

The goldfish in the robot said nothing, while the giant fish merely said in a loud voice, “I’m a giant fish!”

“That’s great, Buzzjaw,” Clearbeard said with a roll of her eyes. “Are you guys going to answer my question?”

Jolly Jim Joe Jim said, with his arms still crossed, “I need not waste my oxygen answering her infantile insults—certainly not from someone with as tenuous knowledge of economic theory as she has. Property ownership has been an aspect of economics since the beginning of time, regardless of whether humans created the natural resources or not.”

“Thank you, Jolly Jim Joe Jim,” Clearbeard said with a look of petulance. “Now, can you idiots get over here and help?”

“Well, I would prefer it if you did not use such demeaning diction, first,” Jolly Jim Joe Jim answered.

“I’m a giant fish!” the giant fish said.

Clearbeard swung all the way around and yelled, “Get your asses over here!”

Jolly Jim Joe Jim ambled over to her side, looking up at the sky snootily in an attempt to ignore Clearbeard’s impertinent stink-eye. When he stopped next to her she turned her eyes on the other two and glared at them.

“Well? What about you two?”

She could faintly see the goldfish swim around in its tank; but the robot didn’t make a move.

Clearbeard threw her arms up in the air. “What’s the point of even giving you that fancy robot if you’re not even gonna use it?”

“I’m a-comin’, I’m a-comin’!” the giant-teethed fish exclaimed. Clearbeard turned her head to look at it only to see it waving its fins wildly, making absolutely no progress toward her whatsoever.

Clearbeard turned around back to Autumn and groaned. “Whatever, I guess we’ll just have to take care of her, Jolly Jim Joe Jim.”

“I thought we were attacking her?” Jolly Jim Joe Jim asked.

“We are. That’s what I meant,” Clearbeard said.

Jolly Jim Joe Jim shook his head and said, “Tsk, tsk. Imprecise diction strikes again,” only to be answered with a burning glare by Clearbeard.

“Wait up, guys! I’m almost there!” the giant fish shouted.

Autumn raised her sword and said, “Ha! You guys don’t scare us! Come on, Edgar and Montago, let’s show these clowns what’s what.”

Edgar gave Autumn a horrified look; Montago pretended not to hear her, still looking up at the clouds.

“Guys?” Autumn asked, her haughty smile melting into an uncertain frown.

“Looks like you’re alone, shrimp,” Clearbeard said with a raised sword as she stepped right up to Autumn.

Autumn held her sword steadily in both hands as she watched Clearbeard make her way nearby. Sweat drenched her forehead as she prepared for what she would do first.

Autumn cleared her throat and said with her sword jabbed in Clearbeard’s direction, “You fight like a dairy farmer.”

Clearbeard stared at her with weary annoyance before kicking upward, knocking the sword clear out of Autumn’s hand and into the water, where it made a great *sploosh!*

Autumn froze, with her left hand still hanging out in front of her, while her widened eyes shifted back and forth from Clearbeard and the sea where her sword sunk. Before she could do anything more she felt a sharp stab in her stomach and looked down to see that it was because Clearbeard had her sword aimed straight at Autumn’s stomach.

“Jolly Jim Joe Jim, lock the other two up. I’ll take care of this idiot,” Clearbeard said.

II.

Autumn, Edgar, and Montago sat on a wooden box in a small room at the bottom of the skull ship with their arms and legs chained together. The only movement any of them made was a slight sway caused by the movement of the ship over rough waters; and the only activity they could think to perform was gazing around at the green-tinged moldy spots on the dirty, brown wooden walls and floor and listen to the ship's lazy creaking.

Autumn stared down at a particular mold spot near her feet, her eyebrows furled in concentration.

Montago said in a low voice, "So, uh, you have any idea how we're gonna get out of here?"

Above their heads they could faintly hear the sound of boiling water.

Clearbeard's deep voice called out, "How long will it take before we can start cooking them and eating them? I'm hungry... and suspicious that they might escape any time soon."

Jolly Jim Joe Jim's voice answered, "You've gotta be patient when preparing Human, Cat, and Skeleton Gumbo, boss. Every step is important, and you must have utmost care. One extra sliced onion or too few pickled oranges and the stew will literally blow up in your face. That's how I got this scar right here."

"You don't have a scar right there—or anywhere, really."

"That's because I had an Anti-Face-Scar Stew blow up in my face afterward."

"Whatever. I don't need your life story," Clearbeard said with a cough. "Anyway, I'm worried those dirt-humpers will find a way to escape."

"Don't worry, boss. I chained e'm up as much as I could."

"I'm afraid that won't be enough. You know how it is with grass-lickers and their always escaping when you don't want e'm to."

"Trust me, if they find a way to escape I'll eat my hat."

"You don't have a hat."

"Well then, I'll buy a hat and then eat it."

Autumn made a futile attempt to pull her wrists away only to feel the hard, tight chains hold them together. She did the same for her ankles for the same outcome. Finally, she made one last desperate attempt and jumped onto her feet, which did succeed. But when she tried to hobble forward over to the door the large black metal balls held her chain back, causing her to trip mid-jump and tumble onto her face.

She raised her rumpled head and glowered at the shut door still feet away from her.

"If I could use my hands I could get out my file and cut these chains," she mumbled to herself.

Although she couldn't move her wrists even an inch she could move her fingers around; she desperately tried moving them around the back of her skirt to see if she could get access to one of her back pockets where she might have kept a useful tool or two, but could not reach anything.

Then her eyes popped open as she latched onto an idea. She drew her knees in and bounced back onto her feet like a spring and then hobbled on back to the box Edgar and Montago were still sitting despondently on. She glanced behind her shoulder, wary of her noise attracting attention from above.

She stopped right next to Edgar and said in a low whisper, "Psst, jump up onto your feet."

"Why?"

"Just do it."

Edgar did as she said.

"Okay, now turn a little left."

He turned a little left.

“Okay. Now what.”

“Lemme see...”

Autumn made a tiny hop so that she was right behind Edgar, but a little right of him, and saw that Edgar’s hand was right under her left pocket. *Perfect!* She then just bent down a little so that her pockets were level with Edgar’s hand and leaned forward so that they were touching.

“Okay, Edgar, now can you feel around for my pocket and see if you can find my file?”

“Okay.”

He wiggled his fingers around until he found her pocket and dug around in them. However, he couldn’t reach in all the way, so Autumn had to move in closer.

Montago watched this all with a puzzled, yet detached expression.

Finally, with enough maneuvering, Edgar was able to get his hand in Autumn’s pocket.

“I don’t think there’s anything in here.”

Autumn groaned. “I guess it’s all in the other pocket.”

Montago cleared his throat. “Autumn?”

“I’m a little busy at the moment,” Autumn said with an irritated tone.

“Are you trying to get things out of your pocket?” Montago asked.

“Well, I’m certainly not trying to have Edgar cop a feel, so yeah.”

“Then I take it you don’t remember that Clearbeard emptied your pockets as she took you in here.”

Autumn paused. She thought she’d remembered feeling something digging around her sides when she was being taken away, but she thought it was just part of the hustling of them being dragged away.

“Well, crap...” Autumn said, frozen in place, thinking.

From above they could hear Jolly Jim Joe Jim say, “I think the stew is almost ready. But we’re gonna need to prepare our main ingredients first.”

“I can do it! I can do it!” Buzzjaw’s loud voice rang.

“You can’t do anything, Buzzjaw: You can’t even move your arms or... you don’t even have feet,” Clearbeard said.

“As I was saying, I’ll need someone to tenderize the main ingredients,” Jolly Jim Joe Jim said.

“That means beat the stuffing out of them with Ol’ Woody.”

“Exactly, and since I am busy stirring this gumbo—and the other two are entirely useless—I’m afraid you’ll have to do it, boss.”

“I gotta say that I’m terribly distraught, too.” Autumn could guess by her tone that she was grinning pretty large up there.

They all heard the sound of Clearbeard’s heavy footsteps above, like a chiming death bell.

“Oh, wait!” Autumn exclaimed, seemingly out of nowhere to Edgar and Montago’s ears. “It’s not there—I only keep money there. No, it’s in my shoe, idiot.”

She lifted her foot up to Edgar’s hand. “Take it off and dig around through it.”

“Okay.”

Luckily, she had remembered the right shoe and he soon found the file.

“Great.” Autumn turned around, though still glancing backward to see. “Now, I’ll move my wrist chains over to the file and you slice.”

“Um... okay. I just hope I don’t accidentally slash your wrist or something.”

To their relief, this procedure went quicker than the others and Autumn’s wrists were soon free. She immediately snatched the file and sliced the chains on her ankles with the speed of a child hopped-up on coffee.

They could hear that Clearbeard's footsteps were now on their level—and they were growing louder and closer.

Autumn looked around the room wildly and then saw the black metal balls. Using the file, she cut the chains around one of them, releasing it from the others. She then heaved it up above her shoulder and slowly shifted her feet over to the door, her ears ever wary of the simultaneous thumping of Clearbeard's footsteps and her own heart beating.

The footsteps stopped. Autumn could hear and see the doorknob jingle as Clearbeard unlocked it. Sweat dripped down Autumn's forehead as she watched the door open with a loud creak. But nothing came through.

Autumn felt both relieved and worried at the same time. Her impulse was to throw the ball the second the door opened; but her mind knew better than that. Clearbeard was clearly not born five minutes ago and would be wise enough to expect anything—even the unexpected. Unfortunately for her, so could Autumn; and Autumn held control of the situation: If Autumn's reflexes worked she would be able to conk Clearbeard on the head no matter how she entered the room, so long as she entered the room.

Although Autumn couldn't see Clearbeard, the same applied in the opposite direction. She stopped on the edge of the threshold and looked left and right, only for the right frame of the door to block Autumn from view. That seemed to be enough of a preliminary check for Clearbeard, and she soon stepped forward through the threshold, not noticing Autumn's absence until her mind was already knocked unconscious by the force of heavy steel. Edgar and Montago cringed as they heard Clearbeard's head thump against the hard wooden floor.

Autumn checked around the door. Though she could tell by her eavesdropping that no one else was able to accompany Clearbeard, she couldn't be too sure. When she was sure enough she rushed over

to Montago and Edgar and sliced their chains apart and put her shoe back on, slipping the file back inside. She then heaved the metal ball back over her shoulder and turned back to them on the way toward the door.

She whispered, “We’re gonna have that crocodile to deal with. If we’re lucky he probably thought all of that noise was just Clearbeard beating the stuffing out of us. But he’ll probably find the *lack* of noise suspicious soon, so we’d better hurry and use our advantage while we can.”

Edgar and Montago nodded.

They crept up the stairs, cringing at each creak that sounded to them as loud as dynamite. Autumn, meanwhile, was too busy trying to keep her mind off the soreness in her arm and, especially, her shoulder as she continued to heave what must have weighed as much as she did, easily. She was used to carrying things around—even running around with them—when she’d rob people, but she’d never robbed anything this heavy before.

Edgar went near her—which was easy, considering how much the heavy ball slowed her—and asked in a whisper, “You need help with that?” although how he hoped to help her, he himself wasn’t sure, as he would be lucky if he could lift half that much weight with two hands.

Autumn merely smiled and said, “No, I’ve got it all covered.”

“Um... okay. If you say so...” Edgar said.

But when Edgar and Montago walked past her, she muttered curses under her breath.

They stopped their steps at the top of the stairs up to the deck where they could see Jolly Jim Joe Jim humming under the early-afternoon sun. He danced around as he shook pepper into and stirred a wooden spoon in a great pot over a charcoal grill, carefully constructed to avoid contact with the rest of the wooden ship.

Autumn whispered, “Stay here,” which Edgar and Montago certainly weren’t going to argue against, before sneaking over to Jolly Jim Joe Jim.

Jolly Jim Joe Jim heard the creaking of her steps and said with a Jolly-Jim laugh, “Did you tenderize them good?”

Autumn paused, thinking of what to say. It took a few seconds for her to come up with the perfect idea:

She didn’t say anything and simply bashed Jolly Jim Joe Jim’s head in with the metal ball until he was lying unconscious on the ground.

“Hey! Intruders! Scallywags! Solicitors! Beasts!” Buzzsaw yelled. “Just wait until I get over there and I’ll show you a thing or thirty!”

Edgar and Montago crept over to Autumn from their hiding place.

“What do we do with them now?” Montago asked.

Autumn answered his question after a quick scene transition by wiping her hands together with a proud look on her face. If the world were only a movie being shot by a camera, said camera would pan back at this point, showing Clearbeard and Jolly Jim Joe Jim chained up together against the same box she was earlier tied up to.

“But what if they escape again... like we did?” Edgar asked.

Autumn tilted her head and held her hand over her mouth, staring at Clearbeard and Jolly Jim Joe Jim as art purveyors do when viewing art in TV shows—but never do in real life, because it is completely pointless.

Autumn answered Edgar’s question after a quick scene transition by wiping her hands together with a proud look on her face while she heard the sound of splooshing water just outside the edge of the ship she was standing near.

Montago had just stopped near her after running, panting and heaving with his upper body leaning down over his knees from the exertion he was not used to. When he regained his composure he stood back up and waved his arms around frantically.

"Are you crazy? You can't just throw them overboard!" he shouted.

"But I just did," Autumn said.

"Yeah, *physically* you did. I meant *ethically* you can't," Montago said.

"But I already did, anyway."

"You're gonna make them drown!"

"Jolly Joe Bob John, or whatever, is a crocodile. He'll be fine in the water."

"And what about Clearbeard?" Montago asked with his arms akimbo.

Autumn paused to ponder this question.

"She's an asshole," she finally answered.

"And how does that help her not drown?" Montago asked.

"It doesn't," Autumn answered. "But it sure makes me not care."

She walked over to the wheel. "Now come on, guys, we need to find our old ship and get on with this treasure hunting business before this story wastes another four thousand words."

III.

It was two hours later when they were back in their old ship and anchored in the area that, according to Montago's GPS, was where the treasure lay underneath.

This required Autumn to dive underwater, which required an apparatus to keep her breathing, which required her old ship, where said apparatus was kept. Autumn and Montago dragged said apparatus by either end out from the hold and over near the edge of the deck while Edgar dug around for the cord to connect said apparatus to her mouthpiece.

"And what else do you need for this crazy stunt of yours?" Montago asked.

“Once Edgar gets the cord we’ll be all set,” Autumn answered.

Montago scratched his head. “Wait... So you’re just gonna dive underwater with just a mouthpiece and goggles? No suit to protect you from the pressure?”

“What do I look like, Richie Rich here?” Autumn asked with her arms thrown out. “The only reason I even got the goggles was because Edgar had some lying around.”

“From what I’ve heard, you *are* rich,” Montago said, “So why you would risk your life in such a way for more is beyond me. Why not just retire and invest in stocks like everyone else around here?”

“The day I retire is the day crocodiles can fly,” Autumn replied. “Besides, compared to most, I would hardly be considered rich.”

Montago was about to say something, but was interrupted by Edgar saying, “Here it is,” along with the sound of the knots of long, thick orange cord dragging against the wooden floor.

“Good. Just attach that end to the machine while I attach this end to my mouthpiece,” Autumn said as she twisted the end of the cord under the long oblong shaped green plastic grilled doohickey she called her “mouthpiece.” Montago was afraid to ask where she got that thing, or the air machine.

She turned back to Montago and asked, “Now, can you keep pumping that thing while I’m under?”

Montago looked at the apparatus incredulously.

“You’ve tested this thing out right?”

“Of course I have,” Autumn said. “What, do you think I just waste my money on crap that doesn’t work? I made them let me test that right in that store. Now, it’s important that you remember to keep pushing that pump, okay? Only while it’s continually being pushed can I get air, which I very much require.”

“Got it, chief,” Montago said with a halfhearted thumbs-up before walking up to the machine, his hands holding the orange plastic

pump in anticipation. *This doesn't feel cheap at all*, Montago mused worriedly.

"Now, Edgar, could you come over here please?" Autumn called with a wave of her hand.

"Aye aye, Captain," Edgar said with a salute as he walked over to her.

With a low voice Autumn said, "Now, since I've known you for years I think I can trust you—at least more than anyone else. So, I'm going to trust you with my property due to necessity while I am down there in the wet and—most importantly—paper-money-ruining water."

"Why didn't you just keep your money in that credit union you opened up?" Edgar asked. "Wouldn't it be safer from theft there?"

Autumn shook her head. "Never put all of your baskets in one egg. No, I need to prepare for all emergencies—even bank failures."

She slipped off her outer clothes, shoes, and glasses down to a swimsuit and put them in Edgar's arms. Curious, Edgar checked the shirt to find a makeshift pocket taped behind the back and checked the shoes to find slits inside that he guessed were also secret compartments.

After throwing on the goggles, flippers, and breathing apparatus, Autumn began climbing down the side of the ship. However, she stopped when her head was just above the side to tell Montago one more time, "Make sure you keep pumping that pump."

"Got it, Senorita Loca," Montago said with a salute before he started pumping.

IV.

Autumn surveyed the vicinity with the knowledge that if Montago's GPS functioned correctly the treasure ought to be somewhere close. As she ruminated over this her thoughts also noted that oxygen still

managed to make its way to her lungs, meaning that Montago was able to make that contraption work—so far.

The great thing about seas like this, Autumn thought, was that they were mainly empty, save for some reefs, coral, and a bunch of fish swimming around—nothing that could hide a large treasure chest terribly well. (She was also glad she hadn't seen sharks or crocodiles, but that's a different point.) So when she saw a lonely wall west of her with a small hole leading to an alcove she knew that that must be where the treasure was hiding.

She swam in and through the tight rocky—and soon, dark—tunnels, ever wary of the length of the cord connecting her to her oxygen.

I paid hundreds of dollars for this stupid thing, so this better reach far enough, Autumn grumbled. But then she thought about it more and then remembered, *Oh, wait, no, the cord I found in some dumpster downtown.*

Although she couldn't see anything as she crawl-swam through the tunnels, she could feel fuzzy moss, scaly fish, and some bastard crab pinching her. However, none of this had any relevance to any later part of the story, so let's not dwell on it too much.

Eventually, the tunnel ended in a much wider and taller—it rose at least three meters high—cove with gaping holes in the ceiling, allowing the sunlight in. Autumn didn't spend much time looking around the area before her eyes singled out the one important object she thought she would find here: a big, dusty brown treasure chest slightly sunken in the sandy ground.

Realizing the chest could be tampered, she edged toward it carefully as she reached out and slowly opened the chest's lid. When the glint of gold light caught Autumn's eye she shoved the rest of the lid open. She could now see that the chest was stuffed with so many golden doubloons, nuggets, and *Nintendo World Championship* cartridges that they seemed to glow with their own light.

Autumn steeled her hands against the edges of the open chest, her mind reeling from the high of her newly-found success, when she heard a voice behind her call out, “So you’ve finally found it, eh?”

She swung her head around and squinted when she saw someone familiar, unable to believe her eyes.

It was Clearbeard. She stood in front of the only exit at full height with a wry, toothy grin. She had absolutely nothing on her mouth to indicate how she was somehow breathing underwater.

“Now, I believe I recall telling you to stay away from my ocean—where *my* treasure is kept, but you don’t seem to want to honor people’s rights,” Clearbeard said, her voice cutting through the thick ocean. “Well then, I don’t suspect you’ll be leaving peacefully, then, huh?”

Autumn paused, her mind still trying to take the situation in. Finally, she stood up and faced Clearbeard with warning in her eyes. She wasn’t sure how this nutjob was breathing so well underwater, but she sure knew she wasn’t going to let her ruin her success—whatever her supposed “rights” were.

Autumn watched as Clearbeard unsheaved her sword, unsure of how she would fight back with her sword lost somewhere else in the briny deep, but still determined to do so, regardless. Autumn’s eyes followed Clearbeard as she slowly paced left, only to see her suddenly stop. She followed Clearbeard’s eyes down to her left foot which Autumn just noticed was tilted up over the orange cord attached to Autumn’s mouth piece.

“That sure is a pretty cord you’ve got there,” Clearbeard said. “It’d be a shame if something happened to it.”

Autumn’s eyes widened as she thought about the implications of said statement. But before she could do anything, Clearbeard made a swift chop down at the cord, severing it.

As Autumn heard the water begin to rush into the tube she immediately unclamped the mouthpiece from her mouth with one

hand and simultaneously clamped her mouth with the other hand to keep water from seeping in her nose. She fished through a secret pocket with the other hand and pulled out a little band she kept for god-knows-what—*you never know when one might be useful*, she mused—and tied it around her nose, freeing her other hand again.

She returned her fists to her sides, still staring at Clearbeard, ready for her first move. Clearbeard simply resheaved her sword and crossed her arms behind her while smiling.

“Well, you sure are a trooper for someone who’s lost her supply of oxygen,” Clearbeard said. “Surely it can’t be healthy to deprive yourself of something so necessary?” She laughed. “It’s too bad none of those gold coins you tried pilfering from me will do you any good in the breathing business. Maybe in a different game.”

Autumn wished she could taunt her back, but was ever present of the need to keep water from seeping into her mouth. Instead she crossed her arms and tilted her head up haughtily.

“Maybe not?” Clearbeard said with her head tilted in suspicion. But then she noticed Autumn’s face reddening and her eyes cringing and she smiled again. “Then again, you don’t look terribly comfortable. It’s too bad you can’t breathe underwater like I can.”

Clearbeard began to take a few deep breaths, each releasing sounds that made Autumn want to scream. Her lungs felt like they were being throttled while her whole head felt like it was being pumped and pumped until it was going to burst open.

Finally, the pain began to become so great that she was almost positive she wasn’t going to be able to end this stalemate before she drowned—especially not when Clearbeard was taking so long to do anything! So she held up an index finger and began to slowly creep over to Clearbeard as if she were simply trying to sneak by to use the restroom.

“I don’t think so,” Clearbeard said. “It’s rude to leave meetings so early, you know.”

Autumn screeched to a stop when she saw Clearbeard's limbs gradually pale into a full white and all of their features—fingers, socks, and shoes—melt into smooth lumps. They all flapped down in front of her while four more white tentacles sprouted out from her sides and back, flopping down onto the ground behind her. The rest of her body grew white, their features melting away. Lastly, her upper body bloated out into the large bulb of a squid's head. Autumn repeatedly blinked at what her eyes once told her had looked like a human, but now shouted to her that it was obviously a squid.

She was so awestruck by this transformation that she did not notice one of the squid's tentacles snap forward, wrapping itself around Autumn's body and hoisting her off the ground. Autumn tried pushing down on the thick, muscly tentacle with her arms while her legs flailed around, but neither seemed to do much good.

Although nothing on the squid's face indicated moving lips, Autumn could hear what still sounded distinctly like Clearbeard's voice say, "I'm afraid you'll have to stick around just like all of my other guests have." Her other tentacle waved forward to showcase the numerous skeletons littering the sand.

However, Autumn was too busy forcing all of her energy against this beast while her lungs continued to protest in pain. Her face was now so red and puffy it looked swollen.

Soon her mouth couldn't take it anymore and it burst open in a desperate grab for air that wasn't there; instead, she got a bucketful of water gushing in, making her choke. Finally, she became so exhausted that she slumped forward, her arms over the tentacle as if she were asleep. Her eyes gradually blinked closed while her dizzy mind gradually blurred into unconsciousness.

I always hate how long this part takes, Clearbeard thought. Still, the brutish method would be too messy. It's already bad enough I still have all of these skeletons lying around, much less to have blood splattered all over.

She waited, examining Autumn's body closely to see if she was pretending or not. When Clearbeard was sure that Autumn wasn't going to get anywhere fast at least she morphed back into her human form, causing Autumn's body to drift down to the sandy floor. Clearbeard cautiously moved near Autumn and ducked her head near Autumn's chest. She could hear the slow pumping of Autumn's heart gradually slacken even more. After a minute or two the thumping stopped completely.

Clearbeard stood up straight again with her arms akimbo. *Now it's time for the next phase of my plan*, she thought.

V.

Montago felt a bright orange glare of light attack his face. He shielded his eyes with his hand and looked out to see that the sun was dipping halfway under the horizon of the river while the sky filled up with puffy pink clouds. He gave a deep sigh as he was reminded of the raw soreness still in his arms; and yet he continued to pump the stupid contraption, nevertheless.

Edgar popped out from the cabin door, staring down at the device in his hand.

"I can't find her anywhere!" Edgar said in a panicked voice.

Montago grumbled. He could make numerous guesses what happened to his idiotic client—and none were pretty. Now he was in the awkward position where he wasn't sure whether he should keep pumping or not. She could go on for days still alive—and thus still in need of oxygen. It also made him wish he'd asked for his payment *before* the job was done.

"You... you don't think she..." Edgar sputtered before stopping with a frantic look at the ground.

But his face darted to his left when he heard the sound of splashing. He threw his arms out and cried out when he saw Autumn climb up over the edge of the boat.

Montago immediately let go of the pump and heaved a heavy sigh, rubbing his tender shoulders.

Edgar ran up to Autumn and wrapped his arms around her while she simply stared hazily out into space.

“Autumn, what took you so long? I thought you might have... Well...”

Edgar blushed as he recognized the feeling of Autumn’s wet skin in her arms and quickly let go.

He scratched behind his head and asked, “Uh, do you want me to go get your stuff for you?”

“Yeah, that would be good. Thanks,” Autumn said dully.

Edgar scurried away back to the cabin while Autumn continued to stare down at the wood planks of the boat floor. Her haze was interrupted by Montago asking, “So I suppose something wrong happened, right? At least I don’t see any treasure with you... uh, unless you’re hiding it really well somewhere.”

She didn’t turn to face him, but instead kept her head tilted down to the floor while her left hand rubbed it.

“I don’t remember much of what was going on. Something happened with my oxygen thing, I think, that made me go unconscious. Then next thing I know I wake up on some beach. I vaguely remember taking a boat out here for some reason and then decided to swim out here in the desperate hope of finding you guys.” She gave a weak smile. “Guess I’m really lucky there.”

Edgar returned, holding her stuff in a neat, folded pile in his arms, with her shoes on the bottom and the clothes on the top. Autumn took it all and let most of it drop down on the floor. She immediately began to check everything—the pockets of her skirt, the

insides of her shoes, and all around everything else—before she clumsily pulled everything back on.

“Well, I hope you’re not planning anything else for tonight,” Montago said with a sigh. “Cause it’s getting late and I’d like to get some rest if I may.”

Autumn nodded. “You two may rest in the cabin or do whatever you like. I can take care of the rest.”

Montago lumbered away to the cabin while Edgar stood around awkwardly like he usually did. Meanwhile, Autumn stepped up to the wheel and began to steer their ship back to the Boskeopolis mainland. As she felt her arms move the wheel left and right her eyes opened out of their listlessness. She took one hand off the wheel and stuck it around her pockets.

I think I’ve got a lot of her goods on me now. I found a few secret pockets among her clothes, and I’m sure she’s got more, too. More importantly, I’ve gotten her nosy nose away from those documents—and the whole ordeal for good!

The being formerly known as “Clearbeard” smiled wryly with Autumn’s mouth.

And as for these two, they’ll make a well-deserved dessert.

#BOSK-BIT-AA000

A LIFE IN THE DAY OF BUZZJAW

J. J. W. Mezun | July 10, 2013

Buzzjaw opened his bulbous eyeballs. Of course, his eyes were technically always open, considering he had no eyelids, which made his eyes feel awfully dry, not being in water and all; but he liked to call his vision turning on when waking up “opening his eyes.”

He stood on the edge of the beach, waiting for his loving master Captain Clearbeard to return. He did nothing else. There was nothing else he *could* do, for he had no feet.

He watched the sun shine up in the sky, slowly drifting down to the ground. Every time he saw it happen he thought the world would blow up in a big boom; but it never did.

It was dark now, and the tingling feeling Buzzjaw felt in his throat told him it was resty-rest time. His body buzzed with anticipation as he drifted off to sleep, excited for what adventures the next day would bring!

#BOSK-BIT-AA101

THIRD ROCK FROM THE EARTH

J. J. W. Mezun | July 20, 2013

Did the sun every tell you about the time those imprudent richardholes Autumn and Edgar invaded him and tried to steal the treasures hidden beneath his fiery surface?

He insists: It did, *too*, happen!

There they were in their cute little spacesuits, hopping around planets as if they were Marco Polo of the solar system, and then they just up and stopped on the sun and stole his treasures. They didn't even get burnt to a crisp, thanks to their fancy suits. How rude!

That's all there is to the story. Mr. Sun doesn't want to talk about it anymore, okay. Stop being rude.

#BOSK-AB0101-MOTELS

STRANGE MEETINGS AND MOTELS HAVE NO CORRELATION SO STOP BRINGING IT UP

J. J. W. Mezun | August 1, 2013



I.

Edgar Winters wandered down the streets of Boskeopolis like a lost child, looking in every direction for people, but immediately turning his head down upon seeing one's face. Though nobody seemed to give his appearance much thought, Edgar was well aware himself of the fact that he was a skeleton, and he still expected abuse for this transgression everywhere he went, though he rarely had since his escape from the orphanage years ago.

Indeed, he originally tried to hide it by covering his head with his robe's hood whenever in public, but Autumn had finally convinced him to stop. His skeletal look would at least scare people away, while the hood would help in no way, she argued.

He finally decided to stop at a restaurant called the "Rock Lobster." Though he couldn't eat or drink anything—having no digestive system—he figured it would make a good excuse to talk to one of the waiting staff and possibly build up the courage from there to ask them about him and his friend's problems.

He gently pushed himself inside and stopped just in front of the threshold, glancing around the room anxiously, trying to find the proper place to sit while constantly aware that people may be watching him.

He finally found an empty table in the western corner nearest the door and slipped away toward it, sitting in the chair nearest the wall. There he kept his eyes on the table and thought as he shakily gripped the table's edge, *Okay, now: When the waiter comes by to ask for your meal, you can start.*

I'm not going to be able to do this... his mind argued back. *You can't just go up to someone and ask for advice on a problem that has nothing to do with them—that you yourself don't even understand fully.*

But I have no other choice...

He had already been musing over the issue for months; but he spent much more time doing so after he learned that Autumn had finally been kicked out of her apartment. Finally, he decided the mental pressure of doing nothing—what Edgar usually did—was greater than this temporary larger pressure that would hopefully release it all once and for all. Hopefully.

The manager/cook/waiter/accountant/cleaner/web designer/poster-hanger-upper arrived at his table and asked, “May I take your order, sir?”

Edgar looked up to see a woman in a green jacket and red-and-white baseball hat with black hair hanging to her shoulders holding a pad and pen. He noticed a name tag on her jacket that read, “Dawn Summers.”

“Sir?” Dawn asked again, looking up from the pad and at Edgar.

Edgar felt his eyeholes widen, despite the physical impossibility of such act, and his hands curl into each other. *This is too soon! I haven't even thought up how to bring up the subject yet.*

Actually, he had spent probably the last few hours trying to devise a strategy to bring up the subject to some stranger; he just never managed to find a *good* method.

“Are you okay, kid?” Dawn asked.

“Uh... I'll just have water, please.”

“Okay,” Dawn said with a nod as she scratched that into her notepad.

Before she left, she looked back up at Edgar and said, “I like your mask, by the way. It looks almost real. Where'd you get it?”

“It, uh... It was a present from somebody else,” he said before a nervous laugh.

“Uh... okay...” Dawn glanced around a few times, nervously, and then went away.

When she had left, Edgar rested his chin on the table with his arms spread out in front of him.

This is never gonna work... he despaired.

II.

Autumn was sleeping peacefully—though lying sloppily, with her limbs and sheets splayed all over the bed—when she was yanked out from her dreams by the obnoxious, repetitive sound of heavy knocking on her door. Her dark, wrinkled eyes slowly opened as the noises finally settled in her groggy head; and as it continued, she finally pushed herself up and off the bed.

“All right, I’m coming,” she said grumpily.

Since Autumn always slept in the same clothes she wore all the time—not wanting to waste the excess money or time buying and changing—she needn’t waste any time, except to put on her glasses so she could see, making herself decent before she opened the door. Behind it was a man in a business suit with short black hair split in the middle of his egg-shaped head, thick glasses, and a small nose.

“Who the hell are you?” Autumn asked.

With a genial smile, the man said, “Good morning, Madame Springer. I hope I didn’t disturb you.”

“You did,” she said with a flat voice, scratchy from just waking up.

But the man didn’t seem to acknowledge what she said and continued: “I am the manager of this motel: Arnold Druitt. I just came by because I noticed you’ve been staying here for quite a while...”

“Not that long,” Autumn said.

“Two months,” Druitt said, his smile still pleasant, but cracking at the edges. “Now, we were just wondering when you were planning on paying your rent?”

She knew this day would come and had amply prepared:

“Oh, right, sorry, I forgot about that,” she said. “See, I stupidly left my wallet back at home;”—she pulled the pockets out from her sweat pants to show him—“but I can pay you when I go get it, if you want.”

“I am afraid that will not be feasible, Madame Springer,” Druitt said. “Maybe you could have a friend deliver the money for you.”

“Gee, I would love to...” Autumn said as her eyes glanced around the room innocently, “but I don’t have any friends.”

“Well, then enjoy your stay,” Druitt said, and then turned around and shut the door behind him. Before Autumn could even think she heard a clicking sound. She grabbed the knob and twisted and throttled it; but it wouldn’t budge.

She slid back against the door onto the floor with a frown and dribbled her fingers on the floor in thought. She wished she still had a phone she could use to call Edgar for his assistance, but knew that was not the case now.

I suppose I’ll just have to handle this myself, she thought. Then she stood up. *Well, I won’t escape by simply standing around hoping for a warp pipe to appear. I’ll just try climbing out the window. Couldn’t hurt to try.*

She opened the window behind the bed and stuck her head out to survey the area. Her eyes caught the slim gray piping stretching the four stories down to the ground, and she reached her hands out to grab it. With her hands secure around the piping, she lifted her right foot onto the window sill, climbed out onto the pipe, and began to carefully climb down.

Because her eyes were focused on her hands holding onto the pipe—figuring that looking down would do nothing to help her—Autumn didn’t see the manager standing below her on the ground

next to a boxy gray-uniformed security guard with black shades and a black mustache staring up at her.

“It seems Madame Springer thinks she can just leave without paying,” Druitt said. “Thinks she’s too good to pay for my fine motel, huh?” And then he turned to the guard and said, “Hamilton, shake the pipes.”

The guard stood stoically still and said in a dull voice, “Sir, isn’t this a little extreme for just one customer?”

“We’ve got an example to show,” Druitt said with a jab of his finger toward Hamilton. “If the infamous thief Autumn Springer can’t escape from my motel then people’ll know that nobody can. It’ll make things easier for me in the long run.” Druitt crossed his arms and looked up at Autumn again. “Now shake the pipes already. She should have already climbed down by now with how long we’ve been speaking—and I’m just making it worse by still speaking.”

“I just don’t think making her fall onto the ground is legal, si—”

“Just shake it already!” Druitt yelled.

Hamilton didn’t argue anymore; he immediately jumped to the pipes and shook them all over. Above, Autumn could feel the vibrations running up to her from below; she looked down with a gasp to see the manager staring straight up at her with a guard trying to shake her off the pipe. Autumn tried to keep from falling off by wrapping her arms and legs all around the pipe.

What am I going to do now? she asked herself. I can’t climb down while he’s down there watching me. And climbing up or down would only risk me falling off. I guess I’ll just have to stay here.

Down below, the guard, who was still shaking the pipes with the same immutable force, said to Druitt, “Sir, I don’t think this is even working.”

“Shake harder,” Druitt snapped. “Pull the pipes back away from the building.”

Hamilton stopped his shaking momentarily and turned to look at Druitt. "Won't that ruin the motel?"

"We can fix it easily. Now start shaking," Druitt said.

Hamilton dutifully continued shaking, and as Druitt demanded, also started yanking the pipes away from the building, bending the metal prongs that were supposed to hold the pipes in place. Eventually the prongs were breaking away from the building, bending and unbalancing the pipe.

Autumn saw that she would not be able to hold on for long, so she tried to reach for the nearest window to grab onto and maybe enter. But even with her left arm and leg now leaning off the pipe toward the window, her grip weakened even more and, mixed with the slipperiness of the grimy pipe, led her to slip backward off the pipe. Gravity finally got its hold on her and she zoomed straight down to the ground, her back smashing hard against the concrete.

While Autumn was lying dizzy in the hole her body left in the sidewalk, Druitt stared down at her with another genial smile.

"Seems Autumn falls early this year," he said.

Autumn raised her upper body off from the ground, rubbing the sores on the back of her head, and said, "You know, it's quite dangerous to shake the motel so much that I fall out the window of the room I was quietly sitting in."

Druitt put his hands on his hips and turned to the guard. "Hamilton, escort Madame Springer back to her room, please."

"And then we'll call the police to handle this payment problem, right?" Hamilton asked. "Because as someone who works in the—"

"I can handle all of that," Druitt said with a wave of his hand; "you needn't worry."

III.

Edgar frowned as he watched Dawn walk toward his table with his water through the corner of his eyes. He still wasn't ready. Then again, he doubted he'd ever be ready for what he needed to do.

She set the water down in front of him and said, "Here you go." But before she could go, he raised his hand and said, "Wait."

"I didn't get your water wrong, did I?" Dawn asked with a concerned look on her face. "Last time that idiotic cook of mine filled it with wine instead."

"Oh, I'm sorry," Edgar said. "I'm sure he understood a little mistake, though..."

Dawn shook her head. "I was furious. Told myself to get that crap away from me and get me what I truly ordered." She shook her head again solemnly.

"Oh..." Edgar rubbed his hands together nervously. "Well, you don't need to worry, because my water's fine."

"Well, that's good."

Dawn turned to leave, only for Edgar to stop her again with another, "Wait."

"Yes?" she asked after turning back to him.

"Uh... well... I was wondering if you, uh, knew people..." Edgar asked.

"What kind of people?"

"Well, I mean, you know, *about* them..." Edgar stuttered.

"Yes, I am well acquainted with them," Dawn said. "Will this take long? I truly would love to chat, but do I have other guests to serve and if I take too long they start turning red and leaving."

Just as she said that, a man stood up—painted entirely in red hues, with cartoony steam spurting out of his head—and said in a booming voice, "I can't take this delay anymore! I'm leaving!" Then

he walked toward and out the door in slow, jerky motions, making beeping noises every time he moved his feet.

“Like that,” Dawn said as she threw her hands up.

“Gee, I’m sorry...” Edgar said.

“It’s all right,” Dawn said with a sigh. “I should have remembered that you distractors appear on level six.”

And with that she left, leaving Edgar even more discouraged than before.

IV.

Autumn paced around her room—glancing here and there, and then here again—as she tried to conjure up a plan that would help her escape. Since the last few hours or so when she tried escaping through the window, it had been crudely boarded up with a bunch of wood planks nailed together; and even though she kept trying to brute-force the door open, it still would not unlock itself, for some reason.

Autumn sat on her bed with her chin buried in her hands. In those hours, Autumn’s impatience with her own inadequacy was only growing. For the past dozen months she had started to think she was losing her touch at this business—actually, she had always had sneaking suspicions; it just spiked in the last few months since she lost the apartment.

But then her head jolted up and her eyes widened. “Wait... that’s it!” she exclaimed as she pointed her right finger out. “I should climb out through the vents. It’s so obvious.”

She looked up at the grated vent door staring at her from the middle of the ceiling.

She jumped off the bed and moved over to the side so she could push it over to the spot under the vent, alternating between pushing the left and right sides of the bed. After only a few minutes, she

eventually had it in an adequate place, and she jumped up on the bed, bounced up, and grabbed the grate, pulling it off the vent. After gently setting the grate down onto the carpeted floor, she bounced on the bed again and clung onto the edges of the vent opening.

Despite the usual discreetness of bouncing around on beds, the manager, Druitt, burst in through the door, shouting, “Random check-up for no reason!”

Autumn froze for a split second, and then scrambled up the vent.

By the time the Hamilton answered Druitt’s beckoning, Autumn was already crawling through the vent. Hamilton stared up at open vent, rubbing his chin thoughtfully, while Druitt seethed up at it.

“Don’t worry, sir,” Hamilton said; “I can call the maintenance crew to get her down.”

“Don’t bother,” Druitt snapped. “Just turn the heaters all the way up.” He began rubbing his hands together like a stereotypical villain. “We’ll see how much she likes barbeques. Ha, ha, ha!” Druitt laughed while twisting the curly mustache he didn’t have.

“Sir... that’s inhuman and illegal,” Hamilton said.

“And comical!” Druitt said with his right finger thrust into the air. “Do it!”

Hamilton shrugged and walked out to find the master heating switch. As he walked down the stairs, he grumbled to himself, “Mom always said to be a pirate, but I just shook my head and said, ‘No, ma; this joke’s cliché.’ Shoulda listened to her.”

V.

Edgar spent the next few hours despairing over his table and pretending to take sips of his water. Every so often, he would see Dawn walk by; and every so often, he would urge himself to solicit her—and every so often, his nerves prevailed and he failed to do so.

He was so engrossed in his worries that the hours slipped by without his noticing. 'Twas not until he sensed someone move next to him that he looked up from his stasis and saw that the darkness out the front door indicating 'twas already night.

He turned to the person and saw that it was the waiter, who leaning back in the chair right next to him with one arm on the back of her chair and the other stretched out on the table.

"So, you staying at Hotel Summers tonight?"

"Uh, I'm sorry... It's... I lost track of time is all. I won't hold you up here." Edgar got up.

"Oh, you're not holding anything up." She raised and have and moved it around the restaurant. "Look, there's no one left to serve."

Edgar paused, his hand still frozen on the back of chair when he was beginning to push it in.

"You don't need to worry about my silly..."

Dawn stopped him by putting a hand on his.

"I can assure you, my fine young man, that nothing of yours is silly... At least, no sillier than anyone else's."

Edgar glanced around—anything to avoid looking her in the eyes—trying to think of what to say. He didn't even know what to think about the warm hand still lying on his sleeve, being such a rare and confusing occurrence. *It probably doesn't mean anything... further. After all, Autumn's held your hand many times before...*

But did that mean anything further?

"Uh... You know people, right?" Edgar asked.

"Yes. I think we had this conversation before, actually," Dawn said with a nod. "Multiple or just one?"

"Um... any," Edgar said, his pitch rising in uncertainty. "I... I just need to talk to someone about something, and I don't know who..."

Dawn patted him on the hand. "Well, I can fix that up for you right now. Follow me."

Dawn stood and headed for the door.

“Are... are you sure this isn’t a problem or anything?” Edgar asked.

“Of course not.”

And with that Edgar tepidly followed Dawn out the door. In the back of his mind was a confused mix of anticipation and anxiety. This was either going to be an exciting breakthrough or an utter failure.

VI.

Freedom: I can just taste it... Autumn thought, but then paused to reconsider. *Now that I think about it, that might be dust and mold I truly taste.*

Autumn was still crawling through the tight, boxy metal passages of the vent when she began to feel the excitement of victory heat her up, making her sweat all over—especially her hands and knees, which were beginning to feel so burning hot that they were now hurting. She raised her blistering hands from the searing metal up to the merely stuffy air and tried to stare at them in confusion with the little light she had to see by, slipping in through tiny cracks in the vent.

Huh? Why is it suddenly so hot in here? Autumn thought, almost already knowing the answer.

But despite her qualms, the vent only became hotter and hotter; and although she could lift her hands up off the fire metal below, the vent was much too short for her to sit up off her knees.

Either way, it won’t get any colder in this vent, Autumn thought.

So she closed her eyes and continued her crawl for the nearest exit while her hands and knees felt like they were having their skin peeled off them and her lungs were being strangled from the thickness of the hot air inside. Her eyes were unable to open again,

being drowned in boiling tears; her head was hazy from heatstroke as she lumbered slowly and stickily forward.

But no tears or haziness would blind her mind from the gleaming treasure she saw in front of her a few feet ahead: a grate. *An escape...*

Autumn smashed down on the grate with her fist, which did nothing but make her already burning hand now throb, too. As she sucked on it, she glared at the grate in blind rage and then grabbed it with both hands and throttled it. It wouldn't budge.

She turned her head around and scanned all over to see through the tiny slits of the grate that it was bolted down. She could also see the manager, Druitt, stare at her through the grate with his friendly smile. Autumn stared back at him with a mix of anger and despair.

"Enjoying your stay in there, Madam Springer?" he asked.

"Oh yes, it's quite a blast," Autumn replied with a flat, tired voice. "If I give you your bloody money will you stop trying to fry me alive?"

"Make it double," Druitt said brightly.

"What?" Autumn growled as she charged at the grate like a lion in a cage. "I'll give you double my foot down your throat, you little bastard!"

Druitt began to say something, but was quickly interrupted by Hamilton at the door.

"Mr. Druitt, there's someone who needs to see you," he said.

"Gotcha," Druitt said, and he skipped through the door, with Hamilton following after him.

Autumn muttered colorful profanities, such as "mushroom head," "business clown," and "fucking asshole," and then grumpily crawled forward through the vent, hoping either they didn't bolt the next grates down or... she was screwed.

But when she reached the next vent, she saw through her tear-blinded eyes another uniformed woman under the grate staring up

at it curiously. She leaned her face toward the grate and the woman's eyes widened in shock.

"Madame, what are you doing up there?" the woman asked. "Did you bolt this closed?"

"No, some jackass did. Let me out or I'll sue your asses," she grumbled.

The woman dutifully fished around her tool belt for a screwdriver and unscrewed the screws holding the vent grate closed. As she did so she asked, "Are you all right in there? You look red all over? The heater isn't on, is it?"

"I'll be fine if you hurry and unscrew that grate, please," Autumn said, trying to be more polite now that she saw that the woman was actually going to let her free. *That slum lord must not have told her about his fun little game*, Autumn thought.

The technician finally released the last screw and the grate smashed down to the floor under Autumn's eagerly pushing weight. She lay there on the grate, heaving large breaths of fresh air—being deprived of it for so long—ignoring the numerous bruises and scratches Autumn had all over her, while the technician stood by, staring at Autumn as if she were some kind of alien. But before the technician could ask Autumn anything, Autumn scrambled up to her feet as if her life depended on it and rushed away without a word.

Autumn ran through the motel, pushing anyone who got in her way away and practically jumping down the three sets of stairs she needed to climb down to get to the bottom floor, until she eventually charged through the glass double doors, pushing them aside, out into the fresh air outside.

She slipped and fell down onto her knees. However, she cared little about scraping her already scorched knees on the rough sidewalk and instead used the pause to give herself time to inhale her energy back while marveling at the wonderful feeling of the cold breeze on her still-red skin.

But she soon regretted taking this break when she heard a familiar voice behind her:

“Oh, we’re not quite finished yet, Madame.”

Autumn turned around just in time to see Druitt standing near the entrance press a button on the front wall.

Odd I never noticed that until now. It seems so conspicuous, Autumn thought just before she felt the ground beneath her disappear. She looked down as saw a big, boxy black hole under her. As she waited there, floating above the hole like Wile E. Coyote, she knew there was no way she’d be able to escape; the only way forward was down.

VII.

Dawn held her arm over Edgar’s shoulders, leading him through the dark streets of Boskeopolis—where, specifically, Edgar couldn’t tell, and it was much too dark out for him to properly discern his surroundings. Dawn hummed through most of their walk, and so Edgar couldn’t bring himself to interrupt her and ask.

This is crazy, he wailed in his mind. I don’t even know who this person is. What if she chops me up into pieces and uses them to turn boneless chicken into regular chicken?

They eventually stopped at some door, where Dawn pushed the door in and held her arms out toward the doorway.

“You first, sir,” she said.

Edgar shivered, even less able to see what was inside than what was outside.

However, he knew hesitating too long would be rude to this polite host, so he walked inside, turning his head all around. His eyes were caught by the one light in this otherwise cavernous darkness: a bright purple light emitted by a pear-shaped lamp sitting in the back corner. A circle of people sat around it, their widened eyes staring

deep into it as if it were a crystal ball, save for one woman who was scribbling in a notebook and another who was licking her hand. Dawn led Edgar to them over to them.

“Can we have a seat around the lamp?” Dawn asked.

They said nothing, but scooted around to give two extra spaces for Dawn and Edgar to sit.

The two sat there glancing around at the others in awkward silence.

Finally, Dawn said, “So, uh, I found this guy at my restaurant who says he wants to hook up with someone...”

No one said anything or even seemed to twitch a muscle.

“...So I thought I’d take him here and see if any of you were interested...”

She turned to Edgar. “Oh, that’s right. How rude of me. I forgot to ask which way you swing.”

“Swing?” Edgar asked.

“I like your skeleton mask,” one of the others said as he leaned in closer toward Edgar, his hands clutching the top of the pear lamp.

“Uh... Thank you,” Edgar said with a titter.

“I had a skeleton mask once when I was five. Did you steal it?”

“What?” Edgar leaned back in fear.

“All right, all right,” Dawn said, putting her hands out. “Quit picking on the new kid, already.”

“Does anyone know a word that rhymes with ‘persnickety’?” the woman with the notebook asked as she twirled her pencil in her fingers.

“That’s a beautiful poem, Nora,” said nobody in particular.

“Thank you, nobody in particular.”

One of the others glared at Nora and nobody in particular with wrinkly eyes and said in a low tone, “Shhh, I’m trying to hear the lamp.”

VIII.

Everything was pitch black, and all Autumn could hear were slow dripping and dangling chains, though she could feel the cold, hard bars wrapped in her hands and had discovered not long after her surprise arrival that they surrounded her.

She had attempted slipping through the holes between the bars, but they were far too thin; she had tested her might against the bars and her weight against the solid cement floor, but nothing budged. Now all she did was grumpily sit along the edge with her feet dangling out the holes in the bars and over the edge of the cage as she devised a strategy for escape.

She found this rather difficult, considering the other problems pressing on her mind. Going so long without water had left her mouth dry; and though she could easily tolerate the hunger and thirst pains, she knew they were pains for a reason: to warn of dire consequences if their causes were not catered to.

And, of course, there was Edgar she had to worry about, who'd probably notice she was missing by now. By logic he should consider it a boon to be freed from her service, and she hoped Edgar would finally move on, but she had learned many times that Edgar did not operate under rational thought. He would have that damned look on his face, aimed straight at the ground, and he'd probably be sitting somewhere in the rain, probably hoping some truck would run him over..

That was the look he had when Autumn told him she didn't want him staying at her motel room, where he would fall into the same trouble she was in now. It was a Morton's Fork of decisions: She could go soft and let him run into the death traps she set for herself or she could go hard and drive his blubbering self to suicide. The former at least offered her the benefits of free service from him and

Edgar had asked for it himself; and yet Autumn had chosen the latter this time for some reason.

Actually, she did know the reason: She had been so stressed over her constant failures that she didn't want to have to deal with him. Ever since he caught her in her pathetic meltdown after her failure with the bank she had been wary to be near him. Here lay another lose-lose situation: He clearly wanted them together in contentment, and yet she could not be content. So he could either be miserable next to her or miserable without her. The latter at least allowed her better concentration.

It appeared to be a convoluted puzzle, but was probably a simple issue caused by holes in her own rationality, Autumn mused. She was confident she would be able to logically straighten it all out—she'd better, at least. Failure was not acceptable. For now, however, she had her financial success to concern herself with and did not have the time to figure everything out yet. She'd just have to manage with Band-Aid fixes...

That's it! An idea came to Autumn's head.

She rummaged through her pockets and took out a bandage carton. She flipped its tin lid open and shook it over her palm to release a nail file.

She thunked her head with the carton. Then she wished she hadn't, because it kind of hurt.

"Duh, it's so obvious I can't believe I hadn't thought about it till now."

Then she tossed the file away and began beating on the cage bars with the carton. Eventually, she managed to bend them in enough to form a hole big enough for her to squeeze through. She discovered that though the cage was indeed off the ground, it was only a few feet down—low enough for a safe hop down.

Since it was still pitch dark, she felt her way forward through the area until she hit a wall and then moved around it until she reached

a hall. As she went down it, she saw a row of lights hanging from the ceiling at every few feet.

And then she reached a fork. One way lead to a long hallway toward what Autumn guessed was the exit from the large blinking sign that said “EXIT” above; the other probably led farther into the compound.

If I try to escape now he’s sure to devise another trap against me, she mused. There’s only one way to settle this issue once and for all...

IX.

Time seemed to dribble away like buttery maple syrup as Edgar sat in that close, warm apartment room, his vision dulled to the constant stream of purple light. He could not tell what time it was anymore, and his attention had drifted so far away from the arrhythmic medley of chat that he could neither offer up even an approximation.

He stared down at the carpet, his mood still a bucket of tumultuous, unclean seawater. He couldn’t understand why he was here, what he hoped to accomplish. Everyone here seemed as if they spoke a different language; and besides, Edgar’s mind was clouded so much by his main troubles that they could hardly interest him, anyway.

He *had* thought about the possibility of joining their group, which would get him out of Autumn’s hair for once, but the prospect seemed ludicrous. They may have been strung out enough to not realize his freakish nature now; but eventually they would and it would be the orphanage all over again: Having to encounter the horror-stricken looks and avoidances every day. No, with Autumn it was much safer—and Edgar was far too selfish to give up that safety.

Dawn, seeing Edgar’s long face, whispered, “Well, I’m afraid you’ll be stuck with me. Don’t worry; I can try to do the work of three.”

She stood and whispered, "Follow me."

Edgar did so, into a small room full of dim light. Dawn stopped on the bed and patted the spot beside her.

She reached a hand around Edgar's shoulder and said, "So, is that shaking fear or just hormones?"

"What are hormones?" he asked.

Dawn chuckled. "How old are you?" Then her eyes widened in fear. She turned to Edgar. "Hey, you're not underage, right?"

Edgar shook his head. "Why? You're not offering me drugs, are you?"

"No, none of us do any of that," Dawn said as she exhaled in relief. "Sorry." She laughed. "I probably should have asked for your age before we even left the restaurant."

Then she paused in thought. "I, uh... I don't mean to be rude, but just out of curiosity... Do you have an ID on you?"

Edgar rifled through his robe and handed her his wallet. She opened it and saw his ID—a regular, though; she supposed he never got a driver's license—at the front.

As she handed it back to Edgar she said, "They let you keep on that mask when they took your picture? Is that some kind of religious thing or did you just lie and say it was because you're really shy about your appearance?"

"I... Um..."

"It's okay, I won't judge. Most of the idiots around here made up their own religions, anyway."

"It's not a mask."

"Oh... I'm sorry. Was it some accident. You don't need to tell me if you're uncomfortable about it."

"You could say 'twas an accident..."

"Then we need not talk about it. By the way, sorry about asking for your ID and all. I'm usually not so distrustful of people, but... well, perhaps I should be because I've stupidly let people pull some

hijinks on me because of it. You yourself seem to, too, since you just gave me your wallet seemingly without a thought that I might rob you.”

Edgar nodded. If she had wanted to rob him she could probably just force him to give the wallet to her, anyway—and ‘twas not as if he cared about its contents so greatly that he would risk inciting uncomfortable conflict to protect it.

“That’s okay,” Edgar said. “I have a, uh, friend who practically distrusts everyone...”

“Oh, really?” Dawn asked. “Do they also think all drugs were invented as a way for the government to suppress our thoughts like ‘Scratch’? He was that wonderful fellow you met earlier who asked you about your fake mask, by the way. His real name is Tim.”

“Uh, I don’t know,” Edgar replied.

Come on... This is your chance, while the subject is brought up, he told himself.

But Dawn was the one who brought it up as she held Edgar’s sleeve-covered hand: “Who is the friend and does this friend have hands as fragile as yours?”

“Um... I don’t know,” Edgar said as he glanced down at their matching hands awkwardly. *Why do I feel weird about this? This is what Autumn wants me to do, anyway.*

But he was unsure about that.

This is how independent people act, how adults act.

But he didn’t want any of those things.

I don’t even know this person... What if it all goes wrong?

You can’t get to know someone before you know someone.

Dawn interrupted his thoughts by saying, “I can see that something is troubling you—and though some open their hydrants for that, I’m afraid not for me, so why not tell me?”

“I... You don’t want to hear it.”

What are you, an idiot? You came here for that very purpose!

"I'm sorry, darling, but I believe I know more about what I want than you do," Dawn said.

"I... It's just that... I have this friend who has a problem and I don't know what to do."

"What's the problem?"

"It's hard to explain."

"Just go slow, then."

"Well... See, she's a thief for a living... both of us are, were partners, and it's such dangerous work and she's hitting a slump and I want to help, but I don't know how."

"Hmm... are you romantically involved and monogamous?" Dawn asked, slowly lifting her hand from Edgar's.

"Uh... I don't know. I don't think so, but that's not important..."

"Well, have you told her about any of this?" Dawn asked.

"She doesn't have the time to waste. That's why *I* need to think of something..."

"Well, she will have to make time, because you can't make decisions about both of you by yourself and you can't be a partner if she does everything herself. Do you have any personal jobs or hobbies?"

Edgar squirmed. "Um... No."

"Then maybe you should develop some," Dawn said. "It's not healthy to base one's entire life on someone else's."

"But I'm not good at anything."

"You can't be good at something until you've practiced it."

"I guess so... but I don't even know what I'd do."

"That's what you need to take the time to find out," Dawn said.

Edgar stood. "Thank you and, uh... sorry for wasting so much of your time."

Dawn stood with him. "Nonsense. 'Twas no problem."

She led him out the door and toward the front door, holding it open with her arms pointed at it as before.

“Keep in touch,” she said.

“Uh... I don’t even know how...” Edgar said, hesitating halfway through the threshold.

“I’ll be anywhere in the dark—wherever you look. Wherever there’s a fight to feed a hungry heart, I’ll be there; wherever there’s a world beating a guy, I’ll be there. Also, you can just check around the Rock Lobster, too.”

X.

In a dark, cramped room stood Mr. Druitt and Hamilton among a console full of blinking lights and bright buttons that looked nothing like real computers. Neither knew what the console was actually useful for, but Druitt thought they fit the mood well.

Druitt rubbed his hands together. “Man, this makes my hands feel warm!”

Then he talked about something that was actually relevant to the story:

“With that mooch Madame Springer locked up in her cage I’ll be able to deliver a test subject to my old friend Dr. Equinox, and then maybe he’ll be nice enough to release my wife from his capture. Then he should finally be able to test his hand-enlarging extract for people who want to enlarge their hands.”

Hamilton sat about a foot away in a swivel chair—even though I just recently said he was standing—flipping through an old gray newspaper. He tried to ignore Druitt as much as possible.

Then the door burst open. Druitt swung around to see Autumn standing in the doorway with a twisted glare aimed at him.

“Hey, how did you escape your cage?” Druitt demanded as he pointed at her.

Autumn didn’t answer him. Instead she stiffened her shoulders and said, “So you thought you could just lock me up like a rat, huh?”

“Hey, you’re a mooch,” Druitt said shakily as he stepped backward in response to Autumn’s steps forward. “That makes it okay.” He smacked up against the console and found there was no farther he could go.

“Hamilton, apprehend this rascal!” Druitt trilled.

“Fuck you,” Hamilton said. He licked his fingers and flipped another page of his newspaper.

By this point, Autumn was right in front of Druitt—so close that he could smell all the slimy sweat dripping on her and see the crawling germ-bugs crawling around her skin-flesh, which grossed him out.

“And what are you going to do about it, huh?” Druitt asked.

The scene transitioned and then Druitt was strapped to a swivel chair with duck tape—tape made out of duck feathers, with the adhesive made from duck saliva—all around him, including his eyes and mouth.

“Mmmffhh, hmm dd hough heghen hgh ht?” he muffled.

Autumn slapped her hands together, indicating a job well done, as well as to get the crawling germ-bugs off her hands. “That ought to ensure I’ll be able to get out of here without any more shenanigans.”

And with that, she left, heading back toward the fork she encountered before, and now down the other path to escape. As she pushed her way out the exit door at the end of the hall she inhaled deeply, enthralled to be out in the fresh air again.

However, when she looked at her surroundings, her smile melted to a frown. All around her was puffy white snow, with fir trees scattered everywhere. The snow stretched as far as the eye could see in every direction she turned, without any sign of civilization.

#BOSK-BIT-AB002

KNOCK-KNOCK BLOCK TOWER

J. J. W. Mezun | August 10, 2013

While Dawn sat on her couch concocting a mixture of red and blue chemicals that would burn the ground under ten pound blocks for homework, she heard a knock on her door, followed by the words, “Knock knock,” for those with hearing impairments.

Dawn got up and walked over to the door.

“Who’s there?”

“Scratch.”

“Scratch who?”

“Scratch the mayor; I hate that crook.”

And so Dawn did. However, the place she scratched happened to have an unbearable itch, and so Mayor Sunday was infinitely grateful and gave Dawn the key to the city. Now she could unlock the already unlocked city anytime she wanted! Wondersome!

#BOSK-BIT-AB103

START OF GRAYNESS

J. J. W. Mezun | August 20, 2013

Alex walked home with rain clouds in his head; and as if that physical impossibility weren't dire enough, he was also grumpy after another failed job search around the city. He stared down at the pavement before his feet, his chin locked tightly and his eyes sunken in. He knew his mother would be annoyed at yet another failure of his.

He hesitated before his front door. He wasn't sure why. What was he gonna do? Never go in? Then again, he did truly consider that, but threw away the idea as quickly as AOL free-trial disk; his mother would only come looking after him if he left so abruptly, and that would concern her even worse.

So, he begrudgingly walked in, only to see her stride toward him immediately with a sheet in her hand.

"Any good luck?"

Alex sighed and shook his head.

"I'm telling you, you should take the offer of that delightful Captain Clearbeard to be one of her crewmates. You know, she offers health benefits and a stepping stone upward in a promising career."

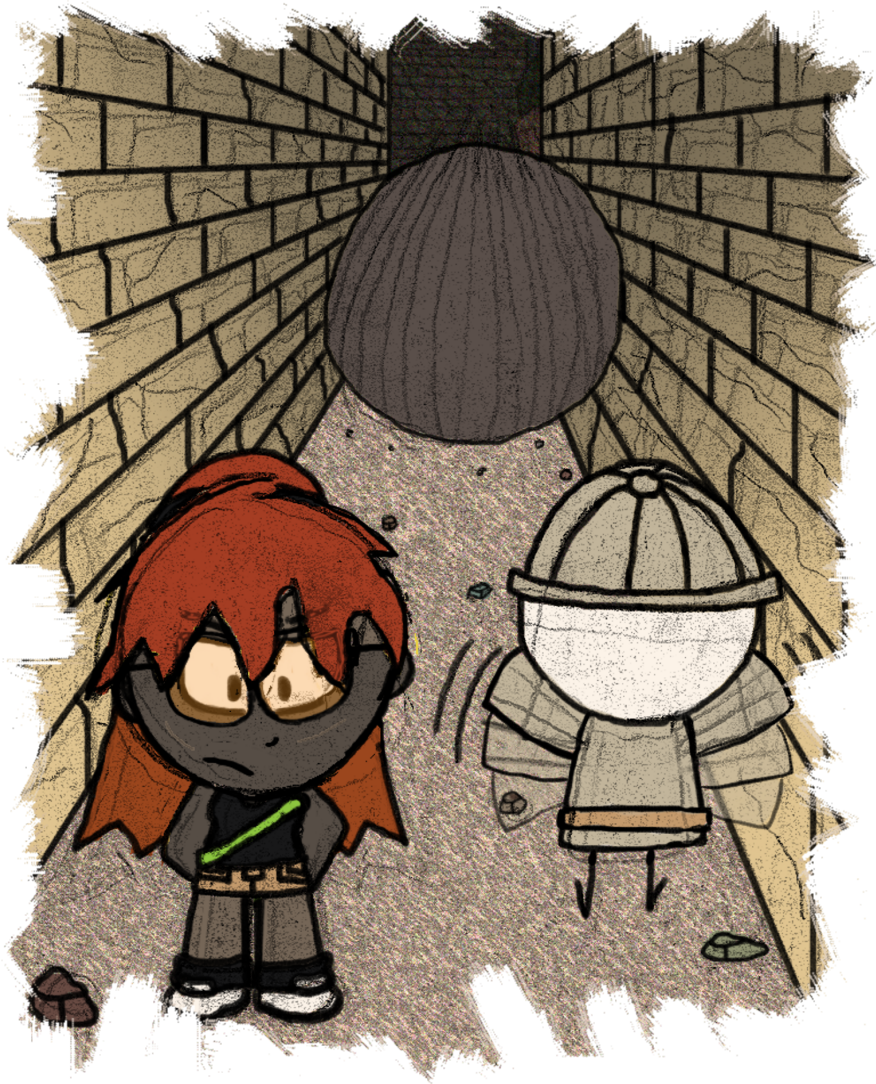
But Alex Hamilton shook his head sadly.

"No, ma; this joke's cliché."

#BOSK-AC0602-TOMBS

TOMBS IS DOOM SPELLED COMPLETELY DIFFERENT

J. J. W. Mezun | September 1, 2013



I.

Autumn leaned her head inside the cavern and glanced left and right, moving her pocket flashlight in sync. It appeared empty—at least as far as the flashlight’s beam could show. The only movement here, other than Autumn’s eyes, were the drops of water dripping without rhythm from the stalactites looming above.

With her head still in the cave entrance, Autumn asked, “Are you sure this is the right cave, Estación?”

Montago Estación was a tall, anthropomorphic orange cat in a business suit and deep blue navy hat. She had heard about his running a sailing business for helping people get around the Verdazul archipelago and had decided that his price was as cheap as she was likely to get.

“Actually, I believe the right *place* would be an employment agency,” Montago answered. He had given her a concerned look when he heard her say she was exploring a cave for treasure, but was eventually talked into agreeing. “But, yes, this is the cave you asked about, Madame.”

“Great. So you can show me where the treasure is,” Autumn said.

“That was not part of the deal, Madame,” Montago said with his arms akimbo.

Autumn glared at Montago. “You can’t just skip out on part of your work. Tell him, Edgar.”

Edgar was standing farthest away from the cave, near a birch tree at the bottom of the hill from whence they came. Edgar wasn’t looking at them, but shyly staring down at the pebble-filled ground as usual.

“I’d, uh, rather not get involved...” Edgar said.

“You realize how dangerous this is, right?” Montago said. “The ceiling could collapse on you, or you could get caved in and suffocate.” Then he waved his hand. “Not for me, thanks. I actually value my health.”

“And I suppose you’ll still want to be paid, right?” Autumn said sourly.

“That was the deal, yes,” Montago said.

Autumn sighed. “I suppose I have no choice...”

She extracted her checkbook, filled out the first page, and handed it to Montago.

“Thank you...” He paused to look at the check and then looked back at her. “...Ms. Williamson.”

Edgar gave Autumn a meaningful look, but saw that Montago was leaving nonetheless.

Autumn turned to Edgar. “Well, I suppose we’d better get started.”

She walked through the entrance and Edgar followed cautiously, looking up and down at anything—a boulder, a stalactite, a different-colored tile signaling a trap door—that could potentially harm them.

Autumn didn’t turn back to look at him, not wanting to delay her trek any further. She simply kept forward, hands in pockets.

The path went straight so far; just a narrow passage wedged between two red-gray walls of chiseled rock curving in at the top. Edgar remained on alert as before while Autumn stared down at the ground, unconsciously kicking loose pebbles as she walked.

Eventually, her eyes caught something to her left: another path. She raised her head to see that she was at a fork between the path she was already on and the other path through the passage in the left wall. Her eyes shifted back and forth between them and squinted in an attempt to see what was down either path, but could see no clue.

Edgar, whose eyes were still aimed at the rocks scattered along the ground, did not notice Autumn stopping and bumped into her

back. After he bent down to pick up his safari hat and returned it to his head, he said, "Sorry. I didn't see you stop."

Autumn didn't turn back to look at him; she continued looking between the two passageways.

"Which path do you think we should go down?"

Edgar scratched his head. "Gee, I dunno."

Autumn laid her right hand on her head and grimaced at the ground. "This is why I needed that infernal ferryman to come with us."

Edgar began to shiver, being blocked from the warm sun outside by this cave's cold, crepuscular, craggy walls. He moved in closer to Autumn so that he could be closer to the small light of her flashlight and farther from the darkness surrounding them.

He could hear nothing but Autumn's quiet "Hmm..."s and the constant dripping of water drops from the ceiling. Edgar fidgeted as if he were in a torture trap, harassed by the drops' lack of rhythm—they just dropped, then dropped, then paused, then dropped, and so on...

After a few more seconds of staring between the two paths, she shrugged. "Well, we'll just have to guess. This path on the left seems to be shorter, or seems to have fewer forks, so hopefully it will either lead the right way or we'll be able to rule it out more quickly. Either way, it seems the best choice."

Edgar nodded, although Autumn was turned away from him and couldn't see him. Knowing Edgar didn't care either way, Autumn didn't wait for a response and walked down her chosen path; Edgar followed silently.

The new path was narrower, which only made Edgar feel as if the walls were closing in on him even more. Still, he preferred seeing the walls so close—and being able to see that they were not moving—than to be able to see little, and so he kept his head up this time, making sure to keep close to Autumn's light. Autumn swished her

flashlight left and right repeatedly so that she wouldn't miss any other pathways.

Autumn was unsurprised when she saw the ground change in front of her; she raised her flashlight to see that it was, as she thought, a dead end. She stopped at the edge and saw that it was a hole that went from wall to wall, no way around it. Raising her flashlight again, she saw the path continue after about five meters past the hole—much too far to cross.

She looked back at Edgar to make sure he didn't keep walking and accidentally fall in the hole; to her relief, he was still standing behind her, safe. Edgar saw her look at him and shrugged.

"I guess we'll have to go back and take the other path," he said.

But Autumn turned back to the hole. She sat down on her knees and leaned her head down near the ground, eyes over the hole. She pointed her flashlight down it, moving it around to reveal splotches of the area to be put together in her mind. The hole was about ten feet deep and seemed to lead down to another part of the cave; a passage that was more than twice as wide as the one she was already on. Leaning all the way right and twisting her head a little, looking left, she could faintly see the walls of this area: Instead of rocky walls, they were golden bricks. Autumn's heart jumped.

Golden bricks means treasure! she thought.

She shifted around back to Edgar, clutching her knees in excitement. "Edgar, I need you to hold me upside down so I can see what's down there better."

"Um... okay," Edgar nodded.

Edgar held onto Autumn's ankles, and she leaned backward—a little too quickly, as she smacked her head hard against the wall leading down the cliff.

As she rubbed her sore head, Autumn called up to Edgar, "Okay, now move me down as low as you can."

Edgar dutifully dragged Autumn's feet down the cliff until her entire body was about a foot below the top of the cliff, hanging upside down—causing her helmet to plummet to the ground—from Edgar's outstretched arms while he was leaning halfway off the cliff.

Autumn didn't say anything, but only held her glasses so they wouldn't fall and turned her head all around, looking at everything she could.

It was then that it finally came to Edgar's mind that perhaps Autumn might be a little heavy for his weak arms to hold up, which made him worry about how long he'd be able to keep her from falling, much less how he was going to get her back up.

Autumn was positioned low enough that she could see the golden brick walls better, but not much more important. For all she could see, the long passage was empty, and seemed to end in a perpendicular fork going left and right.

But her thoughts of how she was going to get down there safely were interrupted when she felt herself shift downward a little. She looked up and saw Edgar's upturned head closer than it was before, cringing from Autumn's weight twisting his body against the edge of the cliff.

"I'm sorry, Autumn, but I can't hold on much longer—" Edgar struggled to say.

Just then, Autumn fell straight down, pulling Edgar with her by his arms, until she finally landed at the bottom, crashing her head directly against the helmet still lying on the ground. After a minute or two of dizziness Autumn sat back up, rubbing her injured head, readjusting her glasses, and looking around her, when she stopped, staring wide-eyed behind her. By this time Edgar had mended his shattered bones and gotten up, he noticed Autumn seemed to be in a trance, until he followed her eyes to a large gray treasure chest sitting against the back wall comprised of pink bricks.

Before Edgar could say anything, Autumn jumped up to her feet and ran for the chest. After bonking into it, falling over, and then sitting back up and regaining her composure, Autumn stared at the chest and her eyes caught the giant black bumpy hole at the front of the chest's rim in the middle: a keyhole. She got up and tried pulling and pushing the chest open to no avail.

As she sat against the chest, grumbling, Edgar timidly crept near and with one of his bony fingers pointed at the lock, said, "I think you need a key to open that."

"That is excellent deductive work, Mr. Winters. Please, keep up the good work," she said with a scuzzy stare.

But then she jumped back onto her feet and said, "Well, complaining won't get us anywhere. We'll just need to go looking for that key."

"But where do you think it might be?" Edgar asked.

"Well, there's only one direction we can go now," Autumn said.

She was gazing down the hallway before her, bordered on both sides by walls of gilded bricks. But rather than the golden walls she'd already seen before, her eyes caught the tiny sparkling objects forming a line down the hallway. She stepped forward, scooped the first one up, and saw that it was a little red gem with a pointed, diamond-shaped bottom and a flattened top. All of the sparkling objects were small gems; most red, although there were a few green and one blue rectangular gem at the end.

Autumn continued down the hall, making sure to pocket all of the gems littering her path, while darting her flashlight left and right repeatedly to make sure she didn't miss any. Meanwhile, Edgar slinked behind her, his eyes scanning around the area as well, though less in search of gems and more from the fear that something might jump out any minute and assault them, devour them, or force them to look at pictures of its family.

At the end of the long hall was a ninety-degree fork going left and right, between which was a large stone door with four congruent shapes embedded. No matter how hard she tried, Autumn couldn't budge it open. She soon gave up and instead elected to focus on the other two paths. She shined her flashlight around on each of them, but could not see far down either way; all she could see down either path was just empty dirt and the same golden brick walls.

Autumn shrugged. "Well, I guess we'll just have to take another guess." She panned her flashlight between the two routes a few times before stopping on the path leading to the right. "I pick this one."

Edgar nodded, not seeing any reason to argue with Autumn's scientific reasoning.

The most notable difference between this new path and the previous was that there were little Persian-style pots leaning against the walls. Autumn picked one up, wondering if a few of them would be worth the extra weight.

However, as she lifted the pot, she heard a rattling sound inside. So she did the rational thing to find out what was inside: She threw it against one of the walls, smashing it into a pile of shards. Scattered among these shards, she found three green gems. As they walked down the pathway she proceeded to shatter every pot with a kick and scoop up all of the delicious gems released.

While the route looked pretty much the same to them as the last one—save the pots full of gems—it eventually ended in a manner that was much more original: an opening on a small cliff that lead down to an enormous room carpeted by a dark green pool of slimy water.

In the large lake Autumn could see a couple graying skeletal hands grasping the air right above the surface and ravenous fish hopping up and down out of the water at crack-addict speed,

comprising nothing but bones and teeth. The reek of wasted bodies and bodily waste wafted up to Autumn and Edgar's nostrils.

While Autumn could see the other side of the path from her spot, she could also see that it was much too far to jump to. She watched the many jumping fish skeletons—especially their rapidly chomping sharp teeth—and thought that those choppers would probably shred them to pieces if they tried wading all the way to the other side. Edgar's shivering, which was passing on to her through Edgar's arm tightly clutching hers, told her that Edgar had the same idea.

"I think maybe we should try the other path," Autumn said.

Edgar nodded almost as fast as the fish skeletons were leaping.

Much like the path above, the left path had an abrupt end, this time breaking off to a large pit. Autumn bent down and tried to see where it led, but all she could see was pure darkness below; she figured it would likely be unsafe to casually fall in.

But as Autumn examined the pit more closely, her eyes caught the row of ropes hanging down from the ceiling, tied around metal hooks embedded in the ceiling stones. She followed them forward and saw that they ended near a short cliff—about a yard of land between the pit and rocky walls surrounding the other three sides. Autumn could see something sparkle from the other side.

Probably some gems, she guessed.

"I think there's some treasure over there," Autumn said.

"I suppose you're going to go get them, then," Edgar said, cringing at the ropes and then the hole. "Is there, uh, anything you want me to —"

But Autumn had already grabbed the closest rope and kicked off the ground, causing her to swing back and forth. When she swung as far forward as she could go she jumped to the next rope, and the force caused her to swing forward and back on that rope. Edgar watched this diligently while he squished his hands together, waiting for the moment when she would slip off into the abyss and disappear

forever. However, she progressed from rope to rope just fine, and was soon jumping off the last rope, her feet hitting steady land once more.

It was then that she realized what the sparkling object was: a gray key hanging off a hook fixed in the back wall.

Autumn trekked back, swinging from rope to rope again, and stomped back on Edgar's side. When she'd finished panting from the exertion and excitement she held the key up to Edgar's face and said, "I got... the key..."

"Are you sure that's the right one?"

"Of course it's the right one," Autumn said with one hand on her side and the key hand still up in the air. "It's gray, the chest is gray. Gray opens gray. What kind of idiot would make a gray chest open with an orange key?"

So Autumn dashed back into the hallway with the grey chest, smacking her face against the front of it again, and fiddled the key in the hole until she heard a loud click. She pulled up the chest lid and pulled out two items: a yellow inflatable raft and a yellow topaz tablet.

She set the raft and tablet on the ground in front of her and bent down to get a closer look at them.

"What do you think these are for? I suppose the tablet could fetch a few pretty pennies—but why a raft?"

Edgar froze in place as if he were shocked and then ran over to Autumn and grabbed her arm to get her attention.

"Maybe it's meant to help you cross that lagoon at the end of that one passage?"

Autumn tilted her head in thought.

"Could be," she said. "We might as well give it a try; we have nowhere else to go."

She stowed the topaz tablet and raft in her pack and they went along toward the right path again when the stone door between the

two paths caught Autumn's eyes again. She looked at the entrenched shapes and pulled out the topaz tablet to examine it: They appeared congruent. She tried sticking it into the left slot and was surprised to find it fit exactly, glowing bright yellow light from the cracks between the tablet and the slot. However, when Autumn tried to force the door open, she found that it still wouldn't budge. She figured the other three slots still needed to be filled and ignored it once more, continuing on her way back to the lagoon.

When she reached the edge of the cliff, she dropped the raft into the green lake and watched it as if a crocodile might devour it or it might instantaneously combust. It sat stationary on the surface of the water, instead.

Seeing it safe, Autumn crawled down in and helped Edgar—who was too busy hugging himself with shivering hands to do so by himself—down after. Since the raft was rather small, they both had to squeeze together with their knees drawn all the way up.

As for movement, the lake was as still as a skeleton—well, except Edgar, who was still shivering—so the only way Autumn could make them move was to pull the map from her pack, roll it up into a cylinder, and use it as an oar, not wanting to make contact between her hand and the water for fear of a skeleton pulling her down or one of those bone piranhas biting any of her fingers off.

"You... you don't think any of those jumping fishies will be able to jump at us, do you?" Edgar asked as he stared down at the water.

"I wouldn't worry about it too much," Autumn said without turning back to him, focusing her attention on rowing the raft instead.

As the raft floated farther into the lagoon, Autumn noticed that there was not only one passage straight in front of her, but two more on either side. However, she noticed that the passage on the right was blocked off by a pile of boulders. The wall beside the clogged

route held a red-orange plastic sign with the black silhouette image of a pile of lit TNT.

Since the left route was the closest, Autumn chose to paddle in that direction, after making a quick stop at a small clump of land poking up in the middle of the lagoon and smashing all of the pots for gems.

On the left path was a skinny strip of land growing up from under the water and curving upward, the rest of the path shrouded by stone walling. Directly right of this strip of land the water continued until fading out into the black horizon; except the water seemed to be moving against them in a mild current, unlike the water Autumn had encountered so far.

Not thrilled to struggle through any more water—certainly not any that was in a current—Autumn parked the raft near the strip of land and she and Edgar ventured up along the path. Although the path began rather steep, after a few yards of climbing, the path flattened. The land still rose and dipped enough for someone to stumble if she had unsteady feet; but Autumn and Edgar, who were balanced and careful enough, didn't notice these subtle level variations.

What they did notice, however, were the pits littered along the path, spread over the entire width of the skinny path between the walls on the sides, and the metal boxes rooted in parts of the wall spraying fire at patterned intervals. They stood frozen with their arms hanging down their sides as they gazed at it all.

“What are we gonna do, now?” Edgar asked.

Autumn looked at Edgar, looked at the obstacle course in front of them, and looked back at Edgar again.

“I guess we're just gonna have to go through all of this,” Autumn said.

“What? But—but how?” Edgar asked.

“Running, jumping, and ducking, I would guess.”

“Well... Okay, but I don’t think I’d do very good at this sort of thing, really...”

Autumn paused in thought. “Hmm... Don’t worry, I think I have an idea.”

“What?” Edgar asked.

But next thing he knew Autumn wrapped her arm around Edgar’s waist and hoisted him in front of her.

“Ready?” Autumn asked.

“Ready for what?” Edgar asked.

“All right, let’s go!”

Autumn bolted forward, jumping over gaps and ducking under flames, all the while carrying Edgar along with her. Edgar, for his part, could only cover his eyes and try not to shiver as much as possible.

“Are you all right?” Autumn asked, turning to look at Edgar still in her arm.

Edgar nodded.

Unfortunately, this distracted Autumn, leaving her with only a second to see a flame spurting right in front of her face. The shock caused her to jump back, only to find that there was no ground there. She and Edgar fell backward, Autumn knocking the back of her head on the cliff behind her, and they both plummeted down the pit until landing in a river of green water.

They struggled to the surface, which was difficult with the current pushing them backward; but when they turned around and swam with the current, they found staying above surface easier. Autumn spat with disgust as she thought about all of the diseases that might have seeped into her mouth while Edgar hugged her tightly, shaking as he watched the water in fear of what might be waiting underneath for them.

But no harm came to them—*Probably because none of the skeletal fish or hands could fight the current and keep enough attention to*

attack them, too, Autumn thought. After a short trip, they found that the river dropped them off at the water next to the skinny, upraised path they'd just climbed. They could even see their yellow inflatable raft still floating by the coast. They climbed up to land and sat down to catch their breath.

When she finished capturing her breath, Autumn turned to Edgar and asked, "So, are you ready for a second try?"

"What? Uh... A second try?"

"Well, yeah; there has to be something up there. Why would anyone set up fire-spurting machines to guard nothing?"

"Yeah, I guess that makes sense..."

"I'll tell you what," Autumn began, now standing up and staring at the large main area of the lagoon, "I'll probably have to come back here for the other paths. How about you stay here and I'll go handle this route real quick?"

Edgar stared down at the ground in front of his feet and thought.

"No, I'll be fine going through it again," Edgar said as he stood up.

"Great, then let's go."

Autumn bent down so Edgar could climb onto her back, and then she rushed through the fire-and-pit hall once more. Luckily for them, this time they reached the end unscratched; unluckily for Edgar, he did get a few eight-degree burns from getting too close to some flames. Luckily for him, these burns had little effect on him other than inflicting pain, and they would never be an issue again.

When they stopped at the end of the corridor, and Autumn had dropped Edgar back onto his feet, something other than the opening to the next area caught her attention: a large red metal door with the silhouette of a flame on it. Autumn tried knocking on it and kicking it, and was shocked to find that it remained closed.

"I don't think we'll be able to open it," Edgar said.

"Hmm... I dunno," Autumn said, biting her index finger in thought as she stared fixedly at the door. "This door is not natural, so

it must have been put here for a reason. The fire picture there is probably meant to indicate that you need fire to burn this door down.”

“But how are you gonna do that?” Edgar asked. “I don’t think you’ll be able to pull any of those fire machines out of the walls—certainly not when they spurt fire every so often. And it’s not like you could just pick up their fire and take it—”

But before Edgar could finish, he threw his arms out and yelled, “Autumn, what are you doing?” He’d just noticed that Autumn was now standing in front of one of the fire-spewing machines.

“You’re latter idea was close, Edgar,” Autumn said.

“Autumn, are you crazy?” Edgar shouted.

The fire burst out of the machine and engulfed Autumn in flames. She was rather surprised to find that it was extremely painful—so painful, in fact, that she couldn’t stop herself from running around the area with her arms waving out in the air. It took her a while to regain self-control, during which she charged at the big metal door. As she’d guessed, it caught on fire and melted away.

With both Autumn and the large door creating large flames—in addition to the machine flames—the area filled with so much smoke that Edgar couldn’t see. But after the fire died away, the smoke gradually faded, too. Edgar climbed over the soldered metal scraps at the bottom of where the door used to be to find Autumn sitting in a round pool of water with a look of relief on her face.

When she saw Edgar, she smiled and held up a red key.

“I’ll wager a guess there will likely be a red chest somewhere in this cave,” she said.

II.

The passage Autumn had ignored until now led into a small room with a floor made of wooden planks. There seemed to be nothing in

this room except a big metal box suspended in the wall above them with the letters “C. C.” scribbled on it in black marker, just below a crude picture of a bandana-helmed skull and above the words “Ol’ Factory” in the same marker.

On closer inspection of the room, however, Autumn could see through the slits between the floor planks a room below them, which held the red chest.

She tried pulling the planks up, but nothing would budge except her blistered, slivered fingers; and when that didn’t work she tried stomping down on the floor as hard as she could in sync with Edgar, only to find that the wimpy-looking floor boards were stronger than they seemed.

When Autumn had finally paused to look around the ground for possible weak points, she noticed a little pile of donuts lying on the ground that weren’t there earlier. She puzzled over it until she heard scraping mechanical sounds above her and looked up to see the metal box spit out another donut.

“Why would someone put a machine that makes donuts in the middle of a cave?” Autumn asked as she stared up at it and scratched her head.

“Maybe this is some guy’s hideout and he really likes donuts,” Edgar said.

Autumn glanced at the donuts, the machine, and the floor alternately, trying to piece the puzzle together in her mind.

“It seems odd that he would go through all the trouble, though,” Edgar continued; “especially since he didn’t choose a particularly nutritious food choice. He would never be able to live off this if he ever got stuck here and became desperate.”

“No, he’s clearly trying to hide that chest below here,” Autumn muttered, half to Edgar, half to herself.

But the word “nutrition” caught Autumn’s attention. Donuts were junk food and they clearly were the key to getting down there. It

would require creating strong downward force. Donuts were junk food—fattening. Heavy.

She gasped and began scarfing down the donuts. It was happening so fast that Edgar was taken aback.

“What? What are you doing?”

“I figured out how to get down to that chest,” Autumn said between bites, her words muffled by the mass of food filling her mouth.

“Um, are you sure eating that much sugar and fat is good for you?” Edgar asked. “It, um... well, you seem to be gaining a little weight.”

“Good, then it should be working,” Autumn said, not even taking a pause between her constant devouring of maple-covered and jelly-filled donuts.

And indeed, as Autumn continued her mealtime massacre, her belly began to expand and her face and limbs began to puff up, until she looked like a giant water balloon.

When Autumn noticed the creaking sound and the dipping feeling of the plank floor below her, she crouched on her little stubby legs and leaped into the air as high as she could—which, due to the heaviness of her body compared to the smallness of her legs, was not too high; and yet it created enough downward force to break straight through the wooden floor down to the dirt ground below, where the red chest awaited.

She was so excited about her victory that she instantly made for her pockets to drag out the key, only to discover her fingers were too thick to fit into them.

Edgar, who was stunned by the impact of the breaking planks, had recovered and was now carefully climbing down to the level Autumn had fallen down to.

“Are you okay?” he asked.

“Can’t talk now; busy,” Autumn said as she hustled back and forth, shifting her arms front and back, in an attempt to lose all of the weight she’d gained.

As is common in reality, after a mere ten minutes, Autumn exercised all of the fat out of her and she was back to her original weight, albeit with somewhat stretched-out clothes.

Now that her hands were small enough to fit into her pockets again, Autumn was finally able to fish out the red key, and with it she opened the red chest to find a match and a red ruby tablet.

“I guess this’ll come in handy later on,” Autumn said as she pocketed the match.

“But where do we go now?” Edgar asked.

Autumn looked in the direction opposite the chest to see a river of green water moving away from her and Edgar.

“I’d guess this is the same river we fell into below that passage before. We’ll just have to swim down it again back to our raft.”

III.

When they returned to their raft, Autumn and Edgar paddled back to the main area and then toward the other open passageway. As they floated down the passage, they found the path became vertically narrower until they had to duck. But eventually the low ceiling ended; Autumn and Edgar turned around to see that it was the bottom of a couple of rocky steps leading up to a green treasure chest.

The rest of the river went in a backward current, making it impossible for the raft or Autumn and Edgar to go any farther. Thus, they had no choice but to climb up to where the chest stood. Looking up, Autumn could see a metal wire net attached to the back wall; she figured it was probably the only way forward.

They climbed up, hanging on with their fingers and feet in the net holes—which Autumn found difficult with her feet, due to her bulky tennis shoes.

When Autumn was halfway across the net, she turned back to Edgar and asked, “Are you doing all right, Edgar?”

But Edgar pointed up above Autumn’s head, shaking with horror, and said, “Autumn! Look out!”

Before Autumn could register she felt slimy tentacles wrap around her wrists. She looked up to see a human-head-sized ammonite hanging just above her, its eyes bulging and its fangs hissing. Before Autumn could do anything, she felt a vibration flow from her hand to the rest of her body, which eventually grew into a full-on static shock that stunned Autumn so much that her hands and feet lost their grip. The ammonite released Autumn’s wrists, eliminating her only defense against gravity, which was now plunging her straight down toward the running green river below, until she hit the bottom with a giant splash.

Edgar gasped and tightened his grip on the metal net so hard that it began to hurt his fingers until he saw Autumn’s head burst back above the surface, panting and spitting. She swam back up to the steps and was soon back up onto the net. Edgar was so preoccupied by these quick events that before he knew it, Autumn was already next to him on the net.

“I guess we’ll have to keep our eyes peeled for those shelled octopus creatures,” Autumn said.

This turned out to be prescient: Halfway through the net path again, she saw an ammonite who was cornering Edgar near the bottom of the net and kick it away before it could reach him.

Soon after, they reached the end of the net and dropped down to a high cliff just below, looking down on the current running back to the steps and the chest on one side, and another river running the same direction down on the other side. A meter or so forward hung

two clumps of rock: one hanging down from the ceiling with spikes pointing down and one underneath with spikes pointing up, leaving a narrow gap between the spikes and a narrow gap below, above the river.

Autumn winced as she surveyed this obstacle: She could either magically fly between the spikes or try swimming against the current below, which they already learned earlier they couldn't do.

"Now how are we supposed to get through this?" Autumn said.

"Maybe we're supposed to use this owl to do something," Edgar said.

Autumn turned back to Edgar and followed his outstretched hand to a large—almost as big as Edgar, and much wider—owl in a gray sweater vest with eyebrows so long they protruded from its head sleeping against the wall opposite the metal net.

She walked over to it and poked it. Its eyes popped open, its wings rose, and it suddenly jumped into the air and fluttered around in circles, squawking madly.

"B'ware th'forst shróms! Th'sésons chanj s'kwik!"

"How will this be any use to us?" Autumn said.

"I dunno. Maybe we're supposed to fly with it," Edgar said.

"Fly with it?"

"Well, why else would they put an owl right before an area that requires flying?"

As absurd as the idea sounded, Edgar's reasoning seemed sound; besides, she had no better plan. So she looked up at the circling owl, still blathering paranoid nonsense, and waited until it was above her before hopping and grabbing its... claw? It took until then for her to notice it had only one leg protruding from the middle of its body. As she pondered the strange phenomenon she felt Edgar wrap his arms around her waist and hang on behind her.

If the owl panicked when it was woken, now that it had these two strangers hanging onto its leg, it was going completely pineapples—

which is even crazier than bananas. But rather than flying around in circles, it now zipped straight for the narrow passage between the spikes, which did not frighten Autumn and Edgar one bit.

“Th’saws! Ey com to chop th’trés dow!” it bleated.

While Edgar closed off the sight of his eyeholes and gripped Autumn tightly, she briefly speculated whether there was a way to control the owl. When she couldn’t think of a way, she made due with hanging patiently and awaiting either the end of the spike pit or impalement. The owl seemed to know where it was going, anyway, turning when the spikes turned perpendicular; she only wondered whether it would do so without impaling them—either accidentally or intentionally.

Although the owl wasn’t perfect in its dodging—giving Autumn and Edgar a few scrapes and scratches along their feet, legs, and arms—they made it to the end of the passage in two pieces, toward a small cliff against a wall holding a green key.

The owl didn’t bother to slow as it made toward the wall, which Autumn used as a sign that she should jump off above the cliff. She did so and ducked with Edgar just in time for the owl to crash into the wall, creating a loud explosion. When the noise of thunking metal ceased, they rose and opened their eyes to see scraps of metal lying on the cliff; looking down they could also see some scraps floating down the river.

“Well, we got the key,” Autumn said as she pocketed the it. “Now I guess we’ll have to go back to the green chest.”

“But how? The owl exploded.”

“We’ll have to go the bottom route.”

Edgar looked down at the river that was at least three meters below them.

“I guess there isn’t a safer route...”

“We’ve fallen farther,” Autumn said.

And with a grab of Edgar's hand, she jumped down into the water. Much like the last time she fell in, she quickly jumped up to the surface and spit out the filthy water that seeped into her mouth before setting off down the river—an uneventful trip, except for maybe their need to duck under the cliff where they first found the owl.

It was not long before they reached the rocky steps—and Autumn wasted even less time scrambling up to the green chest and opening it. Inside she was not surprised to find a green emerald tablet, as well as a bunch of dynamite sticks with a strip of black tape wrapping them together.

Remembering the only passage they hadn't ventured through yet, she immediately returned to the raft, where Edgar was still waiting quietly, and without a word rowed out into the main area and toward the eastern side, where the opening blocked by the pile of boulders lay.

"Wait here in the raft and be ready to start paddling when I jump back in," Autumn said before climbing out to land. Edgar, who saw the orange plastic sign with the picture of TNT on it didn't need to ask why.

Autumn set the dynamite against the pile of boulders and struck the match she found in the red chest. She carefully moved the flame toward the fuse, and when the fuse was lit she jumped into the raft and commanded Edgar to paddle. They were already near the middle island when they heard the TNT explode—as well as the splashing of stones in the water afterward—leaving a hollow ringing in their ears for the next four minutes.

They turned around and saw that the opening and sign were still in perfect tact; the only difference was the conspicuous lack of boulders blocking the way.

Compared with the previous two passages, which were full of exhausting traps and obstacles, this new passage seemed eerily

empty: It was nothing but a long pathway littered with gems and gem-holding pots.

Autumn stared furtively around the hall, especially behind her. *Something's suspicious about this room...* she thought.

She received her answer five meters down the path, when she heard scraggly rolling sounds growing louder behind them. They turned around to find a giant boulder rolling toward them.

"I thought so..." Autumn said. "Must've had planner's block when they devised this one."

Though it required some deliberation, they soon decided it would be best if they ran away from it. As they did so Autumn alternated between looking forward and looking back.

There was an upside and a downside to this predicament: On the upside, they were able to run faster than the boulder, which meant they were probably not going to get smooshed by it; the downside was that running this fast made their legs awfully tired.

But as the race went on some other issue caught their attention: a blue key hanging up from the ceiling. Although the ceiling was low, Autumn hopped and found that she would not be able to reach the key when it came by.

"How are we gonna get the key?" Autumn asked.

"Key?"

Edgar looked up and saw it.

"Yeah, the ceiling's too high for me to reach. Do you think the guy who set this up expected us to jump on this boulder to reach it?" Autumn asked.

"I don't think he expected us to get it, period."

"I don't know... The donut machine and the robotic owl were awfully convenient. I think he set these up to be passable."

Edgar didn't reply. He was lost in thought, looking up at the ceiling and then Autumn.

"I think I have an idea," Edgar said.

“What?”

Edgar grabbed Autumn’s shoulders and hoisted himself up, holding onto Autumn’s head tightly to avoid falling off from the unsteady movement of Autumn’s running. Autumn said nothing, already guessing what Edgar had planned.

Edgar saw the key rush toward them and raised his arm up in the air. He tightened his hand as the key passed through it, yanking it off its nail.

“I got it!”

“You what?”

Autumn looked up and saw Edgar waving the blue key up in the air.

“Hey, awesome job!” Autumn said as she high-fived his key-holding hand—the only one that was free.

But their celebration was cut short when Edgar was suddenly knocked off her back by the frame of the doorway between the passage and a wider, but much shorter, room with the blue chest standing against the back wall. Autumn had little time to acknowledge this sight, as she turned around immediately to see Edgar lying on the ground under the door frame. She turned just in time to see the boulder smack against the frame of the door, stopping it in its tracks.

Edgar sat up, rubbing his head with his other hand, and said, “I’m okay. Good thing I have this helmet.”

Edgar held up the key to Autumn; but before she could reach out to get it the door frame suddenly collapsed down on top of him, under the weight of a ton of rocks and soil. Autumn cringed her eyes closed in shock, only witnessing the sound of the heavy crumbling of rocks... and the cracking of bones. When she reopened her eyes, all she could see was Edgar’s arm poking out from under the debris, still holding the blue key.

Autumn stood frozen solid, staring blankly down at Edgar's arm while her mind tried to register what had happened.

"Edgar... Are you all right under there?"

There was no reply.

"Edgar?"

There was still no reply.

She put her hands to her sides. "Well, surely you're not dead, since you're already a skeleton."

All she could hear was the crackling of tiny pebbles against the ground.

"Well, anyway, let's not waste any more time in this dump," Autumn said as she bent down and pulled Edgar's arm out from under the boulder. She held up the arm, turned her head to it, and said, "This chest should hold the last tablet, which means we'll be able to open that door all the way before. Then we'll be able to get the real treasure, right Edgar?"

The air was empty with silence.

"Exactly," Autumn said with a nod.

She opened the blue chest to find a strange yellow-green-brown jar shaped like some bulbous figure with a flower on its head, which Autumn thought might fetch a cute coin or two; but what was really important, and what Autumn guessed would be inside, was the blue sapphire tablet.

It took a while for Autumn to dig out enough rocks and dirt to leave an opening for her to climb out through—although it was made less tedious by Autumn's constant hope that Edgar would soon, any minute now, climb out from under the rubble and reclaim his missing arm. She even procrastinated, digging out much more debris than she needed to leave enough time for Edgar's recovery.

But when the hole was dug so huge that it risked caving in again, which would have forced Autumn to start all over—*Not to mention*

that it might kill Edgar, she thought—Autumn finally crawled back out, walking down the long, empty pathway.

Along the whole way back to the tablet door she kept looking back—especially at every sound she heard—expecting Edgar to be not far behind her, saying in his wimpy voice, “Wait up, Autumn; I’m all right.” When she wasn’t looking behind her for Edgar’s body she spent the rest of her time staring at Edgar’s arm, speaking to it reassuringly and hugging it tightly.

IV.

She plugged the red, green, and blue tablets in the three vacant slots and they glowed in their respective colors, just like the yellow tablet was still doing in its slot. Soon after, the ground rumbled as the door slowly slid upward, revealing a small room buried in red, green, blue, gold, and pink gems—as well as one lonely scrap of dusty paper, which, Autumn could faintly see from afar, was covered in scribbly writing.

But what truly caught Autumn’s attention was the giant, blindingly bright, glowing diamond hanging from the ceiling, above a plastic blue frog statue. She made for it in an instant, climbing up on the frog statue and snatching the diamond off its catch.

Autumn was so dazzled by it that she hadn’t noticed the statue below her flatten down. What she did notice was the room rumbling, the sound of tiny pebbles crumbling down the ceiling and walls, and a booming voice shout, “Hurry up!” followed by ominous, off-key piano music.

She looked down and saw that the statue she was standing on was a switch that was now being pressed down by her weight. What’s more, the gray cylinder below the blue frog was now open, revealing a lit bulbous black bomb.

She scrambled for the door, only to find that it had already caved in, much like the one that... injured Edgar. Anyway, she had no time to think about this too much, as the ceiling was crumbling all over, including some large rocks she had to make an effort to dodge.

Autumn scanned around the room frantically until her eyes caught a small hole in the back wall. She bent down in front of it and, with a little more digging, was able to crawl inside.

The passage was ash black, which is not incredibly rare for a little hole in the wall lacking lighting fixtures or lamps; and since Autumn forgot her flashlight in her hurry to escape, she had to make due with scratching blindly in front of her, which was difficult with only one hand, the other arm preoccupied with holding the large diamond and Edgar's arm.

"I can't even imagine how much this diamond will be worth when we get out of here, can you, Edgar?"

She could hear nothing but the crumbling of rocks and dirt.

"I dunno. That gold diamond you found in the landfills—or wherever you found it—was worth at least ten times that, remember?"

But Autumn's discussion was cut short when her hands scratched solid metal. She thought about trying the sides—however awkward it would be without the ability to turn her body toward them—but decided that the pressure of the tons of rocks above her was getting tiring. She crawled backward toward the opening, hoping that the other room hadn't caved in, when she felt her feet hitting hard rock behind her. She kicked behind her in every direction, only to find that the whole opening was clogged.

"Okay, Edgar, no need to panic. We'll just dig in farther, which will hopefully buffer us from the explosion, and then dig on the sides. We just need to relax and breathe easy—"

Autumn's eyes bulged as she noticed the tight feeling in her lungs. Not only was the opening blocked off—the only passage for air to move through was, too.

Because of the tight space, she couldn't turn around, so she made due with digging the dirt to her right wildly and shouting, "Help! Anyone?" as loud as she could in the desperate hope that someone would hear her.

But she knew neither option had more than a shard of a chance of success. As she felt her body buzz with numbness from the lack of oxygen, she thought of how odd this situation was: She'd been in plenty of life threatening situations, and she'd been through plenty of situations in which success was impossible; but this was the first life threatening situation in which success was impossible. She wondered why that was.

#BOSK-BIT-AC004

AND I MUST THINK

J. J. W. Mezun | September 10, 2013

“Autumn! Are you still nearby? Autumn?”

Autumn, I don’t know what happened to my body, but I’m stuck and can’t move, so if you can hear me, please help me out of here, please.”

There was no response. And since Edgar couldn’t hear anything from outside, he guessed there never would be.

So it was that Edgar’s panic grew and grew as the hours turned to days turned into months turned into years, all of which was spent alone in that black hole, completely immobilized by the rocks he couldn’t even see pinning him down.

Of course, since he never needed food or drink, Edgar knew he could last for many more years. Indeed, even if he *wanted* to—even though he *did*—Edgar didn’t even have the mobility to do so.

All he could do was think.

#BOSK-BIT-AC105

GOING OUT IN A GLAZE

J. J. W. Mezun | September 20, 2013

The construction worker scratched her head.

“So, let me confirm this, Ms. Clearbeard... You want me to build a canister up here”—she tapped higher up on the wall—“that will spout a different donut every minute for eternity?”

Clearbeard nodded. “Aye.”

In these hours of weight self-consciousness, no one will ever think to use their sugary weight-enhancing abilities to break through the floor to the treasure, Clearbeard thought as she rubbed her hands together with a wry smile.

The construction worker stared at Clearbeard blankly—probably because of the aforementioned hand-rubbing and wry-smiling.

“Okay, no problem, Madame,” the construction worker said brightly. “We can get that setup by tomorrow.”

#BOSK-AD0303-CIRCUSES

CAPTAIN MATADOR'S PURELY LAND-BASED CIRCUS

J. J. W. Mezun | October 1, 2013



I.

The crowds shook in their seats with anticipation inside the giant red-and-purple striped tent as they saw the plump Captain Matador step up to the front of the stage in his tiny black boots, his purple top hat, and his purple-and-red striped suit. On his pudgy, smiling face were two bulbs of orange fur making up his walrus-like mustache; and in one of his two white-gloved hands was a black cane with an orange tip.

He spread his arms out in front of him and announced, “Ladies and gentlemen, what you are about to see is inappropriate for those who are weak in the stomach, weak in the head, or sore in the mouth. I present to you the Woman Who Will Do Anything for Miniscule Financial Success! Watch her walk the tightrope.”

His gloved fingers pointed up at the pole to his immediate left. The crowd followed his cue and saw on top of that pole a woman with a red-orange ponytail covered by a purple top hat staring grumpily down at the thin, wiry rope in front of her.

“You’ll get back at that fat bastard and these petty cretins one day, Autumn,” she muttered to herself. “One day...”

“Hurry up, or I’ll halve your pay!” Matador shouted up at her with his hand-funneled mouth.

Autumn carefully raised her left foot and stepped on the wire, feeling it dip under her weight as if it were made of paper. But whether or not it was made of paper, or even nothing at all, she still had no choice but to cross the stupid thing. So she picked up her right foot and put it on the wire, too, and began to slowly inch her

way over to the other side while the rest of her body leaned and swayed in every direction as she tried to keep balance.

This is easy... she thought as she stared fixedly at her feet. *Just watch your step carefully...*

Below, the crowd and Captain Matador looked like tiny ants. For anyone else this remembrance of height would have frightened her; but for Autumn the height over the little worms only pleased her.

However, these bitter thoughts only served to distract her and caused her to lose her balance. She began to stumble forward off the rope, only to have the front of her shoes catch the rope while the rest of her body hung limply below. Meanwhile, her glasses slid off her face. She waved her hands forward, attempting to grab them as they fell, but she missed. Her arms hung limply as she heard them clack against the ground.

The crowd laughed and cheered wildly.

"Ooo, this doesn't look good for her," Captain Matador laughed with a thumb jerked in her direction. "I hope she makes it, though; I paid two whole dollars for this one."

Autumn wrenched her right leg around the wire and pulled herself back up close enough to grab on with her hands, grumbling the whole way through. Eventually she climbed back up to the rope and continued where she'd left off.

"I'll show these dicks," she muttered as she squinted down at the blurry rope below her.

And to everyone's surprise she was crossing the rest of the rope with few balancing problems, focusing all of her energy on doing the most competent job ever, despite the watery pain in her eyes from squinting so hard at fogginess. She even quickened her pace just to show off—as well as end this ordeal as quickly as possible.

"Well, just look at her go!" Captain Matador said with a laugh. "Well, let's see how well she does dodging the cannons!"

Autumn pulled her attention off the wires and stared forward, wide-eyed.

“Cannons? What?”

Suddenly a barrage of cannon balls shot up at her. She jolted and panicked, jumping left and right to avoid them, until she reached two cannon balls side-to-side she couldn’t dodge. She tried to jump past one of them, but ended up getting smacked right in the face with the other one she hadn’t seen, knocking her off the tightrope, plunging straight down to the ground.

The crowd covered their eyes and shrieked with glee as they heard the loud *Whomp!* of her back crashing against the dirt floor—the people in the front row could even hear the cracking of her bones as they broke on impact, which was extra exciting!

Captain Matador waltzed over to Autumn, who was lying spread-eagle, still dizzy from the hard fall. He looked down at her with eyes of pity and shook his head slowly.

“Aw, too bad. I’m afraid I cannot pay you for that atrocious performance.”

Autumn immediately sat back up and stared at Captain Matador, horrified.

“What? But... but...”

She was interrupted, however, by Captain Matador, who walked forward toward the crowd with his arms stretched out again.

“If you think that’s all, you’re crazy!” he announced as he pulled out a furry pink scarf. “Now watch her strangle herself with this scarf for a mere dollar.”

“What? But... but I could kill myself,” Autumn said, the bags under her eyes hanging in despair.

Captain Matador bent down next to her on one knee, leaning in toward her and holding a dollar bill in front of her. Though she could hardly see what it was, her vision still blurry without her glasses, she could still tell what it was just by the smell.

"You're already dead," he whispered to her, and then pointed toward the crowd. "Look at them all laughing at you and your ragged, pathetic self. The only way to stop that is with this baby." He jiggled the bill around. "This is the only way to be free."

Autumn reached out, picked up her glasses, and put them back on as Captain Matador dropped the scarf in her lap. She stared down at it nervously.

Gasps, laughs, and cheers erupted from the crowd as they watched Autumn hesitantly wrap the scarf around her neck and tighten it, choking her until she became too lightheaded to tolerate it anymore and let go, gasping.

But Captain Matador shook his head. "Uh uh. Don't stop until I tell you to."

"Sorry," Autumn squeaked and tightened the scarf around her neck again.

Captain Matador stood back up and faced the crowd.

"Amazing! Look at how blue her face is!" He pointed toward Autumn's cringing face shaking and bulging from the pressure. "Now *that* can't be healthy."

The crowd laughed.

Matador turned back to Autumn and said, "Okay, you can stop now." Autumn let go of the scarf, but was so lightheaded that she passed out, feeling even dizzier than she did after falling.

"Now go back in your cage and my assistant will give you your fifty cents," Matador said as he continued staring down at Autumn listlessly.

Autumn immediately jumped back to a sitting-up position and pointed an indignant finger up at Matador.

"Hey! You said a dollar!"

"Make that *forty* cents."

"Wait! I'll go!" Autumn said, and she scrambled back up to her feet and scurried away to her cage.

Captain Matador turned back to the crowd and announced, "Next we have the Amazingly Meek Skeleton, who will do anything you demand him to," and then turned to the left and shouted, "Edgar!"

A shrimpy skeleton in a matching red-and-black vest and jester cap lined with yellow crept over to Matador's side, the bells on his jester cap jingling the whole way.

"Um... yes, sir?"

"Edgar, eat this hot coal," Matador answered.

From Edgar's left Matador's assistant carried a hot coal with a set of rusty metal tongs and leaned it toward Edgar's face.

Edgar looked at Captain Matador and asked, "Um... isn't this dangerous?"

Matador pushed his reddened face in toward Edgar and yelled, "I said eat it!"

Edgar squirmed and squeaked, "Y-yes, sir!"

Edgar turned back to the hot coal still held in front of his face and gulped. The crowd laughingly cringed as they watched Edgar open his jaw for the coal to be dropped into his mouth. As the coal went down his throat into his stomach Edgar stared down at the ground and squeezed his stick-thin left arm in pain; but he made sure not to make any sounds of pain for fear of upsetting Captain Matador.

Cheers of "Wow!," "Amazing!," and "How pathetic!" jumped from the crowd.

Captain Matador patted Edgar on the skull and said soothingly, "You're such a good skeleton..."

Edgar continued squirming and shaking, but also nodded and squeaked, "Thank you, sir."

Captain Matador then pointed toward the back room and said, "Now get back to your cage, you worthless garbage."

Edgar scurried away to his cage next to Autumn's in the back room.

Captain Matador turned back to the crowd and with a puff of his chest said, "We'll have a great show tomorrow, folks! Goodnight!"

As he watched the crowds disperse the attendant at the front brought over the box of profits. Matador opened it and scooped the dollars all together until he held it all in one neat stack in his hand. While walking toward the back room he counted it by flipping each dollar around with his thumb.

Autumn sat crouched in her cage—since the cage was much too short to stand in, or even sit-up in—feeling around her still-aching neck to see if there was any permanent damage.

As she saw Matador walk by she asked, "Hey, when am I gonna finally get enough to buy my way outta here?"

Matador snorted and said, "I wouldn't hold your breath on that," before passing her.

As she watched him go she grasped the bars of her cage tightly and gritted her teeth.

Oh, we'll see about that, she thought.

II.

Though Autumn lay curled in a ball with her eyes closed as if asleep, her mind was awake, concocting plans for how she could finally escape her farcical imprisonment. About two hours later she believed she'd reached a plan that could succeed.

When she decided that Matador must have gone to sleep, and she could see that all his assistants were outside guarding the tent, Autumn tapped on the bars nearest to Edgar's cage and whispered, "Edgar! Edgar, wake up!"

After a few tries she finally dragged Edgar out of his sleep.

"Huh? Autumn?" he asked as he sat up, rubbing his skull.

“Shhh!” Autumn whispered as she glanced around the room. When she was satisfied that no one heard them she continued, “Tomorrow we’re busting out of here. Understand?”

“I dunno... we might get in trouble...” Edgar squirmed.

“Trouble? Trouble?” Autumn said, her whispers becoming harder and raspier. “Did we worry about trouble when we escaped Gatsby’s train unscathed?”

“No.”

“Did we worry about trouble when we trudged through the blistering Milky Mountains under the overbearing, never-ending sunset?”

“I suppose not...”

“And yet I should let this humiliating scam Captain Matador has pulled over me stand?” Autumn asked, a finger flung into the air.

Edgar looked down, distraught. “I guess not... But how are we going to escape with his assistants there to stop us?”

“Don’t worry about that,” Autumn said as she drummed her fingers together: “I already have a plan on the coals. Just do what I say and we’ll taste salty freedom soon.”

III.

A waxing gibbous moon surrounded by clouds sat staring down at the giant red-and-purple striped tent the next night as the crowds returned to watch more clowns perform wacky hijinks so they can temporarily ignore their abusive spouses, impending bankruptcies, and drug-addicted children—plus the cotton candy’s a whole bag for only fifty cents!

So it was that during Edgar’s act Captain Matador paced around the back room and barked, “Okay, you dregs: We’re packed, so no screw-ups!”

Autumn saw this as her perfect chance and ran over to Matador with a sheet held out in front of her, exclaiming, "Well, that's wonderful, because I have this new act that will really get them!"

Captain Matador didn't take the paper, but instead just looked down at her with a sour smirk.

"Leave the ideas to me. You're just there to look stupid and slutty."

"But it's perfect! And even if I do screw up, it'll just make people laugh," Autumn replied as she stood there staring up at Matador with a faux-innocent look on her face, still holding the paper up to him.

Matador snatched up the paper with his left hand and held it up above his shoulder while he turned his head and looked at it with a sneer.

"Why would you care whether people laugh? Hmm?"

Autumn stared down at the ground and wrapped her hands around each other nervously.

"Well... I was wondering if maybe you could raise my..."

"Hmmp. We'll see," Matador said as he pocketed the paper. "But if they all hate it I'm halving your pay. Just get ready. Go!"

"Yes, captain!" Autumn said as she turned toward the backroom to prepare.

As she went she rubbed her hands together and grinned wryly, her eyes glancing behind her at Captain Matador.

Oh, we'll see how funny this will be... she thought.

Meanwhile, Matador walked out onto the main stage, where Edgar stood shakily still as he was pelted by rocks thrown by the crowd. He wrapped his arm around Edgar's shoulder and smiled at the crowd.

"Are you amazed at how he utters not a single sentence of solitary objection?"

"Captain, I think I might be bleeding," Edgar said as he held his hands over his right eye hole.

As the crowd laughed Matador pointed toward the back room and Edgar scurried over to his cage.

Matador stood up straight, puffed out his bulbous chest, and announced, "And next we have what you've all been waiting for: The Magnificent, Money-Hungry, Madame Springer!"

Edgar was walking back to his cage when he ran into Autumn moving in the opposite direction toward the stage.

"Are you sure this will work?" Edgar asked, still holding his right eye hole.

Autumn ignored him, marching past with a stern expression of determination. Edgar turned back to her and asked, "Autumn?" But this also went unanswered.

Autumn trooped on stage with her arms crossed behind her back, trying to tone down her excitement so as not to alert Matador. When she reached her spot next to him he leaned his head down to her and whispered, "Don't mess this up!"

"Never have I ever wanted to avoid messing up more than today," Autumn replied.

Captain Matador pulled out the sheet of paper, unfolded it, and held it up to his face. After clearing his throat for a bit he began to read it:

"Madame Springer will now begin by shooting herself out of this cannon just to get a single puny penny right over there!" He pointed over to his right, then turned his head rightward with a confused stare.

"Wait, then why is it pointed that way?" he asked as he pointed to his left.

But before he could get an answer Edgar pulled on the rope of Autumn's cannon and Autumn was shot into the cannon on Matador's left of the stage, which shot Autumn into another cannon in another direction, and continued going from cannon to cannon. Matador's eyes move all around the room trying to keep track of it.

Matador threw his arms out to his sides and asked, "What is the point of this?"

But then an assistant rushed up to him and whispered, "Captain, she's hitting our entire workforce!"

Matador looked around and saw that, indeed, the cannons were positioned so as to shoot through the various stations where the guards were placed. Matador turned to Edgar, who was still standing behind the original cannon, watching it all himself, and yelled, "Edgar! Stop her!"

Edgar shrugged. "Sorry, but it's automatic."

"That's impossible!" Matador yelled as he stomped his right foot on the ground; but before he could continue his rant he was suddenly knocked over by Autumn shooting from behind the crowd to a cannon behind him.

Matador sat back up, raised his fist up in the air, and shouted, "Autumn! I'm lowering your pay to a penny now! Let's see you try and buy your freedom now!" The force of the hit had crumpled up his suit, flattened his hat, loosened his gloves, and somehow made his mustache crooked.

"Captain..." Edgar began, which caused Matador to glare at him. "Uh... the crowd seems to be laughing."

Matador looked at the crowd and saw that they were in an uproar. He scrambled up to his feet and bowed with cheerful smile.

"Yes, well, amazing isn't it?" Matador said.

"They won't be laughing for long."

Everyone looked up at where the voice came from and saw Autumn standing on the tightrope, which was now positioned up above the crowd. She was twirling a big metal magnet on her finger. When she saw that she had everyone's attention she flipped a switch on the magnet all the way, bent down, and hung the magnet down toward the crowd. Suddenly golden coins began jumping out of

people's pockets up to the magnet until it was covered with a swarm of them.

The crowd was no longer filled with laughter and cheering, but now with shouting, angry mutterings, and raised fists.

Matador walked forward toward Autumn with his finger pointed up at her and shouted, "Autumn! Stop that at once! That's it... you're down to half a penny!" He then looked around him with his arms thrown out and asked, "Where is my security!"

Edgar pointed in front of Matador and said, "Um, captain... the crowd's coming after you..."

"What?" Matador asked as he turned his head back in front of him and saw the mass of people charging toward him with shouts and glares. Matador backed away from them slowly with a look of horror on his face.

"We want our money back!" the crowd yelled.

"Stop! I'm not the one you want—s-s-she is!" Matador shouted as he pointed his shaking finger at Autumn.

The crowd turned their heads to Autumn, who was now floating down with a large blue helium balloon.

"I can't help it; I'm the 'Magnificent Money-Hungry Freak,' remember?" Autumn said with a smile; and then she turned to Edgar with a pointed finger. "Edgar, the helium."

Edgar scurried over to her carrying a long gray tube.

Captain Matador shook his fist at Edgar and shouted, "Edgar! Don't you dare!" But the only answer Edgar gave was a rock thrown at Matador's face, causing him to grasp his nose in pain.

"Sorry," Edgar said nervously as he pumped Autumn's balloon.

As the balloon filled with helium it quickly bulged until it was the size of a small bathroom. When the balloon began to float up to the sky Edgar let go of the pump and Autumn grabbed Edgar's hand, pulling him up with her.

"Thanks for all the laughs, by the way," Autumn said with a salute; and soon they were floating high up in the air and being blown away by the wind, until they shrunk into the sky, no longer able to be seen.

The crowd was full of shock and awe.

"Wow! That's amazing!"

"I don't even think you can do that in real life!"

"And we didn't even *think* to stop her, even though we had plenty of time before!"

Meanwhile, Matador stood in front of them, staring down at his wringing hands.

"So... I, uh, hope you enjoyed yourselves," he said with a nervous laugh.

The crowd suddenly turned angry eyes on him.

"Oh, we've got a show for you!" one of the crowd members said as he held up two buckets—one full of feathers and the other full of tar.

All Captain Matador, who was backed up against a wall, could do was stare horrified at the two buckets.

IV.

The moon and stars pierced the otherwise black night sky with white, shining light on the one lonely blue balloon slowly floating through the air.

Still hanging from that balloon, Autumn laughed as she stared at the magnet full of coins in front of her.

"So what do we do now?" Edgar asked as he readjusted his grip around Autumn's waist.

"We fly away to the city, free!" Autumn exclaimed. "No longer will we be some fat asshole's slave; no longer will we have to dehumanize ourselves to make a living."

V.

Autumn and Edgar stood behind the counter of the local McCheesy's fast food restaurant in gray uniforms, fake-smiling at the lines of people in front of them.

"Welcome to McCheesy's. How may I take your order?" Autumn said with fabricated cheer.

"Hey, I ordered my burger without pickles and I demand a refund!" the customer yelled as he stamped his fist on the counter.

Autumn continued her fake-smiling, but answered back, "No, I remember you specifically called for pickles." She held up a tiny tape recorder. "I even have it on tape."

"Are you calling me a liar? I want to hear from your manager!"

"What's going on out here?" the manager boomed as he walked out behind her through one of the back doors. He was a hefty man in a somber black business suit and matching black top hat. On his face lay thick round glasses and a heavy black walrus mustache.

"This woman messed up my order and now refuses to refund me!"

Autumn turned around and smiled nervously at her boss.

"No, I know I got it right this time," Autumn squeaked. "I even have it on tape if you want proof." She held up the tape recorder shakily.

"Give him his refund, Autumn—and I'm taking this out of your check."

"Yes, sir," Autumn said with a bow, and promptly opened the cash register and handed the customer his cash.

The manager began to walk back to his office when he heard a loud crash and turned around to see Edgar nervously picking up a pile of napkins that had fallen out of the square, black canister that fell on the linoleum floor.

“Edgar! That’s the third time this week, you clumsy dolt! I’m taking those napkins out of your pay—and if you do it one more time you’re fired!”

“Yes, sir! Sorry, sir!” Edgar squeaked.

When the manager was gone and Edgar was finished picking up the napkins he turned to Autumn and whispered, “So, when can we buy our way to freedom from this place?”

“Shut up, Edgar,” Autumn muttered under her fake smile.

#BOSK-BIT-AD006

NEEDLE-LESS TO SAY

J. J. W. Mezun | October 10, 2013

“Are you sure this is a good idea?” Edgar squeaked as he swung his head around him, looking at all the bat, skull, and drug paraphernalia he had around his office.

“Don’t worry. Once I get enough money, I’ll easily find a way to escape his greasy clutches,” Autumn whispered.

Just then, Captain Matador burst in through his curtain door and said, “You ready to sign?”

“Yeah,” Autumn said without looking up at him, “but I need a pen.

Matador strode over to her and slapped a needle on the table before her.

“Madame, we always sign our contracts in blood.”

Autumn stared at the needle for a while before looking back up at Matador.

“A pen would be nice, please.”

#BOSK-BIT-AD107

DON'T YOU BELIEVE IT

J. J. W. Mezun | October 20, 2013

Nora sighted when she heard a knock on her door. She could guess who it was.

Begrudgingly, she got up and answered the door. As she expected, it was her landlord. Behind his tiny but thick glasses his eyes appeared irate. He was breathing deeply, as he always seemed to be doing—at least around her—and he was drumming his fingers frantically on the side of her door frame.

“Do you have it?” he asked in a stressed tone.

This time Nora took a deep breath, before answering in a squeaky voice, “No... But I do have an excuse...”

“What?”

“Well... See, you’ll never believe this, but while my son and I were at this circus show one of the actors leapt up on a high tightrope and used a magnet to steal all the patrons’ money... even paper money, somehow. Anyway, the guy who ran the place refused to give us our money back... You can ask any of the other customers who were there, if you don’t believe me; it happened to all of us.”

She could see by the reddening of the landlord’s face as she told her story that he didn’t believe her.

“Get it to me by the tenth or I’m afraid I’m going to have to evict you,” he said before turning and walking away.

#BOSK-AE0504-MACHINE

BATTLE AGAINST A MACHINE

J. J. W. Mezun | November 1, 2013



I.

Twas a rainy November night. Autumn was on her way to the Technophilliac Museum after reading an article in the news about a newly developed prototype of a time machine placed there. Autumn figured 'twould be worth a healthy sum, so she planned to steal it.

Of course, she knew the place would be infested with security, so going through any of the doors or noisily breaking any of the windows would be untenable.

The best plan Autumn could conjure up was going through the vents in the ceiling; and so she did: After climbing to the top by stepping on trash bins and then window frames, she tied one end of a rope to a metal bar on the ceiling and the other end around her waist for an easy return. From there, she merely had to slide in the vent, a map she downloaded off the museum's website in one hand and a flashlight in the other.

When she came to the first grate, she looked through its slits to see what room resided below. There she saw a security-uniformed man sitting on a toilet—though still fully clothed, for some reason. He sat there without even seeming to move to breathe, staring blankly, as if he were guarding it rather than using it.

Seeing nothing to gain there, Autumn moved on, purging all questions burrowing in her mind.

She stared down into the next grate and saw a tall blue hunk of plastic with a bulbous transparent glass front revealing the faded image of indecipherable doohickeys scattered around its insides.

She extracted her screwdriver and unscrewed the grate open,

carefully placing it next to her in the vent to avoid creating needless noise. Then she poked her head out the vent just enough to check if the area was safe from dangerous eyes. When she confirmed that it was, she tried carefully sliding down the vent hole, only to get stuck in midair. The rope's length had been exhausted.

Luckily, she brought a pair of scissors—along with an assortment of other useful items—for emergencies like this. Though 'twould make escaping much harder, Autumn decided she didn't have much of a choice.

The main problem she had was trying to find the rope behind her with her scissors, unable to see behind her. But after only a minute or two of fumbling, she chomped the blades against the rope; after a few more heavy chomps, the rope ripped, plunging her stomach-down against the hard linoleum floor five feet below with a loud *Whomp!*

The hard fall had temporarily stunned her, but she shot back to her feet when she heard muffled footsteps outside the door. Ignoring her smashed ribs and chin, she picked up her flashlight and searched for a hiding spot. Unluckily for her, the place appeared empty—save the time machine in the middle, of course.

With the footsteps growing even louder, she rushed over to the time machine and tried pulling on the bulbous door; only it wouldn't budge. 'Twas then that she noticed a red oval button next to the bulb and pressed it, causing the door to slide leftward into a slit in the time machine with a soft zip.

She slunk inside and frantically started pressing buttons in hopes of reclosing the machine's door. Meanwhile, the door to the room opened, revealing a large yellow circle of light. From behind it she could see the remnants of the light reveal a hard, boxy face with tufts of hair on the top and sides under a gray security hat.

Haven't I seen him before? Autumn wondered.

She didn't have enough time to answer that thought. Just then the

glass door of the time machine closed again. Suddenly, she felt a metal clasp cover her mouth and nose, pushing her back toward the chair while a leather belt wrapped around her waist. The clasp around her face blocked air from reaching her nose and mouth. After a few minutes of futile struggle, she eventually lost consciousness.

II.

After what felt like the longest sleep she'd ever had, Autumn's heavy eyes gradually blinked open and saw a plastic bulb around the front of her; through it she could see a room dimly lit by outside sunlight. Suddenly, she felt the clasp and belt release her and witnessed the glass door open. She stumbled out the machine, dizzy and still fuzzy on how she got here.

Autumn stood absentmindedly in the middle of this dusty room for a while, gazing around at everything, and yet registering nothing in her mind. The night's events gradually began to solidify.

She figured they must not have found her and, as she hid, she fell asleep until she awoke now, likely in the middle of the afternoon based on what she could see through the dusty windows.

For such a costly museum, this place sure is a dump, she mused as she looked around the room again with clearer eyes, seeing rusted metal and broken plastic everywhere.

She looked back at the time machine and wondered how she was going to get such a large contraption out without being spotted. Though the area seemed eerily empty, she assumed it couldn't possibly be any less occupied than it was last night. Carrying it up into the vents was certainly not an option; besides, she summarily saw that the rope was now gone.

She opened the door and peeked out the long hallway: It looked just as empty. Then she stepped out and carefully tiptoed down it,

peering through every turn only to see more empty hallways. She continued this route, going down two sets of mahogany spiral stairs, until she reached a large set of double doors. To her surprise, 'twas unlocked; and when opened, it led outside over a set of short white steps.

Autumn scratched her head in confusion until she finally decided that it must be Sunday or a holiday and some idiots just forgot to lock the doors.

But then wouldn't they still have security? Autumn thought.

Well, I'm certainly not going to go all the way back so I can stand around not knowing what to do, Autumn thought; so she dragged out her cellphone to call Edgar.

But when she tried calling, she found that her service was dead.

Bah, must have forgotten to pay the bill, Autumn thought as she stuffed it back into her pocket.

All she could do now was walk over to Edgar's to contact him personally.

But on this trek she thought something seemed... odd about the city. The buildings all seemed different than how they looked last night—although due to the dark drizzle last night, she didn't exactly get a clear picture of them. They seemed larger than any she'd ever seen in Boskeopolis, while the cars passing her seemed smaller, quieter, and not smelling so much like gasoline. But what truly caught her attention were the lines of highways slithering all around above. She couldn't understand how she could've possibly missed *that*. What, did she think 'twas truly huge lamp posts in the middle of the street?

She held her forehead as she tried to remember, but 'twas all still static.

She surmised that it must've poured hard last night, too, since the streets were covered in thin rivers up to her ankles. Every step she took made a little splash. And despite the sun being completely

smothered by gray smog, it felt warmer than she'd expect from late fall—not exactly summer heat, but noticeably warmer than last night.

Suddenly, she heard a commotion. She swung her head to the source and saw, to her shock, Edgar being carried away by an angry mob. Autumn rushed over and pulled Edgar away from them.

“What do you guys think you’re doing?” Autumn shouted.

Edgar’s eyeholes lit as Autumn pulled him into her arm, blocking him from the others.

“Step out of the way, Madame. Don’t you know who this man is?” one of the women in front said.

“I’m quite certain I do,” Autumn said; “though I know I don’t know you. If you have a problem with me—as I’m guessing you do—you can address it to me.”

Autumn could feel Edgar shivering in her arms. When she looked down into his eyes, she could see wide bewilderment. She couldn’t blame him. He even appeared to have a few tiny cracks in his skull, and was a much yellower tint than she remembered.

What did they do to him? she thought, feeling the bile suddenly rise in her throat.

“Then you know that he is an accomplice to the most dangerous machine in the city.”

“Right...”

Autumn made a few subtle steps backward, and then suddenly turned and bolted, carrying Edgar in her right arm as a large football.

This didn’t please the crowd at all, who proceeded to chase after them with raised fists and shouts, “Get back here!” only to lower them in distraught surprise when they didn’t see Autumn and Edgar stop.

One turned to the others and asked to the general world, “Hey, why aren’t they stopping?”

“They’re bloody rude, that’s what.”

The rest of the crowd simply shrugged.

Autumn twisted around every curve through the streets, which became somewhat easier once she returned to familiar ground on the eastern side. Well, somewhat familiar. Autumn faintly recognized it as Mahogany Street, though many of the buildings looked different: some olding and decrepit, some utterly replaced. But ‘twas still similar enough that she knew where she was going, at least.

This was when Autumn began to get suspicious. ‘Twas one thing for an area she’d hardly been in to be unfamiliar, but she knew what was clearly Mahogany Street shouldn’t have changed so much in only one night.

What happened so long since I was in that time...

And that was when she figured it out.

But she didn’t have time to confront Edgar about it, still not feeling safe until they were completely hidden.

When she remembered where they were nearing, she headed toward their hideout, an abandoned storm drain hidden behind bushes and long grass—conspicuously longer grass now—a few blocks from the Fred-Mart on Acorn Avenue. She slid them both inside and waited near the hole, close enough to glance out it, but not close enough to be seen. As they waited, they took the opportunity to breathe deeply, having expended almost all of their energy running for so long.

After ten minutes, Autumn felt safe that they’d lost the mob.

Autumn turned back to Edgar and whispered, “What year is it?”

“Um... twenty-one hundred, I think. Why? How did you get your body back?”

“Wait, say that again? What year?”

“Twenty-one hundred.”

“As in two thousand and one hundred?”

Edgar nodded. "Uh huh."

"Well, that explains a lot," she muttered. "And I suppose the Technophilic Museum is shut down, which was why 'twas empty when I left."

"Uh... I wouldn't know. Uh..."

But Autumn interrupted him with a grunted curse. "Shit... Wait. What am I thinking? If it's shut down, but still has its valuables, that only makes robbing it easier. Hell, it technically wouldn't be robbery anymore; just discovering unclaimed goods."

Autumn scrutinized the ground as she pondered the possibilities, only to look back up at Edgar when she remembered something.

"Um, Autumn... That is you, isn't it? You're truly Autumn."

Autumn looked up at Edgar with a puzzled look. "Of course I'm— Oh..." She frowned as it came to her. "I'm dead in this time period, aren't I. Yeah, I'd be over a hundred by now. No way I'm living this long."

"So, who are you, then?" Edgar asked. Then he added quickly, "If you don't mind me asking, of course."

"I accidentally fell in some time machine and ended up here."

"What year was that? When you fell into the time machine, I mean..."

Autumn paused, wondering why Edgar wasn't more suspicious of this wild claim.

Then again, it is a hundred years later. Who knows what technology they have now.

Not enough to rise Boskeopolis from the dump it always was.

"Last time I checked, 'twas twenty thirteen."

Edgar gasped. "So it is truly the normal you!"

He rushed forward and wrapped his arms around Autumn. She rubbed her hand along the back of Edgar's head, frowning awkwardly with the abrupt feeling of constriction in the pit of her stomach.

“So... why was that angry mob chasing you?” Then she chuckled. “Did you get in with an even crazier woman?”

“Well...” Edgar hesitated.

Autumn nudged him. “Come on. I’m a thief. I’m hardly going to judge you for anything.”

Finally, he sighed, and said, “Those people... weren’t happy with the way you’ve been treating the city...”

“Me? I thought I was dead.”

Edgar backed out of their hug and said, “Um... I’m not sure.”

“What do you mean you’re not sure? Did I go missing? Surely I must’ve died by now—I’d be over a hundred elsewhere. But I still want to know what happened. How successful was I before I disappeared?”

Edgar hesitated and glanced out the passageway hole into the city. Then he said, “Follow me.”

III.

They quietly crept through the city, keeping in the long shadows cast by the dim, cloudy sky, in case anyone was still after them. They went far off east, through Wasabi Woods all the way into the Mustard Mountains, until they saw a large canyon behind thick stones. Inside this canyon was a giant gray boxy machine with a long black oval over its front.

More important, ‘twas surrounded by a river of gold, silver, and every jewel Autumn could identify—rubies, sapphires, topazes, emeralds, bloodstones, opals, crystals, dragon coins, diamonds, pearls, and more. Autumn’s eyes widened when she saw it.

“Wow, is this all mine?”

“Yes,” Edgar answered. “And, um... that thing is... it’s you.”

“What thing?”

“That thing in the middle...”

Edgar pointed at the giant machine in the middle.

“I’m a robot?” Autumn asked, bewildered.

Edgar nodded.

Autumn turned to him. “How?”

Edgar exhaled sadly. “About sixty years ago you had an accident... You were exploring the Cinnamines for treasure and something happened to make it explode. I was able to preserve your brain, though. Uh, as the years went on scientists were learning how to develop more and more complicated robots, and one of them promised he would be able to revive humans whose brains were still intact by putting them in a machine. I, uh, agreed and so you were revived.”

Autumn gaped at Edgar, but found it difficult not to believe him. *It isn’t as if Edgar’s the type to yank my bone—and everything I’ve witness so far seems to connect. After all, if time travel, why not this, too?*

Because this meant literally replacing my physical self with an object.

“And then what?” she asked.

“Well, your body was more powerful than the average human’s and you used it to get more wealth much more easily. Then you paid scientists, or threatened them, so that they would make you even more powerful until you... well, became an unstoppable machine.”

Autumn looked back at the machine. “It doesn’t seem too unstoppable now.”

“Well... now her—*your*, I guess—energy is heavily depleted. She needs to be recharged... But nobody will recharge her; and since she now can’t move, all she can do is attack anyone who gets too close. But everyone else stays out of her range.”

Autumn looks back at the machine rubbing her chin disconcertingly.

“So that’s me?”

“Well, it’s what’s left of your brain. I, uh... I think it might have been damaged during the accident.”

“How so?”

“Well...”

Suddenly, a thin sliver of pink light appeared in the long black oval near the top of the machine. It slid left and right as the tail of a rattlesnake ready to strike.

A distorted, stilted, mechanical voice called out, “I hear voices. Show yourselves.”

Edgar slipped out from behind the rocks. “It’s, uh, just me, Autumn.”

“Edgar. Good. Have you found a technician for me?”

“Um... not yet...”

“Edgar, you know there is not much time left. I would hope you are not planning to let your partner die just like that.”

“Um... no. Of course, not,” Edgar squeaked.

“You are taking a long time, though. If you cared about me, you would try harder.”

Edgar looked down shamefully at his feet. “I know...”

But then Edgar was jolted when he felt a hand yank him back a little.

“Psst, Edgar. You’re not really going to fall for such a shotty attempt at pity, are you?” Autumn whispered.

“I heard that,” the machine’s robotic voice thundered. “Who is there with you, Edgar?”

“Um...” Edgar began, but Autumn lightly pushed him aside as she stood out from behind the rocks.

“It’s me, Autumn,” she said.

“That is impossible. I am Autumn.”

“No, you’re my damaged brain in a metal contraption,” Autumn replied. “How could you end up such a failure? I built my success on clever theft and you further that legacy by being nothing but an

insipid thug extorting people for money, relying on some robotic superpowers you weren't even capable of acquiring yourself. And now you simply sit there and try pitying people into helping you bully them more. 'Twould be better to let yourself die than live in this kind of disgrace."

"Silence, meat sack," the machine replied as its thin pupil reddened.

"Watch out!" Edgar shouted as he dived at Autumn, shoving them both behind the rocks while a large violet laser beam blasted behind them.

"Thank you," Autumn muttered as she returned to her feet.

"Edgar. Why are you helping that fraud, backstabber?" the machine asked.

"I, uh..."

But he was interrupted by another tug on his robe, pulling him back behind the rocks.

Autumn whispered to him, "Don't bother answering it—it's not as if it has any leverage to threaten you. Let's just leave so we can get on to important business."

From behind the rocks they could hear the machine's voice boom, "Edgar, I hope you are not going to abandon me for this fraud, are you?"

"Don't fall for its bull, Edgar," Autumn whispered. "It's just trying to use guilt. It's one of the most obvious of tricks."

Edgar hesitated, glancing back and forth between the machine Autumn a few yards in front of him and the fleshy, yet much too young for this time period, Autumn standing right next to him.

"I... I don't know what to do," Edgar whimpered as he held his blank-faced skull in his hands.

"I see what you have become now," the machine said. "I thought you were my partner, but clearly I was mistaken."

Autumn looked around awkwardly, not sure what to make of this

scene. She couldn't help noticing Edgar next to her staring down at the ground holding his left arm as if he was literally injured by those words. Age seemed to weaken Edgar, who now looked more crumbly, shaky, and dirty than the Edgar Autumn remembered from the past.

Yet again Autumn pulled Edgar back to speak with him. This time she held him much more closely in her arm, lightly rubbing his shoulder.

"Listen, I know it's been a long time, and you probably feel attached to the fake me over there, but that thing's hopeless. Can't reason with it. If that thing was me once, whatever that me was has already died.

"Now the *true* me is still here, you might notice—one that knows enough about herself to know that she would rather die than act as this machine has been doing so recently."

Autumn stood up and walked away, her eyes still on the contraption behind her, in case it tried one last hit against her.

Edgar sighed. "I guess you're right..."

"Do not listen to that imposter, Edgar. You know for a fact I'm the real Autumn. You saw me put in this machine and everything. This fraud, on the other hand, only appeared just recently."

But Edgar shook his head.

"You were Autumn, but I can see that the other is right: You *have* already died. I've known this for years, but denied it. The Autumn I know would never commit the things you've done."

He turned and followed Autumn.

"Edgar. Edgar. Come back here. You cannot just leave me here to die. You are an atrocious partner."

Edgar cringed as he heard each word, but continued beside the flesh Autumn all the same. Said fleshy Autumn, for her part, also cringed, though for a different reason: 'twas like watching a movie of herself when she was eight.

That thing's not me. I can't be me. I wouldn't act like that... No.

Finally, they gained so much distance against the machine that its monotone rants dissolved into incomprehensible whispers, and then finally to nothing at all.

“So, is the machine dying?” Autumn asked.

“No,” Edgar said with a heavy sigh. “She... it will still have a few years of energy left before it... shuts down.”

“And is it always on alert?” Autumn asked.

“Yes,” Edgar said, and then turned to Autumn. “But don’t worry. She can’t hurt any of us as long as we don’t go near her.”

“I know,” Autumn said.

Edgar hugged Autumn’s right arm. However, this didn’t register much with Autumn, who was too busy staring up at the sky, biting her lips as she concentrated on a tricky debate she was having in her head.

IV.

That night, Autumn stayed with Edgar in the abandoned sewer, as she did in her own time. But instead of sleeping, Autumn could only lie there on her back, staring up at the dark concrete ceiling.

Finally, after much debate, Autumn sighed and sat up, gently moving Edgar off her, and climbed back out into the city.

Autumn wandered through the mostly-vacant city. Even if it weren’t, she didn’t feel particularly afraid of anyone attacking as they did against Edgar earlier that morning; after so long ago, she doubted anyone remembered her appearance, even from when she rescued Edgar.

Besides, the highway, which seemed to stretch all the way west-to-east, left so many shadows along with those of the buildings that she doubted anyone could see her even if any were around.

Eventually she again reached the canyon where the machine stood, having memorized the path they went as they left.

She poked her head out from behind the boulders and whispered, "Psst! Metal box!"

"I am Autumn, you imposter," the machine answered immediately. "How dare you return, knowing that an inch closer I could obliterate you?"

"An inch closer that I will not make," Autumn said.

The machine shifted its pink pupil left and right furtively before saying, "And yet that inch and more is necessary in order to procure my treasure."

"That should not be a problem in a few more years," Autumn said.

"But you can't wait that long, can you?"

Autumn narrowed her eyes as she stared at the machine, its pink pupil still slithering around its black eye. She then gazed around her. The area was empty, including the sky, which was a starless black abyss.

Autumn turned back to the machine and asked, "How would you like to make a deal?"

#BOSK-BIT-AE008

GONE MISSIN'

J. J. W. Mezun | November 10, 2013

Edgar sat on the curb in front of Autumn's apartment with his face down in his hands, tears dribbling down them while he blubbered incoherently.

It had been weeks since Edgar last saw Autumn. He couldn't find any clues as to where she last went. Even when her landlord let him in when opening the door to check where she went himself, all Edgar could find was her laptop—which was locked with a password Edgar didn't know.

Of course, he did have one basic idea of what might have happened to her—but he desperately hoped it wasn't the case.

So Edgar had remained there, from foggy morning to chilly night, either blubbering into his hands or staring up at the sky, waiting for some sign.

#BOSK-BIT-AE109

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J. J. W. Mezun | November 20, 2013

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#BOSK-AF0E05-DUMPS

DOWN IN THE WASTE DISPOSAL AREAS

J. J. W. Mezun | December 1, 2013



I.

Autumn woke shaking with a vicious chill and a hard ache in the middle of her throat. All of this paled to the weakness she felt from the recognition of her surroundings, of her life: the scratchy hard bottom of an abandoned storm-drain with a dead view—save the little mild light peeking through the hole near the top of the wall. The stench saturating the area reminded her of what lurked down here: waste, material without a purpose, other than to create inconvenience.

All of this created in her mind a conflict of interests. On one shoulder, she didn't even want to get up and face the prospects of further failure; on the other, she certainly didn't want to stay down here and have past failure's products reek right in her face.

She tried to sit up carefully so as not to stir Edgar, who was lying next to her under the same blanket; but as she did, she could hear him murmur and felt a sleeve of his robe brush against her.

"I didn't mean to wake you," Autumn whispered with a gravelly voice.

"It's okay; you didn't wake me," Edgar replied.

This was certainly a lie. She wasn't sure why he bothered. Quite honestly, she wasn't sure why he bothered with her in the first place, considering the immense success she'd gained. *Could he truly do worse alone?*

But she'd learned years ago to stop asking that question, whose answer she knew would always elude her. Instead, she stood and trudged over to the boxy hole that served as the "door" to their sewage home, reaching her arms out to push the tall grass away so

that it didn't block her view of the outside. The sky was still dark blue—the usual early-morning scene of late January. To her amazement, the air outside was somehow even colder than the air inside.

Autumn was overtaken by a violent sneeze and responded by rubbing her stuffy nose, shaking as a cat fresh out the rain and grunting.

“Well, I guess we'd better get to work,” she said as she climbed up the hole. Edgar couldn't help noticing how much more muffled and raspier Autumn's voice sounded today.

“Uh... Autumn, you don't sound very good,” he said.

“You just noticed?” Autumn said dryly.

“No, I mean today you don't sound... you don't sound normal, I mean,” Edgar said, starting to feel the shaking from the chill affect his own voice.

“Who cares? Come on,” she said as she waved her hands forward.

She sat bent near the opening so she could reach her arms in and help Edgar out. With that settled, they continued down the street, Autumn shuffling her feet and stuffing her hands deep in her pockets to stifle the cold, visible steam emanating from her heavily-breathing mouth.

“Are you sure you're okay?” Edgar asked. “You don't look... you don't look the way you normally do.”

“Well, that can't be too bad, then,” Autumn said.

“No, I mean worse...”

“That's possible?”

“I mean you look ill,” Edgar said.

“When don't I?” Autumn asked.

“Even more so.”

Autumn settled the matter with a wave of her hand, muttering, “Bah.” Edgar decided that furthering the issue would be futile.

“So what are we doing today, Autumn?”

“The same thing we do every day, Edgar: try to get rich.”

“Oh, uh, I meant what specifically in order to do that,” Edgar said as he rubbed his sleeve-covered hands nervously.

“Ah. That’s a good question,” Autumn said. “To be honest, I don’t know. I simply decided ‘twould be better to go out in the main city for inspiration than sit around trying to plan in a barren sewer, distracted by poo gas.”

Autumn sneezed again. Edgar tried to ignore it.

“Do you think we should try to find you something to eat first?” Edgar asked. “I don’t think you’ve eaten for two days now; and my experience with humans tells me that they get kind of less human and more deadish when they go too long without food.”

“I think we have more important things to worry about than my survival,” Autumn said with a sniff and a cough.

“Autumn, you know it’s really not healthy to go without eating for so long.” Then Edgar turned to the audience—which is quite impressive in a nonvisual medium—and said, “Remember kids, you should always start your morning with a healthy breakfast.”

They continued down the street, passing what appeared to be the same buildings over and over again, as if in a Hanna-Barbera cartoon, since the author was too lazy to draw different buildings—which is quite an impressive failure in a nonvisual medium.

“Think of anything yet?” Edgar asked.

“No. Do you think I’m a mental wizard or something?” Autumn snapped.

Edgar’s head slunk down. “Sorry.”

Autumn exhaled deeply, feeling the icy-sharp air stab the back of her throat. “No, I suppose I should apologize. I was hoping to return to ground level—whatever ground level I ever had—at least before the end of the year, but I’m just as mired as I ever was.”

Autumn stared down at her shoes with a haggard expression. Edgar noticed that everything about her looked haggard, especially

her slumped stance.

"I don't know... I'm starting to believe I can't hack this thieving industry anymore. I was okay when I was in high school, but now... I just can't do it."

Edgar clutched Autumn's arm in his. "Sure you can."

"Blanket assertions lacking any form of evidence are not valuable," Autumn said.

"But there's plenty of evidence you can still succeed, Autumnn."

"What?"

"Well, uh..." Edgar scratched his head. "It's not fair that I'm not smart enough to know where."

"Nobody, no matter how smart, can find facts where there are none," Autumn said.

Autumn felt a bubbling pain in her stomach, followed by a gurgling sound. She clutched her stomach and gave an annoyed grunt.

"Maybe it's your empty stomach that's, uh, weakening your thinking abilities," Edgar said, almost leaping at this epiphany.

Autumn grunted again. "I don't feel like eating anymore banana peels from the dumpsters."

"Wait, what? Is that what you've been eating the last few months?" Edgar asked.

"Sometimes I nibbled the leftover fruit from disposed apples or even ate a few newspapers. What do you expect me to do, eat at the Chez..." Autumn pressed her fingers into her forehead as she tried to devise a clever way to finish this comment, but the function returned null. Eventually she just swiped a hand forward and muttered, "Bah."

"Couldn't you steal something from a grocery store?" Edgar asked. "I mean, we've passed one of them five times already."

"Maybe; but then I'd have to sell it," I said.

"Why?"

“Because I’m not going to waste such a good heist. Do you know what still-good food is worth?”

“But what will you eat, then?” Edgar asked.

Autumn sneezed. “I told you: banana peels, apple cores, and newspapers. Products I can’t profit from. Don’t you listen?”

“Autumn...”

“What?” Autumn threw her arms out after wiping the snot from her nose. “Oh all right, I’ll get some food when the grocery store passes by again.”

“Don’t you mean when we pass by the grocery store?” Edgar asked.

“Oh, please. It’s quite obvious that the background moves regardless how we move. Watch.”

Autumn stopped; Edgar stopped with her. The background, however, continued to slide past them at the same speed as if they were still walking.

“Wow. That doesn’t even make any sense,” Edgar said with awe.

“Quite impressive for a nonvisual medium,” Autumn said with a nod.

II.

Only a few minutes later—which meant we didn’t need a change of scene, truly—the local grocery store rolled by, so the animators stopped the background in accordance with the plot. This actually was not impressive for a nonvisual medium; in fact, it’s very easy to do if one knows how.

“Okay, now you wait out here and hide at the end of these bushes —”

“But we’re not next to any bushes,” Edgar said.

Autumn emitted an annoyed sigh and then led Edgar over to a row of bushes stretching out from the side of the store.

“Okay, *now* you wait out here and hide at the end of these bushes while I go inside and get what I need—”

Autumn was interrupted by a sneeze.

“You should get some cold medicine, too,” Edgar said.

“I don’t have a cold,” Autumn snapped as she rubbed her nose and sniffed. “I just happen to have all of the symptoms of a cold.”

“Isn’t that pretty much just what cold medicine cures, anyway?” Edgar asked.

Autumn waved her hand forward and muttered, “That is a piece of information that I consider much too trifling to waste my mental energy replying to.”

Edgar watched Autumn walk inside and then, with nothing else to do to pass his time, his eyes drifted up to the sign above, which said, “Fred-Mart,” and below that, “Cheap prices, cheap products, cheap labor!”

Once inside, Autumn made her way directly to the first aisle she saw in hopes of getting this over with as quickly as possible. Unfortunately, a few people were in her direct path, so she had to shove them out of the way.

“Hey, you’re not the center of the universe, madam!” one of them yelled.

“Yes I am; I’m the star, you idiot,” Autumn grunted.

“Oh. Okay, then.”

Autumn stopped in the middle of the aisle, hoping it would be the hardest place for the cameras to see. Then she proceeded to pick up, pretend to examine, and put down items in speedy motions—as if she were scrambling for a certain product—while sneaking a food item into her coat every so often in the middle. However, she also sometimes conspicuously pocketed items—only doing so for canned food so that she could easily remember it.

When she’d gotten enough to fill her pockets without rising suspicion, she proceeded to the checkout counter. Though there were

automatic checkout stations, she made sure to pick one that was human-operated—well, organism-operated, at least; she knew Cthulhu sometimes worked there to pay off its gambling debts, and she wasn't prejudice against eldritch horrors.

She began to fill the counter with the canned food while the chatty moron who wouldn't shut up about his favorite clock hand finished his purchases. As the cashier started pricing and bagging her items, she put her hands in her pants pockets and then wiggled around, feigning a horrified expression.

"Oh, crap," she said. She wiggled her hands around more before she continued with a deep sigh, "I forgot my wallet again." She put a hand on her forehead. "I'm sorry to waste your time. You want me to put this all back?"

"H'mnahn' y'athg sign h'ah ep," the cashier said.

Autumn wiped pretend sweat from her forehead, only to realize real sweat was there and being grossed out.

"Thank you, Mr. Cthulhu," she said.

"Nafl'y'hee," Cthulhu said with a wave of one of its tentacles.

"Thanks," Autumn said with a wave as she walked back toward the door.

But when she began crossing over the threshold, she bolted, setting off the alarm as she passed through the sensors. Cthulhu heard this and immediately chased after her.

As Autumn ran down the parking lot, she yelled, "Come on, Edgar, hightail it!" Edgar, who was already familiar with this type of ordeal, didn't waste any time being surprised and immediately jumped to his feet and followed after Autumn.

Seeing that they had already gotten away, Cthulhu stopped in front of the store door and shook a fist at them dwindling in the distance.

"Y'stell'bsna n'gha wgah'n'wg hlirgh!"

Then it looked down grumpily and muttered, "Hai mnaiih

stell'bsna y'n'gha..." which roughly translates to, "Now my boss will kill me..."

III.

It took Autumn and Edgar a few revolutions around the background loop before they figured out the right directions to go in and how to understand the badly programmed interface and finally escape the never-ending loop. Hopefully this will be simple for the reader to visualize.

When they finally escaped the background loop, they stopped to catch their breaths, which included hacking and a few sneezes from Autumn.

"Good thing I remembered to get that cold medicine," Autumn grumbled as she rifled through her pockets.

She took a quick look at the instructions on the back, untwisted the cap, and knocked down two pills as instructed. However, as she felt them hit her stomach, she felt a pain spread out from her stomach to her throat and nasal cavities. Suddenly, her already-stuffed nose was dribbling mucus like a faucet, intermittent with coughing and sneezing attacks.

"Augh. These drugs are a ripoff," Autumn said with a low, hollow voice as she held her aching throat.

"You didn't pay anything for them, though," Edgar said.

"It feels as if they made my cold worse."

"Well... maybe that's just some temporary thing while they begin working."

"Bullshit!" Autumn shouted.

Edgar turned, startled, and saw Autumn glaring at the medicine bottle.

Autumn poked at the bottle menacingly. "This medicine isn't for curing medicine; it's for *causing* it. What kind of jackass would sell

that kind of thing and what idiot would want it?”

She paused to read more. “Oh, it’s for lazy idiots who want to skip work or school. That’s great. Thanks a lot, assholes.”

She had the momentary urge to chuck the bottle away, but then her inability to waste anything smothered that urge, and she stuffed the bottle in her pockets instead.

“Ah, that’s what I was looking for,” Autumn said as she sped forward toward two homeless people (whom she assumed were a couple) sitting by the curb with a cardboard box in the nearest one’s hands. Written on the front was a message asking for spare change in felt-tip marker.

She stood before them, staring down into the box while Edgar stood a few feet back, glancing around nervously. She saw to her pleasure that it contained a few hundred points¹.

“Could you spare some change, Madame?” the one with the box asked as he looked up at her.

“Sorry, but I don’t have any money,” Autumn said; “but I do have some food I’m willing to sell for a steep discount if you’re interested.”

She took out a few bags of chips and cookies. “As you can see, they’re still tightly sealed, so I haven’t tampered with them, and you can check the expiration dates to see that they’re new.”

“How much?” the homeless person closest to her asked.

“How many you want?” Autumn asked. “I have eight on me. I’ll take a hundred points for all of them.”

The homeless person looked at his companion, who nodded. Then he looked back at Autumn and said, “Okay.”

Autumn mumbled a good day before walking on. Edgar, seeing her leave, rushed after her.

They turned the next corner and Autumn sneezed. After rubbing her nose she said, “God, I was afraid that would happen while I was

1 100 points was worth 'bout a dollar and a half in American currency.

still talking to them. They'd probably balk if they knew I had a cold and could infect them with it. You don't think they could tell, do you?"

"Autumn, why did you sell that food? Wasn't the whole point to get you something to eat?"

Autumn waved her hand out. "I told you, Edgar: I'm not wasting the good stuff for that. I know there's a dumpster around here somewhere."

There was, and she was soon standing next to it inside an alley. She opened the lid and peeked inside to see a farrago of items. However, her eyes stopped when she saw a damp dark brown banana peel. She lifted it out from a puddle of strong-smelling liquid under a pile of magazines and test-tube-looking bottles and opened it wide, revealing a small chunk of browning banana still left inside. Then she began licking the inside.

Edgar took a few steps back as his whole body cringed.

"Autumn, isn't that unhealthy? Couldn't you get food poisoning, or something?"

"I've eaten enough of this crap that my body's developed an immunity to it," Autumn said. "Besides, it can't be much worse than the food thousands of Boskeopoleons eat at McCheesy's."

She then began to eat the peel, chewing at it as a long piece of taffy. When that was completed, she nibbled on a few apple cores and mushrooms and ate a loaf of moldy bread and a half-eaten McCheesy's burger before shutting the lid and moving on.

"So, what do we do now?" Edgar said as he rubbed his stomach area with a grimace. He didn't have a stomach, which was why he didn't need to eat, but still felt the tinge of nausea where it would be.

"Let's stop by the library so I can do some research," Autumn said.

"Okay," Edgar said, his voice brightening. "That'll give us a chance to rest a little. It may do your cold a little good."

Autumn waved her hand forward, but didn't say "bah" this time.

This was obviously not a bah-worthy moment, but merely a hand-waving-forward moment.

“Bah, I feel fine.” Fooled you fuckers.

However, unbeknownst to Autumn at this moment, the germs from her recent meal were already spreading out through her stomach and multiplying. There was a great diversity among them: cute little cyan blobs with big bulging eyeballs; spider-like, diamond-headed viruses; and puffy pink fur balls, also with bulbous eyes. As they spread out through her body, they swayed and swaggered around in an assortment of dances—the most common being the conga line—going in and out of other cells, causing them to break and the viruses to multiply.

However, their party was soon interrupted when a group of white blood cells blocked their way, standing erect with their arms crossed, their faces covered with opaque black shades. Around their necks were golden chains with the words, “Killa-Ts.”

“And what do you think you’re doing, trespassing on our body, fellas?” the leading white cell asked.

“Chill it, man, it’s the fucking popo!” one of them half-chuckled into the front bacterium’s ear.

“Sorry to ruin your little party, fellas, but I’m afraid I’m gonna have to ask you to leave,” the white cell said.

“We ain’t going anywhere, you fucking fascist pig!” a virus shouted as it shook one of its pincer-like limbs. “We have a right to be here just as much as you do!”

“Oh, really? It looks like we’re just gonna have to flush you little rascals out, then,” the white blood cell said.

They charged forward with batons in their hands, only to be outmatched by the millions of bacteria and viruses in front of them. Soon the battle erupted into an all-out war across Autumn’s cardiovascular system, with numerous casualties on both sides—but many more on the white-cell side.

The fighting gradually began to affect Autumn, starting with a deep pain in the pit of her stomach. She wrapped her hands around it, thinking nothing of it, only for it to evolve into an even deeper pain in her throat, mixed with nausea. Soon sweat-saturated heat flowed over her like lava.

“Autumn, are you all right?” Edgar asked.

“Yeah...” she muttered with a dry voice.

Then she collapsed onto her knees and vomited over the curb for a minute, thick chunks of mushy gray-brown brew spilling out onto the street as if being wrenched out her gullet by an invisible hand.

Eventually, it petered out at the end into dry heaves. She sat there breathing deeply and staring blankly in front of her, burning tears dribbling down the dark sacks of her eyes and saliva settling back into her throat.

Edgar stood a few feet back with a stare of concern for another minute before she stood up and walked on again. Edgar followed, but decided not to say anything.

However, after a few more meters, her legs began to wobble and collapsed under her. She tried to drag herself forward against the sidewalk with her hands for the next few feet before she finally stopped, wrapping her arms around her stomach and cringing.

“Do you want me to get a doctor or something?” Edgar asked, his voice rising in hysterics while his hands rose to his head.

“No,” Autumn grumbled. “We don’t have the money to waste on those ripoff artists.” She groaned.

“Are... are you sure?” Edgar asked.

“Just... just give me a few seconds until I feel a little better.” Autumn’s eyes were open, staring up at Edgar. “The time some measly flu fucks me over is the time you can just throw me out to the land...fills...”

She clutched the side of her face madly, the dark rings under her eyes stretching to comic proportions. This in addition to her

profusely dribbling sweat made her appear mad.

“That’s it! We need to explore the landfills for treasure!”

“Autumn, I really think you should see a doctor. I think you might have gotten some poisonous chemicals in you from that food you ate and I think it might be damaging your mind.” Edgar’s voice shook.

Autumn shook her head. “No, I mean it. Rich people throw rich shit away all the time. We could find some good sells.”

She tried to pull herself back up and managed to make it halfway up before clutching her stomach again and falling back down. Then she seized her forehead and moaned.

“Edgar... I need you to try searching around the landfills for me... I’m afraid my worthless body has betrayed me once more and rendered me immobile. You should be able to find the landfills a few blocks forward and then a few to the right.”

“But... but what about you?” Edgar asked, his voice piercing.

“There’s nothing you can do for me, anyway, Doctor Winters. All I can do is lie here and writhe around in pain until my body finally decides to stop sucking again. Now go!”

“If you say so...” Edgar said with a guilty look.

“Well, hurry! We don’t have all day!”

“Okay...” he began moving. Then he turned back to her and added, “If you start feeling really bad, you should try to find a doctor.”

“Yeah, yeah, go on,” Autumn mumbled, her eyes closed and her body curled up, ready for sleep.

Edgar turned back around and went onward, his nonexistent stomach feeling as if it were mashed around by a blender. He wasn’t good at handling stressful events like this, which Autumn usually did herself. Actually, now that Edgar thought about it, he wasn’t really good at anything, really.

IV.

To Edgar's surprise, he was able to find the landfills—or at least *a* landfill—after only a few dozen minutes of aimless wandering. This gave Edgar a needed boost after a whole journey of stormy indecision.

He ambled around the fence until he found a trash can and used said trash can to climb over the fence. Luckily, there didn't seem to be anyone around to cause uncomfortable conflict.

Inside the fences he gazed at the mounds of dirt—caked with millions of different objects—stretching out in all directions for meters, strewn here and there with pelicans pecking at the ground. The sheer amount of material before him overloaded his brain, causing him to panic.

Where should I even begin? he wondered.

He shrugged, bent down where he stood, and then began digging immediately below him, scrambling out forward, tossing tin cans, plastic bags, paper wads, and soda-can rings with strangled birds' heads caught in them to the side.

Though the sun was smothered by a flat tapestry of fog, and the temperature outside was around eight degrees Celsius, Edgar's head dripped with sweat from the sheer exertion—so much so that Edgar didn't even have the energy to wonder how he was sweating without skin.

Hours later the toil became too much for him and he stopped, coming close to plopping face-first in the garbage under him. He inched his way over to the nearest mound and sat on it, breathing deeply.

Still, he couldn't relax yet. He wasn't sure how long Autumn wanted him to try searching. He was pretty sure he wasn't going to find anything even if he spent thirty years looking; and yet, knowing

Autumn, she would wonder why he returned so soon without anything. On the other foot, he had to worry about what was going on with Autumn.

Then again, it's not like I can really do much anyway, Edgar thought.

Edgar sighed. He didn't think he was going to be able to come to terms with the fact that Autumn wasn't likely to last much longer. *What'll happen first? Will she get arrested again or just slowly fall apart?*

Nor did Edgar know what role he was to play in any of this. 'Twasn't as if he suspected she didn't want his company anymore; he knew her enough to know she wasn't shy about telling people to get lost. He just didn't know *what* kind of company that was supposed to be—other than being there at the awkward side, doing nothing.

Of course, doing nothing was what he was most comfortable doing—harder to cause problems that way—but he had a sneaking suspicion that it wasn't something he *ought* to do, else he didn't understand why life would be wasted on him to do it.

Well... Look, Edgar, she has you here digging for treasure. That's doing something useful.

A whole lot of good that'll do...

He stared up the sky and saw nothing but grayness. It didn't seem to indicate the time at all.

He stood back up and walked over to the fence on the other side, ready to return to Autumn. He was so preoccupied with his worries that he wasn't paying much attention to his feet and soon felt them trip under him, knocking him to the ground.

He looked behind him to see what tripped him when he saw something sharp and bright shine under his foot. He dug it out and saw that it was a golden top hat with sparkling red ruby band, twice the size of his hand. Despite being covered with dirt he could still see it sheen underneath.

After a minute or so of dumbfounded staring, the implication knocked him in the head like a meteor. He glanced around him to see if anyone was watching and, when he saw that there wasn't, he snuck the top hat into his robe.

"Well, let's just hope this isn't as cursed as that diamond she found before," he muttered with a sigh.

He scuttled over to the fence, hopped it, and practically flew back to Autumn, feeling as if the sun had melted through the fog and shined down on him.

It didn't, of course; that would be silly if the weather just magically changed based on one skeleton's moods. Nevertheless, Edgar could use his imagination.

V.

When he returned, he saw that she was still lying curled-up on the ground with her eyes closed. The slow, erratic movements of her chest and the loud rasping of her breathing did not give Edgar much solace.

He bent down and gently shook her. "Autumn, I have great news," he whispered.

Autumn only released a long wheeze. He tried again to no avail. As he watched her for the next few minutes, he noticed her pulsating slow until she had completely stopped.

He shook her again.

"Autumn?"

He put his ear to her chest and heard nothing.

"Autumn?" he repeated, the pitch rising into hysterics.

He put his hand on her wrist and felt no pulse.

"Oh my god!" he whimpered as he rose back to his feet with his hands clutching his head. "What do I do? What do I do?" he said as he turned his head left and right frantically.

He squeezed his hands together until they hurt and took a deep breath. *Okay, I need to find a doctor immediately if I'm going to prevent her from dying—if. Just need to stay calm... Please God don't make me screw this up...*

He bent down and struggled to lift her until her upper body was above his shoulder and then slowly hobbled down the street, his head twisting in every direction in search for a hospital. After his heart had been lifted only a few minutes ago, he now felt 'twas sinking like an anchor. He had no idea where a hospital was in the giant city and knew the chances of him randomly happening upon one before Autumn became unrecoverable—if she hadn't already—were bleak.

VI.

If only Edgar had realized he was in a literature series and knew that Autumn was the irreplaceable star of the story, he would not have stressed himself so, for he would have known—as the reader surely did—that, of course, Autumn would have made it out alive. After all, do you truly believe I would have let her die? Surely that never happened in any other story.

He had been sitting on the floor with his knees raised in the waiting room, his face buried in his robe, when he heard the nurse say, “Mr. Winters, the woman you brought in has awoken.”

Edgar gasped as he stood up and then followed the nurse into Autumn's room. As he walked up to Autumn's bed, he saw her sitting up and rubbing her eyes and forehead on each side of her face. Though she still had tired dark rings under her eyes and she still had black cords attached to her arm for some reason, her skin seemed to regain its color and she looked as well as she'd ever looked to Edgar.

“Again?” Autumn said dryly. “Some pokers didn't secretly turn me into a cyborg again, did they?”

Edgar shook his head. “The doctor said you got acetone poisoning somehow and they had to pump it out of your stomach by connecting one and a half pills of matching color to each little virus guys without the pills reaching the top of your stomach. ‘Twas truly fascinating; he made it to level fifteen before failing.”

“Oh...” Autumn said as looked down dully. Then her eyebrows arched in understanding and she looked at Edgar again. “I really wish you didn’t send me here. You know these cronies are gonna drill us out of everything we own—which is virtually nothing. Escape won’t be as easy as last time...”

“O-oh, not anymore, Autumn,” Edgar said as he dug through his robe, shaking with excitement. He pulled out the golden top hat and held it up to her.

Autumn waved at him as if trying to swat a fly. “Put that away before someone sees it! Quick!” she whispered as she turned her head left and right for any eavesdroppers.

Her heart suddenly started racing and she had to put all of her effort into keeping her legs from shaking. Whatever weakness still resided in her body was quickly thrown out by the urgent needs of her mind like a sluggish typist being shoved aside for the new master to attack the keyboard with the speed of lightning.

When Edgar dutifully returned the top hat to his robe, Autumn asked in a low voice, “Where did you get that?”

“Well, uh... In the landfill, actually...”

“Landfill?” Autumn asked as she scratched her head.

“Remember? You asked me to search around a landfill for treasure.”

“I don’t remember that.”

“‘Twas just before you fell asleep... or whatever you did. You didn’t seem to be fully, uh... conscious, I guess.”

Autumn stared down at her blanket again, her mind lost in thought. From the short glimpse she got of the top hat she saw that it

was shiny and an exquisite color, though she hadn't had a chance to actually feel it to better test its authenticity. Would be too dangerous, now—it could wait.

Anyway, she wasn't an expert in jewelry and wouldn't know how much it could truly sell for anyhow. This was the problem. She knew she had to research it to at least gain some indication of its true worth and then figure out a way to properly sell it without getting ripped off. She was so close and yet she could see traps everywhere, each threatening to ruin it completely.

But the first obstacle she had to vex about was evading paying whatever exorbitant fee this hospital would certainly charge.

She leaned into Edgar and whispered, "Did you give them my name?"

He whispered back, "No, I, uh, said you were some stranger I found on the street."

"You learn well," Autumn said with a smile and a light pat on his back. "Now let's sneak out."

"Uh... Are you sure you're ready to leave yet?" Edgar asked.

"Of course. I feel fine," Autumn said as she detached the black cords from her arms.

She rose—her eyes wary of her surroundings to ensure nobody was coming—and then she walked up to the window. She untwisted the lock and then lifted the window up, letting the frigid air inside what was previously stifflingly warm. She looked down and saw that the grassy ground was a few floors down.

Nothing she hadn't handled before.

"You want me to get your clothes for you?" Edgar whispered.

Autumn looked down and saw that she was in a thin white patient's gown instead of her normal clothes.

"Oh shit!" Autumn said in a hushed shout. She remembered what had happened last time she was in one of these hospitals.

"Yes. Please do."

Just as she was climbing over the window sill, the nurse returned, only to have his eyes bulge when he saw Autumn.

“What do you think you’re doing?”

“Hurry up, Edgar!” Autumn shouted as she went over the edge.

Edgar scurried after her and leaped out just in front of the nurse chasing after them. The nurse stopped with his head out the window, looking down at Autumn climbing down a vent pipe, Edgar hanging from the back of her patient’s gown with his arms around her neck.

The nurse rubbed his hand over his forehead, brushing the small mat of hair on the top back. “Madame, are you crazy?”

He didn’t wait for a reply—which was wise, since Autumn wasn’t planning on giving him one—but instead turned back and rushed for help. However, by the time security arrived at her landing spot, she had already landed and was running across the street, away from the hospital.

After a few sharp turns and curves through the city Autumn thought she lost them. Nevertheless, she kept up her speed just in case.

“You want me to get off your back and start running with you?” Edgar asked.

“No...” Autumn said between pants. “That would be too much of a delay. Let’s wait until we get near the library.”

“Why are we going there?”

“Research. Hey, what time is it, by the way?”

“Oh, I don’t even know...”

“How many days has it been since I passed out?”

“None,” Edgar said. “You passed out this afternoon.”

“Shit. You can’t approximate how many hours it has been?”

“No. Why?”

“It looks like it may be too late for the library,” she said as she looked up at the black sky full of stars.

They stopped at the library regardless and, when she tried to

push her way through the front doors, saw that it was indeed closed, the darkened inside hall visible from the glass of the doors.

“Ah, fuck it. Let’s just sell this stupid thing already. I won’t be able to do any good research, anyway,” Autumn said as she turned back to the sidewalk.

“You want to change back into your normal clothes first?” Edgar asked.

“That would be a good idea. It probably wouldn’t help my prospects if I came in looking like a mental patient.”

They stopped along an alley and Autumn changed inside while Edgar kept guard. Finding it impossible to waste anything, Autumn stuffed the patient’s gown in her coat pockets and they continued on their way toward the plaza.

They started their walk silent. Autumn in particular was staring down at the ground, trying her hardest to hide the anxiety over what might screw up her prospects for fear of attracting attention and making it more likely to happen. Being robbed—the ultimate ignominy for a thief—was the foremost fear on her mind, especially during such a dark night—it had already happened before. She hoped that Edgar’s skeletal visage would scare any would-be thief away. But then she glanced over at him staring down at the ground with his hands clasped together like a priest and doubted it.

Edgar’s silence was for a whole different reason altogether. Autumn could guess that it was due to the same concerns she knew he had hidden in that little skull for months now—and she had a few guesses as to what those concerns concerned. However, she elected to deal with it after their gains were secured.

Or at least that was what she told herself, aware that it was an excuse, but sticking with it all the way, anyway.

A few blocks later, they entered the first jeweler’s shop they saw. Autumn was surprised to find it still open, but could see from its near vacancy that it probably wouldn’t be for long. There was only

one other person inside, being closely watched by the sleepy-eyed teller.

However, his attention shifted to Autumn when she walked in through the door and stopped at his desk.

“Do you buy jewelry?” Autumn asked in a tired voice.

The cashier made a humorless laugh. “Marital trouble?”

Maintaining her tired expression, she answered, “Yeah.” She loved it when her marks offered facades for her. Cut down on the planning.

She turned to Edgar. “Show him the top hat.”

Edgar dug through his pockets and pulled it out, holding it up to the eye-searing white light with both hands. When the cashier saw it, his eyes widened.

“Holy—That’s... That looks just like the famous Gilded Top Hat of Chamsby. I can’t believe he would give that to you? Was he—?”

Autumn nodded with a subtle brew of solemn irritation. She had no idea who this Chamsby person was, but figured she’d escape with her loot long before this idiot bothered to look up the facts—if he ever did.

“And you’re selling that?” the cashier asked, his voice rising in incredulity.

Autumn feigned a deep breath and a haggard look. “I hesitated at first, but I have bills to pay and I don’t see why I should hold onto it for that asshole. If he wants it again, he can surely afford to rebuy it.”

“How much do you want for it?” The teller asked.

“How much you willing to pay?”

Autumn kicked herself in her mind—which is pretty hard to do, admittedly. Research would have helped her a lot more than she originally thought.

“How about twenty million²?” The teller asked.

“That’s all?” Autumn immediately shot back. She made a subtle glance over to Edgar and saw that he looked down at his feet shyly, not revealing any change in emotion.

He does learn well, she thought.

“Well, how much do you want?” The teller asked.

Autumn paused for approximately a minute. She didn’t need that much time to consider her next part of the play; she only knew she needed to pause that long to keep the play successful.

“Five hundred million,” she said.

“Five hundred million? That’s crazy!”

“It’s the Gilded Top Hat of Chamsby for god’s sake,” Autumn said.

“Fifty million,” the teller demanded with his arms crossed.

Autumn waited for another minute before faking a tired sigh.

“Whatever. It’ll be nice to screw over that dick, anyway.” She knew she was probably being screwed out of a hundred million or so for her failure to do proper research, but decided not to risk it by declining. After all, she could’ve been screwed over worse.

The cashier wrote her a check and handed it to her. Autumn inspected it before slipping it into her pocket. Edgar looked to her and she nodded.

As he handed the teller the top hat, Autumn said, “I expect this check not to bounce or else the police will have to get involved.”

“This is a respectable business, Madame,” the clerk said with a glare.

And with that they left, Autumn leading them down the street in the direction of their underground home with her hands stuffed in her pockets. She wanted to keep her hand on her new check, paranoid that it may slip out if she released it for so much as one second.

2 Approximately 297,088.53 American dollars.

They went without any communication until they stopped at the familiar grass-covered hole, when Edgar looked at Autumn and saw her nod in affirmation.

When they sat down inside, covered completely in darkness, Autumn whispered, “The banks are almost certainly closed already, so we’re just going to have to wait until tomorrow morning. Thankfully it’s a weekday.”

“Yeah...” Edgar said.

Autumn sat in silence for the rest of the night, her mind filled with too many concerns to sleep—the foremost being the prospect of being robbed during her sleep. She could also sense that Edgar was still troubled; but what she would do about that, she had no idea. She felt Edgar’s head rest against her knee only a half hour later, signaling his going to sleep, anyway.

She looked down at Edgar sadly and rubbed his dusty skull a few times, feeling him bob up and down over her knee with his heavy breaths.

Poor guy. Must be tired after that whole ordeal, she thought.

Autumn kept looking up above her shoulder at the opening every so often to check how much time had elapsed until she felt Edgar stir awake. At that point she could see a gleam of blue light seep inside, signaling that it was early morning.

“Couldn’t sleep?” he asked.

“No.”

“You want to check if the banks are open or wait to be safe from robbers?”

Autumn paused to deliberate.

“’Twould be safer out in the light than down here in the dark. But if you want more rest, ’twould be better that we wait.”

“I don’t think so.”

“Kay, then let’s go.”

She led them outside and down the street toward the main plaza

again, where the jeweler's was and where she knew a credit union would be. She kept her hands in her pockets, where they'd been for the last eight hours, still wary of robbers. Luckily, she saw that the sky was rather rosy, indicating that 'twould likely be a sunny day, despite the frozen temperature.

"So, uh, which one are you going to?" Edgar asked. "Do you even have an account anywhere? I mean, I would suppose, uh, Syrup would be out of the question..."

"No, and I certainly won't be trying Syrup," Autumn murmured back. "I know there's gotta be a... union around here somewhere."

Edgar nodded in understanding.

They wandered around the plaza for about a half hour—Autumn's nerves on edge and her eyes watching for robbers at every step—before they finally found a shop with the sign, "St. Hermann Credit Union." To their surprise, the light was on inside and, when they tried the door, 'twas unlocked.

Though there was a teller at the desk, there didn't appear to be any customers yet. He gave Autumn a creepy smile that only made her feel more insecure about her check. She cautiously stepped up to the desk.

Autumn was surprised by how easy 'twas to open an account, though she ruminated that it was probably so they could take people's money more quickly. When the teller asked them if they needed anything else about a half hour later, Autumn handed him the check with a heavy heart.

"Wow, you sure struck it rich," the teller said with a chuckle. "I sure wish I had that much."

Autumn decided not to answer him. Luckily, he didn't seem to expect a response, immediately turning to his computer and tapping on a few keys.

"Do you want this in your savings or checking?" he asked.

"Uh... What? No, uh... I want to withdraw this money," Autumn

said.

The teller laughed nervously. “Uh, we’re sorry, Ms. Springer, but we have a three-thousand-point withdraw limit per day. Would you like to withdraw thirty thousand?”

“What? That’s robbery!” Autumn shouted as she pointed an accusatory finger at the teller.

The teller gave another nervous laugh, sitting back farther. “We understand your concerns, but we can assure you that your money will be perfectly secure. We actually hold this policy to keep your money better secured, in case somebody steals your identity and tries to make off with all your money.”

Yeah, sure you do, she thought, but managed to stifle her anger. She knew ‘twould only make things worse.

After a deep breath, she said, “Well then, I’ll withdraw as much as you’ll allow me.”

“Thirty thousand? Okay,” the teller said as he tapped a few keys. Then he pulled counted a few points and handed them to her. She counted them herself and saw that they were thirty thousand.

“Now, what about the rest? Savings or checking?”

“What’s the difference?”

“Savings accrues more interest but you can automatically send bills to checking.”

“Interest? You’re charging me for keeping my money?” Her voice rose a little again, but she managed to stifle it again.

“Oh, no,” the teller said with another laugh that Autumn began to find annoying. “That’s what you *gain*.”

“Gain?” Autumn’s eyes widened. Then her eyes narrowed again. “You mean you pay me to keep money here?”

“Uh... I guess you could think of it that way...”

“Why? What’s the catch?”

“Uh... Well... I guess there is the extremely rare risk that we may go bankrupt, in which case you’d lose your money—but that would

almost certainly never happen.”

I knew there'd be a catch, Autumn grumbled in her head.

“However, even if that happened, the government would insure up to ten million—and honestly, you can check this yourself, nobody has ever lost money from bank failure since the Great Depression.”

Autumn made a mental note to check as soon as she had the chance.

“Well, I hope you won't mind if I check on my account every so often,” Autumn said.

“Oh, actually we send notices every month by mail and email.”

“Good. I'll be watching them,” Autumn said while pointing at him again.

By the time they left, the sun sat much higher up, creating a bright yellow glare that hurt their eyes.

“I must admit I don't know whether I feel more or less safe,” Autumn mumbled as they walked down the street.

“If it makes you feel better, I'm sure they couldn't get away with stealing your money without getting in serious trouble,” Edgar said.

“I dunno... You never know with banks. Besides, how do I know that one guy couldn't just run off with my money? I don't trust that smile.”

“They must have some kind of safeguard against that,” Edgar said. “Otherwise people'd be doing it all the time and they'd never be able to function.”

“I suppose...” Autumn said. “Anyway, there's no point in worrying about it now. What's done is done. I guess things could've gone worse.”

“So, uh... What are you going to do now that you're rich?” Edgar asked with a little giggle. “You want to get something to eat... hopefully not from the trash this time.”

“I'd rather try getting an apartment so I at least have a locked door protecting my money,” Autumn said.

VII.

It actually took Autumn a few days before she could get an apartment, thanks to her credit being ruined by the default on her rent at her previous apartment.

Finally, she managed to find a small apartment room in a seedy neighborhood far off on the eastern side of Boskeopolis with the intention of setting up carefully-hidden hiding places for her valuables that night.

After she finally paid the slumlord his deposit, and he finally handed over the keys, she stepped inside to see a boxy white-walled room—yellow under the tacky light—that looked just like her old room. Perfect.

After a quick inspection—what she was looking for, however, Autumn couldn't quite figure out—she sat down against a wall to rest.

“Is something wrong, Autumn?” Edgar asked as he walked toward her.

“What?” Autumn asked as she looked up at Edgar, surprised. “No, of course not.” She gave a humorless laugh. “I would expect you of anyone to whine at me to take a rest.”

“Well, it's just that... I dunno... I would assume you'd look a lot happier after becoming rich,” Edgar said.

“If the bank doesn't rip me off, I suppose,” Autumn said with a sigh. Of course, she had checked every day when she withdrew her thirty thousand points and saw that they still at least claimed to have her money still.

“If you must know, I suppose I expected it to be more... significant than what happened. At the very least I would have expected to be conscious when I won it. I mean, technically you were the one who found that golden top hat, anyway, by stumbling upon it randomly,

no less. Truly, if you weren't stupid enough to just give me it and I weren't so selfish enough to take it, you could've kept it for yourself."

That was the aspect that formed the most confused mixture in her mind. Normally, she didn't come to accepting unearned wealth—only that which she stole by her own hands held value in her eyes.

But then, she knew refusing would be futile—what would Edgar do with it, anyway? He never seemed to want anything. Besides, she could at least use the money to finally try the more expensive ventures she'd wanted to attempt, but always lacked the funds for, and possibly multiply this wealth.

"Twas a middle ground she could accept.

"'Twas your idea to check the landfill, though."

She held her forehead in her hand. "Yeah, I don't even remember that, though, my mind was so fevered."

"I should point out that I, uh, didn't really find it by searching," Edgar said. "I, uh, just happened to trip as I walked back to the fence."

"That's even worse. I mean, I've done so much for nothing and now I just happen to find fifty million randomly through someone else." She shrugged. "That just seems stupid, truly."

"Maybe it's a gift from karma or something," Edgar said tepidly. He knew 'twas a stretch that such an argument would soothe Autumn.

"No karma would ever give me anything," Autumn replied.

Then she stood. "Anyway, there's no use whining about it. I suppose I'd better prepare my security areas, since I know that flimsy lock won't keep anyone out."

"Need any help?" Edgar asked.

"If you want to," Autumn said as she looked up at the ceiling.

"Well, since you at least shared in spinning the wheel of our arbitrary jackpot, is there anything you want out of this?" Autumn asked. "Other than foo... shelter, of course. I would think you'd want

at least half of it.”

Edgar shook his head. “I don’t need anything.”

“I didn’t ask if you needed anything; I asked if you *wanted* anything.”

“Uh, no. Thank you, though. You’d make much better use of it than I ever could.”

“Well, yes, for *me*. But what do you get out of the deal?” ‘Twas a question Autumn had asked before and knew she’d get nothing from it.

Instead, Edgar asked, “Well, I mean... What do you get from it?”

“Success, the ability to gain even more money, many things,” Autumn said.

She also quietly added security and general well-being to that invisible list, two qualities she hadn’t appreciated until recently.

“Well... Can’t I feel successful without the money?” Edgar asked.

“You can *feel* however you want, but that doesn’t...”

Or maybe it does... Autumn thought. *Surely I would not argue that money gained unearned is the same as money earned; it’s the earning that is important. Then, can’t it also be that money gained earned is the same as money earned lost? Even if he doesn’t “own” it physically, isn’t that mental ownership still there, no matter where it lies physically?*

Of course, neither of us earned this money, so neither of us is successful.

Then she added, “But since I hold the money, I can make the decisions for how it’s used, and thus further money gained from it, which adds to my mental success, but not yours, since you do not share in the decision-making.”

Edgar squirmed, his head bent as far downward as it could. *Defense mode, it seems*, Autumn mused.

“It’s... it’s not important, anyway. It’s stupid.”

Autumn turned to Edgar. “No, please tell me. I’m legitimately

curious. I... I know so little about what goes on in your mind—though I suppose this is mutual.”

“Well... You like real-life evidence and that stuff, right?”

“Okay, now I’m even more intrigued. Continue.”

“Well... Let me just say that... Watch your money and other stuff closely and see that... you’ll never see me take any of it.”

“I never thought that you would...”

Now that she thought about it, this was an irregularity. *People’s normal function was to try to stifle others’ power—in the form of material wealth—as much as possible to gain more power for one’s self. Edgar’s providing evidence that he would never do this to me, of course, but more importantly that I would never expect him to do so. I suppose he could still do so—and one would expect me to still expect it through complicated layers of subterfuge. But the prospect of him doing so would be about as likely as gravity suddenly not working.*

“What importance does this have to success?” Autumn asked.

“It’s stupid...”

“No. No, I must know, whether the payoff is stupid or not. Tell me.”

“Well... It’s true that you... that you trust me, right?”

“I suppose...” Autumn looked down at the ground herself as an automatic response to rumination. “Yes. I remember you said that was important to you for some reason years ago. I suppose you did ‘succeed’ in that then.” She looked back up at Edgar. “Why is this useful to success? I would think...” Her eyebrows narrowed. “Unless you plan to use that trust later to strike strongly. But why point this out then?”

“Of course not,” Edgar blurted, holding his hands out as if he needed to physically defend himself against such an insinuation. “That would ruin the whole point of it.”

“Then what is the point of it?” Autumn asked.

“Well... What is the point of money?”

“As I said before, power over others.”

“Well... Doesn’t trust do that?”

“Yes, only if it’s taken advantage of. But that only works if you didn’t tell me your plan.”

Edgar shook his head. “I wouldn’t benefit in any way from that. First, even if I didn’t say anything, this... supposed chance would only work once, right?”

“Yes.”

“And you could easily take the money back from me—money I have no use for, as you’ve seen by knowing me so long—and I’d be left with nothing again.”

Autumn nodded. “You might escape where I can’t find you.”

“Where would I hide?”

Autumn’s eyes twisted in thought.

“You did think this whole theory of yours through in detail, haven’t you?”

“I... I learned from the best,” Edgar said, shyly staring down at the ground. “And... you know... I would’ve never learned that if you never trusted me enough to be your partner.”

Autumn’s eyes averted to the side, also reflexively. This theory seemed to be leading to unorthodox conclusions.

“So... so you’re saying trust itself has inherent benefits?”

“Y-yes.”

“But here’s the problem,” Autumn said, eying Edgar again: “Couldn’t *I* abuse that trust to exploit you for any gains you might create? That’s why distrust is so important, after all: as a balance against other distrustful actions.”

“Why would you ask that if... Remember what you said earlier? You’d be blowing your ‘scheme’ by saying this aloud.”

Autumn’s eyes widened. *Well... of course I wouldn’t mind saying this aloud, because I don’t plan to do so... In fact, I’ve been worried that I might accidentally do this.*

“And why would you offer me half of the money you know you could’ve kept for yourself easily,” Edgar asked.

“So then... *you* trust *me*?” Autumn asked.

Edgar nodded.

“And this creates an equilibrium of trust between us, ensuring that neither of these are broken,” Autumn added.

But her eyes twisted incredulously again. “But how does this help you succeed?”

“Well... let’s look at the golden top hat we found. Could I have found it if you hadn’t said something about the landfill?”

“And I couldn’t have found it if I hadn’t told you about it, because of my weaknesses at the time,” Autumn added with a nod. “Interestingly, I would add that I for some reason trusted you to carry any wealth you found back to me without running off with it.”

“Exactly.”

“So that’s where the success comes from,” Autumn said with more nods. “Hmm... That is an intriguing idea. I’d considered a vague similarity to the idea ever since I took you up as my partner, but I’d never understood the full logic of the idea until now. Still, it seems to check out.”

She stared back up at the ceiling, suddenly remembering the job they were going to do.

“Anyway, we’ll have to go out and get some materials. Might as well get something to eat while I’m at it.”

“I’m sorry I wasted so much of your time with that nonsense...” Edgar said.

“You’re wrong. This was actually a great use of time. It’s settled many questions I’ve held,” Autumn said as she walked to the door and opened it.

They stepped out the apartment, climbed down to the bottom floor, and walked down the street. By this point the sun was already going down, filling the sky with pink-orange clouds.

Though Autumn was wearing a jacket and Edgar his thicker robe, they both felt chilly in the winter night, leading them to walk close to each other, holding hands, to better heat each other.

Another way mutual actions create gains that could not be gotten individually, I suppose, Autumn mused.

#BOSK-BIT-AF00A
THROWN AWAY

J. J. W. Mezun | December 10, 2013

While walking down the sidewalk in front of her apartment, Autumn noticed the recycling bin standing on the curb, which was odd, since it was recycling day that day. Even odder, though, she noticed Edgar sitting inside, with his legs hanging over the edge and the lid hanging over his head like a cap.

“Edgar, why are you sitting in a recycling bin?” Autumn asked when she stopped in front of it.

After a moment of staring down guiltily and fidgeting fidgetedly, he said, “I’m hoping maybe someone could salvage me into something useful.”

After a short pause, Autumn leapt up into the neighboring bin.

“Uh, Autumn... You know that’s a garbage can, right?”

Without turning to him, Autumn replied, “I’m not as optimistic as you are.”

#BOSK-BIT-AF10B

CTHULHU STRIKES

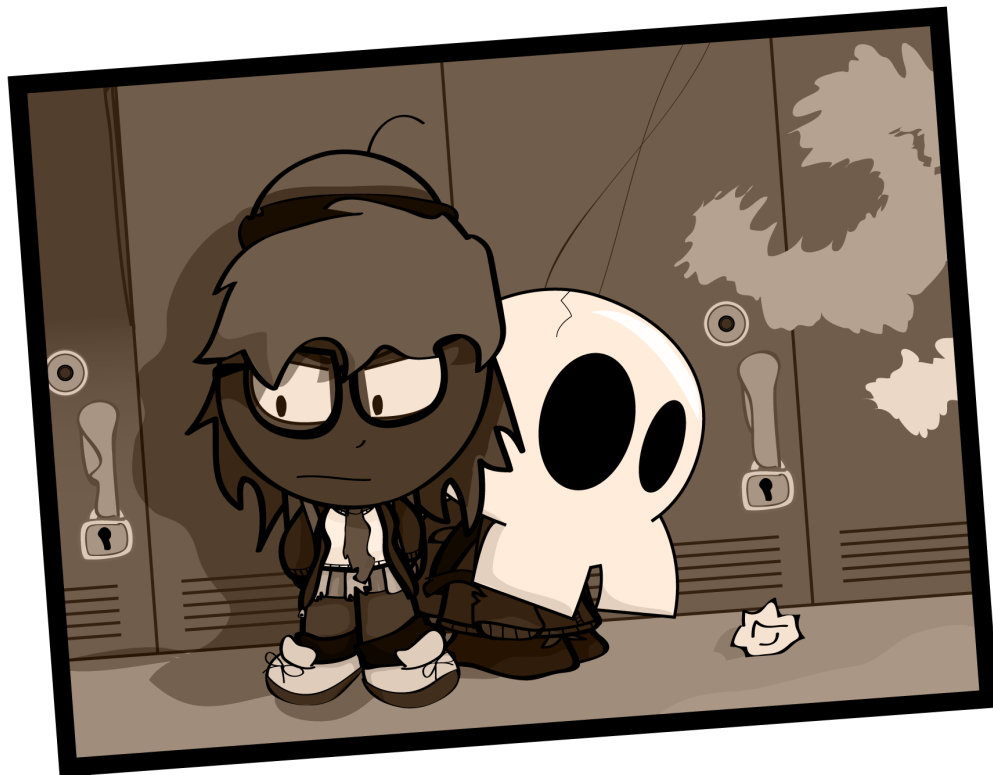
J. J. W. Mezun | November 20, 2013



#BOSK-AG0206-PAST

THE PAST IS PAST PASSING BUS PASSES TO PASSERBYS

J. J. W. Mezun | January 1, 2014



I.

Autumn was called into the Principal's office yet again when a teacher caught her rifling through a backpack a classmate had left behind as everyone went off to lunch—everyone except Autumn, who always lagged for opportunities to swipe anything left behind without being spotted.

Well, this time she didn't factor in—or rather, judged the risk worth it—the teacher returning because she'd forgotten her assignments, which was when said teacher saw her bent down, digging through a gray-and-black Starsun backpack.

'Twas only when the teacher loudly coughed that Autumn raised her eyes from the backpack and up at the teacher's questioning stare. Autumn didn't move an inch; she simply stared up at her without concern.

"Madame Springer, that isn't your backpack, is it," the teacher asked.

"Why, yes, it is," Autumn calmly lied.

The teacher pointed behind Autumn. "Then what is that on your back."

"My other backpack," Autumn answered.

"Autumn, I know you don't have two backpacks," she said.

Autumn shrugged. "And whose backpack is it? The invisible man's?"

"I believe that's one of your classmates' who accidentally left it behind," the teacher said.

"Then he clearly didn't care about it that much," Autumn said as she continued digging through the backpack.

“And how would you feel if you left your backpack behind and someone stole it?”

“Who cares how I would feel?” Autumn answered. “If I’m dumb enough to leave my stuff behind wouldn’t I deserve to have it stolen? I would simply steal it back; and if I couldn’t steal it back, well, wouldn’t I deserve to not have it?”

“You know this is serious, right?” the teacher said. “You could get kicked out for this kind of behavior.”

Autumn didn’t respond. ‘Twas a statement of fact, not a question, and thus didn’t require a response.

The teacher sighed and pointed at the open door behind her. “You’ll need to go to the Principal’s office. And don’t think about blowing it off, because I’ve already called the Principal and told him you’re coming.”

“I’ll go,” Autumn said with a nod.

She stood up and casually walked out into the hall and toward the Principal’s office with her hands in her pockets, feeling the leather wallet she’d pilfered.

Thankfully that idiot hadn’t considered me having already absconded something from the backpack, Autumn thought. I feared my leaving without protest might arouse suspicions, but it seemed to have satisfied her so that she would not pester me further, as I’d hoped.

Autumn walked into the main office and stood near the front desk until another student behind the desk told her, “He’s ready to see you back there,” with a look of nervousness, as if she were afraid Autumn would blame her for her punishment.

But Autumn simply nodded and walked down the designated hall. Since this was nowhere near the first time she’d been sent here, she already knew where it was.

Principle Barter’s office was a small boxy room with a short gray plastic desk covered with an old computer, piles of disorganized

papers, and a wobbly little plastic chair for guests. When Autumn entered, she sat down on it and distracted her head to the right while Barter typed on his keyboard.

Barter—a short, balding, hefty man with eyes covered by large, round glasses—noticed Autumn sit down and turned away from his computer and toward her in his chair, creating a creaking sound in the chair underneath him as he moved. He clasped his hands together and leaned them forward over the desk while he stared at Autumn with a polite smile, slightly tilting his head. Autumn met this with a glazed stare, her arms hanging limply over the back of the chair.

“Madame Springer. Would you be offended if I guessed that you were brought here for being caught stealing again?” Barter asked, jokingly trying to emulate Autumn’s professional diction.

“No,” Autumn said. “Twould be accurate.”

“Now, I know you have some financial difficulties at home, Madame Springer,” Principal Barter said; “but surely there are better ways to get assistance than stealing.”

“That’s none of your concern,” Autumn said, adding in the back of her mind, *or at least your fake concern.*

“And why do you think that?” he asked.

Autumn gave him a strange look, as if he’d asked why poking oneself in the eye is a bad idea.

“Because you’re not me, nor do you know me, and the possibility of having authentic concern for so many people is thin,” Autumn said.

“If we didn’t care about you would we waste our time talking to you,” he said.

“Considering you have to for your paycheck, yes,” Autumn said. “And anyway, your concern is unasked for, and thus it’d be better for both of us if you saved that concern for other matters—perhaps your

own problems.” She didn’t add that she felt he needed it—having Principal as one’s career not being what she’d consider the height of success—since she knew the offense it might create would not be worth the slight increase in persuasive power it’d create for her argument.

Figuring he wasn’t going to convince Autumn any time soon—he never was able to in any of the various meetings they’d had before—Barter moved on to another subject: “Anyway, it is our concern when our students have their stuff stolen. Do you understand how it might make them feel?”

“That is not *my* concern,” Autumn said.

Barter sighed. “It *will* be your concern when you get expelled. You know this is serious business, right?”

“I do,” Autumn said with a nod. “I’ll have you know that I take thieving very seriously.”

“But don’t you think there might be better ways to use your talents?” Barter asked.

“Considering my talents are based primarily on my thieving, no.”

“Look, you can’t seriously expect to make a career out of stealing. It’s illegal.”

“That doesn’t make it impossible,” Autumn said. “That doesn’t stop gangs or businesses from thriving off law-breaking. I just need to learn to get caught less as they do. Now, are we finished? This is cutting into my lunch, and I think we can both agree that this conversation will lead nowhere useful.”

Barter’s smile melted into a look of sadness. They had this same conversation dozens of times already, and it always ended the same way. He knew there was nothing he could do to stop her from stealing.

He leaned in closer with a look of grave sincerity in his eyes. “Madame Springer, look, I know you think this is all fun and games, but you can’t keep going around doing this. We may not be able to

expel you because the loss of your grades would ruin the school, but there will come a time when you're arrested and put in jail; and you're too smart to throw your life away like that."

"I disagree with both points and neither of us have any evidence to back up either of our arguments, so let's save time by agreeing to disagree and end this time-wasting conversation, please," Autumn said. "I have far too much planning to do for my 'fun and games' to spend here."

Barter simply stared at her grimly without any idea of what to say. Of course, he'd met plenty of students like this over the decades he'd held this job. He'd watched them as one watched a slasher movie, dreadfully waiting as life sneaked behind them with a knife, ready to slit their necks at any moment.

Barter took off his glasses and sighed as he rubbed his face. "I just wish you would think about what I said, Madame Springer; but, yes, you may go."

"Thank you," Autumn said perfunctorily with a nod, and then rose and left.

II.

The halls were congested with various students sitting against walls, chewing the fat while chewing fatty food. But Autumn spent no attention on them; instead, she made straight for the cafeteria and stood at the back of the shortest line, which today was for mushrooms dowsed in honey syrup with Carbo cookies and Able juice on the side.

Every day Autumn would sell her daily free lunch at a price slightly lower than the regular price, usually to the same few people who were always hungry for a second meal (she made a mental note to avoid stealing from these people—at least not in a way that might

risk her getting caught—so that they would remain neutral enough toward her to keep buying from her, as opposed to some of her classmates who outright despised her because they lost an expensive cellphone or iPod to Autumn’s pickpocketing). When that meal was sold, she would then sit at an inconspicuous booth near a back nook and devise plans for prospective heists while keeping her eyes scalloped for any stray trays of nourishment abandoned for her to snag and sell.

This afternoon would turn out to be an anomaly when she went up to one of her customary customers—a student one year younger than Autumn with short moppish hair, a Hawaiian shirt and a large mouth—hiding behind bushes outside to sell him her lunch.

“Well, I’ve already had my second meal, but sure, I could use a third.”

“Oh, do I have competition now?” Autumn asked in a faux-jovial tone, though dully; but behind this she was truly curious about this arrogant newbie trying to invade the industry and purloin her profits.

‘Twould be quite interesting crushing her or him, Autumn thought.

Paying no mind to Autumn’s usual quiet detachment as she stared up at some random elm trees glowing under the afternoon sun, the other student shook his head.

“Some little weird kid in a large puffy jacket came up to me and offered to get me lunch for some reason. I guess he overheard me complaining about you taking too long.”

His face slumped in mild disgust. “When I asked him why he was giving it to me, he said ‘twas because he wasn’t hungry, and all I could see were these glowing red orbs of light surrounded by darkness where his face was supposed to be.”

He shivered. “He freaked me out so much I tricked him into getting some book from the library for me and I hid around here.”

But Autumn wasn't too interested, her thoughts distracted more by this mysterious student giving away free lunches.

Hmm... He sounds as if he'd be gullible enough to give me his lunch every day, which would increase my profits exponentially, Autumn thought. *But do I truly want to go down that route?*

Of course, if she did indeed, she still needed to think of a crafty means to do so, and quickly.

The other student suddenly remembered who he was talking to, and then gave her a stare of stern warning. "Hey, you're not going to go tell him where I'm hiding, are you? I know you like to do anything for money."

"No, I was planning on snatching his daily lunch," Autumn said, figuring 'twould be better to tell the truth, not wanting this customer to have needless ill will toward her.

Autumn was about to go, but the other student interrupted her:

"Wait, I want to ask something real quick."

"What?"

"So you do anything for money, right?" he asked with a wry smile.

"I suppose," Autumn said.

"So, would you even have sex with some really ugly dude for money?" he asked.

"Why? Did you want to be my first customer?" Autumn asked, unable to stifle her tight frown and glare of disgust.

"Oh, god no!" he said with a cringe. "I was just curious."

"Well, anyway, I have business to attend to," Autumn quickly mumbled before speed-walking away back toward the cafeteria, silently muttering, "Jackass," to herself along the way.

III.

She didn't find the strange student anywhere in the library, but she did eventually run into him in one of the hallways, walking next to a short, skinny freshman with thick bangs, who was nodding absentmindedly as he glanced side-to-side warily, as if he were ensnared and searching for a way to escape.

Sure enough, he was covered entirely in a thick coat, shrouding his face in pure blackness under the hood, save two glowing red balls of light. But the way he slouched and aimed his shaking eyes straight at the floor, Autumn thought he appeared more pathetic than petrifying.

She could hear the middle of this mysterious student's nervous sputtering grow louder as she neared them: "—classes do you take next?"

"Uh... math, I guess," the other student answered in a bored tone. His eyes briefly flickered on Autumn walking toward them, and then continued searching around the area.

Autumn abruptly hesitated. *I still don't know about this... Am I truly going to stoop this low?*

Look, we're strapped for cash. We only have two years till graduation and you're still not even close to self-sustainability. Are you truly going to let this potentially large gain go because of some minor uncouthness? After all, it couldn't be worse than what you've done in your earlier heists. Dishonesty's what it's all about.

Yes, but that was honest dishonesty. These dickbags already know I hate them; this is a creepier manipulation—one that's less likely to succeed, too.

None of your plans are likely to succeed. It's all based on risk. And besides, if you don't care about these dickbags, then let them make fools of themselves. It never stopped them from doing the same to you. Remember, you're a piece of shit on purpose: because that's how you get ahead. So then just throw away that final inconsistent shred of pity for these dopes and push to your full potential.

*But it's not pity that's troubling, so much as the indignity of it.
Superstition. Selling government-funded lunch is hardly dignified,
either. How is this different?*

Then a direr uncertainty sprouted:
*And what if he rejects my offer? 'Twould put quite a dent in my
reputation.*

*He gave away his food to that one asshole before. He clearly has no
standards.*

*Those still might be higher standards than I need. Besides, I still
don't know how I'd carry this out. Do I just waltz up to them and say,
"Hey, give me your food while I pretend to be your friend?"*

That was the original plan. However, this plan was
circumstantially changed when she felt herself suddenly bump into
them, being too distracted by these thoughts to notice her
environment.

"Sorry," she mumbled as she clutched the mysterious student's
arm and helped him up.

The mysterious student raised his glowing eyes in shock when he
saw her do this.

"Uh... that's okay..." he said.

The other student also stared at her, shocked—and then an
ecstatic smile appeared on his face.

"Well, don't let me interrupt you two from meeting," he said, and
quickly walked off before any of them could even acknowledge him,
staring forward in horror at the boredom he had to endure with that
kid.

Autumn stood there in awkward pause as her mind tossed file
cabinets around to find ideas for the next proper statement. Luckily
for her, the mysterious student supplied it for her:

"Oh... Um, hello!" he weakly exclaimed. "Uh, my name is Edgar...
Edgar Winters. What is your name?"

“Autumn Springer,” Autumn said as she started to take Edgar down the hall with her, her arm still clutching his arm as if helping someone with a broken leg walk. “You look lonely. You have any friends?”

“Oh... no,” Edgar said as he shook his head. “But I do hope to make some. Are you looking for some?”

Perfect, Autumn thought: He’s one of them wimpy types; so he shouldn’t be too hard to convince me to give me his food—especially if he easily gave it to that one swabber back there.

There was still a tinge of uncertainty surrounding what would be an enduring heist. Autumn had long since begrudgingly recognized the need to exploit others in order to gain wealth, but they were usually on the periphery. This was the closest she’d ever allowed herself to get to someone, and she worried over the effect ‘twould have on her work.

The... properness of the venture, too, still festered in her mind.

‘Twas the right thing to do, though, she reminded herself. That’s why he won and you failed, after all. The same logic applies here.

I remember...she thought grimly.

“Why yes, I was,” Autumn lied; “but I’m not looking for any loser to be my friend. No, there’s something... special about you...”

Autumn wasn’t sure what she was supposed to mean by that; but she knew she needed an excuse to blow off any other idiots who might want to bug her. Besides, ‘twould make Edgar keener to help her, though she felt it was a little too sycophantic, which kind of disgusted her a little.

Then again, business is all about jerking the haves off so they give what they have to you, she thought.

Pathetic business. No, you fucked up. Became frazzled by a hastily planned endeavor and overcompensated. It’s too late to take it back, but we must be more careful in the future.

But while Edgar seemed to get excited by what Autumn said, he also looked afraid, and he stared at Autumn curiously.

“What do you mean I’m... special?” Edgar asked as he held his hood down tighter.

“Uh...” Autumn stared straight forward, trying to think of an answer to give, when her thoughts were suddenly interrupted by whispering she heard to her right: “Hey, kid, can I speak to you for a second.”

She swung her head rightward and saw someone whose face she recognized, but couldn’t remember his name. He was tall, skinny, had thick, moussed hair and thick, round glasses. His eyes looked stern; and when they temporarily flicked angrily up at her, she remembered who he was (or at least one important thing about him): He was one of the rich kids she often stole from. She remembered that she specifically liked to steal from him, not only because he would leave his stuff lying around all the time, but also because of some indignant remarks he’d made about her that she couldn’t quite recall now.

Edgar, who of course knew nothing about any of this, only stared worriedly at this stranger. “It’s... it’s not about the hood is it?”

But before the stranger could answer, Autumn loudly blurted, “What? There’s no rule against hoods in the hallways. You’re not trying to fill this poor kid’s head with lies, now, are you?”

He glared up at her and replied, “No, I don’t think you’ll need any help with that.”

“Listen, kid, I’m just warning you: Madame Springer here is pretty infamous around this school. You can ask anyone if you don’t believe me. She steals from everyone around here. Don’t be fooled by her street-urchin-like appearance.”

Autumn stood silently with an impatient expression. She knew outspoken denial would only feed fire to suspicions.

The other student looked back at Edgar. “I’m just trying to warn you.”

And with that Autumn and Edgar continued walking down the hall as the other student walked past them. Autumn paid little attention to Edgar still caught in her right arm; instead her eyes wandered around the putrid yellow, green, and gray cracked walls while her mind focused on how to keep the rest of the zoo from sabotaging her plans.

She’d expected Edgar to bring up the other student’s charges, ask her if they were true, which was why she frantically constructed the most persuasive answer she could; but he never did. He simply stared down at the gaudy ground as he followed her.

Edgar did finally attempt to make small talk with Autumn—the same as with the other student: “What classes do you take?”, “What do you do after school?”, “Have you lost any lives yet to bottomless chasms?” The usual. Autumn carefully answered all of these questions while offering the least incriminating information she could. She still didn’t say anything about her thieving work, though she knew he’d figure it out eventually.

Then again, perhaps he doesn’t care. He hasn’t brought it up yet, she thought. For some reason, it only made her curiouser about what this abnormal specimen of hers was thinking about the situation, the business-based detachment she felt easing the normal aversion she’d feel to associating with someone else.

After all, she rationalized, he’ll eventually find out and be pissed off, anyway, so it’s not as if what he’d think should matter.

The bell rang. Autumn and Edgar had the same class for next period, so they walked over to Edgar’s locker—Autumn always kept her backpack with her, not trusting some government-controlled locker to protect her valuables from one of her enemies—and then to Room 1704, where they had “10th Grade World Literature.”

Autumn never liked this class much because she couldn't hide out in the back of the class and do her "real" work. Instead everyone's desks were arranged in a circle, where the teacher could clearly see if she was doing something else during class. So Autumn had to sit still and pretend to pay attention to the class—a skill she'd mastered, which involved turning to people when she heard them begin to speak and moving her eyes down from their eye contact every so often so she could pretend that she was pondering what they were saying—while she secretly thought about other money-making schemes. She did half-listen to what the teacher said, though; only so she wouldn't be completely lost when she was inevitably called on to say something. The gist of it was that they were learning about "postmodernism," specifically "breaking the fourth wall," which was when obnoxious writers think it's really funny to write something weird or stupid and then point out how they wrote something weird or stupid.

Although Edgar overall enjoyed the class, he didn't enjoy the beginning when the teacher forced him to take his hood off.

The teacher sighed. "I'm sorry, Edgar, but the school rules require you to not have your hood on during class."

Autumn felt awkward in this situation, not being used to pretending to be anyone's friend before. On one finger, she felt she was probably expected to stand up for the loser; on the other, she didn't want to needlessly net herself extra scrutiny. She calculated that Edgar was not assertive enough to reject her fake friendship if she did nothing, so she temporarily pretended that neither of them was there, her mind returning to her plans.

Edgar, who didn't dare disobey the teacher for fear of being cooked in a giant dunce cap full of chili—standard protocol in high school—dutifully pulled his hood off, revealing a large gray skull with two big black holes for eyes.

“See, Edgar, that wasn’t too bad, now was it,” the teacher said.

Then she opened her copy of *The Catcher and the Rye*. Seeing that the minor drama was now over, the other students turned away from Edgar and opened their books as well, the event soon fading from their memories.

Autumn herself used this cue to take out her book she stole from the library—attempting to ignore the embarrassing racial slurs and penile artwork featured inside—and pretended to focus on it. She momentarily moved her eyes off it to glance sideways at Edgar, just to see what all the fuss was about his appearance. Though it briefly intrigued her, she quickly turned back to the book all the same.

IV.

The hallways were filled with gossipy whispering:

“Hey, did you hear that Marvin got Samantha pregnant?”

“No... That’s impossible.”

And then another woman walked down the hall toward them.

“Hey, did you hear that Marvin got Samantha pregnant?”

“I am Samantha.”

“Oh... Well, did you hear about you getting pregnant yet?”

There was even some gossip about Autumn befriending Edgar, which actually has some relevance to the story.

“Hey, you know that antisocial woman who steals everyone’s stuff?”

“Yeah?”

“Apparently she’s hanging out with that weird kid in the large jacket.”

“Wait, who cares about this? I mean, our existence is based entirely on whispering news about other people that everyone already knows. What kind of cruel gods rule this world?”

And so these two unnamed people were obliterated from existence, never to be read about again now that their purpose has been fulfilled.

Edgar needed little convincing to deliver his free lunch to Autumn, who carried it around with her own lunch, asking people to buy them, including that one large-mouthed guy I still haven't named yet.

"Hey, large-mouthed guy, you want to buy an extra meal? I have two of them here—fifty cents each."

"My name's not 'large-mouthed guy,'" large-mouthed guy corrected.

"So?" Autumn asked. "You're not important enough to earn a name. Now, do you want to buy or not?"

Large-mouthed guy couldn't argue with this logic, and he bought all three meals, even though there were only two of them. When Autumn tried to correct him on this, he refused to let himself be constricted by reality and adamantly paid Autumn the full 150 cents.

After stuffing a few imaginary fries into his mouth, he said through his loudly munching gums, "So, are you just hanging with this freaky hooded guy because he gives you his lunch?"

Autumn glared at him, while Edgar only stared down at the dewy grass in embarrassment.

"No, of course not," Autumn grunted as she crossed her arms. "I'll have you know that I and, um... um..."

Autumn made a mental note to practice remembering his name yesterday, but was so caught up in her school work and her heist work that she forgot to do it—and now she couldn't remember it. After all of the risky stunts she'd done to steal people's possessions, this was the first time she'd ever failed something so mind-numbingly easy. She stared forward with widening eyes of horror,

trying her hardest not to even peek in Edgar's direction, while her hands withered down to her sides.

She turned around and muttered, "Well, I have business to attend to," and then quickly walked into the cafeteria to sit at one of her usual tables in the back.

I can't do this anymore, she thought. It's too pathetic. It'll be worth starving on the street years from now if I avoid becoming that bastard.

She sat her backpack next to her and dug around inside for her pencils and papers when she heard Edgar slide in the chair in front of her. She focused all of her attention on writing, too embarrassed to look at Edgar, all the while thinking, *If he's pathetic enough to continue hanging around me it's his own fault.*

Edgar leaned into the table to see what Autumn was writing, only to realize he couldn't understand any of it, other than that it involved what looked like a diagram of the school and a bunch of lines drawn around it.

"So, do you always sell your lunch? I mean, every day?" Edgar asked.

"Huh?" Autumn muttered, while taking the time to glance around the table now that she remembered to look out for abandoned meals. Without looking at Edgar, she said, "Yeah."

"Well... I mean, what do you eat?" he asked.

"I don't know. Nothing."

"Isn't that bad for you, though?" Edgar asked.

"There are lots of things 'bad' for you. I only do 'bad' things that help me become successful. Maybe when I'm rich in the fantasy bizarro mirror of this reality, I'll be able to worry about such luxuries as eating. Until then, shut it."

They both sat there with not a sound between them except the scratching of Autumn's pencil on paper. But the more Autumn saw Edgar sit there the more revolted she felt at herself.

“Look, I know it’s quite stupid of me to forget your name, being so ‘special’ and all, but I’m truly bad at names, okay,” Autumn muttered gruffly.

“Well, I mean... we only just met yesterday,” Edgar said.

Autumn couldn’t help thinking the amount of denial one would have to have to say something so pathetic, which only made her want to puke even more.

This time Autumn looked up, directly into Edgar’s red glowing eyes and pointed a finger toward him.

“Look, in case you’re a total dolt, I am just pretending to befriend you for your free meal; but I can’t use you anymore. It’s just... it’s just not right. Any money I steal through you is worthless. So I think you’d be wise to leave.” Autumn waved her hand signaling him to go.

“Oh, well, that’s okay...”

Autumn moved her pencil around, pretending to continue working, while in reality she wondered why the skeleton kid was still around.

Edgar sensed this irritation and said, “Uh... Do you still want me to leave?”

Autumn nodded. “Yes, thank you.”

“Uh, okay... Sorry for all of that trouble...” Edgar mumbled as he looked down at the table. After a minute’s awkward silence as he puzzled over something more intelligent to say, he slid out and walked away.

Autumn squeezed her pencil tightly, somehow angered even further by Edgar’s docile reaction.

V

Most of her fellow students were even less happy with Autumn since she broke off their business relationship—not because they felt bad for him, but because now he went back to annoying everyone else. For the braver students they could just yell at him until he slunk

away; but the more polite students, they had to make excuses to get away from him.

This was especially hard for the two or three shy losers scattered outside during lunch who were too nervous to tell Edgar they preferred being shy losers. One of them couldn't take the awkward silence and heavy breathing of being around Edgar so much that he'd impaled one of his eyes with a fork for an excuse to spend the rest of lunch in the nurse's area; but then Edgar followed him there to see if he was okay. So his next plan was to whisper to the nurse that Edgar was the one who stabbed him and Edgar was thrown into Mt. Volcocoa for an hour as punishment—standard protocol in high school.

Tomorrow's lunch break, Edgar was walking down a long hall of rusty gray-green lockers, trying to find more people to befriend, when he noticed a tall woman in a blue basketball jersey whose eyes were aimed sharply at him. He waved nervously and skipped over to her with a, "Oh, hello. My name is Edgar. What's yours?"

"Melissa," she said. "Hey, you hang around with that Autumn bitch, right?"

"Uh... no. At least I don't think so..." Edgar sputtered out.

"What do you mean 'you don't think so'? You either do or you don't," she said. "I left my iPhone with all of my pics and shit in it in my locker, and about a minute ago I found my locker hanging open with my iPhone missing, even though I sure as hell remember it not being open when I last left it. Now I know that bitch is the one who always goes around stealing people's shit. Now where is she?"

Edgar began to shake, his thin bony hands covered by his bulky sleeves glued to his chest.

"Uh... I haven't seen her today, but I do have her next period and I can tell her what you said."

"Tell her it'll be the last time she ever steals," Melissa said.

And with that Edgar continued walking on past her at a speedy pace, nervously glancing behind him until he was safely past the next corner and he was satisfied that she'd let him go in peace.

Edgar dashed over to the cafeteria and searched around until he saw Autumn sitting at an empty table near the back corner and sneaked into the opposite seat, ducking his head in hopes of hiding behind the back of his chair in case Melissa came by. Autumn could see him appear in the corner of her eye, but she refused to take her eyes off of her paper and pretended to ignore him.

"Autumn, did you recently break into a locker, by chance?" Edgar whispered.

This, however, seemed important enough for Autumn to look up at him, earlier expecting him to be here for something stupid. With a glance of suspicion she asked, "Why? Was your locker broken into?"

"No, but some truly strong person's was and she said she wasn't very happy about it," Edgar squeaked.

"You'd be surprised to find that most people aren't happy about their possessions being stolen," Autumn replied.

"So... so did you take it?" Edgar said.

"I'm not sure. Probably," Autumn said as she leaned her head into her right arm. "Walking down here from third period, I did see a loosely-opened locker, pried it open, and stole an iPhone from it. So, yes, 'twas likely me. Why?"

"She, um... she said 'twould be the last time you'd ever steal again..." Edgar gulped.

"Ah, a tough one, then," Autumn nodded. "Yes, they're always risky ones. Not the first one I've dealt with, however."

"Well, I mean... how did you deal with the others?" Edgar asked.

"Oh, they never do much, actually," Autumn said. "Most I was able to trick into believing I didn't take anything from them. I have ways of hiding my treasures, let me just say. Some just pummel me

or yell at the authorities, who are never able to find anything on me; but none of them have ever killed me yet.”

“But... but what if this one does?” Edgar asked.

Autumn shrugged. “Well, then she does and that’s that.”

“Aren’t you worried about what she might do to you?” Edgar asked.

“How would worrying benefit me?” Autumn asked as she picked her pencil back up. “Now, if you’ll excuse me, I still have work I need to do.”

Autumn did, however, make use of this tip by lying low during breaks, sticking near large crowds while walking through the halls and spending most of her lunch in her emergency hiding place: a secret hole under the school she’d found two years ago and covered with a pile of inconspicuous wood planks. Since Autumn didn’t share any classes with this Melissa student, she had no run-ins with her for the next couple of days. She just had to hope Melissa would soon forget about the whole ordeal, as most did.

But ‘twas clear the next day that Melissa was still after her. She hunted for Autumn all over the hallways, but could only find Edgar, who was not lying low, but instead went around introducing himself to everyone. She picked him up by the back of his coat by surprise when he was talking with one of the students and turned him to face her bitter frown.

“Okay, where is she hiding?” she asked.

“I... I don’t know...” Edgar squeaked. “I told you... we don’t hang around during lunch anymore...”

“Yeah, but you also told me you have next period with her,” Melissa said as she glanced around the hallways suspiciously. “Now I want you to sneak her backpack and deliver it to me tomorrow, okay?”

“What?”

“What? That shit’s irreplaceable. You think she cares about *that*? Besides, she deserves it for taking other people’s crap all the time. What does she think she is, queen of the world? And you said yourself that you don’t hang out with her anymore, so why do you care?”

“I, um... I don’t know if I can steal people’s stuff, though...”

“It’s not stealing if you’re taking what’s already been taken. You know that rat doesn’t have anything valuable that she didn’t pilfer.”

“Somehow I think she would say the same thing...” Edgar gulped.

She shook him up a little with one hand and pointed menacingly with the other.

“Look...” she began, trying to keep control of her temper. “I need that phone and I’m not going to let her get away with it like everyone else at this lazy school. Now, the way I see it, you have a choice here: you alone have the choice to do the right thing, or you can help her do wrong by doing nothing. And I have no qualms with hurting people who abet criminals.”

The bell rang and Melissa dropped Edgar back to the ground, her face softening as she began to feel guilty about the harshness of these actions.

He’s gotta learn now that everyone’s actions have consequences. If he’s fine with standing around letting others get victimized all so he can save his sorry behind, well, then maybe it’s time to give him a taste of it, she assured herself.

As soon as Edgar gained control of his body again, he scurried away to room 1704, this time looking all around him in all directions, fearful of any random danger that might be hiding somewhere.

As he entered the room, he saw that Autumn was already present, her attention still rapt on her plans. He scurried over right next to her right ear, which was enough of a disturbance to pry Autumn’s attention from her papers up at Edgar.

He whispered shakily, "Autumn, can I speak to you privately?"

"What is it, now? I told you, I don't care about some idiot who's angry about me stealing her crap," Autumn whispered back.

"But she said... she said she was going to hurt me if I didn't steal your backpack for her today..."

Autumn paused for about a minute, staring blankly forward before she finally replied, "Well, that's no surprise. The people at this school are all awful. What, did you think me and my stealing were some special case?"

"What should I do?" Edgar whispered hysterically.

Autumn paused again, tapping her hands against the top of her desk. Well, she knew what he *should* do: steal her backpack; but, of course, Autumn didn't *want* him to do that, so why should she give him the idea.

All Autumn could think of to say was, "The idiots around here make empty threats all the time. I wouldn't worry about it too much. I'm sure she'll forget."

But that didn't seem to be the case the next day when Autumn noticed Edgar wasn't present when the bell rang for fourth period to begin.

There could be an infinite number of reasons why he's not here, Autumn tried to reassure herself. *It's not as if he were dropped in the middle of Mt. Volcocoa.*

But when fourth period ended, and everyone else filed out of the class—except for the two early fifth period students—she went up to the teacher, cleared her throat, and asked, "Uh... would you happen to have seen Edgar around?"

The teacher looked at Autumn with shock and said, "He's at the nurse's. Apparently he got into a fight. Are you friends with him?"

Autumn didn't waste her time answering. Instead, she instantly turned around and dashed off toward the nurse's office, hearing the

teacher call out, "I'll tell your fifth period teacher I sent you to the nurse's, okay?" from behind.

Autumn cringed as she realized the true magnitude of this plan's failure: it hadn't just wasted her time and dignity, but also left lingering troubling consequences.

She slowed as she entered the main office so she wouldn't arouse any suspicions about her own connections to this incident and walked slowly to the front desk, where she asked the nearest student behind it for the nurse office's location. She followed the student's finger to a door leading to a little yellow-walled room, where she saw a man in a light blue uniform putting Edgar's arm in a sling.

Edgar turned with a look of surprise at Autumn as she walked over to him and said with a little wave of his other hand, "Oh, hi, Autumn." The nurse also turned to her, gave her a smile, and asked, "Are you a friend of his?"

But Autumn ignored him and focused her eyes on Edgar, his broken left arm, and the tears on his jacket. Although her eyes kept their normal bored stare, her mouth twitched in irk as she thought about all of the damage that might be hidden under that jacket.

"So I take it I was wrong yesterday?" Autumn asked as she glanced rightward at the nurse, suspicious he might catch on to Autumn's meaning.

"What? Oh... Yeah, she wasn't very happy about it, no," Edgar replied.

"You know why these two got into a fight?" the nurse asked with a questioning stare aimed at Autumn.

Autumn only shrugged.

She turned back to Edgar and asked, "Are you busy next lunch?"

"No... not really. Why?" Edgar asked.

"Meet me at my regular table at the beginning of tomorrow's lunch, okay?"

“Okay,” Edgar answered.

VI

Edgar met Autumn at her usual table in the cafeteria the next day, still with his left arm in a sling, but not looking as shaken up as he did before. This time Autumn wasn't digging her face into her papers, but instead had her backpack still on her back as her attention focused on surveying the cafeteria for Edgar, with a few taps of her hands on the table top in bored anticipation.

When she saw Edgar walk toward her, she stood and whispered, “Follow me,” with a wave of her hand. Edgar nodded and she led him outside, to the side of the building where the large pile of wood planks lay. After shifting her eyes around to ensure nobody saw what they were doing, she moved a few of the planks to reveal a boxy hole underneath.

“This is my secret hideout,” she whispered. “It's small and dirty, but 'twill hide you from what's-her-name until this all boils over.”

“Oh... thank you,” Edgar said with a mix of nervousness and cheerfulness.

“Yes, well... sorry about mixing you up in all of this, I suppose,” Autumn grunted back.

She motioned Edgar inside, which he dutifully followed, and then climbed down herself before moving the planks back into place, hiding them both. However, she made sure to leave a streak of sunlight in so she could see.

After sitting and setting her backpack down next to her, she dug her papers out and continued her usual work, using one of her school books as a board set on her upraised knees.

Meanwhile, Edgar sat right next to her, staring down at the papers in front of her in curiosity and, when he saw again that he couldn't understand any of it, stared straight forward while his hands fiddled around with his sleeves awkwardly.

VII.

But Autumn's hiding strategy met its limit when she sold her lunch—and Edgar's, now that he was accompanying her every lunch—at the beginning of next Monday's lunch and she walked out the back door only to see Melissa standing there waiting with her arms crossed.

Autumn swung into the other direction and zipped forward, dragging Edgar behind with her, only to crash right into the nearest table, knocking her to floor, where Melissa's feet had already stopped.

Melissa grabbed around her neck, picked her up, and held her back up against the wall while Autumn stared awkwardly at Melissa's stern face.

Most students in the cafeteria turned their heads toward the two because of the commotion, as well as the intrigue at the local thief actually being caught for once in public. They all gapped their mouths up and down in incomprehensible mutterings, the way large crowds of unnamed people never always do when staring at something important.

Among the people watching, but much closer, was Edgar, who had just gotten up from his fall caused by Autumn's accident. The first thing he noticed when he returned to his senses was Autumn being held up by the neck. He quickly dashed over and lightly pulled on Melissa's shirt.

Autumn, who was looking to the side of Melissa to see where Edgar was, was the first to notice Edgar running over to them. She thought, *Ah, shit. Now what's he doing. I'm not equipped to handle this*, with a weary expression as she shook her head and silently mouthed the word, "No. Go away." Melissa didn't see this; by this time Edgar was already pulling on her shirt, and she had already

turned her head toward the annoyance and saw Edgar's two red glowing eyes aimed at her.

"You're not... you're not going to do anything too drastic are you?" Edgar squeaked, remembering his bandaged arm and wondering what worse ideas she had in store for Autumn.

Melissa ignored this question and answered instead, with a stalactite tone, "I see you've been running around with this thief now again. Now run off before your other arm's broken."

This caused Autumn's blood to abruptly erupt; but she said calmly, "Run along, Edgar. You won't be able to stop her anyway, so you would only be harming both of us instead of one of us."

Though Edgar backed up a meter, he still stood nearby, afraid to watch what might happen, but even more fearful for what worse could happen for some reason if he didn't keep his eyes open.

Autumn turned back to Melissa and said, "And for the record, the only reason he's 'running around' with me is to protect himself from being attacked by cowardly thugs. Next time you have a problem with me, you might prefer putting in a better effort to find me instead of taking out your aggression on someone clearly much weaker than you."

"A petty thief shouldn't be lecturing me on ethics," Melissa said as she throttled Autumn against the wall, which Autumn noted hurt her neck, but did no further damage.

But Autumn felt no need to pay attention to that, since there was nothing she could do about it. She looked around below her and tried to think of what she could do to escape, but couldn't think of anything. Counterattacking would only get her attacked even more, which would hardly be beneficial.

When the throttling stopped, Autumn turned up at Melissa again and said, "I know I shouldn't be; but then here we are."

She couldn't explain how this would be a good strategy, since it likely only made her madder; but then she figured 'twould be better

to get pummeled to death than to let what she thought was clearly a pathetic, petty thug pretend to have moral supremacy over her.

And as Autumn guessed, Melissa was not too fond of this answer, and proceeded to punch her in the face, giving her a black eye and chipping two of her teeth, causing a little blood to dribble down her lips.

‘Twas at this point Autumn decided maybe ‘twould be best to tone it down; although she was not badly damaged yet, she was worried about what damage she might sustain later—especially broken bones that may interfere with her work.

Melissa calmed down again and said, “I know you think you’re pretty clever stealing everyone’s stuff and never getting taken to task for it. Well, I hope you’ve now learned that that isn’t the case.”

Autumn nodded in understanding.

“Now, where is my phone?” Melissa asked.

“See, now this is the funny thing: I really don’t have your phone,” Autumn said. “You simply assumed I took it because I have notoriety for robbing people, as if nobody else has ever committed theft, or as if nobody who hates me for robbing him or her set me up. Did it ever occur to you that the reason I never get ‘taken to task’ for stealing people’s possessions is that I do not steal from people who might beat me up?”

“Then why were you hiding?”

“To avoid the punches I just received,” Autumn replied.

“You’re full of crap,” Melissa said.

“Check my backpack for yourself,” Autumn said with a shrug.

And so Melissa did, taking her right arm off Autumn’s neck, while her left arm remained, and used it to slip off her backpack and dig through it, checking every pocket, as well as checking the entire binder. But all she could find were a bunch of books, pencils, and a ton of papers.

Melissa looked back at Autumn's calm stare with sour incredulity and proceeded to stuff her free hand in both pockets, in both her jacket and skirt, only to find a couple one-dollar bills and a handful of change, which she put in her own pocket.

Damn it, I knew I shouldn't have left that in there, Autumn grumbled in her head.

But Melissa still found no phone and resorted to yanking off Autumn's jacket and shaking it out, and then shaking Autumn herself, upside-down by her feet. Nothing fell down, except the glasses that had already been clearly visible on Autumn's face.

"I'm telling you I don't have anything," Autumn said.

But as Melissa shook Autumn she felt a strange bump on Autumn's left shoe and, suspicious, pulled it off only for a flat, black cellphone to tumble down on the ground, as well as a wad of paper money plopping down nearby.

Though she could barely see without her glasses, Autumn could feel the shoe slip off her foot and had already cursed in her head with the knowledge of what would happen next. Still, she maintained her plain expression, knowing there was nothing she could do about it. Though she'd tried to think of ways to break through Melissa's grasp, none seemed operable. She just had to hope Melissa would not find much more.

Without a word, Melissa bent down, still holding Autumn by just her left leg, and picked up the phone—as well as scooping up the wad of money and stuffing it into her pocket. She then examined the black phone now sitting in her right hand.

"Strange, this looks just like my phone," Melissa said with a patronizing glare aimed at Autumn.

"Could be coincidence. After all, if it's your phone your information should be inside it," Autumn replied.

Melissa turned it on and tapped around in it with her thumb as she examined it.

“Hmm... It seems the information is all blank,” Melissa said with barely-concealed anger. “Funny you would be carrying around a blank phone that you certainly didn’t hack into to erase the data from.”

Autumn remained silent. It wasn’t as if she could say anything that would change her mind.

Hmm... That’s a good idea. Why hadn’t I thought to put my information in there to better conceal its true quality.

Probably because that could’ve incriminated you even further in other circumstances, she answered herself.

Melissa then grabbed her other shoe and shook it, as well as her two socks, to release more wads of cash, which she also scooped up into her pocket while Autumn barely held off cringing at most of her success being scooped into that pocket.

“Got anything else on you?” Melissa asked.

Autumn shook her head. “Where else would I hide any money?”

Melissa didn’t reply, but she patted around Autumn until she found another little bulge on the side of her skirt.

Next, Autumn felt herself being shaken up and down until she fell out her skirt, landing directly on her head, like a pickled sardine.

Autumn sat back up, rubbing her sore head, as the crowds watched her in hushes and wide-eyed stares—the way large crowds of unnamed people never always do at these occasions. But Autumn’s widened eyes instead looked up at the blurry image of Melissa towering above her, just at that moment pulling a thick wad of bills out of her skirt from a secret pocket she cut on the inside that she was sure nobody would find.

Melissa looked down at Autumn with a look of triumph. “I hope this teaches you not to steal from me again.”

She then snatched Autumn’s backpack and opened it just to stuff Autumn’s skirt in it before closing it again.

“And I’ll be taking these things just in case there’s more wealth hidden in these. I want to make sure you have nothing that you didn’t earn yourself—which would be absolutely nothing, since I know you don’t make any money legitimately.”

Then Autumn cringed even more as she heard the crack of breaking glass and plastic. She had specifically avoided moving for her glasses, knowing ‘twould give Melissa ideas; but now she realized Melissa was savvier than she’d originally imagined.

“And that ought to keep you from stealing for a while,” Melissa said before turning and leaving.

Autumn stared down blankly at the blurry ground, paralyzed by the immense loss, oblivious to her surroundings.

She’d gotten through every clever defense I’d crafted, she thought. I mean, I’ve been foiled before; but never this completely—and so quickly too.

Edgar, meanwhile, had moved over next to her and asked, “Are you all right?”

Autumn looked up at Edgar confusedly and said, “What? Oh, yeah,” and stood up. “Not nearly as bad as you received with your arm, actually.”

“I’m sorry I didn’t do anything to help you...” Edgar said shyly.

Autumn blinked up at Edgar confusedly. “I specifically told you not to, precisely because you *couldn’t* do anything.”

The bell rang and Autumn stood and walked toward her next class with her arms out, trying not to bump into anything else. All the while she stared down at the ground grumbling in her head about everything she lost.

That was about two hundred dollars’ worth of material I lost —‘twill take about a year to make up for that!

“Hey, Autumn... Autumn!” Edgar shouted, shaking Autumn out of her distraction temporarily.

“What?” she muttered.

“You, uh... you need help finding your way around?”

Autumn sighed. “If you insist.”

She felt cloth grab her hand and lead her forward. *And now I am disabled so much I cannot even walk by myself, apparently...* Autumn mused.

“Um... What are you going to do about your, um... lack of wardrobe...” Edgar said as he stared up away from her awkwardly.

“What do you mean—ah, shit,” Autumn grunted as she stared down to check her clothes.

“Do you think we should take you to the office or something?” Edgar asked.

“I don’t know—Does this school have standard protocol for when people lose their clothes for further money inspection?” Autumn asked. “These are the only clothes I have, too; and as you saw already, I lost all of my money.”

“Can your mother not buy you anything?” Edgar weakly asked.

“No,” Autumn said with a shake of the head. *At least I sure as hell am not going to grovel to her to buy me anything.* “Anyway, fuck the office, they never do anything anyway.”

“So you’re just going to go to class like that?” Edgar asked.

“Yeah,” Autumn said.

“But... but aren’t you embarrassed?” Edgar asked.

“You’re damn right, I’m embarrassed. I’m supposed to be the best thief around, and yet I lose everything in one day. It took years to save that up.” Autumn turned back to the floor in front of her before remembering something else and turning back to Edgar with her arms raised in frustration. “And she found my secret pocket, too.”

Wait... should I be saying this all out loud?

What harm could it do now?

You never know about the future...

Edgar, who became so distracted by the conversation that he forgot to avoid looking at Autumn, finally noticed Autumn's backpack gone.

"She... she took your backpack, too?" Edgar asked.

"Yeah," Autumn mumbled.

"Oh... Well how are you going to do your homework?" Edgar asked.

"I'll manage" was all Autumn said; but what she really worried about was all her plans being taken. *Great, now I have to start all over on that, too.*

VIII.

Autumn thought she might actually get used to seeing without her glasses—or at least that's what she told herself as she walked down the street toward home, her eyes squinting so she could get at least a vague glimpse of her surroundings.

In reality, she had to put effort into keeping her nerves calm. For reasons she could not explain, the lack of sight caused by lack of glasses made her feel as if something might attack her from any direction; and no matter where she turned, she wouldn't be able to see it, whatever it might be.

When the need came to cross the street, Autumn stopped on the curb and looked both ways, trying to listen for any cars coming. Unfortunately, the street was full of them, and so she could only hear a cacophony of objects zoom by here constantly.

She made one more look around and, when she had a good inkling that no car was coming, she made her way through.

Unfortunately, this was not the case; a sedan was rolling down the road just as she started walking. When its driver saw her crossing he shoved his foot on the brake, screeching his car to a halt just in time so that it barely bumped Autumn onto the ground.

“Hey, kid, are you all right?” The driver yelled out his window.

Autumn sat up and gave him a thumbs-up. She made a quick assessment of any damages and found that she only had a bruise on her side.

“You want me to call an ambulance?” The driver asked.

Autumn shook her head, slowly stood up, and moved on as if nothing had happened. After she felt the situation had safely passed, however, she turned her head around her more often, hoping to avoid any other problems.

I think I'm getting the hang of this seeing without glasses. I'm not sure if it's possible, but I do wonder if I could force my eyes to adjust to proper sight by sheer muscle power.

When she finally made it home, she stayed on her bed, safe in the knowledge that she couldn't bump into anything if she were not moving. Since she couldn't convince herself that she could even see writing on paper, she eschewed writing her new plans—she didn't have any paper or writing utensils anymore, anyway—and settled for relying on memory. She was actually glad she was sent home early as it gave her plenty of time to plan the rebuilding of her empire.

Then she remembered why she was sent home in the first place and decided to rectify that immediately. She searched around the house for scissors and, upon finding a pair, cut out a piece of her bed sheet and crafted a makeshift skirt from it, using tape she found in the closet to tape together multiple folds so that 'twould at least look vaguely like the standardized school uniform.

As she gazed down at its blurry wonder she mused to herself, *And people actually waste money on this stuff...*

IX.

Autumn spent lunch sitting at a lone table with her face leaning on her arm and staring down at a piece of paper when Edgar finally found her. He could see by the hard squint in her eyes and deep breathing that she was peeved.

“Uh... Autumn?”

Autumn jumped, only to calm down again when she turned and saw Edgar there.

She took another petulant deep breath. “Don’t tell me she’s screwing with you *still*?”

“Uh, no... I, uh, I just wanted to see if you wanted to try these on.” Edgar dug through his pockets and held out a pair of spectacles.

Autumn blinked at them in confusion. “Why are you giving me these?”

“What do you mean?” Edgar asked.

“What are you looking for in return?”

“What? This is... this is just to thank you for helping me yesterday.”

“But the problem was my doing as well, so at best, this would be a neutral outcome,” Autumn explained.

Edgar paused to consider how to reply, and then just said, “Well... don’t you still want them? I mean... You can’t seriously think about going around unable to see for much longer can you?”

“Blind people manage,” Autumn said. “So can I.”

Edgar didn’t know how to respond to this.

She shook her head. “Yeah. Sure. If you insist.” Then she blurted, “Sorry. Thank you.”

“Is something wrong?” Edgar asked.

Autumn paused to consider the question. “If I said ‘no,’ even you would be smart enough to interpret that as a lie, I suppose; and you would keep pestering me about the subject, too, right?”

“Uh... yes?” Edgar said with a confused tilt of his head.

He handed her the glasses and she fit them on. She blinked in wonder as if she had entered an alien planet, gradually stopping as her eyes adjusted. She was not sure whether she was gladder or more distressed over their working.

“Do they work?” Edgar asked.

“Yeah,” Autumn said with a sigh.

“I, uh, figured they would... I took a few pieces of your glasses’ shattered glass and used that to have someone find a new pair for you.”

“Who?”

“An optometrist.”

“And where’d you get the money for that?” Autumn asked.

“I had a few dollars saved up, and I was able to scrape up enough aluminum in garbage cans to sell.”

Autumn stared at Edgar as if he were a cat who fell off the table.

“And, uh, also, I, uh...” He pulled out a plastic bag and set it in front of Autumn. “I got you this.”

Autumn hesitantly opened the bag. Inside she found a skirt.

“And I suppose you sold an arm to buy this,” Autumn said dryly.

“Uh, no,” Edgar said. “I, uh, I found it at the lost and found.”

Autumn nodded in understanding. She would solicit the lost and found every so often, but only rarely and without taking too much, for she knew they would catch on if she had overstepped their suspense of disbelief. She had not, however, thought to solicit it for this purpose and felt a little shame in not doing so.

Then Autumn said, “Edgar, sit down, please.”

When he slid into the opposite seat she continued, “Edgar, you can’t keep doing this.”

“What?” Edgar asked.

“What are you doing?” she asked.

“Well... I feel a little guilty about all of the trouble I caused... You probably wouldn’t have gotten caught if you weren’t trying to protect me,” Edgar said.

“No,” Autumn corrected. “Quite the opposite: I wouldn’t have even known she was after me until ‘twas too late if you hadn’t warned me.”

“Still, you didn’t have to protect me, so I thought I’d help you, too,” Edgar replied. “Anyway, if you want I can give you some peace now...”

Autumn knew she should’ve taken him up on the offer, but knew it’d only create further problems for her in the future.

“No you can’t. Whatever you meant to do, and to no fault of your own, you have attached yourself to me. Tell me, has anyone been picking on you?”

Edgar began to shake his head, only for Autumn to interrupt him again:

“Don’t answer that; I already know the answer. I can see the bruise around your left temple that was not there last time I saw you. I can clearly see the logic here: The lesser idiots—not including Melissa, who did eventually come to me, in fairness—want to try to tarnish my standings through you. I cannot allow that to continue.”

“Uh, okay...” Edgar stuttered as he rubbed his sleeve-covered hands together. “I’m sorry...”

“No you’re not because that doesn’t even make any sense,” Autumn said. “I can see by the look on your face that you have no idea what I’m saying, which is no surprise considering the obscurity of my circumstance.”

“So, uh... What do you want me to do, then?” Edgar wrung his wrists nervously, images of him being locked in a cage or some other torture fresh in his mind. “I’m sorry if I didn’t, uh, understand everything you said.”

Autumn nodded in understanding. "All you need to do is sit over there quietly for now and avoid any potentially dangerous people as much as possible between classes. That's no burden, is it?"

Edgar shook his head. "Oh, no. I can do that, fine," he said, his voice brightening.

She nodded with a curt, "Excellent," before immediately turning her head down to the paper she had attempted to read before.

Being reminded of her ability to see again she muttered, "Oh, yeah, and thanks for the glasses, by the way."

Edgar nodded. "You're welcome. Uh... You want any help with that?"

She was about to decline, only to remember his idea about the lost and found.

"Why, do you have any ideas?" she asked.

"Uh, well..." Then he jumped up. "Oh, have you tried the blood drives?"

"They pay you for that?"

"Uh, yeah. Just a little."

"I suppose 'twould be worth the trouble. Uh... thank you."

"Oh, that reminds me... Did you eat yet?"

The mood on Autumn's face immediately turned stormy, being reminded of idiotically dropping her lunch on the way to large-mouthed guy.

"If you mean did I get my lunch already, yes, though it didn't do me much good. Why?"

"I'll be right back," Edgar said as he jumped out of his seat.

Autumn finally looked up from her work and watched Edgar as he joined the shortest line. She kept him in the corner of her eye until she saw him walk back to their table. She had expected him to set it down, but instead saw him pause standing.

"Uh, okay... I'll let you have this on one condition," he said.

She eyed him suspiciously. “What’s that?”

“You have to eat it.”

Her suspicion only grew; though she hadn’t seen him tamper with it in any way, she had not watched him closely. He could have snuck something inside.

“Why?” she asked.

“Well, I mean... You can’t go without eating lunch every day,” Edgar said.

“I have for the past years.”

When Edgar made no reply Autumn added, “Eating that would be a waste of precious money—and I’m desperately low on that right now, thanks to my recent troubles, if you do not remember.”

“But is that really worth starving yourself?” Edgar asked weakly.

“Clearly, yes. No pain, no gain, after all.”

“But...”

“What concerns you so much about whether I eat or not?” Autumn asked, a suspicious eye still screwed on him.

“Well, I... uh...”

Edgar was taken aback at such a strange question.

“Well, I mean... you need the energy to come up with these, uh, plans and stuff.”

“Why would you care about that?”

“Well... that also includes protecting me, I guess.”

She shrugged. “Anything greater than nothing’s a gain, regardless. It’s your lunch, after all.”

“Thank you,” Edgar said as he set the tray in front of her and slid back into his seat.

“I’m not sure why you’re thanking me for doing something that doesn’t benefit you, but okay,” she said as she stabbed her fork into a homogenized blob of vague meat.

The she looked up at Edgar credulously.

“Hey, that claim that you don’t need to eat isn’t manufactured, is it, you hypocrite?”

Edgar shook his head. “Though I don’t know why you’d be concerned about that.”

Autumn stared down at the table in concentration.

“I suppose you have a point,” she said.

And so began a partnership that, unbeknownst to both, would last for decades.

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J. J. W. Mezun | January 10, 2014

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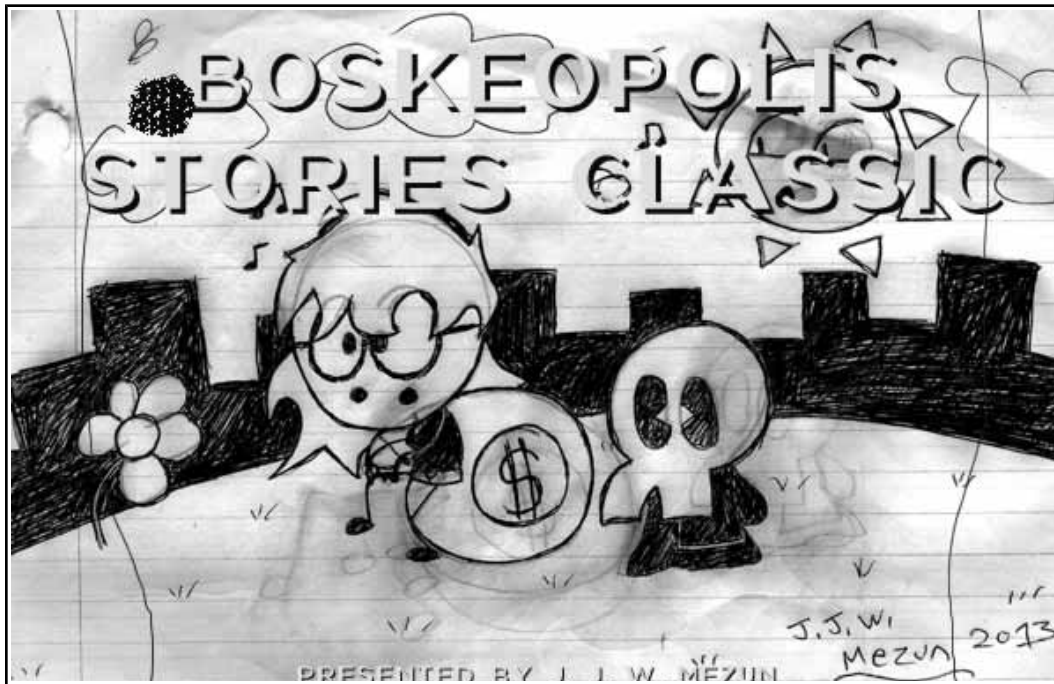
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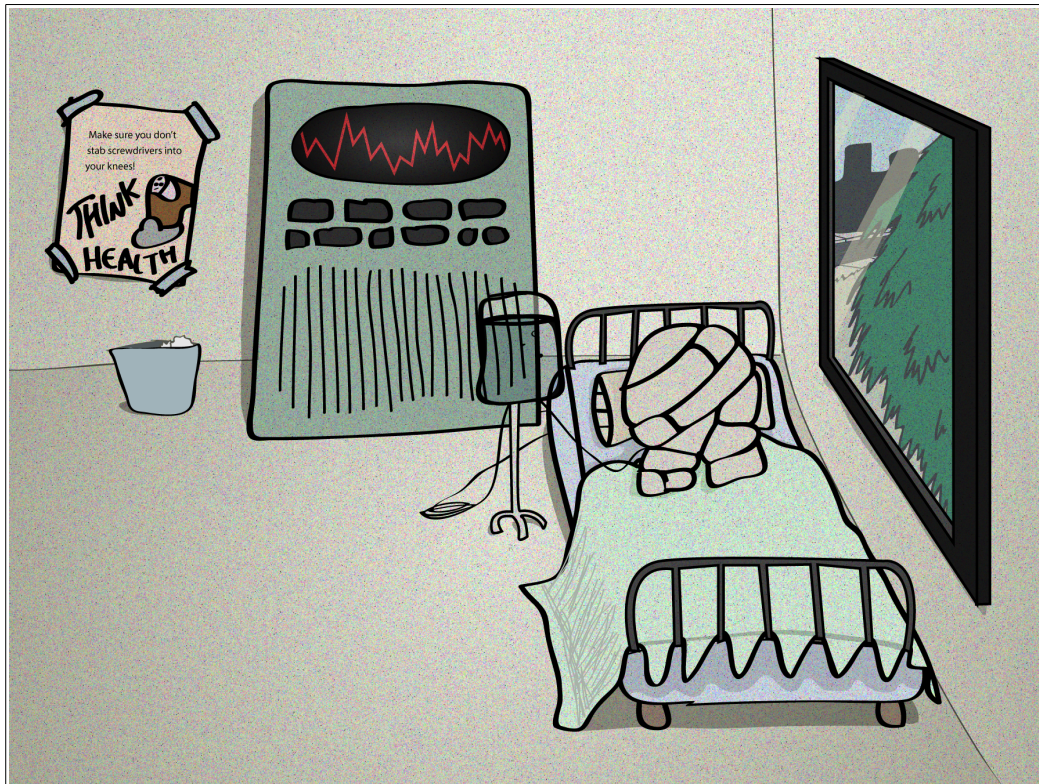
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#BOSK-AH1E07-EMERGENCY

PROVINCE OF EMERGENCY

J. J. W. Mezun | February 1, 2014



I.

Autumn was called into the Principal's office yet again when a teacher caught her rifling through a backpack a classmate had left behind as everyone went off to lunch—everyone except Autumn, who always lagged for opportunities to swipe anything left behind without being spotted.

"I told you you should've worn 'nother jacket," Autumn said.

"I don't think 'twould help..." Edgar replied as he stared pensively at his snow-covered boots.

Autumn's eyes caught this expression.

"You're not still afraid of *Mayor* Chamsby locking me up and going Queen of Hearts on my ass, are you?"

Edgar didn't answer, but stared out silently at the few remaining stars in the cerulean sky and then the dim shadows of the sleet-covered skyscrapers surrounding them, sitting shivering behind the roof's border with his arms hugging his upraised knees to protect them from the gelid wind.

Autumn sat next to him in the same position, foggy breath emanating from her open mouth.

"You want to"—she cleared her throat—"share my coat?"

"Um... if it's no problem to you..." Edgar squeaked, his voice quieting so much that the last word was almost silent.

Autumn unzipped her coat while Edgar shifted in front of her. She scooted closer till they were pressed gainst each other and wrapped it 'round him, zipping it up to his neck. She could feel his fast rattling gradually slow into a steady, sealike pulsing.

She rubbed her fuzzy-gloved hands to warm them, but found that they still stayed cold for some reason. She stared down at them grumpily.

“I thought these were s'posed to be electric. Why did I waste so much money on them if they weren't even going to be any more useful than regular gloves?”

Without taking his eyes off the city below, Edgar said, “You didn't get the electric gloves; you got the regular kind. You said the electric were too expensive, remember?”

“Oh yeah...”

“I'm confused by why you'd worry so much 'bout just buying some gloves, though...”

“Tiny costs like these aren't isolated; they combine to form greater costs.” Autumn said. “This is why you can never have too much money—in fact, why there's never 'nough. The only time one's being too stingy is when one loses oneself opportunities to gain more money than one spends. I don't think electric gloves will ever help me gain more money.”

“Your hands might not freeze.”

“My hands will just have to deal with it. You seem glum; that's usually my job.”

“It's pretty dumb.”

“Couldn't be worse than insisting on wearing inferior gloves.”

Edgar sighed. “If you must know... While I enjoy these adventures we go on, that election's got me worrying that something might happen to us, or Lance will finally... finish you, or those mafia guys again... or just old age, even.”

“Well, that last one's a rather long ways 'way.”

“Time goes faster than you want it to go...”

Autumn shrugged. “We're close in age: When one goes the other will probably go soon. Hopefully not intentionally...” She eyed Edgar meaningfully.

“Skeletons live longer than humans.”

“Oh, really? How much longer?”

“Close to three hundred years... two hundred years longer, I guess.”

“Well, lucky you.”

But the way Edgar’s head slunk down indicated that he didn’t consider this very lucky.

II.

Autumn’s boots crunched against the frosty cement as she landed on the McCheesy’s. Such intense pressure against such slippery ice caused her to slip and fall over, tightly gripping the crenellation behind her.

Good thing these things have these things, Autumn thought with a weak smile.

She slipped off her pack and extracted her makeshift rope hook. Then she returned to her feet and turned back to Edgar, who was still on the previous building.

“Think you’ll be able to catch this?” Autumn asked as she swung.

Edgar nodded tepidly, but when she threw the rope, Edgar stepped back as the metal hook bashed against his roof with a heavy thunk. As gravity’s pull on its rope slid it toward the roof’s border, Edgar rushed forward and held the hook so that ’twas clamped tightly.

“Have it secured?” Autumn asked as she held her side firmly.

“I think so...”

Edgar hesitantly climbed the crenellation, eyeholes glued to his rope bridge, which to his sight seemed to stretch for kilometers. Though the snow had mostly subsided, the wind continued to blow so hard that Edgar’s hood and robe were flapping all over him as a homicide of crows eager to devour him.

He turned sideways and slowly inched down the rope, cringing as he felt it bend under even his tiny weight. Each step was an effort not to slip and crack his skull on the pavement below.

Autumn stretched her arms out and leaned forward so that, when Edgar neared, she could grab him and pull him in.

“How many more buildings do we have to cross?” Edgar asked breathlessly.

“I think I see it just two more buildings down.”

“Same strategy?”

Nose prickling in the frigid wind, she sniffed, and then rubbed her nose on her sleeve. After seeing how Edgar barely crossed the rope before, she doubted he’d be able to do so again. She leaned over the edge, gazing down at the space ‘tween their building and the next.

“How far can you jump?” she asked.

Edgar joined her and gazed at the gap himself, eyes gliding roof to roof.

“I think I might be able to make it...”

Autumn stared at the stray pedestrian and car roaming ‘round this early, which from her view looked like a caterpillar and caterpillar car, respectively. She estimated that they were at least five meters from the ground—bloody-splat height.

“I fear the only alternative we have is for me to pick you up and take you with me when I jump, risking us both perishing, or you continuing with the ro—Oh, I’m an idiot.” She smacked her forehead. “You could try crossing the rope while holding onto it, hanging *down*. You’d have a much tighter grip.”

“That sounds good,” Edgar said with nervous excitement.

“The only risk is that you may push the rope down so hard that the hooks lose their grips; but you’re so light, that won’t be a likely risk.”

Edgar gulped, but nodded in agreement.

Autumn stood back to the middle of the roof and then ran as fast as she could, leaping as she stepped on the crenellation.

No matter how many times he saw it, Edgar always cringed at this part, brain shivering in dread at the possibility of seeing her barely miss the other edge, plunge to the bottom, and...

Edgar heard a thump and threw his eyes open with a gasp.

He saw that Autumn was safely on the other side, burrowing through her pack, and he sighed in relief.

Here, they repeated the pattern: Autumn grabbed the rope hook, swung it to Edgar's side, and Edgar pressed it into the roof 'fore it fell.

Autumn pulled and pushed on said rope a few times just to check it.

"It feels secure. This ought to be much safer than before," she said.

Edgar crouched on the crenellation and clutched the rope.

"You don't think my gloves will make my hold too weak, do you?"

"No, but if you want, you could try taking your gloves off."

Edgar, judging fingers inflamed from frigidness was worth not breaking all of his bones on the street leagues below, pulled off and pocketed them.

He released a deep exhale and slid off the roof, heart bouncing up and down as he felt the rope plunge under his heft. Then he felt the rope suddenly jerk to a halt and could breathe again.

He looked down and saw the same caterpillar colony Autumn had earlier, causing his breaths to transform into wheezes.

But he scrabbled down, anyway—for one, he wanted to reach the end and get off as soon as doable. He shut off his vision, sensing only the gushing gales beseiging him and the pinching pressure his pounds pulled on his upper appendages.

The rope gradually stretched down even farther as he reached the center, renewing his fears that the hooks would loosen; but it

began to bounce back up again as Edgar went farther to the other side.

As earlier, Autumn reached out to tug Edgar up when he approached the end. He sat back against the border to catch his breath—not from exertion, but from relief.

“That was much easier,” she said as she began dragging the rope back.

Then she stopped and took a closer look at the rope on her end: she noticed a few hairs sticking out.

She sighed and then looked at the lab right beside their building.

“I don’t know if this rope will last 'nother crossing...”

“Well, we only have one more building to cross, right?”

“True.”

“And I think it’d still be safer than the other ways you said, right?”

“And if it breaks, I s’pose you can still hang on from the other hook and climb back up. Yeah, we should be all right.”

She turned back to Edgar. “You ready?”

“Uh huh,” he said as he stood up.

“To be honest, I’ll be glad when this heist is over. It’s colder out here than I’d thought it’d be. Besides, I think this one will turn out to be a waste of my investment.”

“When we get home I can make us warm cocoa and that Zess Special recipe I’ve been trying.”

“Yeah... Well, let’s get this job finished then so we can do all of that.”

So they repeated the usual pattern one last time: Autumn ran and leapt to the next building, swung the rope, and they each attached their hooks to their respective sides. Having already crossed—twice if one includes the tiptoeing—Edgar didn’t hesitate to start this time, nor did he shudder as much as he crossed.

That is, till he heard a snap. He looked leftward—where he thought he heard it originate—but didn’t see anything.

You're just hearing things; don't be such a panicky pundit, he chided himself.

Then came 'nother snap. And then 'nother soon after. And then Edgar felt an extreme shift in gravity and looked to see that end of the rope fall off, its end torn.

Oh shit! Autumn thought as she saw this. "Hold tight! I'll pull you up!"

She stamped her foot over the end of the rope and began pulling the rest toward her, scooping it up piece-by-piece.

Then she heard a heavy thud just below. She looked down and saw Edgar cringing, the front of his face clearly cracked. His hands looked as if they were barely holding on.

"Hold on tight, Edgar!" she shouted as she quickened her pulling. "Edgar?"

Then she heard snapping sounds below and looked down to see hairs quickly sprouting on the rope, one after the other.

Oh god no...

She put all of her energy into pulling the rope up, only for the splitting piece to pop.

Shit!

She watched Edgar and the rope plunge to the ground, her arm outstretched futilely. Then she cringed and shrunk back just 'fore she saw him crash into concrete, only to still hear its muffled thump.

A minute after, she hesitantly peeked over the edge again and saw Edgar's jacket and robe flattened on the street, but not his head. Leaning in closer and squinting, she could faintly see tiny specks of white strewn all 'round it.

Well, I think we can rule out that cocoa for a while... Autumn thought, face drained of saturation.

III.

Nowhere had Autumn ever witnessed a more harassingly calm environment than the St. Corazon Community Health Center. She clasped the plastic arms of her chair so tightly she thought they would break off, and she heard so many light beeps and clicks of clean shoes against linoleum, she thought she would break her ears off.

She knew there was nothing she could do till the doctor finished his prognostic, but she also knew that she absolutely had to do something—anything—to fix this problem, which only made this straitjacket scenery worse.

Finally, a nurse walked out and stopped before Autumn.

“We’re currently waiting on our assistants to finish finding all of your friend’s, um... pieces. Dr. Sonnenaufgang will have his diagnosis tomorrow.”

“I can wait,” Autumn said straight into the nurse’s eyes.

But the nurse didn’t show any surprise: he only nodded; said, “Okay. We understand”; and then walked ‘way.

So Autumn did wait, shifting her weight on one arm, and then the other, mind filling with dark thoughts.

She didn’t blame herself—not because she was sure she wasn’t responsible for this, but because the issue was nugatory, regardless: neither would improve the consequences, which was where her focus truly lay.

The question festered: what would she do if the doctor couldn’t do anything—if Edgar was terminal? What *could* she do was, of course, the better question, which led to a worse one: *could* she do anything at all? The prospect that she could fail at something so important so conclusively was alien: in every other endeavor, if she didn’t succeed, she knew there were still plenty of other opportunities to fail till she finally met success. Death was a different novel.

Then she tried imagining life without Edgar. ‘Twas certainly

possible; most of the activities she performed—the research, planning, and operation—didn’t strictly require Edgar. Even if she needed someone else for the last one, she could theoretically find someone else. Edgar’s friend in the green jacket mentioned her desire to join them in one of their heists, for instance.

And yet, there was still something that would be conspicuously missing. Sure, Edgar spent most of his time with her by sitting silently next to her; but that lack of something sitting silently next to her would be jarring, like the naked feeling she would have if she went without her glasses for a long period.

When one adds this to the lost fudge, pies, banana breads, and mushroom houses and... silent but much more active activities they did together¹, ‘twas a heavy loss.

Flashbacks raced through Autumn’s head, including all of the places they explored for treasure: Heureux Manor, Orange Ocean, Wasabi Woods, the Sterling Mall, Boskeopolis Underground... she also remembered being in some whale’s digestive system, though she was a little fuzzy on what exactly they did there.

Well, I won’t get any work done sitting waiting ‘round here, she thought as she sat up and walked down the hallway. I might as well search for some way to prevent his death.

“Have a nice day, Madame,” the receptionist said as she walked out.

She didn’t pay him any mind.

IV.

Autumn shivered the second she left the hospital’s stifling heat, stuffing her previously-sweating hands deep into her jacket pockets. Though ‘twas snowy, it wasn’t a dazzling white December snow, but

1 Edgar often accompanied Autumn on adventures and heists, you may remember.

a slushy blue February snow. The whole city was cast in dimness as if it had sunk underwater.

You shouldn't fret just yet 'bout Edgar's condition; he very well may be all right, she thought as she wandered down the sidewalk with her head hunched. *After all, he's never died yet; why start now?* Then she bit one of her fingers. *Hmm... 'cept for that time we explored Tangerine Temple.*

Then she shook her head. *Doesn't matter. We'll do what we can when we get home. It'd be best just not to think 'bout it so much.*

A noise throttled her from her reverie, which she soon identified as rock music, a singer bellowing, “Br-roken bones all 'round you; try to hide, but they find you every time!” She looked up and saw a thuggin’ mathematics professor in a gray tweed suit and bowtie, waltzing down the sidewalk straight out of an R. Crumb cartoon with a boombox over his shoulders.

Hmm... that's mildly contrived, Autumn mused. *I didn't even realize people still carried large boomboxes 'round with them nowadays.*

She exhaled and rubbed her forehead, trying to ignore the headache she'd inexplicably developed, when she eyed a truck passing by, its side logo showing a grinning cartoon cracked skull 'bout to be smashed by a giant yellow hammer² with the words “Smashing Skeletons” in bold white letters. Below, in smaller letters, were “Wicked toys.”

Huh... Autumn mused, frown souring like month-old dairy. *Didn't expect to see a toy van—at all, truly—but much less one that had such an apt name. Yes, that truly is quite a coinciden—*

“Excuse me, madam...”

Autumn turned her head to a street vendor selling—Autumn

2 Considering Boskeopolis is an inherently cartoon world, one should not interpret this as necessarily funny.

predicted it 'fore her eyes told her—boneless chicken.

“I’m not hungry. No thanks,” Autumn mumbled with a disgusted wave of her hand.

“I just wanted to ask if you had a skeleton friend who recently crashed against the street and whose bones were—”

Autumn threw her arms out. “Oh, come the fuck on!” Then she aimed an accusatory finger at the vendor and added, “Fine, let the universe shit on me, but at least *try* to make it believable. This is just lazy.”

The vendor was so taken aback by this that he hadn’t had a chance to continue 'fore Autumn stormed 'way.

The vendor looked to a randomly-generated bystander and said, “I think that was the one who called the medics. Probably his relative or close friend. Must not be taking it so well.”

V.

The bleary blue outside was nothing compared to the utter dearth of light inside Autumn’s apartment. And yet, when she flicked the light on, it didn’t warm the mood at all—it only emphasized the apartment’s emptiness. She turned it back off.

She dragged out her laptop and sat staring at the wall while she waited for it to load. When it finally did, she typed “fixing shattered skeleton” in her search engine. But for some reason, all she could find were two scientific articles 'bout how *human* bones heal, some inane Wikis and Forums for video games, and grotesque images of animal and human bones.

Must not be specific 'nough... She typed in “how to fix shattered undead skeleton,” but its results were even less relevant.

Augh! These infernal search engines have no idea what the hell they’re doing! This is serious; I don’t have time to fuck 'round with some idiot’s video game bullshit!

She spent the next few hours wading through pages of results, trying many rewordings. Not a single result bore bread, instead giving her a bone-cleaning tutorial, movie review, strange recipe, buzzword-laden Wikipedia page, and—most inexplicable—an article written by O’Beefe of all people on some news site regarding some bullshit ‘bout environmentalists she couldn’t care less ‘bout.

So long had she stared at this screen of mostly searing white sheltered in darkness that her eyes now felt like burnt coals. Despite this, the screen attracted her eyes like a lamp to flies, and she stared blankly at it as she puzzled over what she could try next.

She felt her mind freeze into an unsolvable logic loop: there seemed to be absolutely nothing she could do to save Edgar, and yet she knew she had to.

Okay, let’s consider this from a different angle... she thought, holding her still-throbbing head. *If I absolutely cannot prevent one event from happening, then I must adjust to the event to salvage some other success. So, let’s say Edgar does... die. How can I preserve his life after he’s already died?*

The only dregs of a logical answer hit her immediately: *I’ll have to find a way to revive him.* At first, her face hanged at what was obviously such an infeasible solution—even with the sheer level of physics- and biology-breaking scientists have been able to do, finding the elusive “Serum of Reanimation” was not one of them. But then she remembered that the patient in question was a skeleton. A tinge of hope grew from what possibilities that fact could hold, only to add ‘nother dash of despair at the possible *extra problems* this fact could create, leaving her with a muddled mush of sentiments.

She could predict that ‘twould be a long and uncertain trial. She could also predict that both mixed together would cause this trial to hang over her as a carrot eternally reachless.

She sighed and returned her hands to her keyboard. *Well, the sooner I start, the less time Edgar must spend dead.*

She'd just begun reading a page she doubted was relevant 'bout some poison cure in the Spinach Swamps when she suddenly heard her phone ring. She turned and stared at it vibrating and glowing on the floor next to her as if she couldn't believe what was happening. Slowly, she reached out and picked it up, containing whatever strong reaction was trying to rise in her throat.

She was glad she did. When she checked the number she saw that 'twas just Dawn.

She exhaled harshly and raised it to her face. "Yes?"

"Oh, sorry, Autumn. Is everything all right?"

Autumn knew she paused far too long to stem suspicions, but could not think of what to say quickly 'nough.

"Is something wrong?"

"What is it you need?" Autumn asked.

"Well... Edgar asked me to concoct a flameflower for him. Said he needed it for some recipe."

"Well, you need not stress over bringing it over..."

"What happened?" Dawn gasped.

Autumn shrugged, even though she knew Dawn couldn't see her. "You know how our work goes. Death-defying adventures are only fun till one fails to defy death."

"Edgar's... dead?" Dawn gasped again. "But he couldn't! He's a skeleton! He should already be dead."

"Not yet. Hopefully not for many years. I don't know..." The day had passed by so quickly, she had to pause to recall the details. "He fell, shattered everywhere... Doctor says I have to wait to hear the diagnosis."

After a pause that felt like an hour, Dawn asked, "So, uh... you holding up okay?"

"Yes."

"You sure?"

"Yes."

“Well, if you need my help for anything, you have my number.”

“No offense, but I doubt even any of your potions could salvage him.” Though she did consider the option if the hospital fell through.

“Oh, right... Well, if you need any other kind of help, though, the same applies.”

“Okay...” Autumn said questioningly, unsure of what other kind she’d have.

The phone beeped and she returned it to its spot on the floor. Then she looked at the clock on her monitor and saw ‘twas already eight PM. As she absentmindedly tapped the up and down keys and stared inattentively at the screen, she thought, *Well, I seem to be getting nowhere here, and I’ll have much more time later to try this. Might as well try getting some sleep so I’ll be awake if the doctor calls early.*

She climbed into bed and wrapped all of the blankets ‘round her, feeling so exhausted by the day’s activities that she expected she would fall asleep immediately. Instead, she lay shivering, turning back and forth in boredom. She couldn’t help noticing how strange it felt in such a large, empty bed.

Wasn’t since Chamsby kidnapped Edgar that I’d slept alone, if I remember right...

Hopefully it won’t be something I’ll have to get used to.

VI.

Dr. Sonnenaufgang had finally called Autumn the next morning and she agreed to an appointment after her classes.

She was so impatient to finally know how the whole ordeal would go that she practically stormed into the hospital, only to be told that, despite her appointment, she still had to wait a few minutes till the doctor was finished with ‘nother patient. Autumn judged that arguing would get her nowhere—and would, in fact, probably hinder

her—so she begrudgingly sat in a free chair, shifting 'round uncomfortably again.

Luckily, it only took a dozen minutes for the receptionist to call Autumn's fake surname. She bolted from her chair and marched toward the doctor's door just as the previous patient was leaving, almost bumping into him.

"Greetings, Madame Frühlinger. Nice d—"

"What's the diagnosis?" she asked.

Though Sonnenaufgang's smile didn't disappear, it did taper into one of weak awkwardness, rather than cheer. He cleared his throat and looked down at the clipboard in his hands.

"Your boyfriend has a severe case of 'Shattered Skeleton Syndrome,' or 'SSS.'"

"Well, yes, I knew he was shattered—I saw the gruesome sight before my eyes when it happened."

"Well, that's good..."

"No it isn't," Autumn said, eyes drooping exhaustedly. "Look, just tell me if he's going to live or not."

Sonnenaufgang cleared his throat and looked at his clipboard again, which seemed to shake a little in his hands.

"Well, we may be able to put him back together..."

"I want the absolute truth: do you truly mean that? Don't bullshit me with pleasantries, please."

Sonnenaufgang looked up and saw stern steel in Autumn's eyes.

"The only problem is the cost..."

Autumn hesitated for a second, but then said, "Money's no concern."

Autumn noticed Sonnenaufgang's head bent down, aimed awkwardly at that infernal clipboard again.

He said quietly, "Even eighty million points³?"

3 Approximately 810,783.41 American dollars.

“Eighty million?” Autumn said much louder, stepping backward with eyes bulging and arms stretched out.

“I’m afraid so, Madame. This is a very delicate procedure, and getting the bone glue won’t be cheap either. That by itself will be more than half the price...”

“Wait. What?”

“Is something wrong, Madame?” Sonnenaufgang asked as he looked up at her.

“Did I just hear you say ‘bone glue’?”

“Mmm hmm,” the doctor said as he nodded.

“Bone glue? Bone glue!” Autumn threw her arms out in exasperation. “Why can’t you just use superglue or something? Surely it shouldn’t cost more than a couple million!”

“Well, you see, Madame... We need to mix together many exotic ingredients, including the tanuki leaves from the Spinach Swamps, the special chocolate lava from Mt. Volcocoa, Theodore Roosevelt’s saliva...”

“I understand,” Autumn said with a petulant wave of her hand. “And what condition will Edgar be in when you’ve finished?”

Sonnenaufgang’s beaming smile suddenly returned. “If we do a good job, he’ll be just as good as he was ‘fore this story started.”

“If you do a good job?” Autumn raised an eyebrow.

Sonnenaufgang wiped a bead of sweat from his forehead. “Well, you see...” He gulped. “Even doctor’s make mistakes sometimes...”

“And I’ll get a full refund if you do, correct?”

“I’m afraid we can’t promise that... No hospital does,” Sonnenaufgang added, as if he could watch what Autumn was thinking.

Autumn shrugged. “I s’pose I have no choice.”

The doctor cringed again, which caused Autumn to want to cringe, too.

“Also... You’ll have to make out a check, first. We tried checking

your credit and found that you apparently don't truly exist. Happens all the time in this city, unfortunately. But we must get the money 'fore we start, because we've had an awful rash of people running out on their hospital bills—all of which were associated with a skeleton, interestingly 'nough." Then he quickly added, "Not that I have anything gainst skeletons. Some of my favorite friends are skeletons, actually. Lean people, I must say."

Autumn slapped her forehead. "Oh! Did I say my name was Anna Frühlinger? I keep forgetting I'm not in Germany anymore. Sorry, you might try Autumn Springer this time."

Sonnenaufgang's smile widened even further, which Autumn thought would be impossible—especially considering the cheery situation his patient was in.

"I'll go do that while you wait in the lobby some more."

"Got it," Autumn said with a grim frown.

As she turned back, she tried to dispel the warnings of bad decisions being made that festered in her mind.

Now watch me be both out on the street and without Edgar...

VII.

"...And that is the crux of the 'Many-Worlds Theory': that an infinite number of contrasting variations of the same canon can exist at the same time. Let's demonstrate this by putting the official *Harry Potter* books next to a variety of fanfics, each with its own relationship pairings..."

Autumn spent her physics class the way she'd usually spent classes, both all the way back in high school and now in college: staring down at her textbook with her face leaning on her upraised arm, pretending to pay deep attention to the lecture while in reality considering other work.

"...This can even happen within the same series, even the official

series of a universe. For instance, a story can have negative continuity, wherein an important character, let's say, dies or is fired in one story and then is magically revived or rehired the next episode, as if nothing ever happened. This can even be mixed with continuity in other parts of a story, causing certain events to have different meanings in each. For instance, compare the way *South Park* handle's Kenny's death in 'Kenny Dies' versus the many others..."

This time, however, 'twas not because Autumn had something urgent she needed to accomplish—in fact, she repeatedly stopped her thoughts to berate herself for wasting her time with plans that will likely prove fruitless, should Edgar's operation run successfully. And yet, she also knew that the current circumstances would make paying attention to content she had already read, anyway, virtually impossible, and so she might as well focus on her Plan B, just in case.

There is no such thing as being too prepared, after all, Autumn thought.

"...Wednesday we'll discuss the many problems with automatically accepting a universe's god's word on its canon, and instead discuss scientific methods for discovering our own interpretations."

Suddenly, the room filled with noises. Autumn looked up and stared incredulously at all of the students sliding out their seats and walking toward the door. What was s'posed to be an hour-long class felt like a few minutes.

She left the classroom and walked down the hallway toward the stairs, attention glued to the beautiful gray and white tiles on the floor.

That is, till she was knocked out of it by a hand grasping her shoulder. She turned to the person who did it with wide eyes, ready to ground pound the bastard, till she saw that 'twas just Dawn, whom she merely wanted to lightly throttle.

“Autumn, I’m surprised you came. You doing all right?”

Autumn was glad to see that she was at least not smiling, which put her a level 'bove Dr. Sonnenaufgang.

Then she sighed and thought, *Perhaps I am being hard on the twit. Perhaps this is actually the proper way to react to the average person undergoing distress.*

“They’re doing the operation today,” she said. “Hopefully they won’t screw up,” she added mildly.

“Well, that’s good.”

“Yeah...” Autumn looked down, at a loss for what to add to this clearly fruitless conversation.

Then she looked up and said, “Hey, did you bring that fire flower, or whatever?”

“The flameflower? Uh, no. Sorry. I didn’t know you wanted me to.”

“No, that’s all right. Just thought I’d save you a trip if you did and Edgar turned up fine.”

“I can bring it after work tonight,” Dawn said.

“I’d wait till I call and confirm that Edgar’s healthy 'nough to use said flameflower properly first.”

“Oh, I’m sure he will be.”

“What makes you so sure?”

Dawn paused to think. “Well, they’re already operating on him. That must mean something.”

“I truly thank you for the sentiment behind your blatant rationalizations, as misguided as they may be,” Autumn said. “I just dearly hope you don’t think this way when you’re in trouble; I fear what consequences you may inadvertently cause if you do.”

She quickly added, “Then again, considering the consequences I already create myself, perhaps I shouldn’t judge.”

“It’s not your fault.”

Autumn frowned. *Why do people always say such a transparent*

inane nicety? If I thought 'twas my fault, I wouldn't be here; I'd be on a flight to the Philippines to evade the police.

Then again, what's she s'posed to say? "Well, sucks to be in your shirt. See ya"?

"I know..." she said.

They pushed out through the front door into the rain and walked down the street.

"Well..." Autumn turned back to Dawn at the sound of her talking, having almost forgot she was even still there. "Uh... as I said, if you need anything, you have my number..."

There was a long pause filled with nothing but the sound of rain pittering gainst the concrete.

"Uh, okay..." Autumn said.

"Well, uh, see ya," Dawn said with a little wave, and then turn and went.

Autumn turned and went in the other direction with a befuddled expression.

She keeps emphasizing that point... she thought. Is she trying to hint at something she for some reason can't outright say or is this normal procedure in situations like this? Considering we're not on a top-secret mission, the latter is most likely.

Yes, it's very much likely that this is normal and I'm just not familiar with these social mores. Okay.

VIII.

Autumn received 'nother call from the hospital asking her to come in. To her frustration, nowhere in the message was there any indication as to whether the operation was a success or failure, or even if it had finished.

Regardless, she headed back to the hospital and, after waiting 'nother ten minutes, was finally escorted back into Edgar's room. Her

heart leapt when she saw a bandaged-covered figure shaped like Edgar lying in bed, attached to a pouch full of water and some repeatedly beeping machine.

She turned to the grinning face of Sonnenaufgang.

"It went well, I s'pose?" Autumn asked, holding her breath for the answer.

"Well, we can't be sure just yet what complications may come, but more than likely, he will heal within the next few weeks."

Edgar turned in his bed and said in a weak voice, "Autumn?"

Autumn walked over to his bed, staring down at him like a hawk with her hands clasped behind her back, businesslike. Then she raised a hand and gently rubbed it over Edgar's forehead.

"How are you feeling?" she asked.

"Fine... Just a little weak, I guess."

They both paused in awkward silence, Autumn looking far 'bove Edgar at a fascinating poster 'bout knee health.

Finally, Autumn said, "Well, get better soon."

"I will. Sorry for all the trouble..."

"No trouble at all," Autumn lied. "Anyway, it'll only hinder your immune system and slow your recovery if you stress over it; it'd be optimal if you relaxed and focused purely on recovery now."

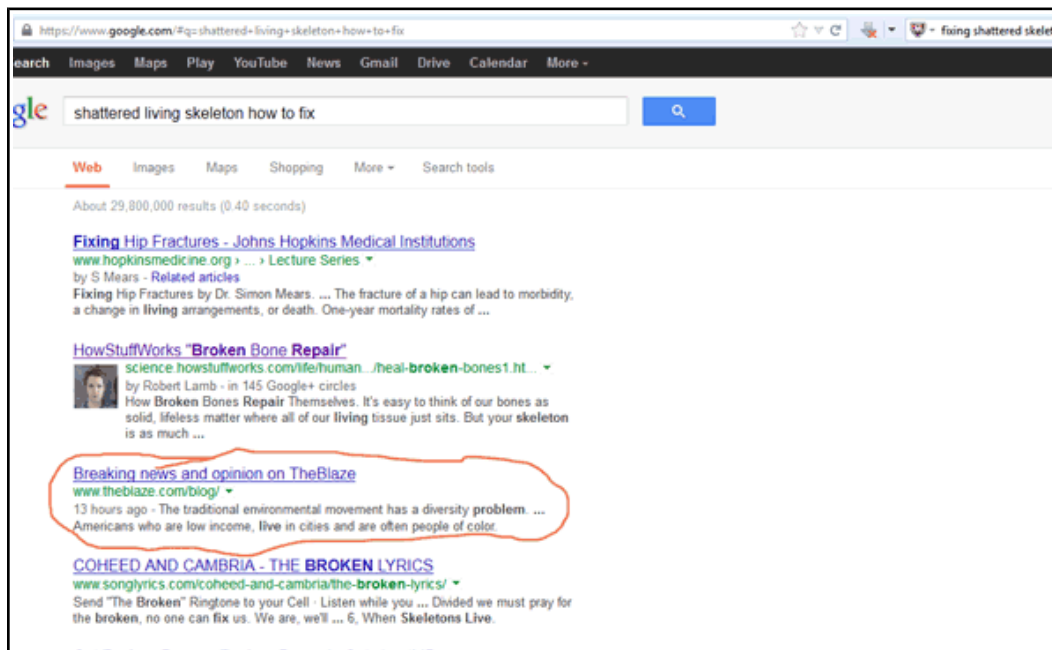
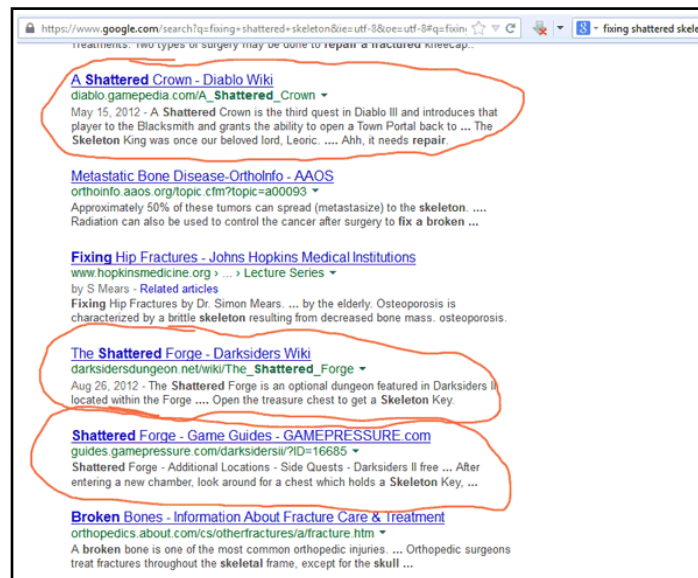
She bent down and kissed him on the forehead, and then turned and left. To her thanks, Sonnenaufgang didn't try talking to her as she did.

Her chest heaved in a heavy sigh as she walked down the hall. *I don't know how I'm going to tell him we're broke because of this operation.*

#BOSK-BIT-AH00E

GOOGLEY-EYED

J. J. W. Mezun | February 10, 2014



https://www.google.com/search?q=living+skeleton+how+to+fix&ie=utf-8&oe=utf-8


The Living Skeleton (1988) - IMDb
www.imdb.com/title/tt0203635/
 ★★☆☆ Rating: 6.4/10 - 162 votes
 Directed by Hiroshi Matsuno. With Kikko Matsuoka, Yasunori Irikawa, Masumi Okada, Asao Uchida.

Undressed Skeleton — Living Lifestyle!
undressedskeleton.tumblr.com/dietplan
 Living Lifestyle! ... wonder why I have recipes for chicken and other meat, but it's because I live with a meat eater. Don't have time to fix a fast snack?

Famous anorexic identical twins die in house fire following prophecy ...
www.dailymail.co.uk/.../Famous-anorexic-identical-twins-die-house-foll...
 Aug 28, 2012 - ... they would 'die together' as they transformed into living skeletons ... both into virtual living skeletons and a problem pair for their parents, ...

Live updates: The shutdown - Washington Post
www.washingtonpost.com/blogs/...live/liveblog/live-updates-the-shutdown/
 Oct 4, 2013 - Live updates: The shutdown. The U.S. government ... From The Fix's Sean Sullivan: After the ... commitments. Read the full analysis on The Fix.

simplethemes/skeleton_wp - GitHub
https://github.com/simplethemes/skeleton_wp
 skeleton_wp - Skeleton is a simple, responsive WordPress theme based on the ... Footer/Comments fix ... Live Demo: themes.simplethemes.com/skeleton.

HowStuffWorks "Broken Bone Repair"
 science.howstuffworks.com/life/human.../heal-broken-bones1.ht...
 by Robert Lamb - in 164 Google+ circles
 How Broken Bones Repair Themselves. It's easy to think of our bones as solid, lifeless matter where all of our living tissue just sits. But your skeleton is as much ...

#BOSK-BIT-AH10F

HIT RIGHT IN THE DEPRESSING BONE

J. J. W. Mezun | February 20, 2014

Shattered Skeleton Syndrome (SSS) Overview

Shattered Skeleton Syndrome is a disease particularly prevalent among skeleton people; though some humans can catch it, too. It occurs when enough damage is inflicted on one so that one's hit points go below zero and their bones become shattered by the immense force.



Symptoms

Symptoms include unbearable pain, difficulty moving, and feeling as if one's bones have been shattered.

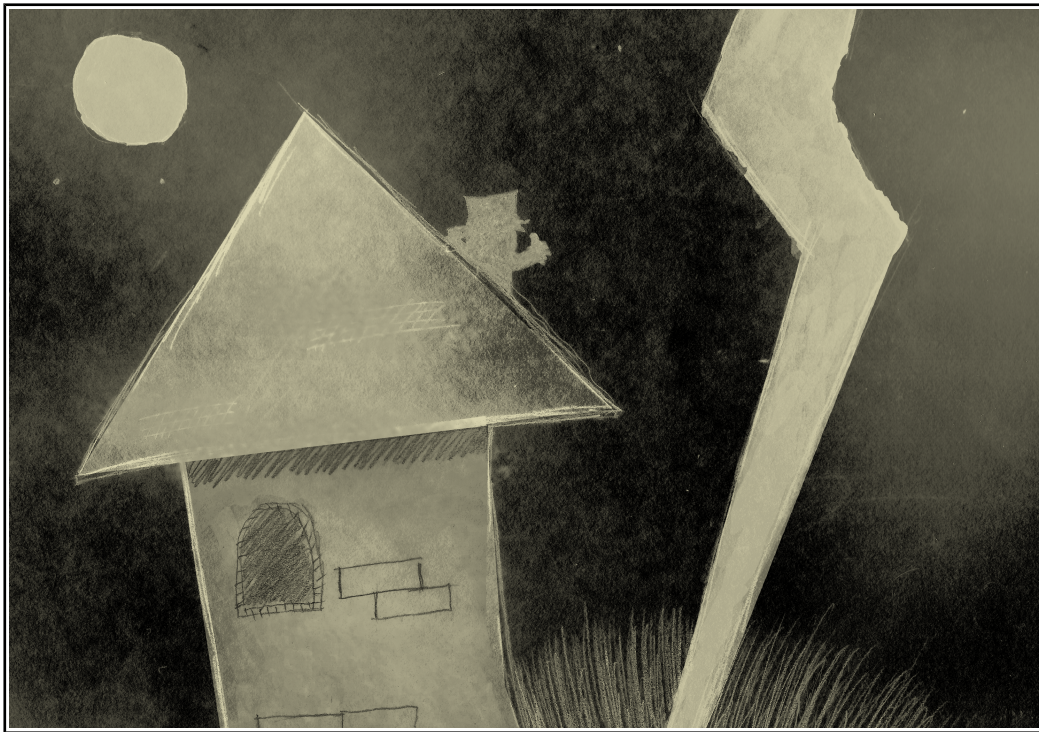
Treatment

If your bones have been shattered, squirm your liquefied body over to the nearest phone and call for a doctor immediately. Having a shattered skeleton is extremely dangerous and can cause trouble with relationships and employment. To maximize prevention, go to a doctor at least every year and check to make sure your skeleton hasn't been shattered.

#BOSK-AI0408-LANCE

SURVIVAL OF THE PEOPLE WHO DON'T DIE

J. J. W. Mezun | March 1, 2014



I.

Lance Chamsby stood naked on the roof of Castle Roark with his arms outstretched, feeling the icy rain and waxing gibbous moon bathe his gleaming body. He gazed down on his tower, its amber-bricked hundred stories standing with the erectness of a statue, immovable by neither other men nor nature. But this tower didn't offer him the silly frivolity of mere shelter from hypothermia or bear attacks; when he looked at this tower, he saw the 17-trillion-point¹ check he wrote with his own hands; when he gazed down at the furs swaying so uselessly in the purple wind, he saw his own hands writing a check for someone to chop them down and saw them into the thousands of pages he will need to fit all of his thoughts; when he watched the moon lying so lazily in the sky, he imagined his own hands writing the check that would send a rocket there and excavate its white-chocolatey goodness.

Then he began to shiver and stepped back inside to put on his red-caped black cloak, red scarf, and black top hat stamped with a golden dollar sign at the front.

He returned to the laptop sitting on his bed, where he was working on his magnum opus. He read the words on his computer screen for the sixteenth time that day. *My words! Words that came only from the infinite faculty of my mind!*

Herman Cain was sitting at his desk like a potent mixture of aristocracy and rugged adventurer, leaning back with the aura of self-satisfaction at a domain that was purely his—at the few, but exquisitely tasteful furniture he had left 'round the place: the portrait of his great grandfather, Louis Cain; at the ancient

1 Approximately 21,529,888.55 American dollars.

Ming vase hand-painted with the pure black designs that represented the magnificence of man and all of his prized values, the black a solid indication of his objective, solid power; and his Wii-U plugged into his television set, which was showing the image of Mario, a representative of the moralist man who through the power of his own mind and will was able to commit what would seem to some as inhuman feats, such as saving the princess from the socialistic Koopa king, Bowser. He looked out at this world that was purely his in every sense: a representative of the strength of his mind alone to shape reality not by simply imagining his goals, but doing them.

Herman could feel the rushing exhilaration as he swiftly moved his pen over the sheets of paper in front of him: signing contracts, writing corporate policy plans, and the most adventurous of his arduous tasks, devising budgets. Herman's mind raced as he devised all of these budgets. He was always moving forward, always racing, always rushing. Movement was the most important, most human and just, man could perform.

Herman glanced at his partner, John Trite, with an expression lacking in any kind of emotion, but only the forward honesty of his mind utterly lacking in contradiction. John stood against the wall to Herman's right smoking a cigarette bearing a dollar sign on it and glanced back at Herman, also lacking any type of emotion. Their eyes met with an exalted emotionless agreement: they both knew what the other thought about this issue, both possessing the same knowledge of the objective truth that is morality.

Lance sat reading his own writing a dozen more times.

The muse that will inspire the rest of this epic lay here somewhere, he told himself. This isn't some dumb, childish scribbling meant for cheap laughs by the mindless masses, after all; even the most brilliant minds would require the sufficient time to craft such a promising work of philosophical sophistication.

As Lance crunched on the caramel-chip goodness of a Yo, Dolly! bar and held a golden goblet full of cherry cola, he glanced over at his still-running TV, only to stop with his mouth hanging open and his eyes ballooning when he saw the words "Gilded Top Hat of Chamsby."

"...this priceless family heirloom of the richest family in Boskeopolis, the Chamsbys, found just recently at a Diamonds Forever in Honey Plaza. Tell me, Mr. Harvest, how did you find this?"

A younger man held a microphone before an older man. The older man shrugged.

"Some woman sold it to me—that new Chamsby kid who inherited ol' Fitz's property, Lance's, ex-wife, I guess. Sounded bitter 'bout it. Probably dumped her for some Hollywood dame." He

chuckled and winked. "You know how young rich kids are; can never keep a hold of their jewels."

Lance tried to break his goblet dramatically, but no matter how hard he squeezed, he just hurt his fingers. So eventually, he just tossed it forward, causing it to emit a soft thud and splash as it smacked the ruby-colored carpet.

"What is this libel?" He shouted as he threw his arms out.

Then he sat back down and drummed his fingers together with flat eyes.

Don't overexcite yourself, Lance, ol' boy. It won't do you any good. Now, there's obviously only two ways father's top hat could've been pilfered: either that Mr. Harvest lied and stole it himself, or some woman broke in and pocketed it when I wasn't looking, and then fabricated this story to evade scrutiny.

He sat up straight. *There's no time for deliberation. I must act—fast!—to stop this irredeemable injustice!*

He searched for the phone number to the Diamonds Forever on Honey Plaza and called.

"Welcome to Diamonds Forever. What can we do for you?"

"Are you Mr. Harvest?" Lance said with lime saliva.

"I'm guessing you want the Gilded Top Hat of Chamsby, right? Well, let me just save you time and say that I'm not selling it."

"By community chest, would you happen to know who I am?"

There was a pause filled with muffled dead noise.

"Uh... No. Who?"

"This would be Lance Chamsby."

Another pause.

"Uh... Oh. And I s'pose you want your top hat back, right?"

"I want to know how you got your greasy fingers on it," Lance said.

"I can assure you, sir, that we here at Diamonds Forever do not

indulge in any theft, if that's what you're thinking. See, a young woman came by claiming to be your wife and sold it to us. I can guess by your tone that she lied."

"No, I just called to make sure it got there safe," Lance said as he glared at the phone. "Who was this woman?"

"Uh... I don't know her name, sir. We don't keep those kinds of records."

'Course he wouldn't. Leave it to Boskeopolis to have the laziest businesses in the world, Lance thought.

But then he exclaimed, "Oh, wait! I just remembered... It's 'Autumn Spring,' or something. I remembered that, because I thought 'twas such a rare name. I mean, what are the chances of someone having both first and last names be season-based?"

"Yeah, what are the odds?" Lance sneered. "Are you sure her name wasn't 'Obvious Alias'?"

"No. I'm sure 'twas 'Autumn Spring' or something. If you want, I could give a description."

"Please do, though I'm guessing it's going to be a woman covered from head to toe in a black veil."

"No. She wore casual clothes. Sweat pants and a T-shirt. Uh... she had a red ponytail and she wore glasses. She also had a skeleton in a robe 'hind her."

"A skeleton?"

"Uh huh. He had big gaping black holes for eyes and everything. Didn't say anything; awfully quiet."

"I think that's all I'll need for now," Lance said.

"Well, okay. Always glad to help, Mr. Chamsby, sir."

"Whatever," Lance grunted before hanging up and returning his cell to his cloak. *I don't know what kind of idiot he thinks I am, but his obvious lies don't cloud my truth-seeking ears one bit!*

Nevertheless, Lance searched "Autumn Spring skeleton," just to be sure. His eyes widened when he saw the results. He clicked the

first link.

His outstretched eyes slowly vacillated left and right as his mouth silently muttered the page's words:

"The Story of Madame Springer," and below that, "Despite the failure of the government to solve the mystery of the theft of Syrup Bank, there is a surprising level of consistency among various theories. After one of the security guards, Nox Wellstone, claimed 'twas robbed by a woman with a red ponytail and glasses, many people came forward to report knowing a notorious thief from their high school with a similar appearance named 'Autumn Springer,' who partnered with a skeleton named 'Edgar Winters,' collaborated by yearbooks from 2008-2010.

"But this was apparently not their only heist, for later the CEO of Sterling Mall, known only as 'the Boss,' claimed his mall was robbed by two with similar descriptions, and that this was what caused its mysterious destruction.

"Course, he was treated as crazy, specially with his talk 'bout the 'Mammonth' monster; but could this not be a simple coincidence? Could this duo—or even more—be a legitimate band of thieves, so good at stealing, that they never get caught? And what else could they have stolen without anyone knowing?"

Lance sat back, his mouth still hanging open.

'Course that's the answer! It couldn't be anything else! And leave it to that looter-loving government just to let her be, violating property rights whenever she wants. I tell you, there just isn't any justice anymore.

To soothe his sore veins, he returned to his Pages file, planning to finish his Great Boskeopoleon Novel. Then he sat and stared at his mostly-blank screen for minutes. His mind began to slip 'way from his story and back to the mysterious "Madame Springer," which only riled his blood 'gain. He started to envision a hero bringing that

rotter to justice. The more he thought 'bout it, the more excited he felt; suddenly writing a book seemed boring compared with the opportunities this raised.

Well, why shouldn't I rid this city of the vermin myself? he thought. *After all, it's only by the initiative of honest individuals standing up for themselves that society can prosper. Heroes like Roark or Galt certainly wouldn't stand by while the Tooheys or Collective 0-0009s of the world work to enslave us.*

Giddy with the thought of all of the ways he could dispose of this parasite, he opened a new file in Pages and devised various plans. This time he had no writer's block at all, and soon scribed a long list of ideas.

Lance raised his goblet. *To a long and successful career for justice!*

He guzzled the goblet empty in one triumphant gulp, and then laughed as the thunder strummed outside.

II.

Lance crouched 'hind a small fern in front of Autumn's apartment room door. His mouth twisted into a grin as he peeked out at the motion-detecting explosive attached to her door.

She'll have to open her door sometime soon—either to enter or leave—and when she tries—Boom! Justice served!

Then his gaze began to wander to the other barren doors and walls, his mouth opening into a yawn. Though he tried to keep as hidden as possible, he couldn't help shifting 'round, causing the bushes of the fern to make brushing sounds.

Augh! What's taking her so long? She can't truly expect me to just sit here all day, all for her sake!

Then he told himself, *These are the sacrifices you have to make for justice, I s'pose. That's how Boskeopolis works—work us as hounds and then expect us to give all of the benefits to them.*

But think of the benefits we'll get, Chamsby, ol' boy. This could be a whole new beginning! I could become a crime fighter—a fighter against the looters who steal from the rich and powerful victims! A living Danneskjöld! I can just imagine what everyone will say when they are in need of justice: "Who is Lance Chamsby?"

Lance was so distracted by these thoughts, he hadn't noticed an old man with a rosy, wrinkled face walking past him toward Autumn's door. Eventually his eyes caught the old man and his mind scrambled to figure out its meaning. He reached out his right arm and shouted, "Stop!"

"Let's see... It's number 201, right?" was the last thing the old man had said 'fore he grabbed the doorknob and was abruptly engulfed in an orange fireball.

Lance ducked his head under the fern, not just to avoid the blast, but also to avoid seeing the catastrophe happen. When he raised his head back up, he saw an enormous hole leading into Autumn's dingy room and what was once the sweet old man's thousands of bloody, fleshy bits scattered all over the room. Lance paused, gazing at the mess with uncertain eyes 'fore he finally stood.

But 'fore he could walk, he heard footsteps from the left. He shrunk back down 'hind the fern, fearful that he might be blamed for this incident.

'Twill take billions to buy my way out of this mess! he thought.

Luckily for him, the woman walked past him without any notice of his existence, focusing her bulging eyes on the human remains littering the room and the gigantic hole in her room.

"What the hell happened here?" Autumn asked aloud.

As he saw his enemy right in front of his face, he snuck his right hand into his cloak and pulled out his secret weapon saved for emergencies: a golden nugget with which to smash Autumn's head open with.

“Justice shall be served.”

Suddenly Autumn swung 'round and aimed a bemused expression at him as he held the nugget 'bove his head.

“Damn it! Why did I say that out loud?” Lance whispered to himself.

“Yeah, why did you?” Autumn asked, and then glanced 'round the room again. “Did you do... this?”

Lance stood back. “Me? Gasp! I... Gasp! Why I never! Do you take me for a petty murderer?”

Autumn's eyebrows narrowed. “How should I know? I don't even know who you are.”

Lance walked backward toward the other end of the hallway. Twisting his black top hat, eyes as icy as the Crystal Caves, he said, “Yes, but you shall. Rest assured, you have not seen the last of me, Madame Springer.” He pointed his index finger at her. “You and the rest of the looters have been feeding off us for too long. I shall see that you are brought to justice.”

“What are you talking 'bout? You should obviously know I didn't”—but Lance ran off before she could finish.

III.

This plan will be flawless, Lance thought as he held a dingy oil can painted with a yellow-and-black radioactive sign over the edge of Bean Bridge and into Lemon Lake, releasing glowing pink liquid into it—and when he'd emptied it, he threw the whole can in, as well.

While he watched it spread 'cross the cerulean surface, merging into a steady purple, he erected a sign in the nearby dirt, shaped like an arrow and tilted downward so that it was pointing at the lake. It said, “Left tons of gold underwater for safekeeping. Please don't loot it.”

After twenty minutes of waiting, Chamsby saw the familiar red-

haired devil amble nigh. Lance cackled and wrung his Mickey-Mouse-gloved hands together, and then remembered that he was s'posed to hide and rushed into the only nearby hiding spot: a browning briar bush. Ten thousand needles scraped gainst him as he pushed the brambles 'round, created a hole big 'nough—and yet inconspicuous 'nough—to allow him to spy on the slimy stealer without being sighted.

Autumn stopped to read the sign and stared at the lake of purple water for a second, muttered much too quietly for Lance to hear, and then turned 'round and walked 'way.

Lance struggled out from the brambles and dusted himself off, not even able to wipe off a tenth of the needles still stuck in him as if he were a pincushion.

He looked out at the street Autumn's tiny silhouette was walking down, and then back at the river, back and forth, trying to crossword why this flawless plan had failed. He scratched a bit of hair sticking out from under his cartoonish black top hat.

Well, it could be worse, Lance thought. I could be eaten by bears.

And then Lance was eaten by bears.

IV.

On the orders of Lance's will, a portion of his unlimited wealth² was used to create a clone of him. He even paid extra money to bypass

2 This is hyperbole, 'course; Lance truly owned only crown trillion points, the crown letter caused by the wealth he'd inherited going far 'bove the limit for the bytes holding his wealth variable, causing the graphics for his wealth score to glitch.

the obvious biological limits cloning imposes so that an exact copy of him was created on the spot, almost as if he didn't truly die at all.

But Lance wasn't 'bout to let a little thing like being reborn distract him from the most important task in the world: disposing of the ponytailed looter.

Lance's next brilliant plan was doing the Charleston in his head as he walked toward the robed skeleton sitting 'lone at the west-most, front-most table in the Rock Lobster.

"You must be Mr. Winters," Lance said as he sat at the chair opposite Edgar, stretching his clasped-together hands 'cross the table toward Edgar in what he hoped was an act of cordiality.

Edgar, who had been staring down shyly at his book, raised his head in bewilderment as he heard this unfamiliar voice call his name.

"Oh... hello there," Edgar said, desperately trying not to flub up his speaking. "I... Yes... yes, my name is Mr. Winters. You can call me Edgar."

"Edgar, eh?" Lance said. "I like that name. That's a good, strong name. 'Edgar Winters,'" Lance repeated it with an attempt at a shaken fist of triumph, but what looked more to the other patrons to be an arm spasm.

"Correct me if I am incorrect, but you are familiar with a young Madame Springer, are you not?" Lance asked.

"Autumn? Uh, yeah, I know her..." Edgar said. Then as the sight of this man's top hat with a golden dollar-sign registered in his mind, he asked, "Why?"

"I was just curious," Lance said. "I'm writing a biography 'bout her."

"Oh. Uh, I dunno if Autumn would like that," Edgar said as he glanced 'round himself absentmindedly. "She's a pretty private person."

"Hmm... truly, now? Her actions don't seem to show that," Lance

said, patting his gloved fingers up and down gainst the table in restless boredom.

'Fore Edgar could reply, Lance knocked on the table, interrupting Edgar 'fore he even began to speak, and called out, "Serving wench! Take my order already!"

Edgar, mortified, slunk down in his seat and kept silent while the owner/manager/accountant/cashier/server/mascot, Dawn Summers, walked over to their table with a pad in her hand.

"Oh, hello, Edgar," Dawn said with a wave. Edgar mirrored. "Is this costumed man harassing you?"

"Uh... No, that's okay..." Edgar said, his voice gliding down to silence.

"Hey, I'm not harassing anyone! I won't take this libel! This is a free city, and I have the right to ask people personal questions," Lance said with his head turned to Dawn.

She cleared her throat and asked, "May I take your order, then, Mr. Misogyny?"

"Why, yes, you may," Lance sneered. "And you must have me mistaken for another patron, because my name is Chamsby, not 'Misogyny.' In fact, I have never even heard of any 'Misogyny' fellow. You might have heard of my famous family. As the last heir I am the richest man in Boskeopolis, you know."

Dawn nodded. "Now, you called me so you could buy food and drink, am I correct?"

"Yes, you are correct," Lance answered with a haughty finger in the air.

"Then perhaps you could tell me what that order is so I could get it to you," Dawn said with a smile Edgar figured probably wasn't used for Lance, but rather gainst him.

"Yes, I could," Lance nodded back.

"That's wonderful. With so few people who can use this magic

called speaking, it's a wonder anything gets done." Dawn said. "Now what's your order?"

"Order, right," Lance said. "I'll have the elephant tusks."

"I'm sorry, sir, but we do not carry that," Dawn said as she stared impatiently at her pad. "I would recommend you actually look at the menu."

"No elephant tusks!" Lance yelled with a look of madness—the kind of madness one would have if one's mother were shot or one lost a game of Scrabble. "What kind of restaurant doesn't sell elephant tusks?"

"This one, like I just said," Dawn said with a nod. "But if you like, I could get you food people actually eat."

"Hmmp. I don't want food that's already eaten. What's the point?" Lance said.

"I'll tell you what, how 'bout I just get you the most expensive meal on the menu."

"As long as it's not costly," Lance said as he played 'round with his golden watch that he hadn't had till just now. He watched it to see what times the hands pointed to, only to remember he couldn't tell time with analog clocks. So he threw it over his shoulder, clocking 'nother businessperson in the head, who yelled, "Ow!"

Lance stamped his fists onto the table. "And can we bring it down with that infernal ruckus already?" He pointed at Dawn and said, "I want the most expensive dish and I want the noisy guy shot. How 'bout that?"

"I'm sorry, but we don't do assassinations. But I can get you the meal," Dawn answered.

"Good, good," Lance said as he drummed his fingers together, just before strumming them together, and then blowing them together. "And I want extra of the most expensive sauce, and I want it all cooked in the most expensive way."

"I can do that Senor Sleezeball," Dawn said with a nod.

Hmmph. No wonder she works at such a roach-bitten restaurant; she can't even remember names after a few minutes, Lance thought.

Then Dawn turned to Edgar, who had already returned to his book. "And do you need anything, Edgar?"

Edgar nodded. "Just waiting for Autumn."

Dawn strode 'way and Lance turned back to Edgar.

"Now, where were we?" Lance said as he twirled his index finger in the air absentmindedly, and then stubbed his finger down on the table. "Ah, yes, the Hollywood leftist looters."

"Well, I know Autumn's left-handed and she makes her money stealing; but she doesn't live anywhere near Hollywood."

"Ah, so you admit that she's a looter," Lance said with an accusing jab of his finger.

Edgar nodded. "Uh huh. She's proud of it, too. Spends hours a day doing it. You'd never believe someone could put so much effort into such a thing."

"Hmmph. Well, that's certainly true," Lance said. "And how much has she earned through all this?"

"Uh... I dunno," Edgar said. "An awful lot, though."

"And all through illegitimate methods?"

"Well, it depends on your definition of illegitimate," Edgar said as he stared thoughtfully at the table. "She actually argued 'twas more legitimate then, uh... what did she say? Well, it wasn't something good 'bout businesspeople, that's for sure."

"I bet," Lance said with 'nough ice to freeze water.

Lance pointed at Edgar. "So you admit that Autumn is a thief, then? Then you would tell the jury this if you were asked in court, right?"

"Gosh, I don't know... I don't think Autumn would like that."

"But I would like it. Aren't my feelings important?"

"I guess so..." Edgar said. "But I've known Autumn for a long time.

I don't even know who you are."

"I'm Lance Chamsby, the richest man in the world!" Lance boomed, standing up with his hands pressing down on the table.

He sat back down and aimed two gun-fingers at Edgar. "I'll tell you what, how much money do you want—name any number that is below a billion."

"Oh, I don't need any money..."

Lance looked at Edgar with so much bewilderment he must have had a monopoly on bewilderment—which makes absolutely no sense.

"You... you don't need money?" Lance asked. He slammed his fists on the table. "Poppypenis! Everyone needs money! Haven't you ever heard the saying, 'Money is the root of all good'?"

"Um, no."

"How much is this Springer woman offering?" Lance asked with a furtive glance.

"Oh, I don't help her for her money. We're just friends."

"Friends... with benefits?" Lance asked, suddenly curious as to the biological possibilities of a human and skeleton, um... boning. He was also unsure whether this idea utterly disgusted him or utterly excited him.

Edgar shook his head. "I told you, I'm not in it for the money."

"Are you in it for the... for the bed stories?" Lance asked.

"No," Edgar answered. "In fact, I don't even think Autumn has a bed to write stories 'bout."

"I meant are you fucking her?" Lance asked with an impatient wave of his hand.

Edgar blushed as he shook his head. "Oh, no..."

Lance looked at his watch, only to remember he already threw it 'hind him. Luckily he had a back-up that appeared exactly the same, which he pulled out of his cloak to look at. Unluckily, he forgot that he still couldn't tell time. So he threw this one 'hind his back, hitting

yet another businessperson in the head, causing him to say, "I must say: that hurt quite a lot."

Lance stamped his fists on the table. "This restaurant is full of whining whiners! I'm outta here."

And with that he got up and pushed on through the front door, down the street toward his castle, only to get eaten by bears 'long the way.

Just then Dawn returned with a large golden plate full of steak with golden-frog sauce, Mustard Mountain mashed potatoes, and a red live lobster with his own miniature guitar. She placed it on the table, only to notice Chamsby's absence.

"Hey, where'd he go?"

Edgar looked up at her in surprise. "Uh, I think he left."

"Did he just leave?" Dawn asked urgently as she swung her head toward the front windows and looked out them for signs of running.

"I think he was just eaten by bears," Edgar said.

"Isn't that always what happens," Dawn said with a sigh. "Ugh. I'm never going to pay off that bill I got from landing on Park Place with that hotel at this rate."

"Gee, I'm sorry," Edgar said. "You want me to help you pay it off?"

"No. You don't have any money," Dawn said as she frowned at the floor. "Oh well, I'll call you when I need that help with the boxes. Thank you, by the way. You're a true one-up."

Then she turned and left.

Edgar sighed down at the table top. All of the disasters I witness happen when I'm 'round. I know it's 'cause I'm too timid to say, "Hey, don't eat that person's limb" or something like that.

And then some person's limb was eaten by bears.

...I probably shouldn't interrupt him. 'Sides, it'll save me greatly if I only buy one fancy costume, was what Autumn was thinking just 'fore entering the parking lot of the Sterling Mall.

It appeared to Autumn to be a great boxy beast, stretching long and tall, its tendrils stretching through the white marks and cars of the parking lot. She pushed her way through the doors and froze 'gain when she saw the sheer number of stores it held. She'd never get used to it.

This is less a mall and more a whole town dedicated to shopping.

She saw the plastic board just 'head, in front of some tacky potted plant, and was gladdened when she saw it held a map. She picked it up, slowly stumbling forward and groaning from its heft, as she tried to follow its directions.

Why would these idiots only have one of these and why would they make it so heavy? Autumn wondered.

She followed an elevator up to the second floor, as the map indicated she should. As she waited, she avoided making eye-contact with the other idiots gaping at her like idiots as if 'twere her fault the idiots who run this idiot mall made the only map they offered big and bulky like idiots.

When she finally found the clothing store she'd been looking for, she dropped the map near the entrance and stepped inside, making her way directly to the cashier on the other side.

She leaned in toward the cashier with her palms spread out over the desk and said in an urgent tone, "I need the cheapest expensive dress you have, immediately."

"Precisely what price are you thinking?" the cashier asked with blank blinks.

"Eight hundred points,³" Autumn said.

The cashier gave Autumn the kind of polite smile one would give

3 Approximately 10.13 American dollars.

when a child gives one a crayon drawing of one of the Ninja Turtles. Autumn didn't like that smile.

"Uh... You may want to try 'nother store for that price," the cashier said.

Autumn threw her arms out. "Okay, what's the cheapest price you have for a dress that would work for a formal party?"

"We have a beautiful black dress for only ten thousand points⁴ over here." He pointed his finger over at a rack of clothes to his left.

"Ten *thousand*? What do you think I am, Richie Rich?" Autumn said. "Is that truly the cheapest you have?"

"I'm 'fraid so, Madame. We deal in the highest quality here."

"I don't know what quality clothes could comprise to be worth so much," Autumn said. "I'm only using this for one day. Can't I rent anything?"

"Yes..." the cashier said hesitantly. "We can offer a one-night rental for forty thousand points."

Autumn sighed. "I s'pose that'll work."

"But you have to make sure you return it in perfect condition. That includes keeping it clean, as these dresses must be dry-cleaned," the cashier said.

"Uh... Just out of curiosity, what if I do happen to... scuff it up a bit?" Autumn asked, glancing 'way from the cashier.

The cashier slammed his palms onto the desk and leaned toward her, shadows hovering over his dead stern eyes.

"Then we'll find you and send you to mall prison for the rest of your life!" he boomed as he pointed a finger straight to his right, where there stood a gray cage covered in bars in a shadowy corner.

Then he stood back, readjusted his collar, and coughed.

"Are you sure renting would be wise?" he said with a lighter tone.

"It seems I have no choice," Autumn said with a shrug. *I'll just*

4 Approximately 126.65 American dollars.

have to be extra sneaky so I can scape in a clean manner.

“Great. I can show you the options we have,” the cashier said as he walked out toward the rack he pointed at before.

Autumn followed and waited as the cashier pulled out a black dress with plastic wrapping 'round it.

“How’s this?” the cashier asked as he held it up to her.

“It looks just like any other dress,” Autumn said. “I’ll take it.”

“You don’t want to look at anything else?”

“I don’t have time. We have to make this snappy.” Autumn snapped her fingers to demonstrate the snappiness in which they must operate.

“Uh... okay? You want to try it on, at least?”

“Do you not understand the snappiness of this situation?” Autumn asked, snapping her fingers once more for further evidence.

They finished up and Autumn jogged out the mall and toward home, going just fast 'nough to make good time while keeping a careful hold of the dress. She hoped the plastic wrapping worked as intended.

VI.

Okay, no more dallydillying, Lance Chamsby thought back in his castle room, after cloning himself back to life 'gain. If I am to rid the world of this vile looter once and for all, I must do it myself... which was what I was already trying to do—but this time differently! I shall challenge Madame Springer to climb my castle, and if she survives, I shall challenge her myself!

‘Twas such an obvious, cunning plan that Lance couldn’t understand why it took him over five thousand words to come up with it.

Lance poked his head out his front window, watching for his guest as he felt the cool rain and wind drench his face, while his

gloved fingers pattered over the stone window sill. After 'bout a half-hour, he saw a black shape emerge from the nearby woods. The dark shape seemed to shift in place before his door in some way 'fore entering, releasing a screeching creak from hidden speakers caused by door sensors, since the door was much too new to be authentically creaky.

And at that sound, Lance rushed to the laptop on his bed and clicked into his camera view, linking the monitor to cameras hidden at various areas of the castle. The monitor was already on the camera disguised as a suit of armor's helmet in the first room, which he soon swiveled to point at Autumn, who was much too preoccupied with the dark room 'round her to notice.

Lance could see Autumn had a flashlight in her left hand, which undoubtedly helped her through the woods. But 'twas not needed in this room: the light of the boiling orange lava lakes scattered through the room otherwise filled with stone flooring provided plenty of light for the whole room. Lance cackled as he watched her scratch her head and stare bewilderedly at the lava, only to lose his grin when he saw her hop 'cross all of the pits, soon making her way up the stone spiral stairs to the second floor.

"Hmmp. So the looter does have some cunning—as well as superhuman heat resistance," Lance said to himself as he clicked for the next camera, dug deep into a wall and hidden 'hind a fake splotch of blood.

Autumn was already at the top, staring a little more shocked than before at the sharp golden scythes swinging in various patterns, suspended by long cords that must've gone on at least ten meters higher.

But to Lance's surprise, Autumn merely shrugged and proceeded to navigate 'round the swinging blades as if they were mere branches on trees. She was moving so diligently, she didn't even stop

when a blade she tried to duck under managed to gash her right shoulder; though Lance could barely hear her mutter to herself, “Good thing this dress is sleeveless or I’d be screwed.”

Soon Autumn was already on the other side of the room, and wasted no time climbing up the dozens of meters of spiral stairs. Lance tapped hard on his keyboard, switching to the next room’s camera, and said with a frown, “Okay, there’s no way she can get through the smashing smasher traps.”

Autumn didn’t even look surprised when she saw the next room full of giant metal hammers with four spikes protruding ‘round each hammer’s barrel—though she did wear an exhausted expression.

“This is it!” Lance shouted to himself. “This is where the vile looter fails. I can feel it. Justice shall prevail!”

But by the time he’d looked back at his monitor, Autumn was already passing by the last hammer and was climbing the next set of stairs. Lance smashed his fists on his keyboard, making a loud beep.

“Impossible!” Then Lance thought ‘bout it a li’l more, and then continued, “Well, of course it isn’t impossible; but it is surely unlikely.”

Lance switched to the next camera to find Autumn in a small, circular room, gaping up at a giant green dragon standing in front of her with its wings spread out and its head leering down at her, its forked tongue swaying left and right.

“Bullshit,” Autumn said as she shook her head. Then, as she walked toward the stairs, she continued, “That’s the last straw. Lava, swinging blades, and smashing, spike hammers are one thing; but dragons go way past the suspension of disbelief. No, I refuse to accept this thing’s existence. Sorry.”

The dragon stared at her sadly ‘fore laying his face on the ground with his eyes closed, drenched in warm tears.

But Lance didn’t have time to pay any mind to this:

“That was the last room ‘fore this one!” Lance exclaimed as he

held his hands up to his head; and then he began running 'round the room wildly, crying, "I'm not ready, I'm not ready!"

Finally, as he heard Autumn's footsteps grow louder, he pulled out his trusty gold nugget and hid next to the door frame. The door opened, and out stepped Autumn, who stopped to scan this new room; but she didn't have much time to survey the area 'fore Lance heaved the nugget over his head and bonked Autumn on the head, knocking her unconscious.

VII.

Autumn's head felt as if 'twere being jackhammered when her eyes peeled open to the thin yellow beam of light screaming in her face, contrasted against the thick shadows surrounding it. It took a while of groggy, blurry wonder 'fore she remembered being knocked out. She could feel tight and itchy substances constrict her ankles and wrists. No matter how much she struggled, Autumn couldn't release any limbs.

The first thing she did when she fully regained consciousness was look down, her heart halting. However, upon closer examination of her dress, she sighed in relief. *I don't see any damage yet*, she thought.

'Twas only when he strode before her into the light that she noticed the youthful, pale-skinned man in a black cloak and top hat, the latter of which had a golden dollar sign—what looked to her like a mix 'tween Count Chocula and Rich Uncle Pennybags. A tiny fang poked out from his grin. Autumn stared at him with sagging eye bags, as one would stare at buckets of paint spilled all over one's carpet.

"So you thought you could just bust in and rob me, Lance Chamsby, the richest man in Boskeopolis, you filthy looter? Did you

not think justice would eventually catch up to you?" He gave a booming laugh.

"Hey, I was told this was some exquisite party," Autumn said.

"Isn't that just a convenient excuse," Lance said with a finger pointing up in the air like a cheesy Sherlock Holmes. "You think I don't know 'bout you and your looting?"

Autumn didn't reply.

"Don't change the subject, looter," Lance said, leaning toward Autumn and pointing at her. "The point is that my ruse worked: you saw a perfect chance to steal and so I caught you commie-handed." Lance raised his hands up in the air as if he were a music conductor. "And now I shall rid the world of you and your violence, thievery, and socialism!"

"Social—" Autumn began with a confused stare.

But then she jolted and turned her head to both sides.

"Did you just hear that growling noise?"

"I won't fall for your tricks, filthy looter," Lance said.

He clicked off the light and then turned on the room's regular switch, filling the room with a much less blaring light. Then he pulled out a sheet and a pen from his pocket and held them up to Autumn.

"You shall sign this document admitting to being responsible for looting the Syrup Bank, robbing my dear old father, and for being a dirty communist."

"What? But that last one isn't even true," Autumn said. "Sides, you know contracts signed under physical duress are considered moot in court, right?"

"You'd have to admit to invading my castle, which is also a jailable offense."

"Yes, well, you'd have to admit to having lava lakes, swinging blades, spike hammers, and dra—" Autumn stopped, shaking her head as if she were trying to shake out a gruesome nightmare.

“Anyway, they can’t be legal.”

“Sure they are. I have the right to protection, just as anyone else.”

“Yeah, that's regarding objects like guns or dogs,” Autumn said. “I don’t think the law of protection defends *Super Mario Bros.* levels.”

“You must not be keeping up with the news lately,” Lance calmly replied with a wagging finger. “Or else you would've heard 'bout the recent bill that made ‘pools of lava, scythes (including those that are suspended from the air and swing), giant smashing hammers (including those that have spikes), and dragons’ part of the official definition of guns.”

“It doesn’t matter anyway, since I sure as hell won't sign that paper.”

“Oh, truly?” Lance said, his head tilted and his eyes questioning. “What if I had to persuade you to do it?”

“And how will you do that? Torture me by reading *Atlas Shrugged*?” Autumn sneered.

“No, that'd be too much a boon for you,” Lance said, bitter-faced; but then he smiled wryly and continued, “I have other ways of making you uncomfortable.”

Autumn eyed the creeper warily, but became increasingly bemused when she saw him walk over to the fridge and bring back a handful of red cans with pictures of cherries on them.

“Well, what if I made you drink all of this Cherry Hero-Hero-Cola?” Lance asked, sounding much less confident than before. “I bet its mixture of high fructose corn syrup, phosphoric acid, and caramel coloring will fill you with cancers and disintegrate your internal organs.”

“Uh... Oh, no. You, uh, wouldn’t,” Autumn said.

“I would,” Lance said as he opened a can, creating a loud fizzy sound.

He then proceeded to pour the can into her mouth while Autumn

pretended to make muffling sounds, protesting, "No, stop!" every so often.

When Lance had finished draining twelve cans into her, she made a quick glance down at her dress, dreading seeing a drop of soda. Luckily, she found none.

I'd better find a way out 'fore this idiot does something that ruins this insipid dress.

She leaned back with a pained look on her face. "Are you done violating just 'bout every human right or shred of decency I might possess yet?"

"Don't be ridiculous: thieves don't have rights. But I can release you once you sign this paper," Lance said as he held out said paper.

"Piss off," Autumn said. "I'm not signing any bullshit legal statement. You think I got where I am by giving in to such a cowardly little shit as you."

Lance put his gloved hands on his sides. "You can't just sit there forever," Lance said as he paced in front of Autumn, staring bitterly at the ruby-red carpet. "You'll have to give up eventually. Someday you'll need to eat, and I'm not letting you out to do so till you sign this paper."

"I've gone at least a week without eating before, and I think I can go that long 'gain," Autumn said with a defiant glare.

"Someday you'll need to drink—"

"Well, you already took care of that problem. Thanks."

And then Autumn paused 'gain and looked 'round the room.

"Seriously, don't you hear that growling sound? I think it even got louder."

But Lance didn't seem to hear this and continued, "You'll... you'll..." Lance turned his head left and right for ideas when he stopped on a door farther back.

He turned back to Autumn and said, "You'll need to use the restroom!" as he pointed a shaking finger at Autumn.

Autumn paused, staring blankly at him while her legs fidgeted a little.

Ugh... Maybe drinking all of those colas wasn't so harmless...

Despite trying to hide her discomfort, she could see Lance's expression of desperation transform into a triumphant smile.

But Autumn closed her eyes in a look of nonchalance. "If these are the best ideas you have, you might as well release me now."

"Nice try," Lance said. "Sooner or later you're going to have to go—and I have weeks to wait. You might as well give up now and save yourself the potentially unhealthy bladder explosions that kill so many Boskeopoleons every year."

"You'll have to be patient if you expect this plan to work," Autumn said.

But in the back of her head, she wondered, *Is there a way to trick him into releasing me?*

"Oh, truly?" Lance said with a patronizing tilt of the head as he walked somewhere Autumn couldn't see 'hind her. "Well then you won't mind if I turn on this faucet. It helps keep it clean."

Autumn shifted in her chair even more uneasily as she heard the sound of spraying water 'hind her.

"No. Don't mind at all," Autumn said, trying desperately to keep her shaking nerves down 'nough to fool the fool.

Clearly this failed, as she next heard Lance say, "You know, you look awfully tense. Maybe this lovely music of dancing waves on the beach will help you relax." She heard a few clicks and then a steady symphony of water slushing 'round.

Hmm... The only way I can scape eternal imprisonment—or at least till I roll evens—is if I hold it till Lance eventually falls asleep—which could take hours—and scape while he can't stop me.

Augh! But I left my tools in my sweats. That's right, 'cause this stupid dress doesn't have any pockets. I can't believe this is actually

worth thousands.

She sighed. *In other stories, the Programmers omit the urination algorithm for more useful functions—like perhaps actual research; but nope, too classy for us. We have to use the fucking Stephen King libraries, including the cartoonish strawmen villains, the ridiculous monsters from B-movies, and the scatology functions.*

Lance stayed seated on his bed, loudly sipping his goblet of Le Triomphe wine with a wry smile aimed at Autumn. When he'd finished, he said, "All you need to do is sign the paper and you can get all the bathroom breaks you want in jail."

"I'm cool," Autumn said weakly, sweat dripping down the side of her face.

"Suit yourself," Lance said before making more loud slurps.

She gazed 'round the room. *If I could find a sharp implement, like a knife, then I could wait till he falls asleep and then hop over to it and cut these ropes... Just like that!*

Her eyes quickly slid 'way from the sword hanging on the wall 'cross the room 'bove the table full of thick books to avoid fueling Lance's suspicions.

Now I just have to hold it long 'nough for this dope to distract himself, then I'll succeed completely. Perfect.

And so the next half hour was spent with Lance loudly slurping his wine against the background music of a gushing faucet and tackling waves while Autumn attempted to stiffen her composure to spoil Lance's hopes.

She took a deep breath, hoping 'twould convince Lance she was bored rather than in the most petulant pain she'd ever endured—though not the worst: 'twas more akin to being poked all over with tiny needles than smacking into a building at lightning speed and plummeting to the concrete from kilometers' height and crushed by a deus ex piano.

What if I just faked my signature? she mused.

No. Surely even this idiot would've done the research on what my true signature is. I'd better not take the risk and have this swabber do anything worse. He won't be able to stay in here awake forever, anyway.

The Lance stood from his bed and walked toward the bathroom.

"All of this water is making me need to use the restroom myself, actually," Lance said with a barely-concealed sneer.

Autumn nodded stoically; but what she was hiding was a smile rather than a frown.

However, she did frown when she saw Lance suddenly turn and call, "Jooster!" The sound of footsteps grew from 'hind the door, and then it opened to release a golden-tuxedoed man whose face was covered in gray hair.

"Yes, Mr. Chamsby, sir?"

"Watch this intruder and make sure she doesn't scape," Lance said.

"Yes, sir," Jooster said with a short bow.

After Lance had shut the bathroom door and begun conducting his transaction, Autumn turned to Jooster with hardly-hidden horror.

"Surely you are not so servile that you'll assist this maniac in kidnapping? 'Cause if you don't release me, your ass is in trouble, too."

Jooster gave 'nother bow and said, "I'm 'fraid I am that servile, Madame. Could I get you something?"

Shit! Think! Think! What could I trick this idiot into getting me?

Her heart screamed when she heard the ominous bellow of a toilet flush.

I could get minor relief from turning off that god damn faucet and computer, but Lance could just turn those back off...

Autumn could hear the faucet's stream become distorted with

sudden slosh sounds cutting into it, like a remixed beat. Then it resumed its steady stream and the door creaked open.

Lance exhaled. "Ah... That was incredibly comfortable."

Then he returned to his laptop and stared at it for a minute or so. Then he turned back to Autumn and said, "You know, the offer still stands. I wouldn't want to have to wait till night and make poor Jooster lose sleep watching you all night while I sleep."

Shit! Well, there goes that plan... Autumn thought.

That's all right. I'll be able to manipulate Jooster better than this poker.

Autumn shook her head.

Dozens of minutes passed, during which plenty of metaphors for needing to urinate—including that Greek painting, a leaky faucet floating in a white void, and a pink silhouette of a woman checking the watch on her arm—appeared in a thought bubble pointing at her noggin.

How this happened, she'd never discover.

Eventually, Lance began to tap his hands against the bed and yawn. Finally, he turned to Autumn again:

"You seem to be rather good at self-control," he said. "Twould be a shame if that control were... weakened." He moved over to Autumn and bent down next to her left leg.

"What do you mean?" Autumn asked as she eyed him warily.

Lance pulled off her left tennis shoe.

"You wouldn't dare." Autumn said.

Next, Lance pulled off her left sock. Autumn tried even harder than she'd already been trying to struggle out of her chair, still to no avail, till she felt Lance's spiderlike fingers begin to tickle her foot. Autumn bit down on her bottom lip and tried to keep her composure; but the tickling kept burning and burning till she finally gave way, her head pulling back with tearful laughter as she shouted, "No! Stop! Stop!"

And much as Autumn feared, her body became so shaken by this devious tickling that she felt the screws holding shut all of her convoluted pipelines—how everyone’s bladder is comprised, ‘course—pop off their hinges. She could hear the funneled sound of draining water, which sounded the same to her ears as a prison door slamming for eternity.

“Okay! Fine! Just release me already!” Autumn shouted, causing Lance to stop with a smug smile.

“Well, don’t sit there smiling like a fucking dolt!” Autumn snapped. “You want me to sign it or not?”

But that was rendered moot when she heard a loud crash to her right and turned to see a large brown grizzly bear growling in Lance’s direction. The sight of such a huge scraggly beast shook Autumn’s nerves so much that her bladder emptied itself immediately.

“Ah, fuck!” she shouted. “Are you fucking kidding me?”

“What are you looking at—AHH!” Lance began, turning toward Autumn’s line of vision to see the bear slowly padding its way toward him as two other bears joined him from downstairs.

And then Lance was eaten by bears, leaving nothing but leathery-tasting clothes, hard bones, and the fat, which the bears were trying to cut down on so they wouldn’t get hypertension.

Autumn watched in horror, not just because ‘twas unbelievably disgusting, but also because she knew she was next and that there was no way out.

Well, at least this ruined dress isn’t a problem anymore, Autumn thought.

But as she twitched in her chair, watching the bears slowly walk over to her, she noticed them stop abruptly, sniff near her, and with a cringed look, they turned toward the door and fled.

“Hey, what’s that s’posed to mean!” Autumn shouted.

Well, at least I can—Oh crap! Autumn thought as she tried to get out of her chair, only to remember she was still stuck in it. *Now how am I s'posed to get out of here?*

Li'l did she realize that the “Get Out of Chair Free” card was in her heart all 'long.

How she'd dissect it to get said card without causing painful stings was a different story.

#BOSK-BIT-AI010

KILLER EXTINCT

J. J. W. Mezun | March 10, 2014

Matt curled around a pile of coins and jewels as if it were a time bomb—a blessed time bomb that would rid the world of Matt’s uselessness once and for all. Tears dribbled down his eyes as he remembered all of the months he’d wasted sitting around empty rooms, bored and alone.

But that wouldn’t be a problem any longer. He knew the whole world hated him, and so he knew that he could easily entice them to do the deed they all so wanted to do.

His frown curled into a melancholy smile as he saw a suit of armor near, a silver sword thrust into the air, shining in the sun.

“Villainous dragon, I shall slay you for that treasure!”

Matt didn’t put up a struggle. He didn’t *want* the treasure; release from such a cold world that treated him as both a gruesome monster and a fantastical joke was all of the treasure he needed.

#BOSK-BIT-AI111

BEARLY BEARABLE

J. J. W. Mezun | March 20, 2014

The cub stared glassy-eyed down at his plate with his chin in his paws and sighed while his mother continued to wash the dishes.

“You’re not having anything else until you finish that, young man.”

The cub lazily picked up a portion with his fork, only for it to summarily slide off and back onto the plate with a thick splat.

“But mother, it’s no good anymore.”

“Nonsense. You had it just last night. It couldn’t have gone bad that fast.”

“Human flesh doesn’t taste good reheated, mom.”

“Well, you’d better acquire a taste, because we’re not wasting that perfectly good food. Now eat.”

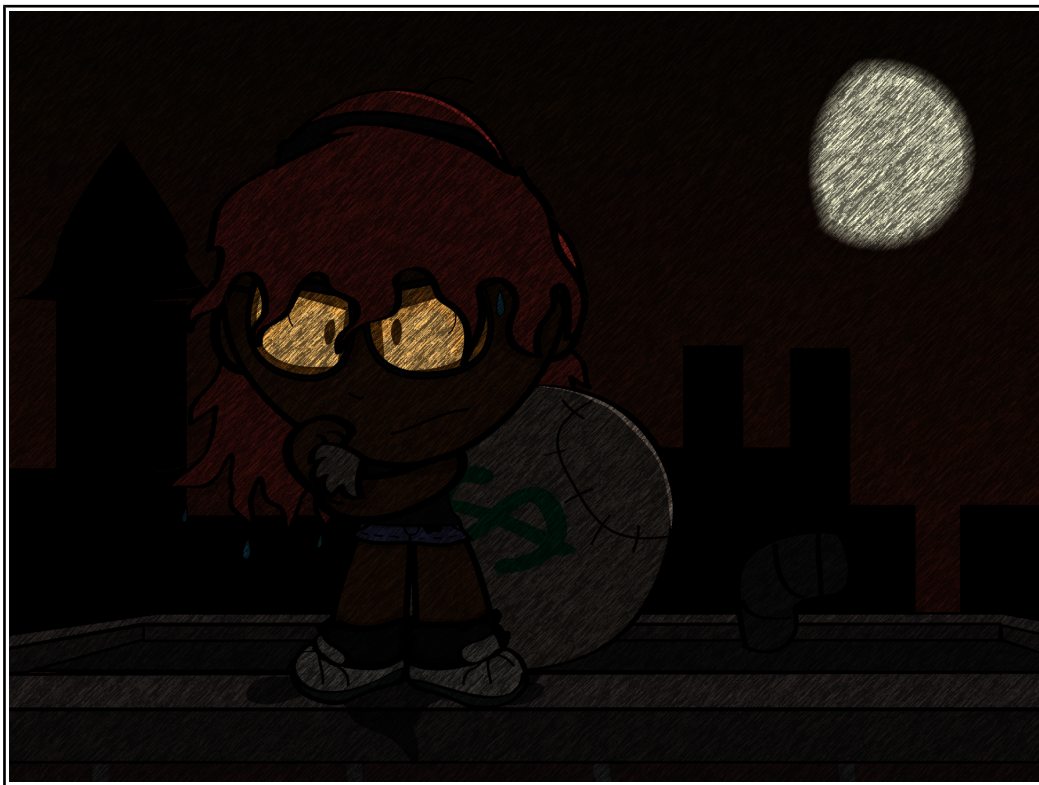
The cub rolled his eyes as he sighed once more.

Why’d I have to be born to such overbearing parents?

#BOSK-AJ0909-BANK

BANKRUPTURE

J. J. W. Mezun | April 1, 2014



I.

If you insist. I must warn: this isn't a pleasant story. I don't mean that it'll make you smother yourself in tissues or burst out your window with a bat raised to the clouds. It'll make you feel less like a bolt struck your heart and more like the inky rubbish at the bottom of the coffee pot.

Now, where should I start? Uh... I s'pose I should start with my first going to the bank...

...

That's a long story.

...

If you insist.

All right, I was sitting on the floor in our apartment finishing up the last of my research. Uh, 'twas dark.

...

Yes, 'twas, as every night in Boskeopolis is in the midst of spring. 'Twas as if we were trapped in a li'l box being lightly shaken up from outside. I dunno.

Anyway, eventually I exhaled and muttered to myself, "Okay, I think I have everything planned." I bit my fingers and tapped an arbitrary key repeatedly 'fore resuming. "I'll have to invest the rest of my money for the materials I'll need; but I'll be repaid exponentially if this succeeds."

"So, uh, what is it?"

I swung my head round, surprised, almost forgetting Edgar sitting just next to me, so quiet.

"Oh, right..." I said.

'Twas then I noticed how much my voice sounded like an unoiled door hinge, going unused for so long—my voice, not the door hinge. Though I suppose my door hinge was used less than most's, too.

There, now can I return to the pertinent details?

So I told him I was thinking of robbing Syrup Bank...

"Oh, wow," Edgar began. "Isn't that kind of... dangerous? I mean, even more than what you usually do?"

"No choice," I respond. "We can't keep scraping by on petty thefts. We need to think big," I said while staring back at my screen.

...

I wasn't spending attention for anything on it.

...

I might as well admit that I had mixed feelings 'bout Edgar and I. Not that I was becoming sick of his presence, mind. Fact, for reasons I can't explain, I quite enjoyed his mere, quiet presence next to me while planning. But, I knew my work was becoming dangerous now, and would rather not have the death of someone I knew so intimately—more than anyone else, a'least—tied round my throat. Plus, my funds had been depleting so quickly, my work going so slowly, that I'd been becoming more and more frantic to squeeze work out of every second so that I'd never have time to spend with him, so what was the point in keeping him round? I couldn't imagine he enjoyed just sitting there worrying himself to death—as if I couldn't guess that that was what he was doing with that expression of his.

I sometimes thought 'twould be better if he left for good or found someone else to hang round—which was why I was ecstatic when he met you—but he's the type who's miserable without someone else, and yet too nervous to find someone else, excepting the contrived circumstances that met us and however he met you. I don't even remember if he knew you yet or not, though I certainly didn't know at the time.

I thought so.

Anyway, since neither of us would like it, 'twas obviously a stupid solution.

Now, where was I?

I forced myself to say, "I don't want you to come, anyway."

He looked down. "Okay."

I was reminded of the old cartoons where the character would change into some deprecating word, like "jackass," with a representative picture while some wacky somber music played. Well, at that moment I felt that if someone had been watching me, they'd see me transform into a giant phallus with the word "dickhole" pasted over it.

With the hopes of improving his spirits—but with the knowledge that it wouldn't—I added, "Not 'nough supplies for you, too. 'Sides, 'twould be too dangerous."

He nodded silently.

I put a hand on his shoulder. "Look, I wish circumstances were better. You understand I'm trying to even out all of these problems, right?"

For some reason, this only further pained his expression.

"I understand," he said nervously with a nod. "I'm sorry."

"Sorry for what?" I asked.

"Oh, nothing," he said as he shook his head quickly.

II.

And now onto the story proper:

I paced north and south the sidewalk on the other side of the street in front of Syrup Bank, my eyes sliding left and right for any sign of human eyes. I checked my phone for the twelfth time to see that 'twas already one AM. The bank was hours past closed, and

there wasn't a live sight round, 'cept lit streetlamps, rain, and the occasional driveby.

I stared down each side of the street one last time 'fore crossing. Once on the other side, I snuck round to the shadows of the alley 'tween the bank and its neighbor.

Using my phone as a makeshift flashlight, I searched round the back and found a dumpster lazing against the back metal fence. I looked 'bove the fence to see if anyone could see me, but only saw faint glimpses of grass and trees smothered by a void of blackness.

So I climbed the dumpster and used it to reach a foot onto the fence, cringing as the flimsy fence rattled like tinfoil. From this height, I set my pack down on the dumpster and pulled out rope with a noose tied at-end. I tried swinging the rope round like a snack-cake mascot, only to find 'twas harder than I'd expected: it flopped flaccidly and splashed in soaked concrete.

I retried and retried till, finally, on the fifth try I managed to hook it onto something. What, I couldn't see; but I could feel by tugging on the rope that 'twas a'least heavy 'nough to support me.

Then I climbed the roof. I took back the rope—not just to better hide my work; I would still need it.

My mind wasn't racing; racing usually implies a steady motion. A more accurate way to describe it would be to say that my mind was sputtering. I flashed the little supernova light over my mind, interrogating for aspects I missed that might turn round and screw me later.

I eventually found the flaw I'd missed:

I thought, *What're you doing wasting all your time standing round? So you can get caught? You're not going to think of anything you missed, so you might as well just get on with it and hope for the best.*

I shivered from a mix of ice-sharp rain and anticipation. The ice-sharp rain was the much greater cause, though.

Then I entered the vent.

I slid down a few feet before landing on the bottom of the horizontal turn. Though the impact didn't hurt, I worried 'bout the thump my shoes made gainst the thin tin.

But I didn't have time to worry idly, so I crouched and crawled through the shaft. In what direction, I wasn't sure. I couldn't find any map of the bank's vent layout online when I prepared, which wasn't a surprise.

I exploited the intermittent grates for hints to where I was; and with the map I thankfully remembered to download and print at the library—lit by the faint light of my phone—I could see where that was in relation to the safes. Soon I found the grate I needed, its slits revealing a giant circular door, locked to the wall by various tubes and bars.

Now that I knew where 'twas, I had to figure out how to open it—or rather, I had to hope that all of my research and all of the tools I emptied my wallets for would win me.

I pulled a screwdriver from my pack to unscrew the screws screwed onto the grate and then slowly, carefully, and—most important—quietly slid the grate from its home, setting it a foot and a half north of the vent hole at a slight angle. There, 'nough detail for you.

I considered tying a rope up here so I could descend and ascend easier when I eventually needed to leave—something I realized, with a panic, I hadn't plotted thoroughly. But there was nothing up there upon which I could tie the rope. 'Sides, I remembered I left the rope tied to the roof. Then I thought 'bout tying the rope to something on the roof 'gain, and then tying the other end round my stomach. But I was already too far down the vent.

So I slid down and cringed as my feet punched gainst the linoleum floor. Luckily, searching round the dark room with my

phone flashlight revealed nobody, nor could I hear footsteps; so if anyone were round, they must've excelled at hiding.

I walked up to the safe door and stared at it for a few minutes in hesitation.

Well, let's hope this does what I want it to, I thought.

I set my pack on the floor at a slight angle and dug through it. I extracted a screwdriver, a dozen cotton bags, a pair of scissors, a hammer, a ruler, a calculator, and a roll of tape 'fore I finally pulled out the last item, holding it in front of me so I could see it. 'Twas a golden key with the insignia of a monster's face at the bottom. I must've paid a fortune; but as far as the vendor's tests showed, he didn't lie when he said 'twas guaranteed to open any lock.

I stuck the key into the thin slit 'tween the circular door and the wall and turned it to hear a polite click. Must've felt good, since I could hear its gears' grinding response.

The key dissolved into dust in my hand. The vendor had warned that 'twas a one-time-use key. Elsewise I could use it to open every lock forever.

And that would just be zany.

My heart scratched its claws gainst my ribcage as I snuck into the tomb and explored it with my phone light. My knees almost fainted under the excitement they felt when they saw the river of green paper drowning the room.

'Course, I was more interested in the money sitting atop it.

I rushed back for the sacks, returned, and unwaveringly began bucketing the bills into the bags like a contestant at a shopping sweepstakes.

I was so ecstatic 'bout my prizes that I didn't hear the footsteps 'hind me and almost missed the loud, raspy yell of an old man:

"Who's there?"

I froze with a point-filled hand halfway to the bag when I turned and saw a short, square-faced man with white tufts on the top and

sides of his face in a gray security suit point a flashlight at me, blinding me so much that I had to use my point-filled hand to shield my eyes. Though the light was thick, I could glimpse the man's face: looked more befuddled and frightened than threatening; though I could see by his scowl that he attempted to appear dangerous.

"Stop right there, young woman," he said. "What do you think you're doing?"

I glanced down at the sacks and the hand grasping cash. You'd think 'twould be obvious what I was doing.

I didn't have time to say so, though; now I needed to think of what to do in this mess. I looked at the door and saw the fatal mistake I'd made: *Idiot! You just left the door open! Way to be sneaky!*

Though my nerves were itching to panic, my mind was more partial to ensuring that this heist succeeded—not just because I didn't want to be in prison, but also because I truly needed this opportunity.

So, I had to remain calm.

The key question was what could I do *now*? I could try escaping immediately; but I only grabbed a fraction of the loot here—what a waste of a good prospect. And if the guard were going to stop me, he would, whether I were leaving now or later. Grabbing more money was no riskier than running.

So I continued to scoop money into the bags, pretending the guard wasn't there, though making a hasty effort. The guard didn't like this as his eyebrows arched lower, and he yelled, "Hey! Madame! Did you hear me! Stop that or I'll call the police!"

His eyes aimed at me, astonished, when I refused to respond to him.

I watched him leave, knowing he was calling the police or managers. What else could he be doing? Getting a gun to shoot me? Since he was a guard, I knew if he had access to a gun anywhere, he

would already be carrying it with him, unless he was completely incompetent.

So, since his sole means of stopping me was the police, there would definitely be a delay. First he had to find a phone—apparently he hadn't heard of this "cellphone" invention, yet—then the police would have to drive here and run all the way over to the bank vaults, which would take long, since everyone knows cops in Boskeopolis are corrupt and lazy 'cause they're paid in grocery store coupons.

By some violation of the laws of physics, I managed to quicken my looting further, till only five minutes later all bags were bursting.

Now I had to carry them out. That would be mildly arduous.

I piled them together and held the mountain all in my arms in front of me, their size together almost twice my mass. Luckily, I was used to carrying heavy objects from past burglaries; all I felt was the pressure of a dozen anvils trying to rip my arms off—nothing excessive.

I ran—or rather, stumbled blindly—over to the window, only to hear the rolling of wheels on gravel outside. I tilted my head so that I could see outside when my eyes landed on the blue and brown car stopping under the light of a streetlamp.

I slid away from the window. I couldn't hear much, since they were so far away, but I could faintly hear footsteps crunching on my right—where the front door was—muffled by the constant pattering of rain. My assumption was confirmed when I heard the front door rasp open like a voice after hours of disuse and the quiet—from my location, a'least—barking of the guard. The building knocking of footsteps told me that I had to, to speak colloquially, get the hell outta Leavenworth.

Well, there was only one way I could imagine: the window. 'Course, breaking the window open without bloodying my hands or fists required instrumental assistance. I queried my tools and remembered a trick I'd read 'bout when my eyes caught the robe I'd

thankfully remembered to take with me.

I wrapped it round one of my fists and used it as a cushion to punch 'nough holes through the glass for me to fit through.

Now I just need to find a way down three stories without shattering my spine, I thought.

I peered round the building's skin through the window and saw the rope I climbed up with still hanging down the side nearby.

Good thing I forgot to pull it back in, I thought.

I carefully ducked through the sharp holes, using the rope still round my hand to safely hold myself through by the top shards, dropped the bags, and then climbed the rope down to the grassy ground.

My ears perked at what sounded like a car door clicking open and I raised my head to see a cop move toward me with a flashlight in-hand. Before he could expose me with it, I immediately jumped to my feet, picked up the bags, and gunned for it in the other direction, up a hill through thickets of pines. 'Twas the opposite direction from my apartment, but I sure as Cerberus wasn't going to pass that cop just to take my favored route.

A few meters forward, I began to realize carrying eight engorged bags might be slowing me a mite. I looked back at the cop over my shoulder and was alarmed to see him gaining.

And if that wasn't 'nough, I soon found another problem to pile on: when I reached a clearing sparse of trees and full of moonlight, I saw bills spilling through a few holes—created by the broken window, I presume—leaving a green trail. I gasped with the pain of having one's blood sucked out, all of that wasted money. But I knew stopping to pick it all up would put it all in jeopardy; so I shifted the bags and moved my hands so that most of the holes were plugged. Then I carried on, keeping my eyes on the cop behind. Thanks to the infesting trees and the air made murky by night, the cop appeared to

lag, too.

This was mooted, though, by one misstep—literally. I was so preoccupied by the cop and the cash that I wasn't watching my steps and I tripped over the thick roots of an oak, stumbling down the hill with the sack rolling beside, releasing points.

I stopped with a splash in a black basin at the bottom of the hill. After I climbed back to land and rubbed the water from my eyes, I swung my head round for the moneybags. I followed the trail of bills to the edge of the pond. I stood at said edge and gazed down into its dingy depths, holding my hands to my head like a koala who wanted to hear no disasters. Much as I'd wished to jump in and rescue my treasure, my ears reminded me of the disaster that was indeed arriving on heavy footsteps.

So quickly had my prospects turned from landing on unowned Boardwalk to landing on someone else's with a hotel.

I ditched my prize.

When I looked back 'gain, I a'least received one modicum of fortune: the cop stopped at the lake's fringe, seemingly more concerned with recovering the money than my capture.

I didn't see 'nother cop on the trek home.

III.

Contrasting the wild rush before, I trudged the last few blocks home, hands stuffed into pockets and eyes glued to the gravel. There was nothing for me to view in the black void that was Maple Avenue. Hair and clothes sagged under the rain so heavy, I thought it might crush me.

I was not in a good mood.

When I finally reached my door, I fiddled round my pockets for

my keys. But when aiming the key at the lock, I noticed my door ajar. I pushed it wide-open, clicked on the light, and surveyed the mostly-empty room.

I almost sighed in relief till I saw my blanket splayed in a far different place than 'twas before and remembered that that was where I hid my laptop—the best place I could in this barren cave. I dashed over to it, practically trembling with exasperation, and turned it over to find my worst fears confirmed.

I spent the next ten minutes rummaging through the room, becoming increasingly incensed, till I checked the last drawer of my file and, rather than sliding it into its hole, I chucked it at the wall. Then I chucked the others at the other walls, so that they didn't feel left out. And then, so that the desk didn't feel too lonely, I began to kick it, and then punching it, not only to hurt the desk, but also my own hand.

From there I logically moved away from attacking inanimate objects, which obviously had nothing to do with my problems, to something that I thought was a little more culpable.

You idiot! You left the one tool you have to help you in your heists in an easy-to-find place! You couldn't even keep your clumsy self from dropping millions in a river! I thought as I attempted to compress my left hand 'tween my right and the wooden desk with nails drilled.

I only ceased this diversion when I heard a familiar shaky voice behind me say, "Um... Autumn? Are you okay?"

I stood there, hands paused in mid-crush, while my blank eyes stared at the wall opposite him. Audibly, all that remained was the ringing that could still be heard from the smashing of the drawers and desk.

Eventually I turned to face him, which only made him squirm even more. I strode over to him and grabbed his shoulder.

"Edgar, I want you to leave and never come back, okay? Trust me,

it is too risky for you to be hanging round me, okay?”

“But...” Edgar began.

“I said *go*,” I said as I gently pushed Edgar out the threshold and shut and locked the door.

I paused, only to hear Edgar slowly trot away. When I was satisfied that he was gone, I sat on one of the drawers lying on its side, leaning back against the wall with my arms crossed behind my head.

“There. Now we are both safe,” I said to myself in a calm tone.

I gazed round the room listlessly and said to myself, “There’s only one option: I must continue till the end, regardless of the consequences. I shall return to the lagoon tonight and try extracting the money from it ’fore the police find it. If they’re still present, then I must take the risk nevertheless. But I won’t be arrested without fighting back.”

My mouth curled up into a smile.

“And if they shoot me down, well, a’least I went out fighting.”

What sound remained was the drawer groaning as it scratched against the wall and the incessant prattling of rain against the window.

IV.

I walked down the hill to the lake at a steady but casual gait with hands in pockets as if I were merely on my way to a shooting gallery. There was no reason to hurry, nor was there any reason to hesitate; the events would happen when they happen.

Soon I reached far ’nough to see the pond shining under the reflected moonlight and the yellow tape round the edge—the side the money fell in. I figured it meant they knew the money fell in and were trying to retrieve it; otherwise, perhaps it meant they were gone for the rest of the night. After all, why else would they need tape if

there weren't police already present?

I crept from tree to tree, closing on the lake. As I did so, I watched for cops—or a'least, tried to, for 'twas much too dark to see much.

Once more, when I reached the pond, rather than jump in immediately, I dropped down on my knees and leaned in, hoping to see signs of the cash below. But if the darkness round me made it hard to see under the surface, the flare of the moonlight against it rendered this impossible.

I even tried lying on my stomach and reaching my right arm inside. No matter how I moved my arm through the limited space I could reach, I felt nothing but empty water and some slimy enigma against the wall under me.

I knew if I had goggles or a flashlight, I'd possibly be able to see 'neath; but I also knew that acquiring them wouldn't be time efficient, nor was I open to the idea of leaving and returning yet 'gain.

Then I thought, *Screw it, I'm going in blindly.*

I returned to my feet when the feeling of something hard in my right pocket reminded me I had my phone with me. I pulled it out and hid it under a pile of rocks.

I thought, *Knowing my luck, it'll probably be stolen as everything else.*

Well, 'twas either that or breaking it by taking it underwater, so I settled for the risk.

With that, I dipped in, the shock of impending failure far greater than the chill. 'Fore my face passed the surface, I remembered to shut my eyes and hold my nose and mouth in my left hand, leaving me to swim blindly with only one hand.

'Stead I let myself sink to the bottom, figuring the money had to be somewhere there. That was when I discovered that the pond was obnoxiously deep; took minutes to reach the bottom.

Then 'gain, I soon realized that not swimming round too much might've been beneficial. 'Bove the surface I could hear muffled voices and steps—what I surmised were the police, who'd probably heard me splash into the water. I still couldn't open my eyes, but I could infer by the noises remaining muffled that they stayed 'bove the surface.

Thus, I decided to worry 'bout them later; I still had treasure to collect.

I'm sure you know me well 'nough now to know that trifling needs like breathing were inferior to my need to succeed.

Finally, feeling the soft dirt at the bottom, I crawled through, grazing my right hand round the ground. I found nothing interesting, only incrementing my frustration, which was not helped by my lungs indeed whining for air.

After a few minutes, I decided to give up, desperate for air. Or a'least, I would've if those cops weren't lingering. Just popping back up was guaranteed to lead me behind bars, so I elected to remain and drown in what appeared to be a more dignified end.

A'least that was my original plan, till my lungs proved to be much more persistent than I'd expected. I did swim away from the edge a meter as I broke the surface so that I'd hopefully be farther from the cops and closer to the other side of the land. When I returned to the overworld—gasping for air, 'course—I saw through blurry, stinging eyes that I was near basin's center and that the police were looking straight at me with puzzled expressions.

I wasted no time paddling to the other side and climbing to land. Luckily, looking over my shoulder, I saw that the cops wasted their time staring dumbfounded. 'Twas 'nough to build a plenty distance.

This time I knew not to look back and risk falling over 'gain.

But just 'fore reaching what seemed to be the woods' end, I remembered that I'd left my phone. I stopped to debate whether or not to return and retrieve it while trying to stifle the renewed desire

to break my knuckles against an oak.

After a minute's ponder, with my throbbing lungs still in-mind, I thought, *I came all this way 'gain and almost drowned myself only to not gain a single point; I won't lose a phone in the process, too.*

I ventured back to the street and circled it back to the forest entrance I used before. I crept and peered round the trees 'gain. Much to my relief, as I neared, I saw that they were gone—probably still hunting for me farther in the woods. I sped to the brink of the lake 'gain and held my breath as I checked under the rocks.

I exhaled when I felt familiar glassy plastic.

When I turned to leave, however, I saw the cops walking down the street over to the same woodland entrance I used. Worrying that running would only alert them—and honestly, too tired to run much anymore—I slunk 'hind a patch of bushes. I waited as I watched them stop by the basin's brink.

"You think that was the thief?" one of them asked.

"Gotta be. Thieves always return to the scene of the crime."

"But the scene of the crime was back at the bank," his partner said.

The other cop scratched her curly head. "Well, maybe she returned to this scene, too, just to be safe."

My attention was torn from this thrilling discussion when I felt and heard my pocket vibrate.

I thought, *Damn it! What idiot's calling me at these hours? The only person who knows my number is Edgar, and I told him to get lost!*

My expression changed from calm to mortified as I stared at the two cops. However, my composure recovered as I saw their own expressions unchanged, indicating that they probably couldn't hear it under the repression of the bushes and my skirt.

One of the cops was looking down at the lagoon with his arms crossed. "You think they'll look for the money tomorrow? Seems like

'twould disintegrate by then, or something."

"Oh, they already looked tonight. Couldn't find anything," the other cop said. "They said they would check 'gain tomorrow; but they doubt it's still there."

A voice in my head screamed, *What?*

"But we clearly saw it fall in; and we clearly saw the thief running away without any bags in her arms... I think."

"No, I'm sure she just used that as a clever ruse to hide the money somewhere while she was underwater."

"Where could she hide all of that money?"

"Oh, I've got a couple ideas," the cop said with a chuckle. Then she continued, "Her hair, obviously. The guard did say she had a large ponytail."

"I think that violates the laws of physics a bit."

"You and your laws of physics," the other cop barked. "Well, anyway, I guess we'd better go. The thief obviously isn't going to return a second time—that would just be ridiculous."

I planned to wait ten whole minutes after I was sure they'd left 'fore getting up and sneaking home; but then my phone started vibrating 'gain. Figuring the cops must be gone by now, I a'least flipped it open to confirm that 'twas Edgar and glare at his name for bugging me.

However, when I opened my phone, I didn't see Edgar's name, but the words, "St. Corazon Community Health Center ."

What would they want with me, I wondered. I glanced round to ensure I was alone and then put the phone up to my ear to listen.

"Excuse me, is this Madame Springer?" the voice asked.

"Yeah, what is it? I'm in the middle of something," I whispered.

"Oh, well we just wanted to tell you that one of your friends is here in the hospital and might like a visit—"

"Friends? You mean Edgar?" I asked, voice rising accidentally.

"Um, yes. It seems—"

I demanded answers.

So he said, “Well, it seems he was jumped on his way home. You know how dangerous the streets are nowadays, with all of these thieves running round. It seems he’s got a cracked mouth and, um... skull.”

So I sighed and asked, “Where are you from? Maple Avenue?”

“Um, just a few blocks west. It’s just round the corner from Syrup Bank, in Honey Plaza”

So I agreed to be there, closed my phone and pocketed it, and then ran, muttering curses throughout.

V.

I actually don’t know the details to Edgar’s... ailment. All I know was that when I burst through the door, I was smacked by how bright and clean the room was gainst the murk outside. Chillingly calm, too. All I could hear was that ticking clock ’bove the door, filling an otherwise empty room.

’Course, my first focus aimed directly for Edgar, sitting in a small, rickety bed with his skull cap and jaw bandaged. Not nearly as bad as when he fell off that roof—I was never ’fraid he would die here.

Anyway, he says without looking at me, probably not desiring to see whatever haggard expression I wore, “Uh... I’m really sorry ’bout bugging you... I, uh... the nurse forced your number out of me.”

So I feign nonchalance and say, “Huh, what? No, I wasn’t doing anything important. The heist was a bust anyway,”

I couldn’t look at him long, either, so I had my head turned to the side.

“Yeah... I’m sorry...” he said.

“Sorry for what? You didn’t have anything to do with it,” I replied.

And he says something like, “Well, I mean... I could have helped,

though...”

“I specifically told you not to,” I said. “Sides, I doubt you would’ve improved my odds.” I paused before continuing, “Though now that I think ’bout it, it probably would’ve prevented you from being attacked.”

We sat in silence once more. I continued to gaze in another direction, too ’shamed to look at him.

Eventually, I settled on the inane nicety, “So, are you feeling okay?”

He replied, “Yeah. Uh, nothing too bad. I’ll be able to leave tomorrow.”

And I, ’course, said, “Not to sound like a dick, but what’ll the bill be?”

He said he didn’t know.

“Cause I think we’re pretty much fucked, financially.” I said before a weak laugh.

“I’m sure we’ll find some way to settle it,” he said.

I figured ’twould be rude to tell him that was utterly idiotic.

Within the next awkward silence, Edgar starts to stutter, “So, uh... I can... we can...” till I tell him to spit it out. He was much more nervous in his speech back then, but this attack enhanced it exponentially.

So... he... we essentially discuss the incompatibilities I mentioned earlier, ’tween he and I. To summarize a tedious discussion—and ’cause I refuse to release sensitive details ’bout Edgar ’hind his back—it ends with us agreeing to go on my suicidal ventures together—’cause death loves company, after all—and him agreeing to give me ’lone time when I’m mentally unstable. I don’t think I sacrificed anything in this deal, but Edgar was smiling afterward, anyway. Then ’gain, I don’t think he sacrificed anything, either, since the worst part for him was the part he wanted. After all, shoddy programming doesn’t sacrifice anything to become well-

programmed other than time in the short-run; similarly, I actually think we saved ourselves trouble in the long-run.

I don't remember the details. It certainly wasn't emotional, if that's what you're wet for. He stuttered his problem and I explained my own interpretation of the problem as one would explain the Filled-Hole Theory, in monotone. Imagine going back-and-forth over the issue as if 'twere a contract in these same emotional states and you have the gist.

Anyway, knowing you, you'll probably prefer the next part.

...

When our discussion ceased, so did our speech, since neither of us knew how now to proceed.

...

Finally, I looked down at Edgar's bed and said, "Scoot over."

Edgar looked even more confused and asked "What?"

"Scoot over," I repeated. "I'm not walking five blocks just to despair over my failure 'lone all night."

He obliged and I slid in beside.

"Are... are you sure this is allowed?" he asked. "The nurse might get angry..."

I mumbled, "He can cram a vag in his mouth," or something similarly vibrant, as I, ah... snuggled would be an accurate term, yes.

Then we said goodnight to each other. I would add, "And then we all lived happily ever after," but that certainly wasn't true after this, and I'm still not so sure it'll be true in the end.

#BOSK-BIT-AJ012

SWIMMING IN WEALTH

J. J. W. Mezun | April 10, 2014

“Madame and Sir Pescario, so wonderful to have your company,” Mortimer said as he led them inside.

“I say, old friend, where did you get the money to afford such residential enhancements?” Madame Pescario asked as she gazed around at all of the sparkling diamond coral and the giant limestone castle.

Mortimer snickered, clicking his claws. “You wouldn’t believe the stupendous luck I’ve had.”

“I wouldn’t,” Sir Pescario said as he rubbed his pince-nez with a fin as if everything he saw were fog.

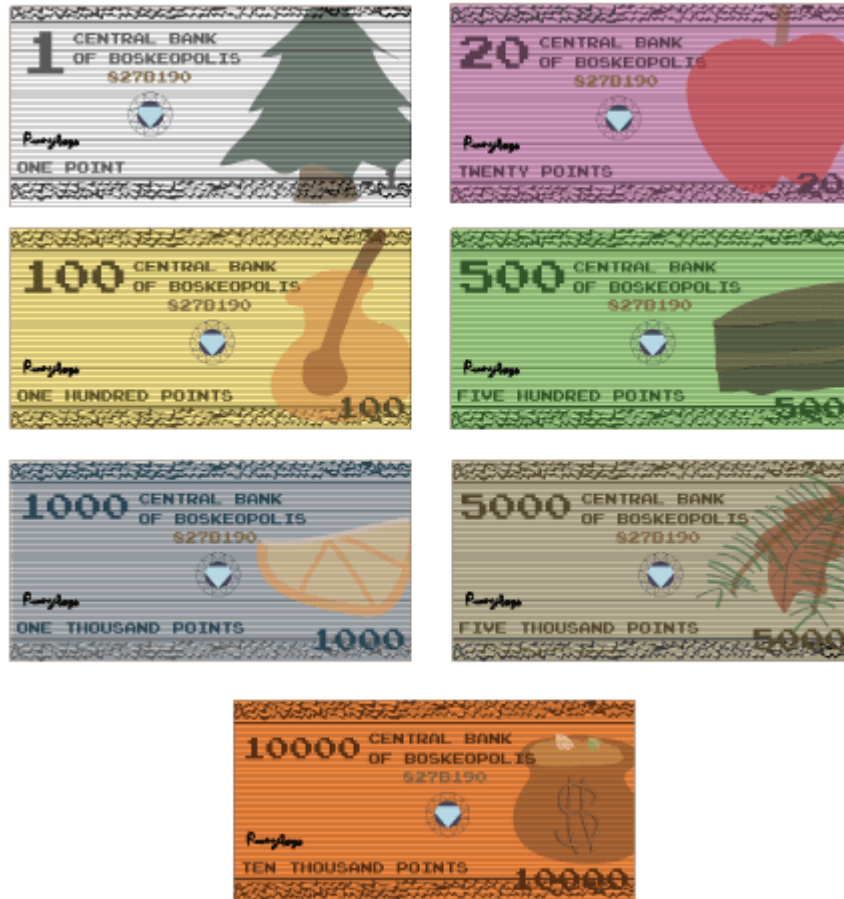
“You didn’t win big at *Go Fish*, did you?” Madame Pescario asked.

“Nope,” Mortimer answered. “You wouldn’t believe it: I was scuttling on the edge of the lake, and wouldn’t you know, I just so happened to find piles of money scattered along the ground. Amazingly, nobody had claimed it yet.”

#BOSK-BIT-AJ113

IT'S CURRENT, SEE?

J. J. W. Mezun | April 10, 2014



#BOSK-AK0F0A-SNOOZE

YOU SNOOZE YOU GET EATEN BY AN ELDRITCH HORROR

J. J. W. Mezun | May 1, 2014



I.

Autumn and Edgar sat in a cave. They weren't sure how they ended up in such cave; they simply knew they had to stay inside or else be eaten by the monster outside.

From what they could see out the small opening, they were in a barren veld strewn with a few tall tropical trees, mulberry bushes and grass, and onion fields forever. There didn't appear to be anything else sentient, save for the monster—and its sentience was debatable.

Autumn and Edgar couldn't confirm what exactly the monster was, though they certainly knew 'twas dangerous. From what they could see, 'twas an inky black splotch with a rubbery lump protruding from its middle, while the rest o' its liquid body stretched out in a number o' tentacles—what number, they could not discern, for it seemed to change every so oft when they weren't looking. On the rubbery lump was one magenta eye with a searching pupil as dark as its body.

It repeatedly tried seeping into their cave through the opening, spreading up the wall from the ground and into the hole as a spilled drink that ignored gravity. The only way they could keep it back was to poke at its tendrils with wooden sticks, which caused it to squeal as a barking walrus whose young had been excluded from its local softball team.

However, 'twas a persistent monster—to the point that Edgar and Autumn both had to use their full energies poking the beast back; and though it'd eventually give up its chase and dribble 'way from sight, neither was daring 'nough to attempt sleep for fear o' a quick

return from the monster. They considered taking turns sleeping, but knew even the mere minutes it'd take waking the other would be 'nough for the monster to sneak in.

When the monster had left for the moment once mo', they sat against the wall perpendicular to the wall with the opening, Autumn right next to the hole so she could keep watch.

She used the lull to examine the rest o' the cave for signs o' a hidden passage to scape 'gain, though she'd already searched repeatedly. As one might expect from a cave, 'twas full o' dirt and brown. For decoration, the cave was filled not only with rocks, but also stones, boulders, and even crag—yes, that's right: crag. They were also full o' brown; but the type o' brown varied: some were a reddish brown, while others held a tinge o' yellow; some had the saturation setting set much lower as they were being prepared in Photoshop.

As she gazed over this scene—while sneaking glances through the hole every so oft in anticipation o' the monster's return—she wondered just how she ended up in this strange cave, in this strange wilderness, in this strange assortment o' letters combined into a specific set o' patterns that other people's minds translate into ideas, unless they can't read English. So she decided to ask Edgar:

“Edgar, I was wondering... Just how did we end up in this strange cave, in this strange wilderness, in this strange assortment o' letters combined into a specific set o' patterns that other people's minds translate into ideas, unless they can't read English?”

“Uh, I dunno,” Edgar said. “Maybe somebody dragged us here while we were asleep.”

“But that doesn't make any sense. Why would anyone just drag us into a random cave and have a monster try to eat us? If someone wanted us dead, couldn't they just shoot us in our sleep or fill our minds with sentiments o' inadequacy so that we eventually commit suicide?

“And ’sides, I don’t even remember waking up in this cave; and if we had slept in here, wouldn’t the monster have eaten us already?”

Edgar had to pause, not only to ponder the giant wad o’ text Autumn spewed forth, but also to read it. He was a slow reader.

“Now that I think ’bout it, I don’t even think we know that the monster wants to eat us. Maybe he just wants to give us a hug or tell us where we can get a good deal on car insurance.”

“Don’t be zany, Edgar; ink blobs can’t drive cars or feel the emotion that compels people to commit hugs.”

“How...” Edgar turned to look at Autumn. She had a face and eyebrows. “How do you know that?”

“I read it in this book, remember?” Autumn held up a book that said, *Anthropology o’ Inky Blob Monsters*.

“When and where did you get that?”

“It’s always been here, remember? That was how we figured out the monster has a taste for human flesh, skeleton bones, and cotton clothing.”

“Sorry, it didn’t know that. The narrator hadn’t explained it yet.”

“Yeah, well I just did. Didn’t you read ’head o’ the script?” Autumn asked.

“No... I thought that might be cheating.”

“Oh. Well, I did. For instance, a few pages later we’ll learn in the one hundred and thirty sixth paragraph that there are dinosaurs round here.”

Edgar covered the invisible ears at the sides o’ his skull. “I don’t think you should spoil the ending.”

“Augh. The monster’s back,” Autumn said.

They grabbed their sticks and stood, their eyes locked on the opening and their hands tightly clutching their sticks. Autumn felt her hand itch from the perspiration and the abrasive texture o’ the stick.

The monster tried sneaking in, they poked it a bunch with their sticks, and later they all dined together at the *Chez Beret* by the crystal lake under the waxing-gibbous moon. But for now, the monster was sloshing 'way, permitting Autumn and Edgar to sit and gaze at that beautiful cave again.

"You know, this is a pretty beautiful cave," Edgar said.

"Shut up, Edgar," Autumn said as she rubbed her face. When she stopped, Edgar could see the dark sagging bags o' sleepiness under her eyes.

"What're we gonna do? There's no way we can stay up forever," Edgar said, feeling drowsy himself, though without the sagging bags.

"I don't know..." Autumn said with a deep sigh. "Here, I'll make us a pot o' coffee while we think."

"What?" Edgar asked, looking up and following Autumn as she walked over to a boiling pot o' coffee, plugged into an electrical socket embedded in the dirt wall. "I didn't even know we had a coffee pot."

"Well, no one did till I mentioned it," Autumn said, stirring her cup, having filled it 'tween this and the previous paragraphs.

CLVII.

At this point, the reader is certainly curious 'bout how Edgar had gotten into his possession the wooden stick he used to dispatch the inky blob monster.

It began after Autumn had first finished reading the aforementioned anthropology and they first realized they would need a way to keep the monster from crawling in. So they both stood and wandered round the cave till they each found a stick.

Edgar had only spent a minute or so traipsing round with his head tilted downward 'fore he found one. He bent down and picked it up, rubbing his bony fingers to better examine its scratchy texture.

It had an earthy yellowish tint to it, with a green fuzz at one end that Edgar s'posed was probably moss. Though 'twas skinny and light, Edgar could feel its timbered weight, could feel the sliver-inducing power it commanded.

Edgar was so distracted by his stick, in fact, that he hadn't noticed the purple ink monster already sneaking inside. Autumn, for her part, had been virtually nonexistent in this chapter till I've just now brought her up again. 'Fore she could even react to her renewed existence, the ink monster tackled her, pinning her to the ground like a heavy blanket.

Edgar, seeing this, threw his stick up in the air in surprise. Unfortunately, he needed that stick to fight the monster, so he had to go back and get it, the dumbass.

When he returned, he saw the ink monster squirm 'way from a pile o' bones. Edgar fell on his knees and wailed as if he were in a shitty soap opera over not only the death o' his close companion but also the fact that the artist who drew 'twas so lazy as to render it biologically incorrectly. Most egregious was the rendering o' two skulls, despite Autumn having left her second head at home that day.

While Edgar was wasting his time wailing, the ink monster snuck 'hind him and devoured him. When he finished, he finally slugged out the cave, also leaving behind nothing but bones—which was convenient, since Edgar was nothing but bones, anyway.

Nevertheless, he died. Just 'cause.

21.

Autumn struggled against the cuffs locking her to her chair, to no avail. Suddenly, a small yellow light opened just 'bove her, causing her eyes so used to the cool darkness to wince.

“How did a street rat like you know such an answer?” a deep

voice said.

Hmm... I wonder if they know 'bout the stolen food, Autumn thought.

“What are you talking 'bout? 'Twas 'bout my partner. Why shouldn't I know? Look, all I wanted to do was use the restroom,” Autumn said.

“Oh, truly? And what did you plan to use it for?”

Autumn's brows fell.

“Ah, crap; I hate it when that happens,” she said as she stared down at them lying on the floor. “Look, could you pick those up for me?”

“We'll deal with these,” the deep voice said as a hand reached out and dragged them back into the darkness.

“Hey! Give those back! I need those to emote!” she shouted as she struggled against her chair 'gain.

“Answer the question, please.”

“What d'you think I was doing? Enjoying the view? I needed to piss.”

“But you already completed that mission on your own,” the voice said as a hand pointed at the empty bladder bar in the bottom-left corner o' the screen.

Autumn wished she had her brows back so she could arch them.

“Yes, thanks to you for tackling me out o' nowhere, holeass,” she said. “I would call that mo' an irreversible mission failure. I swear, if it isn't some scientist running in the line o' my shooting and getting killed, it's some poker tackling me. D'you know how childish I'll look?”

“Your sprite is still drawn the same. The Designers are lazy.”

“Yes, but they still know,” Autumn grumbled. “That variable's public. Anyone can call it and laugh at it whenever they want—people who have nothing better with which to occupy themselves.”

“So you agree that you no longer have a need for the restroom.”

“Not anymore, no,” Autumn replied grumpily.

“Then why were you looking for the restroom if you no longer need it?”

Autumn stared at the area o’ darkness where she guessed the figure stood.

“D’you not hear me? I was looking for the restroom in the *past*; now’s the present.”

“But the chapter when you are tackled in question happens later in this story, does it not?”

“Yes, but that’s just ’cause the Programmers like to mess round with the chronology o’ everything,” Autumn said with irritation.

“Obviously I can’t have been tackled ’fore being tackled.”

There was a pause.

“Okay...” She could hear the suspicion still dwelling in the figure’s voice. “Just stay ’way from restrooms for the rest o’ the story. Got it?”

Autumn nodded, even though she knew she’d break this promise.

SIXTY-FOUR.

Despite drinking five cups o’ coffee, Autumn could not drive off the numb feeling o’ weariness in her head or the airy pressure within her throat demanding that she yawn. All she gained from all that caffeine was it going straight to her bladder. However, she wasn’t able to take the time to urinate or yawn, knowing that either would distract her so much that she knew the monster would just slip in the second she started, waltzing in as if he were the guest o’ honor.

What an arrogant prick.

Worse, Autumn knew her food satiation meter was getting low. No matter how much she searched the cave, she couldn’t find anything edible.

So Autumn simply sat near the opening, hugging her knees

tightly, and vibrating from the excess caffeine and the rumbling o' her stomach.

And despite all these problems, she still heard a voice in her head urging her to sleep, enticing her with visions o' beds full o' fluffy pillows, hammocks full o' fluffy leaves, and iron maidens full o' fluffy spikes.

Unfortunately, said voice only spoke in Spanish, so she twisted her eyes in confusion as the words, "Debe dormir," ran through her head in their brand new sneakers, pumping their arms and puffing for oxygen.

To keep her tiredness and personified schizophrenias at bay, she smacked herself in the side o' her face with her fist a few times. Edgar gave her a confused look, handing it out to her in his hand, and said, "Autumn, are you okay?"

"Course I'm okay," Autumn said as she cringed and rocked forward and back.

"Autumn, what are we gonna do? I don't think I'll be able to stay up much longer, and it doesn't look like you'll be able to either."

"Did you try the coffee yet?"

Edgar shook his head, even though Autumn wasn't looking at him. "I can't drink coffee, remember. That stuff goes right through me—literally."

"You're not the only one..." Autumn said.

Suddenly the cave was filled with the sound o' a variety o' people laughing.

Autumn jumped, holding her arms out and turning her head in every direction.

"Where'd that come from?"

"We're probably not safe in here, either," Edgar said as he tightened into a ball himself.

Autumn looked round the cave so as to avoid making eye contact with the tiny flying Medusa heads. She remembered them.

You need to calm. Need to calm. What if the monster comes back and your all hopped up on caffeine, sleepiness, hunger, and bladder pains? I need to focus.

“You know, this is a beautifully pretty cave,” she said.

“Shut up, Autumn.”

Autumn threw her head round fore reattaching it to her neck.

“What? Edgar, that’s inconsistent with your characterization.”

Edgar looked down, shamefaced. “Oh, whoops. Sorry.”

She was ’bout to wince at Edgar, wondering if he’d been stealthily replaced by a Trojan virus when she was looking round the cave.

“Human! Look!” whispered a voice.

Autumn threw her head to the right, smashing her brains into a bloody mess. After cleaning it up, she turned to look out the opening to see the ink monster staring at them with its three eyes, a top hat on its head and a cane in its orange tentacles.

“Was that you?” Autumn asked as she pointed at the monster. “I didn’t know you could talk. I mean, the anthropology said you could, but I hadn’t read that part yet.”

“I was wondering when you were going to invite me in, mate. I *am* the guest o’ honor, after all.”

Autumn’s eyes darkened, ’cause I used the burn tool on them.

“I don’t think so,” she said.

“Blouse yourself.”

In one o’ its tentacles, the monster raised an onion. It winced in a way that said, “Yeah, that’s right; this will truly make you unhappy,” if one is an expert at eye-reading, which the Programmers had suddenly decided Autumn is.

“What is that?” Autumn asked in horror. Then she asked it ’gain in sci-fi.

“You know... I found this amazing—what do you call it? Onion?—I found this in a generic place and I was only thinking you perhaps

are interested in viewing it, because I can imagine you have been bored... stuck up in that cave for so long,” the ink monster said.

Autumn looked 'way and said nothing:

“Nothing.”

“You do not look good, human. *The Anthropology o’ Homo Sapiens* says that when a human’s skin become mo’ pale and thin, it is a problem. It also says that humans need to consume things called food every once and a while. I hate for you to be separated from your... dire need, human, only because o’ me. I promise if you go perform your necessary function I will not try entering.”

“I have no idea what you’re talking 'bout,” Autumn said. “Whoever wrote that book must be a liar.”

“You certain, human? It appears very delicious...”

“Sorry, but I’m busy now,” Autumn said without looking at the monster.

“Tuxedo yourself, human.”

CIENTO SETENTA Y OCHO.

But Autumn knew that staying inside forever was futile. However much she berated the pathetic weaknesses in her design, she knew she would still need to meet these weaknesses or be wiped out completely—and that would leave a gross smudge, which is gross.

She only held out longer and longer in the hopes o’ finally developing the perfect plan. But the headaches and the tiredness—only worsened by the hunger—only weakened her ability to think, and she didn’t think she could physically stay up for long.

Thus, when Edgar finally awoke, Autumn scooted to his side and whispered in his ear, “This isn’t getting us anywhere, so I have an idea. It’s not very good, but it’s the best we have.”

“What is it?” Edgar whispered.

“We’ll wait a li’l longer and hope the monster finally leaves for a

moment. Then we'll climb out and run 'way in separate directions. That way the monster won't be able to get us both."

Edgar nodded. Autumn could tell he didn't like the plan, but knew there was no safer alternative.

Autumn scooted back to her spot and watched outside for the monster to temporarily leave again. She had to force herself into a stoic composure so that the monster would not anticipate her giving up anytime soon, as that would only prolong his presence. This was harder than it sounds—and that means much when one considers how difficult hearing text is.

Eventually the monster said, "Well, I think I will just be going 'way for a very long time. Make sure you do whatever you need to do when I am not here to take advantage o' your distractment."

Autumn turned to Edgar and waved him over to her. She then peeked out their cave window and saw the monster slosh 'way over the corner to the right.

"Let's go," Autumn whispered. "You go left and I'll go up. He'll then mo' likely go after me."

"Are you sure that makes sen—"

"Shh," Autumn whispered as she put her index finger up to Edgar.

And with that they both climbed out the window and bolted in either direction. Though Edgar knew he shouldn't, he couldn't help looking over his shoulder to see if the monster was chasing him or Autumn. He saw, indeed, the monster's sixteen eyes widen and its seven wheel-shaped legs chose Autumn with its hammer-shaped arms thrashing forward and back while Autumn continued floating up the sky.

Though she looked down at first to ensure the monster wasn't close on her shoelaces, she looked forward 'gain to ensure she didn't bonk into a solid cloud or contrived metaphor. Instead, all she saw was the morning sky deepen its periwinkle, while the tan sand below

shrunk.

“This can’t go on forever,” Autumn said to herself. “There must be a gas station rest stop somewhere nearby.”

Unfortunately, it did go on forever and Autumn eventually starved to death.

-522.

Edgar crouched, panting wildly as he glanced round himself. He feared the aquamarine ink monster would jump out and crush him with its giant crab claws. He had run so long, his nonexistent stomach burning with stitches, but his fear propelling him nevertheless that he only stopped when his body practically collapsed on himself. His head still tingled from tiredness and he was ‘fraid he would fall asleep right there and then.

“How am I gonna get out o’ this wilderness alive?” He asked himself.

He then decided that he couldn’t keep going on forever and that he’d have to risk going to sleep. He stumbled at a stooped gait over to a low bush o’ blue-green leaves and curled himself up like a cat and drifted off to sleep.

A few hours later, he was awoken by the sounds and sensations o’ earthquakes rumbling ‘neath him. He opened his eyeholes and sat up to see giant scaly blue legs before him. He slowly tilted his head upward and saw those legs rise to the body and head o’ a triceratops. It had its head dipping down to the ground, chewing on an onion while its sharp eyes watched Edgar without emotion. The three gray spikes lying on its face sparkled from the light o’ the sun dipping halfway under the horizon—sunup or sundown, Edgar couldn’t tell; the sun had stayed in that exact position for the past twenty hours.

Edgar weakly waved his hand at it. “Uh, hello, Sir or Madame Dinosaur. My name’s Edgar,” he said with a nervous chuckle.

\$.

A half hour after gorging to life, Autumn finally reached the abandoned gas station. Though there were rusty sedans and pickup trucks at some o' the pumps, she didn't see any people. She went inside the nearby convenience store and surveyed the area as she walked with the most casual gait she could: slide 'cross the floor without any animation frames.

The closest thing to a person she witnessed was a human-sized fire ant—it literally had orange flames spreading 'cross its back—slurping up spilt peas on the linoleum floor; but it didn't seem to register Autumn's existence, and she didn't want to bother it.

So she opened the first food packages she found—including a bag o' Spicy Trigonomtasty! chips, mint cookies, and peas off the floor. She spent almost a half hour engorging herself till full, and then stuffed her pockets with what she could fit.

To her surprise, still no one came inside; still no one stopped her.

Strange how life-threatening bad luck can suddenly flip to life-saving good.

Then she remembered she still needed to use the restroom and explored round the store for them. She stopped in front o' the two doors: the one on the left had the black—well, now brownish-gray due to dust—silhouette o' an octopus with lobster claws; the one on the right had the silhouette o' a fly/bee hybrid. Her head vacillated 'tween the two.

“Bah, nobody's here, anyway. I'll just look in one and see if it has any urinals inside. If not, it must be the right one.”

She pushed the left door open and peeked inside to see a black void 'hind it. From inside she could hear the screeching cries, “Oh god, stop! aaaAAUUUGGGHHH!”

Autumn pulled her hand back, letting the door fall closed.

“That’s clearly not the right one.”

She opened the other door an inch, even mo’ hesitant than before. However, when she looked inside, she only saw a dirty yellow bathroom inside, with checkered flooring and the stench o’ vomit. When she saw this, she opened the door all the way with a breath o’ relief.

However, when she opened the nearest stall, she saw nothing but a wall ’hind it—well, a wall with some mysterious brown stain on it, but with no toilet.

Autumn held her hands to her side. “What kind o’ troll bathroom is this?”

She tried the next stall and saw the same, sans the brown stain. With her patience thinning, she tried the third stall, only to see it open to a whole ’nother room: a hallway with the same yellow walls and checkered floor as the bathroom. Along the right wall were mo’ porcelain sinks, and ’long the right were ’nother line o’ bathroom stalls.

She tried the first one. ’Twas empty.

“Whoever designed this bathroom was a sick bastard,” Autumn grumbled ’fore throwing the door closed.

Still desperate, she tried the next few, only to be interrupted by English-accented speech.

“Hello, Madame. Do you need any help?”

Autumn swung her face in every direction, but saw no one.

“Who said that?” she asked.

“I did.”

“Who?”

“Up here, Madame.”

She looked up ’bove the entrance door to the hallway where she heard the sound come from and saw the blue male icon on the sign wave its hand at her.

[illegible]

[illegible]

the floor. Then she felt the floor rumble and raise up under her. A light jazzy tune started playing—from what speakers, Autumn couldn't see.

As she waited to reach the top, she leaned against the back wall with her hands stuffed in her pockets and her teeth drilling her lips. *This better be the end*, she grumbled in her head.

Knew I should've just gone outside.

Just didn't want to try my luck and catch being caught with the stolen okays.

The elevator stopped. However, the doors remained closed.

Now what?

An electronic voice said, "BEFORE YOU MAY CONTINUE, YOU MUST ANSWER A SECURITY QUESTION TO PROVE YOUR IDENTITY."

Autumn tilted her head back and groaned.

Well, there goes that.

The intercom continued: "YOUR QUESTION IS, 'WHERE DID YOUR PARTNER, EDGAR WINTERS, ACQUIRE HIS STICK?'"

Autumn straightened her face, race pulsing.

She said shakily, "U-u-uh, he... He found it on the ground."

She twisted her legs together tightly and held her breath as the elevator lights darkened and pastel lights flashed 'long the ceiling.

"THAT IS CORRECT!"

She heard a ding and then saw the doors slide open. Outside she saw a tiny, boxy room just big 'nough to fit its one object: the Golden Latrine, shining brightly under the golden light streaming from 'bove.

Autumn quickly stepped out, 'fraid the elevator would drop her back down, and then let out a deep breath. *Finally!*

But then she winced her eyes at it. "Oh, great: a *urinal*. Sexist bastards."

That was when she was suddenly tackled from the side by a

mysterious stranger.

$$f(x) = 2x^2 - 4x + 24.$$

Edgar underwent the most magnificent montage. One moment he skipped gaily next to his new triceratops friend, the next he was slowly tossing a discus and watching the triceratops turn and fetch it, and then watching it return the disc to Edgar and lick him, causing him to giggle.

Li'l did Edgar realize, the triceratops's toxic saliva now gave him twenty-six varieties o' cancer, including the rare tropic variety.

```
function PrintChapterName ($chap_name) { echo $chap_name; }.
```

Autumn's mood was not improved by the glare o' the eternal sundown/sunup that attacked her eyes as she exited the restrooms. It was, however, when she caught sight o' a giant blue triceratops in front o' her, giving her glassy eyes. She looked up and saw Edgar sitting on top—though he was lurching so low, with his arms tightly wound round the creature's neck, that he was practically lying on it.

“Ah, I see you found the dinosaur. That's cool,” Autumn said.

“Hey, Autumn,” Edgar replied. “Glad to see the inky blob monster hadn't eaten you.”

She climbed up on the dinosaur and wrapped her arms round Edgar's waist while the triceratops raised its head and began plodding forward, developing into a steady scamper. As they rode Autumn felt the dry, hot wind blow all over her face, causing her safari hat to fall off. She didn't bother to pick it back up, since there was no reason why she had it in the first place.

“So, I was thinking if with the help o' this polite dinosaur we'd eventually be able to reach the end o' this wasteland,” Edgar said.

“Hmm... Perhaps,” Autumn said. “However, I think we have other

business we should attend to, too.”

Edgar turned his head to look at Autumn. “What?”

“Look, it’s obvious something strange is going on round here. We start this story in a cave hounded by an inky eldritch horror that randomly shifts its form every so oft, you find a dinosaur that just so happens to allow you to ride it, and I wander through some long-winded bizarro bathroom.”

“And?”

“And I think somebody’s ’hind this.”

“Well, yeah: the Programmers. They’re ’hind everything,” Edgar said.

Autumn shook her head. “I don’t think so. Somebody else is ’hind this. I think somebody’s taken over the story within the story, as if pirating the transmission o’ a radio signal.”

“But who?” Edgar asked.

“There’s only one person I can think o’ who’d be so immature as to do something like this,” Autumn said. “Just follow my directions and I’ll lead us to him.”

AHHHHHHHHHHH!.

Meanwhile at Castle Keep, the dark figure continued to sip his tea, eat his sugar cookies, and read today’s *Blondie* in the Funnies. “Silly Dagwood; you can’t eat a sandwich that big,” he said with a chuckle.

His merriment was interrupted, however, by a sudden slam o’ his door. He turned round and saw Autumn standing in the threshold with Edgar hiding behind her.

“All right, Lance, you can take off that giant bushel o’ black hair; you’re not fooling anyone.”

“Drats!” he dratted as he threw off the shroud o’ curly hair. He glared at Autumn. “So I see you’ve made it here.”

Autumn pointed at him. “You’ve been screwing round with this whole story haven’t yo—I can see you writing what I’m saying right now!”

The handsome, sexy Lance was standing valiantly next to his golden-trestled table, his firm right hand typing on his laptop keyboard while his perfectly-carved face sneered at the vile, slobbering ponytailed devil.

“Why’d you do it?” Autumn asked in her raspy, dying-cat voice.

“Isn’t it obvious?” The gorgeous Lance asked in his clear, luscious voice. “So I can manipulate you two to do anything I wish!”

While Lance laughed his lyrical laugh that spineless weasel Edgar looked down and scratched his chin. “That might explain why earlier I had the sudden urge to vote Gold.”

“No, I mean why did you waste everyone’s time with this story? None o’ it contributed to your goals in any way... whatever your goals are,” Autumn said.

“Oh, truly?” Lance asked. “I’m truly curious; is that truly true? As a perfect specimen of... specimen I work in mysterious ways; even I do not know how I operate.”

“So that whole section that was nothing but the word ‘AHHHH!’ for almost three thousand letters? That had a purpose, did it?” Autumn asked, tilting her head with a look o’ deep petulance.

“It looked cool,” Lance said as he gave a rueful glance to the side.

“That doesn’t make it useful,” Autumn said. “Common rule among writers: even if it’s wonderful, if it’s not useful, kill your babies.”

“Okay,” Edgar said as he lifted baseball bat and started bashing a baby on a table that miraculously appeared next to him this very minute. He continued to bash it till ’twas nothing but a bloody mess, splattering its heart juice all over him.

Autumn threw her arms out in utter shock. “Edgar! What the hell are you doing? That’s utterly inconsistent with your characterization!”

She heard tittering to her side and turned toward it to see Lance covering his great grin as he scribbled on his sheets o' paper.

Autumn snatched the pencil from Lance's grasp. "Gimme that!" Then she scribbled on the sheet herself.

Edgar put his hands on his head and said, "Golly, that sure wasn't nice o' me to do. I'm sorry, baby." Then he lightly kissed where he thought its head probably used to be and patted it gently.

Autumn swiped the sheets from Lance's table. "Now this is going to stop this instance."

Lance crossed his arms. "Oh, truly? And why do you think that?"

Autumn gripped the sheet by its top with both hands, each on either side as if ready to rip it in half. "Cause I'm going to destroy this paper."

Lance put his heads up on his head. "You can't do that!"

"Why not?"

"You'll destroy us all!"

Autumn shrugged. "Only for this story."

"But... but that's a stupid way to end a story," Lance blubbered. "You can't ruin my one story! That's unfair!"

"And why am I being depicted so unflattering in my own story!" Lance whined like a blubbering crybaby. "Hey!"

Autumn was writing on the sheet.

"Gimme that!" Lance shouted as he grabbed an end o' the sheet. But Autumn still held onto the other end and they both tugged on it as if it were a tug-o-war match.

"Stop, you monsters!"

Everyone paused. A silence entered, so heavy the ground squeaked at every step. They slowly swiveled their heads in the direction o' the noise and saw the black ink monster, its cane hanging in a limp tentacle, its pink eye staring at them all with consternation.

“Can’t you all just get ’long?” it asked.

Autumn’s brows narrowed. “Weren’t you trying to *eat* us?”

But the ink monster shook its head.

“I tried to tell you, but you wouldn’t listen. I wanted to invite you to this exquisite restaurant called the *Chez Beret*. I told you, I’m the guest o’ honor, so they let me bring whoever I want and... well...” the ink monster bent its visage, its eye curving downward. “I don’t have many friends... I was wondering—you know, if you’re not too busy—if you wanted to maybe go...”

Autumn and Edgar exchanged glances—no, not *literally*; God, don’t you understand figurative language at all?

“Course I do,” God replied.

Autumn scratched her head. “We don’t have to pay for anything, do we?”

“Course not. It’s all paid for us,” the ink monster said.

Autumn turned to Edgar and shrugged. “No loss for us.”

Edgar’s expression was less calm. “You sure this isn’t a trick?”

“I can prove to you it isn’t. See here.”

The ink monster held up a laptop in Firefox, its screen covered in peach with black text on top.

“See, it says right there: ‘It wasn’t a trick.’”

Autumn leaned in, her eyes squinting to see the text better.

It wasn’t a trick.

With that settled, they all hopped on Edgar’s triceratops and ventured back to the city.

But there was no city, and they never made it to civilization, so Autumn, Lance, the triceratops, and the ink monster starved to death, while Edgar died o’ tropic cancer.

#BOSK-BIT-AK014

WAR AND SMALL ROUND VEGETABLES THAT'S GROWN IN PODS

J. J. W. Mezun | May 10, 2014

For years Adam had suffered under the magnifying glass o' whom he'd only recognized as the Manager.

That all changed when he finally found the fabled mutagen at the bottom o' the drainpipe next to what he'd only recognized as the gas station.

After that he underwent an immense growth spurt in what he'd only recognized as a growth spurt.

He could see that the Manager was not pleased by Adam's presence.

He fixed that by moving the Manager to 'nother realm with his fiery breath.

Now, after years o' the Manager blocking him, he could finally accomplish his life's goal. He began slurping 'long the floor with his huge pincers.

Mmm... Love these what I only recognize as peas!

#BOSK-BIT-AK115

PORTRAIT O' A YOUNG BOUGH AS A YOUNG BOUGH

J. J. W. Mezun | May 20, 2014

Bough[146] fell off Tree[42] in the autumn o' 2014 during a particularly breezy night. Though it'd never had to endure life independent from its paternal tree, it withstood with bravery.

Most o' its life for the next few months were spent lying in the dirt in a cave it was brushed into during 'nother storm.

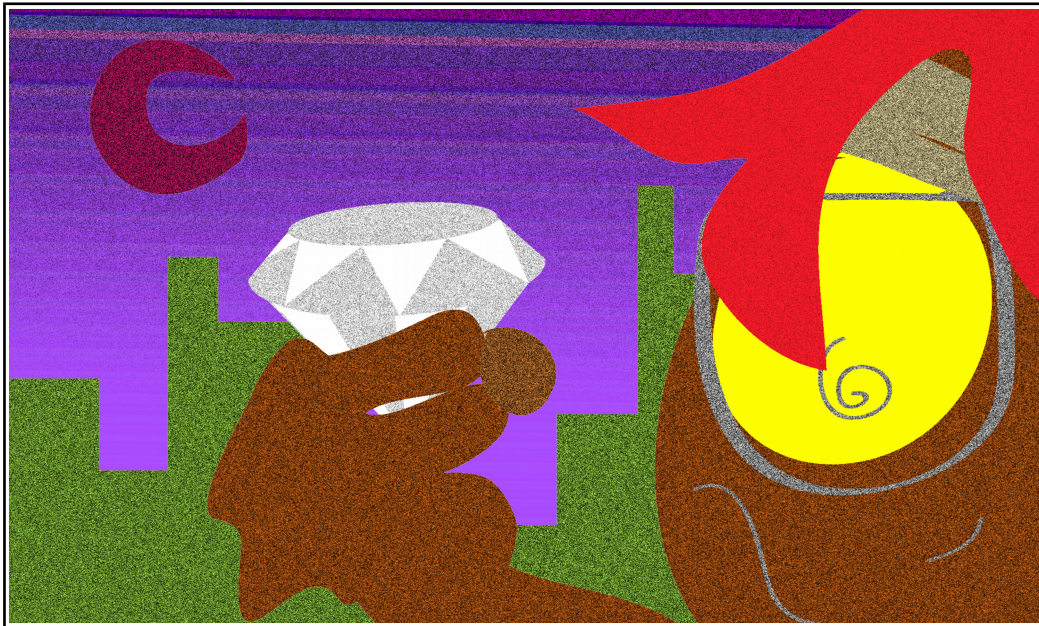
It wasn't till the late spring o' 2015 when it was recruited by Sir Edgar Winters for military service. Though this gave it as much anxiety as anyone, at the same time it felt proud that it'd finally have a chance to give back to its community.

Alas, the war with the ink-monster ended 'fore Bough[146] had a chance to join the fray.

#BOSK-AL100B-DIAMOND

DIAMOND IN THE THIRD DRAFT

J. J. W. Mezun | June 1, 2014



I.

“Stop!”

Autumn didn’t stop. She continued running past the threshold & into the rainy streets, pockets stuffed with tools. She looked over her shoulder & sweat when she saw Edgar lagging ’hind—though still ’head o’ their pursuers.

With her head still pointed backward, she felt her feet struggle against gravity & fell forward, smacking her face onto craggy concrete, as well as spilling her pockets’ contents all over the street & sidewalk.

“O my god! Are you OK?” Edgar said as he tried quickening his run toward Autumn, almost tripping himself on his robe.

“Fuck,” she muttered as she raised her head, revealing a red crack on her forehead. She glanced to the side to see the pursuers gaining.

“Shit,” she muttered as she leapt to her feet. “Keep going,” she said to Edgar just ’fore resuming her run.

She examined herself as she went. She exhaled easily when she realized her glasses had only been cracked. However, she noticed a stiff numbness in her right arm, & when she tried moving it, found that it moved just as stiffly.

Well, that can’t be good.

As was her usual technique to lose pursuers, she winded round alleys & turns, trying to obfuscate her trail as much as possible.

One o’ the benefits ’bout taking Edgar on o’ all these excursions o’ mine is that he should’ve become experienced ’nough to know what I’m doing—which means he should hopefully not be caught.

Hopefully.

She risked a second's pause in the middle o' a particularly dank alley & looked over her shoulder. When she saw nobody nearby, she lifted the lid o' the dumpster sitting gainst the alley's back brick wall & climbed in, closing the lid tightly 'nough so that she could see outside, but none could see inside.

She waited inside for almost a half hour 'fore she judged it safe to return to the outside world, emerging from the black void o' the dumpster & the shadows o' the alley.

As she peeked out the corner o' the alley, she thought, *I wonder if it'd be safe to return to the scene o' the crime & see if my pilfered wares are still there.*

But she already knew that the one rational option—a'least, the one option that fit within her mind's logic: the only outcome o' her not returning to pick up her spilled burglaries would be to gain nothing—would be an implicit surrender.

& how could I give up a still-slightly-viable victory so easily & then complain 'bout a lack o' opportunities?

So she tried retracing her paces, hoping she'd relocate Edgar on the way.

It turned out, she found Edgar loitering round the same area in which she'd dropped her goods.

"There you are," he said. "I thought you'd return to see if you could pick the stuff back up 'gain. You OK?"

"What? Sure," she muttered as she unconsciously rubbed her forehead. "You shouldn't have waited round here out in the open. Cops may check round here to see if we'd return, & they *did* see you, too, so they would arrest you as an accomplice."

"I know," he said as he nodded. "I waited where they couldn't see me till they left—they were here. They picked everything up, unfortunately."

"Course," Autumn said. Her whole body appeared to melt under the torrents: her bangs stuck down to her face like bent tentacles, her

shoulders slumped, & every ripple o' her jacket & sweats sagged & dripped.

Her arms, however, slung themselves to her chest tightly, in an awkward-looking position that caught Edgar's eyeholes.

"Is something wrong with your arm?" he asked as he walked toward her.

"Fucked it up when I fell," she said. "Don't believe it's broken, though—just sprang."

Edgar gasped as he stopped next to her & stared @ it. "I'm sorry."

"To be fair, I doubt you were a cause."

"Does it hurt?"

"Not much. The true problem is the negative effect it'll have on my thieving abilities—which evidently need sharpening." She stared down @ the puddle-strewn street.

"I'm sure that was just bad luck. It's not your fault," Edgar said.

"Less my legs were suddenly possessed, I doubt that," Autumn said. "Sides, those who can't succeed through bad luck are just as much failures as those who rely on good luck."

They paused, both still staring @ the empty gray street.

After a few minutes, Autumn said, "Come," & began walking 'way.

"So what're we gonna do now?" Edgar asked as he followed.

"Same thing we always do: try, try 'gain for that .1% victory hiding 'mong the 99.9% haystack o' failure."

II.

If Autumn & Edgar's surroundings could be described with one word, it'd be "empty." Within the half hour since they'd stopped to rest, the rain had run out like a shower nozzle turned off. The dusty cloud curtains parted to reveal their contrastive radiant star, just as she was on her way out, leaving the sky to look like a sloppy

watercolor o' dreary grays & bright primaries. Meanwhile, the roads & sidewalks were starved o' cars & pedestrians. The only noise that remained were the sparse drips o' the rain's dregs left on roofs & pines.

To what extent am I in control o' my success? Autumn mused as she clutched her forehead like a "Magic 8 Ball." *'Cause I just can't think o' anything. I mean, I've always had to pump the ol' well for drips; but now it seems completely parched. I'm sure there are opportunities out there, but how to find them? I could try squandering all o' my energy wandering round in idle search, as I've already done many times 'fore; but that has almost never correlated with success, indicating its prospects o' benefit are far lower than the energy costs.*

'Course, the same applies to thieving in general.

Autumn stood, startling Edgar into attention. She didn't notice.

I have to think o' something completely new. Must break through the tedious patterns holding my imagination back.

"You have an idea?" Edgar asked.

"Huh?" Autumn turned to the noise as if waken from a dream. "O. No. Just thought some movement might make me think better."

She sat back down & stared @ the thin rainbow swimming in the road puddle.

Their attention shifted when they heard a man's voice & footsteps echo through the empty city as if in a tunnel. He was gasping as he trudged through the pavement on his torn knees, shirtless, his hair the shattered branches o' a fur. Autumn's bile rose as she noticed the flesh o' part o' his belly & two o' his fingers had been ripped off, leaving visible bone.

Edgar looked 'tween her & the stranger, though

"You, uh... you need any help, sir?" he asked in a voice much too quiet for the stranger to hear.

They watched him crawl to the storm drain & hold his hands over it. A flash o' white zipped by.

“There...” he gasped. “Now I’m free.”

& with that, he slowly crawled ‘way.

It probably wasn’t anything useful, Autumn thought as she continued to stare @ the storm drain.

It wouldn’t hurt to check.

She waited till she was sure the stranger had left & then carefully rose from the curb. She walked over to it with a feigned casual sway—while glancing furtively to her sides—and then stopped & bent down next it.

When she peered inside, all she saw was a thin beam o’ light; so she pulled out her flashlight & pointed it inside. As if ‘twere the moon reflecting light from the sun, she saw what she swore was shaped as a diamond sparkle.

Couldn’t be, she thought. *How would a diamond end up in a storm drain? Surely that fellow didn’t drop a diamond down the drain.*

Maybe he’s superstitious. Maybe he went through a disaster & thought that dropping a diamond in a storm drain would get him greater fortune from god, or some tripe.

Well, there’d be nothing to lose in trying to get it.

Well, there might be—but that’s even unlikelier than our other hypothesis.

No gain without risk.

She lay on her stomach & reached her left arm inside, but was unsurprised to find that it wouldn’t reach. Luckily, she was scrawny ‘nough to fit her whole body inside after removing the grill, & lowered herself in, legs-first.

Edgar, who had already noticed her sneak over to the storm drain, & now saw her going inside, walked over to it & peeked inside. He glanced round himself to ensure nobody was looking.

“Find anything?” he whispered.

Autumn’s face suddenly popped into view like a deranged clown.

“I think so. Help me up, please.”

She reached her left arm & head up & Edgar grasped her by the head & shoulder & pulled while Autumn pushed. Soon she was outside 'gain, 'cept now covered in cobwebs with her shoes & the bottom o' her pants dripping with dark water.

Autumn looked round 'gain, whispered, “Come,” & they scurried 'way.

When they reached an obscure alley blocks 'way, she stopped & took the object from her pocket. It continued to sparkle, even through the dirt. She dusted it off with the bottom o' her shirt & saw that it looked just like an authentic diamond—'cept 'twas much bigger than normal & pulsed.

“Is that a diamond? It looks pretty,” Edgar said.

“Yeah. It's throbbing, for some reason, though.”

“What?”

“It's throbbing, like a hard, sharp heart.”

“I didn't even know diamonds could do that,” Edgar said, his eyeholes widening.

She shook her head. “Bizarre. I wonder if he did drop it as some obscure ritual. Maybe that's why it looks & feels so different.”

“Maybe it's karma. Your bad luck being made up by good,” Edgar said.

“I doubt that,” Autumn said as she continued to stare @ it. “Still, we should rush to the library 'fore it closes & research it to get a better idea o' what price we should sell it for.”

Edgar gasped. “Think o' how much it'll be worth. You won't have to sleep in storm drains anymore.”

“Perhaps.”

So she snuck it into a secret pocket in her pants & they ventured toward the nearest library. By this point the sun had vanished & the city twinkle blue with white stars. Though they were used to warm noons & cold nights, this day seemed to be reversed, with the chilly

rains leaving 'hind a balmy evening. As they went, they saw Boskeopolis rev back to life with copious cars riding past them in both directions.

Autumn, was glancing both ways as she crossed the street with Edgar when she felt the earth below her disappear & fell into a black hole. A few meters later, she landed in water. She swam round in whatever direction she was already facing till she finally reached ground & climbed out. Eventually she found the ladder back up.

"Autumn, are you OK?" Edgar asked as he looked down @ her soaking head pop out the sewer, dripping brown water on the pavement.

"O, let me check something..." Autumn riffled through her secret pocket. "OK, good. The diamond's still there."

She climbed out & they resumed their trek, Autumn huddled & sneezing, shivering from the cold sewer water.

"Uh, you want us to stop somewhere where you can clean that off?" Edgar asked.

"No. Let's hurry to the library 'fore it closes," she muttered. She glanced round herself. "I don't want to be out here anymore than I have to be. There may be other thieves round, & I don't think I could live with the ignominy o' being robbed myself."

Suddenly, she felt something heavy crack gainst her head. She felt the spot on her head & grabbed something. When she looked @ her hands she saw shards o' glass. She looked up & saw that she was just under a streetlamp that was now missing its bulb.

"Are you OK?" Edgar asked.

"Yeah," she said as she started moving 'gain. "Odd."

"You seem to be having some bad luck," Edgar said uneasily. "You don't think it's 'cause o' the good luck o' finding that diamond, do you."

Autumn exhaled petulantly. "I wouldn't exactly call falling in a

sewer & having a lightbulb drop on my head 'bad luck' compared to finding what could be a multi-million-point diamond," Autumn said. "Worse things could happen."

After she said this, she felt the diamond pulse. She decided to ignore it.

However, as they traveled onward, Autumn noticed that trouble did seem mo' common tonight. Though she thought she was rather careful 'bout looking both ways 'fore crossing the street, on two occasions a car almost ran into her, zooming down the street the moment she started crossing. The second time she even tried moving & then pulling back just after. The car only went after her when she was already midway through the street.

This made Autumn suspect that someone was out to get her through subtle methods. Just as she was musing on this, she was jolted by a creak & turned round just in time to see a tree fall on her, pinning her to the sidewalk while bushes o' pokey pine leaves assaulted her face with the scent o' the jungle.

"O my god, Autumn are you OK?" Edgar wailed as he threw his arms up.

"Yeah," Autumn grunted as she tried to push herself out from under. "Could you help pull me out, please?"

Edgar pulled on Autumn's shoulders while she pushed against the sidewalk for a few minutes 'fore she was able to squeeze out. She panted, covered in pine needles & sap, as she stared down @ the wooden monstrosity, its carcass a warped parody o' the peaceful plants she'd never even thought 'bout before.

When she had mostly caught her breath, she said, "Edgar, I don't think this is just bad luck: I think somebody's out to get me."

This only made Edgar panic mo'. "What? Why would anyone want to... to do anything to you?"

"Obviously they're not happy 'bout my thieving. Probably a prior victim. Perhaps some moralistic nutjob with an obsessed hatred o'

criminals. I mean, you know I'm not the best-loved person in the world, right?

"Anyway, the important thing is that we be careful."

"You want me to help you get those pine needles out o' your hair?" Edgar asked.

Autumn looked @ Edgar as if he had asked her if he could buy her an air balloon.

"That's OK. Let's just move on," she replied.

Autumn was turning her head @ virtually every step this time, wary o' danger in every window o' every building, in every tree, 'hind every fence, & in every sewer hole. Since she was already careful, & this had clearly failed, she didn't have high hopes that this was useful.

Well, the prospect o' death should hardly be surprising, she told herself. *You never knew this to be a safe profession.*

Still, with the possibility fresh in her mind, she wondered if there was something she should do in preparation. Then 'gain, hadn't she already tried optimizing her time to be used toward her one goal—success? What could she do now but just continue?

She glanced to her side & saw Edgar looking all round them himself, his face a clear picture o' fright. Should she say anything to him just in case? She was almost certain there was nothing intelligent she could compose.

This saddened her a bit.

III.

A kilometer later, they reached the library. She even saw by the light inside the main hall, visible through the glass pane in the front door, that 'twas still open.

Perhaps this place will be safer, Autumn thought. *Hopefully this*

screwjob isn't bold 'nough to attack me in such a public place.

Since 'twas so late, & most had gone home by then, they had no trouble finding a computer. As the browser loaded, she extracted the diamond from her pocket & looked @ it once mo'. She could still see & feel it pulse in her hand. There was no denying it, now.

Well, that just makes it easier to describe specifically, she thought as she typed her query in the search box.

She clicked the first result & saw that it led to a webpage dripping with professionalism: blurry, beveled link buttons on the left; blurry ads full o' clip art scattered thoughtlessly @ the top; & the main text found within a classic-bordered table, the text itself manifested in a variety o' colors & sizes. She soon saw that the description equaled in professionalism: it said nothing 'bout price, but 'stead spewed some drivel 'bout its carrier being "cursed" by some god with an unpronounceable name & that this "curse" would leave the holder with bad luck so long as she holds the diamond. Autumn hit the backspace key with disgust.

Edgar turned to Autumn. "Did you read that? Maybe it truly is bad luck that caused all those incidents."

"I wouldn't put much trust in that page," Autumn muttered.

But when she tried the other pages, she saw that they all parroted the same claim. Mo' worryingly, two specifically mentioned the throbbing, claiming that 'twas a reaction to certain environmental cues—the most likely being an upcoming unfortunate event.

"It's possible that they're all simply stealing from the same source, whatever that original source was," Autumn said as she rose from her chair after a half-hour's worth o' futile search. "It's mo' likely that they're all fake & that there's really no useful information on this."

"Then what's causing all these problems?" Edgar asked.

"I told you, some screwjob's out to get us," Autumn replied. "There's no point in speculating 'bout it, anyway: I'm certainly not

abandoning this diamond, even if it is the cause. & if it is, well, then it'll all hopefully go 'way when I sell it."

IV.

After they left, they headed straight for Honey Plaza to find a shop in which to sell the diamond. *I'll just have to guess the price*, Autumn thought grimly. *I'll almost certainly be ripped off; but there's no other option. Hopefully it'll pulse as I'm showing it to them; maybe that'll make them think it's mo' valuable.*

She was so distracted by this concern that she had forgotten all 'bout her earlier problem, & so was unprepared when she felt something heavy ram into her from the side. It knocked her into the fence on the other side so hard that she broke through it, lying splayed over scattered piles o' wood, feeling it impale her in numerous places. From 'hind, she could hear a piercing screech & then a motor zoom 'way in the distance.

So the bastard finally sprouted the spine to ding me, I see, she thought.

To Autumn's surprise, Edgar didn't fly into a wail, but 'stead asked Autumn, "Are you all right," in a calm but sad tone.

Autumn pushed herself up off the broken fence, only to collapse back down from the sharp pain in her side.

"You need help?" Edgar asked.

"No," Autumn grunted as she made 'nother attempt. This time she went slower & found that 'twas slightly easier. Eventually she was straight-legged 'gain—albeit, leaning on an unbroken part o' the fence, holding her side with the other hand.

"D'you think you should go to a hospital?" Edgar asked.

"Don't be zany," Autumn grunted. "Those scam artists will just drill us out o' money we don't even have. I'll be fine."

“How long d’you think it’ll take till we’ve sold that diamond?” Edgar asked.

“It shouldn’t take long,” Autumn said ’tween heavy breaths. “Though, perhaps you should return to your hideout just to be safe. Wouldn’t want whoever’s after me hitting you on accident.”

“You need help walking?” Edgar asked, ignoring her previous comment.

“No. It’ll be fine,” she said as she started walking. She cringed @ the pain in her side that throbbed @ every step, but she was able to do it, all the same.

Edgar followed. Autumn said nothing.

What she was less fond o’, though, was Edgar’s maneuvering himself tween her & the street, the sneaky bastard.

“Edgar, don’t you think that’s a terrible place to be?” Autumn asked. “If that screwjob in the car tries to hit me ’gain he’ll hit you ’stead.”

“Well, maybe he’ll be less likely to do so if I’m here ’stead,” Edgar replied.

That didn’t make it taste any better in Autumn’s mouth, but she said nothing. She remembered the Iggy’s Fork: either let him kill himself or drive him to it by having herself eliminated. No solution.

Even so, the next few blocks were peaceful—which was fine ’nough for Autumn, since she still had the ache in her side to deal with. During this period, what truly assailed them was not an incident in question, but merely the anticipation. The diamond’s pulsation acting up ’gain offered no help.

& then she saw it: a brown grizzly growling so great, its mouth dribbled with saliva. They didn’t need any extra indication that it knew they were there, for ’twas slowly crawling toward them.

Autumn harshly rubbed her face with her left palm & said through gritted teeth, “O, come the fuck on.”

Edgar tugged on Autumn’s T-shirt. “Should we run?”

“That’s a great idea,” Autumn said, keeping her eye on the grizzly: “Run from a bear. I’m sure that’ll work out swell.”

“Then what should we do?” Edgar whispered, shaking in panic.

“Act calm,” Autumn said. “They can smell fear, anger, & pessimism.”

So they just stood there, Edgar wrapping his arms round himself in a nugatory attempt to still his nerves while Autumn averted her eyes from the bear. Ironically, Autumn was mo’ ’fraid o’ the bear attacking *Edgar* ’cause he wouldn’t stop shaking so much.

The bear continued to pad its way forward till ’twas right in front o’ them. It took a second to sniff Autumn’s sweat pants, then Edgar’s robe—which caused Edgar to panic even harder—and then Autumn ’gain.

“See, Edgar, you just have to act calm,” Autumn said. “Bear’s generally try to *avoid* contact with humans & will only attack if—”

She was cut off when the bear suddenly lunged @ Autumn, knocking her to the ground. Edgar immediately turned round to see the bear lying on top o’ her, clawing @ her face while its sharp-toothed mouth snarling ’bove.

“Autumn, no!” Edgar shouted as he rushed forward.

Without thinking, Edgar pushed gainst the bear, which didn’t even make it budge. It did, however, make the bear turn its face to Edgar & growl so deep that Edgar could feel the steamy air from the bear’s throat blow into his face. He noted that the bear needed a breath mint.

This distracted the bear ’nough to give Autumn the opportunity to pull out her lighter & set it afire.

Hate to do this to you, pal, but you’ve left me no choice, she thought as she thrust the flame @ the bear.

The bear roared & jumped back, standing on its hind legs. It looked down & saw that a tuft o’ its belly was on fire.

Autumn returned to her feet & held her lighter up, the flame still dancing 'bove.

"You'd better stay back if you don't want any mo' o' this," she said.

The bear returned to its four legs & ran 'way, growling the entire way.

Edgar slouched his shoulders. "Are you all right?" he asked tiredly.

He turned to Autumn to see that her face was covered with deep red cuts, as well as a large scratch on her glasses.

"Yes. It's nothing," she muttered as she returned her lighter to her pocket. "We should almost be there, anyway, 'less a UFO decides to randomly appear & warp us to the sun."

Indeed, only one mo' block later, they were in Honey Plaza, looking @ every sign for a shop that would likely buy jewelry: they saw a sign for "Muffin Time" that declared, "When it's time to eat muffins, it's muffin-eating time"; they saw a sign for "Burt's Hardware," which had the image o' a wrench with a smiley face & eyeballs; they saw a sign for "Diamonds Forever"; they had a sign for "Orson's Organs," which had the image o' a pancreas with a smiley face & eyeball—

"What a minute, what was that last shop," Autumn said, rudely interrupting the narrator.

They turned back to Diamonds Forever's door, only to see that 'twas dark inside & that 'bove the door glowed a neon sign that said, "CLOSED."

"Well, that sucks," Autumn said. "Guess we'll just have to wait till tomorrow."

Edgar winced. "We need to find a place to hide the diamond till then."

She turned to him. "What are you talking 'bout? It's already hidden in one o' my secret pockets."

"You're not actually planning on keeping it with you all night...?"

“Course I am. What, d’you think I’m dumb ’nough to just leave my property lying round where anyone can take it?”

“But, Autumn, the curse—”

“I just fought a bear with a lighter,” Autumn said. “After that, no cute curses will keep me from me gold.”

“But, Autumn—”

Autumn softly grasped Edgar by his shoulder with her good arm, staring straight into his eyeholes. He grimaced as he saw the bleeding cuts & cracked glasses up close.

She said in a low voice, “Listen, Edgar: this diamond’s liable to be my ticket to success—my chance to finally stop being a street rat living in an abandoned sewer. If I have to risk killing myself to get there, so be it.”

Edgar averted his eyes. He knew there was no point in arguing.

She released him & returned her good hand to her pockets.

“Good. Now, we should return home,” Autumn said with a haggard look. “I wish our turtle cave was closer to this plaza, but what’ll you do.”

They turned & headed home, first through the same path they came, & then through a different path when they hit Orange Avenue. During their trek, Edgar couldn’t help but get edgy whenever he heard a car drive by, saw a person walk by, or heard a tree rustle.

Though Autumn continued to look round herself in every direction, she didn’t concern herself any mo’. Autumn had learned long ago that anxiety was rarely conducive to success, & thus tried to avoid letting it trouble her as much as possible. She did what she could to avoid death and, if it didn’t help her, well, then she was dead. What’ll you do?

Autumn didn’t have to worry ’bout being hit by a car, for it never happened ’gain; this time a car merely drove by & shot @ her with a 20s-era gangster machine gun. Two bullets pierced her—one in the

stomach & 'nother in the arm—both pushing her into the fence to her side, which she also broke through into splintery pieces.

Edgar was rattled by the blast o' the bullets, but was otherwise composed. He couldn't say he didn't expect this. He looked @ Autumn & asked weakly, "Autumn, are you OK?"

She sat back up, rubbing her stomach. "Yeah."

She stood & continued wordlessly @ a clumsy, but steady, pace. Edgar scurried after her, also not saying anything. He did, however, glance over @ her & saw her bite her lip & glare @ the sidewalk. He didn't need telepathy to guess the approximate o' what she was thinking, *I'll be damned if I give up my loot, even if I have to lose all my organs to keep it.*

Edgar simply stared down @ the sidewalk in sadness. After all, what'll you do?

Autumn suddenly felt a box o' wire mesh smack her in the back, knocking her backward into it. She saw that 'twas a shopping cart rolling down the sidewalk @ crack-addict speed. It crashed into the fire hydrant @ the end only to make the hydrant blow its caps, causing water to spurt up & to its sides. The rising spurt propelled Autumn high up in the air like a pulled-back slingshot while the kinetic energy o' her ride on the cart still made her move forward. She finally stopped when she smacked face-first into the window o' a commercial building, her lower body hitting the wall 'neath. The window's gray glass cracked @ the impact, causing it to break into shards & fall after Autumn, who crashed thirty meters on the pavement below. She grunted in pain as she felt all the bones in her back crumble, only to grunt 'gain when she felt the glass shards plunge into her like falling spikes.

She lay there, unable to move as her body had virtually been turned into liquid, waiting for the next contrived object to hit her.

She achieved her wish when she heard some woman say 'bove, "Well, I guess the only thing to do with this broken grand piano is to

throw it 'way out this window," 'fore seeing a small black rectangle fall out a window high 'bove & quickly grow to enormous size as it neared.

"O, come the fuck on!" Autumn shouted. "That doesn't even make any sense! How contrived can you be, you stupid diamond?"

She swore she could feel the diamond pulsing with glee in her pocket as she watched the piano loom closer like a chasing monster. It finally grew so big & so close that it engulfed her completely, covering her whole body with a sharp, stinging pain that eventually oozed out into numb unconsciousness.

V.

Autumn's eyes slowly peeled open to see that she was in a stark white room with some maniac in a baby-blue surgeon's cap smiling down on her.

"Androgyn, you sure had a nasty accident, Madame. Every bone in your body was crushed so fine they became millions o' invisible atoms; blood oozed out so much you looked like a drenched beet when your li'l skeleton friend brought you in," the surgeon said. "Also, I think you might have four types o' cancer."

Autumn tried to ask him if the diamond was still OK, but found that she was unable to speak.

The doctor must have sensed what she was trying to do, for he said next, "Now, now, Madame: you musn't wear your new body out so soon by trying to speak. We'll add a voice module in later. Just rest now."

Voice module? New body? What the hell is this shi—

She gazed down & noticed something odd. She did notice earlier that her vision was covered by somewhat foggy glass, but was used to that, wearing glasses & all. She noticed this glass was a murkier

green & appeared rounded @ the edges, which she'd originally guessed was some new glasses they gave her, since her old ones surely broke. Now, however, she saw that these were no glasses, but a jar full o' some green-gray liquid.

Even lower, she saw through the crack 'tween her T-shirt & sweats, the numerous holes in them both, under her sweats, & under her sleeves that most o' her body was now made o' rusty gray metal.

She relaxed. *Maybe the diamond's still safe...*

She looked back up @ the doctor & saw that he had a guilty smile on his face—the kind one would expect from a naughty li'l boy caught sneaking cookies out o' the cookie jar.

“Now, Madame, I understand you may be a bit miffed 'bout your new body; but I can assure you that it'll work just like your old one”—then he said quickly & quietly, “Cept for a few li'l bugs, no problem.”

He continued in his syrupy tone with his huge, scraggly hands clasped together, “& I promise that none o' the oncoming procedures will be excruciatingly painful.

“Now, let me just turn that dial so you can get some rest,” he said as he reached forward to something on the side o' her head. Autumn attempted to lift her arm & stop him, but was too late. The dial's function kicked in immediately & she suddenly felt her consciousness slip 'way.

VI.

The smiling doctor lied. Autumn felt her eyes peel open 'gain & a numb jabbing grow into a ruthless stinging all over her. She saw herself now in a dark room lit by neon dark red light beams & saw through their dim light the surgeon's crazed face smiling open-mouthed as he proceeded to hammer a giant nail into her with frantic energy.

She internally sighed in relief as she saw him stop, only to see him pull on a metal-framed visor & light a blue-flamed torch. She felt the temperature in whatever formed her nerves now rise to a boiling level, including the water in her head jar, which steamed so much that its glass fogged.

Finally, when he pulled the visor up his eyes, he stopped @ Autumn's head jar & seemed to notice she was conscious.

"Oops!" he said with a li'l laugh as he put a black-gloved hand to his mouth as if he had merely told an inappropriate joke in polite company. "I thought I should have given a greater dose on your sleep dial. Lemme try 'gain."

He pulled on it 'gain. This time Autumn didn't resist. Whatever he did afterward, being numb during it must be a godsend, she decided.

As she slowly slipped into sleep once mo', she thought, *I just hope that bastard doesn't throw 'way my pants & the diamond or find it & steal it. Just let the diamond be safe...*

VII.

Her eyes peeled open yet 'gain, only to see a different doctor with concerned eyesstaring down @ her.

"Ah, you're awake, Madame. I'd like to apologize for the trouble Dr. Equinox caused you with his unsolicited tinkering round. He's always going round trying out his experiments on patients, the kidder." He gave a short chuckle. "Anyway, we've fixed you up so that you're much better: none o' that crazy robotic body & brain-in-a-jar nonsense."

Autumn looked down only to see that her metallic body was now replaced with a bunch o' flopping green tentacles where her arms & legs should be. Round her stomach area she could feel the wiggling o' slimy substances—as if her stomach now comprised a net o' worms

—but she could see nothing, for her familiar shirt & pants were still covering her body.

Hopefully the diamond's still there...

She tried to ask the doctor if she could have some privacy, making up whatever 'scuse she could conjure in the meanwhile, but found that her ability to speak had still not been delivered. She attempted to raise one o' her arms so she could point @ her mouth & indicate to the doctor her problem, but found that she could do nothing but make them flop round in slightly different ways.

However, the doctor must have noticed the effort, for he said in a gentler emulation o' Dr. Equinox, "Now, Madame, you shouldn't try to use your body too much yet. It needs time to heal & fully recognize your nervous system so it can respond to your needs."

He said nothing 'bout Autumn's missing vocal capabilities.

But she did see him turn the crank on some big bulbous pipe next to her & then hold a clear cup over where she breathed—her mouth & nose? Did she still have those? She felt a strange but soothing air fill her throat & her eyes glazed closed, her mind yet 'gain knocked unconscious.

VIII.

Autumn's eyes slid open, giving her déjà vu. Autumn saw 'nother unrecognizable doctor, this time with short hair & boxy glasses. She was not smiling, but staring down @ her with an embarrassed frown.

She scratched 'hind her head & said, "I must apologize for the unorthodox operations you have been subjected to under Dr. Equinox & then some actor who only played doctors on TV, Madame. Hopefully you have not been too traumatized."

Once 'gain, Autumn looked down to see what her new body looked like *now*. She saw that 'twas now skin & bones 'gain; but

'stead o' the same brown shade, she saw an erratic mix o' light, medium, & dark splotches cover her skin, all bordered by sewing lines.

"I'm 'fraid we couldn't salvage all o' your old body, since 'twas destroyed so much; but we were able to stitch you up some extra skin & give you a few donated organs."

She pointed to a wrinkly, dark patch on Autumn's arm. "That patch came from my grandmother, who donated her skin just after she died." Then she pointed @ 'nother, pinkish, splotch. "& that one came from a juggler from Verditropolis."

Autumn tried to move her arms & found that they operated perfectly fine. She then attempted to speak & discovered, to her surprise, that it actually worked—in her usual voice to slipper.

"What happened to my old clothes?" she asked, for what concerned her most when she looked down @ her body was not the patched-together skin grafts, but that they were covered by a light blue patient's gown 'stead o' her traditional clothes.

"O, gee, I don't know," the doctor said with a shrug. "A nurse handled all o' that, & I don't know which one."

"You know, you should consider yourself lucky that the operation worked so well, what with all o' the risks involved. We were sure a lot o' the organs would have been rejected or the skin grafts would cause complications; but it all seemed to work as if by miracle. You are one lucky woman."

Autumn sat up, glad to find that 'twas easier than she'd have expected, & pushed the doctor back. She stood up & looked all round the room, but couldn't find them anywhere.

"You haven't seen a pair o' gray sweat pants lying anywhere round here?" Autumn asked as she picked up a stack o' magazines, thinking her pants may be hiding under them, the sneaky bastards.

"Uh, no, Madame, I can't say I have. Sorry," the doctor answered

as she watched Autumn scour the room. “Was there something valuable in one o’ its pockets?”

Autumn aimed a distrustful eye @ the doctor. “Why do you want to know?”

“Well, I mean, I figure that must be the case if you’re so intent on finding them,” the doctor answered. “I mean, surely you would not go through all this trouble just for a pair o’ pants.”

“I’ll have you know they were rather comfy,” Autumn said with an upward tilt o’ her head.

The doctor stared @ Autumn warily.

Finally, she said, “Well, I promise this hospital will try as hard as we can to help you find your missing wardrobe & we’ll call you when we do.”

“Right, *after* you take whatever treasures you find inside,” Autumn said huffily. “& what if I don’t have a phone?”

“Uh, we’ll find a way to contact you, Madame,” the doctor said. “Now, you may want to see your skeleton friend? He hasn’t been able to see you for a while, what with the tinkering o’ the other two ‘doctors.’”

Autumn agreed, only ‘cause she was sure she couldn’t find her pants in there & wanted to search other parts o’ the hospital. She continued turning her head in all directions when Edgar ran up to her, called her name, & wrapped his arms round her.

“It’s been so long!” he exclaimed. “I heard they did strange things to you, like turn you into a robot & an octopus.”

“Yeah, yeah...” Autumn said, still turning her head left & right. “Have you seen my sweat pants?”

“O, no,” Edgar said. “I haven’t been able to see you since you first went in there with that crazy-looking doctor. You looked truly banged-up, though. They probably threw them ‘way ‘cause they were probably so torn up.”

Autumn’s face flushed with anger. “Bullshit. They looked

perfectly fine during the previous two experiments. Don't tell me the third doctor's so clumsy she couldn't do her minor operation without destroying my clothes. 'Sides, you'd think they'd check if they had any items inside before they did so—unless they *did* do that & somebody decided to take home themselves a li'l prize."

Edgar stared @ Autumn with confusion for a second 'fore gasping. "The diamond! That's right..."

"Shhh!" Autumn whispered, leaning her face closer to Edgar's. "You want everyone to know 'bout it & join in on the plundering?"

Edgar scratched his head—an odd, accidental imitation o' her recent doctor. "Gee, it seems like you'd be better off without that diamond though, what with the bad luck it's brought you."

"That diamond was worth *millions!*" Autumn said in a low voice. "You didn't intentionally get rid o' it did you?" Her eyes twisted in a desperation that Edgar couldn't bear to see.

Edgar shook his head. "I told you, I wasn't in there since you first entered. As far as I know, you still had your normal clothes on when you went inside."

Autumn sighed. "Well, then someone else probably stole them & is making a killing off my treasure."

"In probably a different way than you meant," Edgar said with sadness in his expression, too.

"Come; let's go 'fore they expect us to pay them for their shoddy work," Autumn whispered.

She grabbed Edgar's arm & led him to the front door, looking round her on the way, expecting someone to stop them any moment now.

& indeed, her heart jumped when she heard a voice ask, "Checking out, Madame... O, we never got your name."

Autumn peeked 'hind her & saw that the source o' that voice was a man standing 'hind the main counter, looking @ Autumn from

'hind a computer & a stack o' papers.

"Sarah Morrison," Autumn said immediately.

"Here, we'll need you to fill out these forms 'fore you leave," the attendant said as he reached for a paper @ the top o' a stack 'hind him.

Autumn swiftly filled out the paper with bunk info—though trying to make it resemble legitimate info @ first glance—and handed it back to the attendant. 'Fore he could say anything, Autumn moved on toward the front door, though with a normal gait so as to avoid suspicion.

Glancing 'hind her, she could see the attendant immediately return to his work.

Good: we're clear.

However, Autumn decided not to leave the hospital area just yet: 'stead, she turned round the side to the alley, where its dumpster lay.

"Why are we going this way?" Edgar asked, when he noticed Autumn's detour.

She stopped next to the dumpster & opened its lid.

"O," Edgar said—and nothing mo'. Compared to keeping a life-threatening diamond, digging through dumpsters for said diamond was nothing to complain 'bout. "You need me to help you with anything?"

"Yes: give me a lift, please."

Edgar did so, lifting Autumn by the waist high 'nough so that she could crawl all the way inside. She dug for almost a half hour 'fore giving up, clomping back onto the ground with dirt & banana peels covering her patient's gown & a despondent frown.

"Yeah, somebody must've stolen it," Autumn said as she led them 'way from the hospital & back toward their home in the abandoned sewers under Orange Avenue. She wrapped her arms round herself, freezing in such thin apparel out in the late midnight cold, & felt her hollow stomach rumble, going probably days without any food.

“I’m sorry,” Edgar said, his own low hanging face mimicking Autumn’s. “Well, on the bright side, you won’t have to worry ’bout bad luck killing you anymore,” he hesitantly continued, knowing Autumn wouldn’t think so herself.

All Autumn replied was, “I don’t know...” with a shake o’ her head.

They walked in silence.

After a few minutes, Autumn glanced toward Edgar & said, “Edgar... if I... just in case I’m ever killed...”

“You shouldn’t say that,” he said quietly.

“I know. But just in case I am...”

“Yeah?”

“...

“Never mind,” she said.

“What?”

“Never mind.” She shook her head. “It’s stupid.”

“So, what’ll we do now?”

“Same thing we do every night, Edgar: try, try to find that .1% successful heist within the 99.9% o’ failures.”

#BOSK-BIT-AL016

OKAY THIS TIME THE DIAMOND IS IN THE PREWRITE

J. J. W. Mezun | June 10, 2014

His face was beaming, smile stretching from cheek to cheek as he held it snug to his chest. He could feel its pulsations match those o' his heart.

'Twas his luckiest day in the world.

With this, I'll finally be able to try out my experiment on Boskeopolis in entirety—the grandest o' experiments in the world. I'll be sure to win a Loftey Prize!

He plugged it into the clean white plastic holder, closed the glass cover, & typed in the command to activate.

The machine buzzed.

The machine whirred.

& the earth shook.

& inside, the diamond glowed & pulsed mo' than it ever had before.

'Twas it's luckiest day in the world, too.

It'd be time for its grandest experiment, too.

Then, suddenly, the lights went out & the machine's noises deflated.

"Muridae," Dr. Equinox said with a snap o' his finger. "Knew I needed mo' power. O well: I have all the time in the world."

The diamond began shaking wildly, ready to make a girder fall on Equinox's head.

No. Have patience, it told itself. Your time shall come...

#BOSK-BIT-BIT-AL117

**I TREASURE THE MEMORIES SO DON'T TOUCH
THEM YOU'LL BREAK THEM**

J. J. W. Mezun | June 20, 2014

Super Nutritious Tomato-Noodle Soup

For eons the most famous chefs
in the world had labored to create
the perfect soup: one that
contained every nutrient one
needs, as well as being kosher,
halal, & vegan.



The one downside is that it tastes like a rusty faucet.

Value: 250 Pts.

Encyclopedia o' Infinite Knowledge



The book that is said to hold all knowledge in the world, & have the answers to every philosophical question ever crafted.

Unfortunately, this book is in an ancient language nobody remembers anymore.

Value: 300,000 Pts.

Blissful Robe

Wearing this robe painstakingly knit for years with all o' its creator's love will fill one with a warmth no blizzard can



break through.

'Course, it looks dumb, with its big pink heart 'cross the front; but those are the sacrifices one makes for comfort.

Value: 400 Pts.

Euler's Sexy Formula

$$e^{ix} = \cos x + i \sin x$$

Women will drench their
trousers & men will
harden harder than a

golem @ the mere glimpse o' this magnificent
arrangement o' letters, numbers, & symbols.

Beware: this has the potential to divert one's attention
for eternity worse than the worst sirens.

Value: 75,000 Pts.

BS-Ray Glasses

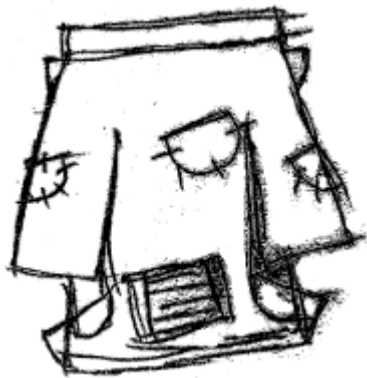
With these glasses one will be able to see through all o' the bullshit o' whoever the wearer looks @.



Immensely useful for watching presidential debates.

Value: 1,200,000 Pts.

Homemade Jacket o' Unlimited Pockets



Scientists have already found 2,356 pockets in this fetching jacket stitched together from over a million patches.

Never worry 'bout running out o' room to store all o'

your phones, wallets, writing utensils, & frog wizard lawn ornaments. Do worry 'bout forgetting which o' these many pockets you stored them in, though.

Value: 2,560 Pts.

Bow Tie o' Perfect Charm

Anyone who wears this tie will gain an instant five points to one's charm & increase the chances o' someone believing what he says by a'least 50%!



Value 7,280 Pts.

