

B\$ke@p@i\$ STORIES

SEASON 2



J.J.W. Mezun

Boskeopolis Stories

Season 2

J. J. W. Mezun

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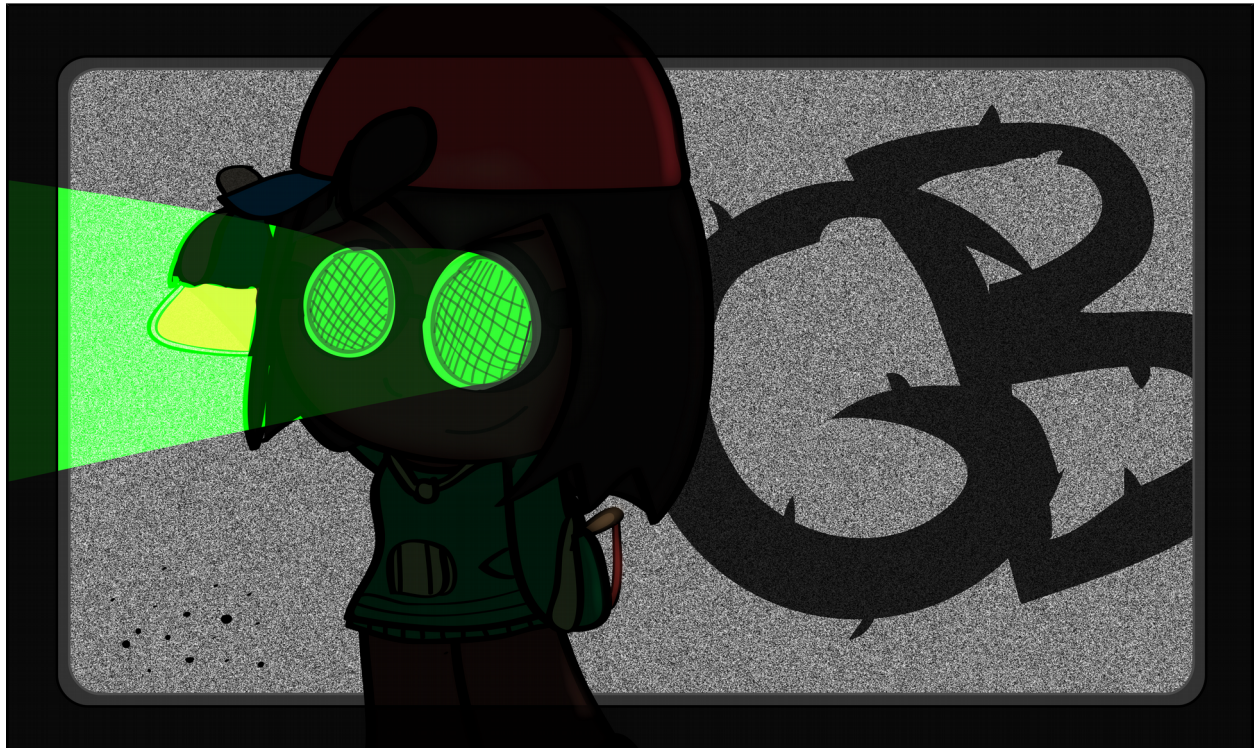
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#BOSK-BA150C-DAWN

SUMMERTIME AND THE LIVING'S HEY NOT TOO ROUGH

J. J. W. Mezun | 2014 July 1



I.

Light streamed in through the window, coloring the inside walls with pale blue. Since the window was just 'hind Dawn's couch, the beam o' light landed right on her like a spotlight, the harsh warmth irritating her eyes till they peeled open. She stared up @ the window, absentmindedly listening to the dull thud o' some construction work far 'way & smelling the air seep in through the open crack.

Well, this is the 1st day 'way from the restaurant. Now time to get started on all the things you whined 'bout not being able to do.

She sat up & dug round her coat pockets till she found a crumpled paper. She pulled it out & looked @ it.

"OK, let's see... My 1st idea was painting," Dawn said to herself.

She looked up @ the easel she had already set up last night in her excitement.

"Let's do it!" she exclaimed as she stood.

She stopped in front o' the easel, picked up the paint palette sitting on it, & stared @ the empty white board, thinking 'bout how she should start. & then thinking some mo'. & then mo', till she spent almost ten minutes just staring @ the easel.

"Well, while I'm thinking 'bout it I might as well get something to eat," Dawn said as she went to the kitchen.

She poured herself a cup o' Kool-Aid & made her own special recipe o' peanut butter & jelly sandwich—special in that it didn't include either peanut butter or jelly, but 'stead chocolate & honey.

She munched on the sandwich, destroying millions o' tiny molecules, still so young. They screamed in agony as they were

crushed by Dawn's mega molars, but nobody could hear them. Those that managed to survive the onslaught, escaping through crumbs dribbling down Dawn's chin, sat silently round her couch, planning their revenge & trying to keep their li'l minds from imagining the horrors their brethren must have been going through during digestion.

However, when she finished, she still didn't have much o' an idea for what to paint, her mind quickly distracted 'way from the issue toward the compelling subject o' pigment chemistry. Thus, she gave herself mo' time by getting herself 'nother cup o' Kool-Aid. & then 'nother. & then 'nother, till she ran out, & it's not as if she could just leave the Kool-Aid pitcher empty—that would be rude to her future self—so she mixed up 'nother batch o' Kool-Aid, only to spill some on the counter, requiring her to wipe it clean; & while she was @ it, she might as well clean the entire kitchen.

Throughout all this she still couldn't conjure up a good painting idea, other than a sky full o' clouds; that seemed simple 'nough, though rather boring.

"It'd be a lot easier if I weren't distracted by all these noises. Like that. Did I just hear a door open? I think I may be getting goaty," she said to herself.

Then, while she was cleaning the kitchen all that Kool-Aid she drank ran to her bladder & she had to use the bathroom, which was exciting; & while she was there, she figured she might as well clean it, too.

& then she heard knocking on the door.

"Ooo! Someone's @ the door!" she exclaimed as she tossed her mop aside.

While she left to answer the door, the mop, having its fragile feelings hurt, crammed its head in the toilet, hoping to drown itself. 'Twas only after minutes o' failure did it remember it never breathed

anyway. Now it could only lie round on the still-wet linoleum, despairing in its infinite failure.

“Hello,” Dawn said after she opened the door.

@ the door was a well-dressed boy in a smooth white suit with short, neat light brown hair, parted in the middle. In his hand was a colorful pamphlet.

“Hello, Madame. I just came by to ask if you’ve met the Heavenly Parliament,” the boy said.

Dawn blinked @ him for a few seconds. Then she waved her index with a savvy smile.

“O. That’s one o’ those religion things, isn’t it,” Dawn said. “You’re one o those people who goes round telling people ’bout it. Wow, I’ll have to admit this is a 1st for me.

“Actually, I haven’t heard o’ this one yet. Is it new? How well’s it been going, anyway? I hear o’ so many religions that start up & never go anywhere.”

The boy stared @ Dawn in utter shock. This wasn’t how it normally went; she was s’posed to slam the door in his face. His nerves bunched up & he felt his hands begin to shake & his throat feel clogged.

What should I say now? he thought.

“Uh... I dunno...”

“& what does this ‘Heavenly Parliament’ offer, just out o’ curiosity,” Dawn asked. “I know everyone says their religion is the only ‘true’ religion, but in reality there is actually quite a steep competition. What does your religion offer me that the traditional religions don’t? Is it one o’ those strict ones that force you to keep your fingernails untrimmed & sacrifice your time for boring meetings or one o’ those hippie ones where everyone just dresses terribly & listens to noisy music till the leader turns out insane & makes everyone dance themselves to death in red shoes? Different

people have different wants, after all.

“Case in point, this isn’t one o’ those archaic religions like that ol’ grampa o’ yours—you know, the one that’s all cheery & funny & then it makes some brief racist or homophobic statement & makes everyone feel awkward.”

The boy blinked blankly as his mind feverishly tried to remember ’nough ’bout his new religion to actually answer her question.

Finally, he said, “Um... Well...”—He cleared his throat —“Currently the Heavenly Parliament is opposed to homosexuality, as you seem to be indicating, but there is an LGBT movement rising among the Liberal party.”

“Heaven has political parties?” Dawn asked.

The boy nodded. “O yeah. Most members o’ the Heavenly Parliament are either part o’ the Liberal or Conservative parties, though there are some Independents, too.”

“So, can I get a vote?” Dawn asked.

The boy nodded ’gain. “Yeah. You just have to pray for the candidate you want to win for your planet’s seat.”

“Hmm... So, is there no singular god, then?”

“O, no there is. He’s just a figurehead now, though. The real decisions are now made by the Heavenly Parliament & Prime Minister.”

“Who’s Prime Minister now?”

“Lucifer’s been Prime Minister since the creation o’ the Heavenly Republic a millennium ago.”

“Lucifer? So he’s good in your religion?” Dawn asked.

“Uh huh,” the boy answered, nodding yet ’gain. “Monarchotheist propaganda tries to paint him as this evil force disrupting traditional monarchy, being sent to Hell for his failure to overthrow God; but in reality, he was quite successful in forcing God to recognize the public’s rights & ’cause o’ that he is very popular in heaven, the

founding father o' the Heavenly Republic. 'Course, there are still those few who preferred the monarchy & heavenly anarchists who believe he's a corrupt sellout & call for direct democratic control o' heaven & the end o' monarchy, period, as well as those who supported him before, but think his constant victories spell a threat to heavenly republicanism; but the vast majority love... him..."

Suddenly, his eyes widened as he tilted his head to see 'hind Dawn.

"You like what I did with the kitchen? See, what I do is I use both soap & water to scrub the floor. I think I read 'bout it in a book once."

The boy pointed a shaking finger 'hind Dawn.

"Madame, is that... is that a possessed pillow walking through your living room?"

Dawn put her hands on her sides & glared @ him.

"Don't tell me that's the best recruitment tactic you have," she said. "Come on, man, you have to put effort into it. Tell me 'bout all the riches they're going to give me; how I'll meet my dead turtle, Stumpy, in heaven. Or how 'bout the fear method—tell me how the Heavenly Parliament will strike me down if I don't worship them *immediately*. You don't expect you'll compete with the big religions if you slack like this, do you?"

The boy wasn't paying attention to Dawn's speech, his eyes still glued 'hind Dawn. Finally, Dawn decided to humor the strange boy & turned round.

"That sure is a walking pillow sitting there, inanimate," Dawn said. "It must be a heavenly miracle."

The man's eyes winced in suspicion. *Hey, she's the one responsible for this, isn't she... That's why she didn't slam the door in my face; she was hoping she could convert me to her savage, occult, tyrannical God! I must get 'way 'fore she washes my brain.*

"I have to go now," the boy said.

"You want to use my bathroom?" Dawn asked, pointing a thumb 'hind her.

The boy blinked @ her for a few seconds, & then abruptly turned & zoomed 'way.

"Hmm... I hope he makes it in time," Dawn said. "Nobody's going to take a religion seriously when its evangelists have soiled trousers & kidney damage."

Her attention was snatched 'way by the sun shining down on the streets below & the squawking o' birds & humans pretending to be birds.

"It sure is a nice day, though," Dawn said. "I ought to do some work outside." She began rubbing her chin. "Hmm... But what?"

She returned to her couch & stared fixedly @ the table in front o' it, her fingers clicking absentmindedly gainst its surface. Behind her, her pillow & blanket wrestled; however, Dawn was far too distracted to notice such an insignificant detail.

She took out her list to look @ the next item, & then clasped her hands together.

"Ah! Become an independent game developer. That should be a li'l easier."

So she took out her laptop & downloaded a compiler & even made a li'l program that greeted the world in white text, though she wasn't sure why a computer program would want to do so, 'mong others. She spent 'bout a half hour mo' brushing up on classes only for her mind to drift off into the ether. To feed her finicky attention span, her body automatically got up to get her 'nother cup o' Kool-Aid. She made a few mo' attempts to read the tutorial, only to keep getting up & getting drinks or making a bowl o' ramen noodles, for which she was always proud she cooked on the stove rather than the microwave.

'Twas not till she finished her bowl o' ramen that she noticed she was reading the same paragraph over & over 'gain, separated by large chunks o' time spent staring out into space. When this realization came she finally decided she'd done 'nough development for now & returned to her list:

"Guitarist, writer, cartoonist, poet, magician, puppet master, race-bike rider, psychiatrist," Dawn muttered as her eyes scanned down the page. "What was I thinking? I'd never be able to do any o' these."

She dropped the page & sighed.

"Perhaps I should go back to my chemistry work... But how am I going to do that? One, I'm probably rusty @ it & 2, even if I wasn't, having gone 5 years after leaving college without any work in the field will probably screw me over.

"Sides, I didn't leave the restaurant so I could be someone else's worker grunt." She stood up with a fist raised into the air. "I've got to do this on my own, my own venture..."

She sat back down & rubbed her chin. "But how would you do that with chemistry?"

She glanced back @ her list & saw the last item—psychiatrist—and was suddenly reminded o' an old comic she loved.

II.

Dawn stared with glazed eyes o' boredom @ the buildings 'cross the street & passing cars as she laid her head 'long her stretched-out arms over her li'l cardboard-box stand in the middle o' the sidewalk. On the front, written in felt-tip market, said, "Laboratory Science – 500Pts.¹" Every once & a while, when someone walked by, she would raise her head in hopes that they would solicit her services; but they never did.

1 Approximately \$6.33 American.

Then she saw someone stop in front o' her booth—someone she recognized by the red ponytail, glasses, & black shirt saying, "PHAT LOOT."

Hey, it's Edgar's girlfriend... Autumn, I think 'twas...

She had to admit to herself that she felt rather weirded-out near Autumn. Though Autumn offered tremendous help with her restaurant, that cold, stoic look in her eyes always made Dawn wonder if Autumn were capable o' stabbing someone, should she need to.

Had she already on one o' her heists? I'm surprised I'd never asked Edgar.

Perhaps I shouldn't...

Without any introduction, Autumn asked, "So, does this 'laboratory science' include checking the DNA o' a hair sample?" As she said this she held up a plastic bag with a thin black hair inside.

"Yes," Dawn answered. "What do you need it for?"

Autumn glanced 'way & paused, seemingly unsure o' whether she should answer or not.

"Somebody robbed me. I need to find out who & teach whoever 'twas a lesson."

Dawn frowned, but said nothing. 'Stead, she went directly to work, 1st by performing a litany o' complex chemical reactions that the author is not literate 'nough in chemistry to know, & then by comparing the DNA information to a DNA listing online using her laptop. As this went on her customer sat silently to the side with her knees raised, staring vacantly @ the street.

"Not a talkative one, are you?" Dawn asked as she worked.

Her customer only replied with, "No."

Dawn took that a signal to be silent.

When Dawn was finished she said, "This hair belongs to a woman named 'Heloise Solstice,' aged 72."

Her customer nodded. “Thank you.” Then she rose, handed Dawn a 500-Pts-bill, & then started walking ’way.

“Hey, wait...” Dawn called out.

Autumn turned back to Dawn, but said nothing.

“You’re not, uh... You’re not going to seriously hurt this person, are you?” Dawn asked.

Autumn blinked @ Dawn for a few seconds. During those few seconds, Dawn felt as if Autumn’s eyes were power-drilling directly into her nerves.

“Course not,” Autumn said.

Then she turned & left. Dawn exhaled, as if her nerves had been dowsed with water. She still felt apprehensive, however:

I’d expected her to smile creepily as I’d seen her do before, I’d expected her to say in that deep tone o’ hers to butt out or something; but I hadn’t expected her to lie right to my face—which was obviously the quickest way to shut me up. Dawn mused. *Well, I’ll say one thing: she’s efficient, that’s for sure.*

III.

He knew he had to get rid o’ the heathen ’fore she caused the collapse o’ the Heavenly Republic into totalitarianism... But how?

@ 1st he tried going round the city & alerting everyone to the “Heathen in the Green Jacket” & her wickedness, but for some reason none o’ them seemed disturbed by the discovery. Indeed, almost all o’ them acted as if they had never even *heard* o’ her or the Heavenly Republic. Clearly they were all in on her heresy, too.

He turned to *Discussions o’ the Matters Involving Greater Public Participation in Heavenly Affairs*—the founding tome o’ the Heavenly Republic—for answers. Since his memory o’ the text was so faint—why else would he be turning back to it for answers rather than rely

on his own memory?—he opened the book @ a random page, hoping fate, or @ least the Great Random Number Generator, would lead him to riches o' philosophy. He opened the book to pg. 162, ran his finger down with his eyes closed, & then stopped in the middle. He opened his eyes & read the passage, Lucifer 18:9:

But even if we are all fingers of the one big hand, do not the fingers ultimately control what the hand does, even if ultimately in the name of the hand?

“That’s it!” the boy whose name shall be a secret to all readers exclaimed. “We are all fingers to the hand o’ the Republic that have been detached by the tyranny o’ the totalitarian religions! I just need to find some super glue so I can surgically attach us all!”

But when he searched round shops, he discovered to his horror—or, a’least, ire, which was close ’nough—that every packet o’ super glue had been bought by “some strange woman & her skeleton friend.”

That scoundrel! She knew I’d attempt to do what no mere mortal has ever done & deliberately sabotaged me with her undead friends just to sabotage me!

The clerk offered him “pretty good glue,” but he knew that would never work, so he gave up & ’stead sat on some random guy’s stoop with his chin in his hands, staring down @ the sidewalk, distraught.

“Hey, kid, I told you I don’t want none o’ your hippy cult!” he heard someone shout ’hind him. “Do you hear me? Get lost!”

The unnamed evangelical sighed.

But his head bolted up when he heard a voice whisper, “Psst! You need help getting rid o’ the green-jacketed heretic, right?”

“Who said that?” the unnamed evangelical asked.

“Your name is now Adam, by the way.”

“What?” Adam asked.

“I said your name is Adam. Can’t you see your own dialogue

indicator? We're not having any more o' that 'unnamed evangelical' crap."

"Who's speaking?"

Adam turned his head all round him, but saw nobody. He looked 'hind him, into the house. The owner was just walking toward the front.

"Sir, was that you speaking to me?"

"Yeah, I told you to get lost. I just called the police."

"No, I mean were you the one who told me you would help me get rid o' the green-jacketed heretic?"

"I most certainly am not! I want nothing to do with you & your obnoxious cult!" the boy said.

"Your name is now Michael, by the way."

"Who said that?" Michael demanded, turning his head left & right. "My name isn't Michael; it's Borace."

"Start using it, then."

The man... Borace shook his head as if trying to 'scape from a nightmare. Realizing that arguing with an invisible voice was futile, he just turned round & went back inside, closing the door 'hind him so Adam or the voice couldn't look inside & see that his carpet wasn't well vacuumed.

Adam turned back to the mysterious figure... or, a'least, he would have *liked to*, but he still didn't know where the figure was, so he made due with turning back forward. It felt right.

"I still don't know where you are," Adam said.

"That's not important..."

"Are you... Are you a member o' the Heavenly Parliament? Are you the Lord o' Speech?"

He could feel hesitation in the air from where the figure was silent, till it finally responded with "Sure..."

"Anyway," the figure continued, "That's not important. What *is* is

that I can help you stop the green-jacketed heretic once & for all.”

“How?”

“O, we don’t want to reveal everything just yet, do we?”

“Sure.”

“Shut up.”

Their conversation was interrupted when Adam saw movement nearby. He looked up & saw that ’twas a woman in a police uniform walking toward him. Under her cap she had bushy, curly hair & wore a pair o’ opaque black shades over her eyes.

“We received a call ’bout possible disturbances @ this residence, so I made sure to send the highest member o’ the force to show we mean business—me. Tell me, Sir, are you the problem we received our call ’bout?”

Adam sighed before saying, “No, officer. He’s inside. Broke in while I was out here enjoying the sun & locked me out.”

The police officer rubbed her chin, which was what she felt people did when the thought ’bout such claims as these.

“Hmm... You don’t sound like the guy who called me... But then, if you say it, I guess it must be true.”

The officer stepped past Adam & knocked on the door. They could both hear footsteps growing louder on the other side till they stopped & the door opened.

“There you are, officer. This bolt just sat on my porch & started babbling ’bout the ‘Heavenly Republic’ or whatever pseudoreligious cakery he’s baking,” Borace said as he pointed @ Adam.

Now the officer scratched her head in confusion. Confusion truly made her head itch.

“Well, now, that’s odd. This fellow here told me you were the one breaking onto his property.”

“He’s lying,” Borace said, his face reddening. “For god’s sake, Madame, his voice sounds nothing like mine—and I *called* you.”

The officer turned back to Adam, still rubbing her chin.

“Hmm... He has a point.”

“He’s just lying,” Adam said.

The officer turned back to Borace.

“He’s got a point.”

“No, he doesn’t,” Borace said in almost a yell. “Look, don’t you have records or something that can check to see that I am the rightful tenant?”

“We do!” she said as she raised a finger in the air.

Then she dropped it ’gain. “A’least, we did... That blasted thief with the red ponytail broke in & stole our files! When I told her to stop... she didn’t! I couldn’t understand what her problem with law & decency was. She was an animal, I tell ya!”

“Don’t you have files in digital form? Files that should be backed up somewhere?” Borace asked.

“So anyone can just hack into our computers & steal them & use them to stalk one’s ex-spouse or send annoying spam? Do you know what crazies are after our files? Radical leftists; radical right-wingers; radical centrists; arsonists; kidnappers; jaywalkers; terrorists; people who forget to leave tips; people who leave tips, but act snooty ’bout it as if they’re doing you a big favor, even though those tips are necessary for waiters to even make minimum wage; communists; fascists; anarchists; the government...”

“Wait, aren’t *you* the government?” Borace asked. Now he was the one scratching his head in confusion—& Arceus did it feel good.

What’s making confusion so itchy nowadays? The summer heat? I think, sitting here typing this now.

“Yeah, & you see how incompetent we are; you think we want the rest o’ the government to have these files, too, so Mayor Sunday can use them to find women to harass for sex, the sleaze? The stories they tell ’bout our force is true. We’re so underfunded that the only

people we can get are crazies that just want to beat up types o' people they don't like or setup their own li'l dictatorships."

Borace cringed. "Gee, I'm sorry to hear that. Why do you stay on force, then?" he asked.

The officer adjusted her hat—not 'cause 'twas on crooked, which it wasn't, but for dramatic flair. "Pride. My family's been in the force since, well... Since my father... We're just starting the tradition, OK? They've got to start somewhere. Anyway, my father Captain Napoleon's been in charge for almost a decade till a tragic accident in a mine-cart chase led to his early demise; but I, Margaret Napoleon, have risen up to his old rank to keep our family tradition alive, & I promise I will avenge my father gainst that dastardly mine cart!"

Throughout her speech, Captain Napoleon had been twisting her arms & body round in strange poses, which Borace guessed were s'posed to be a dramatic supplement to her life's story. When she stopped, he glanced 'way from her, just remembering his original problem, when he noticed the trespassing punk went BWOL, which is rather similar to "AWOL," but much quieter.

"Hey! The religious nut's gone! He left without getting arrested or anything. What a jerk."

"That's right, Sir," Captain Strong said as she adjusted her hat 'gain. "Rather than do the traditional thing o' beating them over the face with a baton, I prefer to just annoy them till they go 'way. Saves me legal fees."

IV.

Adam walked toward Dawn's booth with a purposeful strut till he saw his reflection in a window he walked past & saw how stupid he looked. Then he started walking like a normal human.

Dawn watched him apprehensively. *He's not going to scare 'way*

any o' my customers, is he?

He stopped in front o' her booth, slapping his palms down on top o' it, & said serenely, "I hear you like, uh..." He looked down @ the sign in front o' the booth. "I hear you like laboratory science. Well, I just wanted to know if you could, uh... Use 1 o' my hairs to find out my DNA... I, uh, need to know if my blood will be compatible with my sister's."

"Uh, I can do that—in fact I did for 'nother customer not that long ago," Dawn said. "But, 1, you can't test your blood type with hair, & 2, shouldn't the doctor giving your sister blood offer to check your blood?"

Adam stared blankly @ her as if she spoke a foreign language. Then he thrust a finger forward to something 'hind her & shouted, "O my god! Is that building melting before my eyes?"

"No," Dawn said without moving.

Adam leaned in closer, his polite smile twisting into a petulant scowl. "You don't know that; you didn't even turn to look."

"I don't need to to know that buildings don't melt," Dawn said. "Sometimes they jump off bridges & drown themselves in lakes; but they don't melt. That's just stupid."

"O."

Adam turned his head over his shoulder & whispered, "She saw through our ruse, Minister. What should I do now?"

"I can hear you, you know," Dawn said.

"O." Adam looked down @ his feet, distraught.

Then he added, "You know, I'm getting kind o' bored o' this religion a li'l bit. I think I'll go home & change old video games so that they have a lot o' cuss words in them."

"What?" the invisible voice yelled.

"Yeah, this was all fun & good, Sir Minister, but I'm truly getting tired." Adam yawned, patting the air exhaled with his hand. "I'm

truly grateful 'bout you giving me that name & all, though. See you later."

Adam waved @ thin air & walked 'way till he disappeared in the distance, freeing up the story's memory for mo' characters later.

"Hmm... I wonder if I should be glad he left so early or disheartened that I lost a potential customer," Dawn mused out loud as she leaned her head on her arm.

* * *

V.

The sun was dipping under the—the sun was dipping under the—the sun was dipping under the—

Sorry, the story's skipping a li'l. My younger brother scratched it, the li'l shit.

Anyway, the sun was dipping under the horizon &, when it felt that the horizon was cool 'nough, swam a few laps back & forth as well. The moon, meanwhile, gradually climbed up in its perch, looking down @ that childish sun with its arms crossed.

By this point Dawn had finally decided to close shop & return home. The streetlamps were beginning to poke open—*Whatever that means...* she thought—only to start blinking out whenever she walked near 1.

The street was empty; utterly devoid o' automobiles, pedestrians, & crushed squirrel corpses. Then a red sedan drove by & the street was no longer empty, which Dawn thought ruined the scenery a bit—especially when it would have ran her over if she hadn't been nice 'nough to jump out o' the way. But then it drove 'way & the streets were empty once mo'.

She never saw that sedan 'gain.

But then 'nother car drove by, swerving left & right as if it weren't

even trying to drive well & she began to get a li'l suspicious.

Surely nobody would try to run me over... Dawn thought. *Well, there was that strange cultist I met earlier, the guy who bought my restaurant, or 1 o' my old customers whose meal I got wrong...*

Dawn decided that such thoughts wouldn't help her, so she dispelled them. She did, however, get her baseball bat out & move 'way from the street & closer to the sidewalk. It didn't offer much solace, however, being so near the dark alleys on the other side; but there was nowhere better to walk.

The guy who designed these cities wasn't very good @ his job, Dawn mused. *It's almost as if he'd never even thought 'bout chainsaw killers hiding in alleys or strange vans.*

Then she heard the sound o' steamy shifting cylinders & a high-pitched whistle. She turned round to the source o' the sound & saw a locomotive chug 'long the road 'hind her, the lights from its headlights seemingly leading it forward like searchers after prey.

Well, whoever this is, he must mean business if he's resorting to breaking the laws o' physics, Dawn thought.

Luckily, the train rolled on past her, & she didn't see it 'gain till the infamous Case o' the Robbed Ruby years later. Nevertheless, the eerie locomotive remained on Dawn's brain for some time after.

I'm not far from home, anyway, so I shouldn't worry too much...

The road rose into a steep mountain, the buildings on the sides rising like spires, reflecting light from the stars & the moon.

'Twas a peaceful climb @ 1st: the streets had been emptied yet 'gain, filling it with a cool silence, only to be broken yet 'gain by the familiar huffing & whistling sound. She looked up & saw where it came from.

The narrator had lied. She did see the train 'gain—and 'twas charging right down the hill on the sidewalk toward her.

She barely had 'nough time to jump out into the alley to her right

'fore the train charged through, grating Dawn's ears with the sickening scrape & screech caused by the train's wheels thumping gainst its false track.

But then the chugging melted into silence 'hind her, & this time she *truly* didn't see the train 'gain for years.

I promise.

But 'stead o' turning back & risking the train turning round & making 1 mo' run for her—for she knew she couldn't trust the narrator now—she continued through the dark maze o' alleys, judging that the risks o' being attacked by an axe murderer here were less likely than whatever dangers still lurked out in the streets.

This was unfortunate, since Dawn certainly didn't *feel* any safer in there. The streets were @ least lit by a well-fed moon; the alleys were pure darkness, so that all Dawn could do was feel her way round the walls & hope it led somewhere that didn't involve spikes, gunshots, rabid dogs, fruit that crushed her into a bloody pile just when she'd thought she'd reached safety, or being smacked in the face by a grumpy apartment dweller opening her door without looking out the door's window 1st.

They say that losing 1 sense sometimes allows one to gain 'nother; Dawn, however, was unhappy 'bout this, for the sense she gained was a deeper imagination for what her surroundings might look like if there were light—& the mo' these ideas sprouted, the gladder she felt 'bout being unable to see.

To add to this unnerving unknown, Dawn could hear a widely-spaced collection o' muffled sounds whose source or meaning she could only guess: Voices? Clacking glassware gainst tables? A baby crying? @ 1 point she heard bass music so loud she could feel it seep out through the floor under her feet, creating what felt like miniature earthquakes.

So she was infinitely relieved when she saw the literal light @ the

end o' the tunnel, emerging once mo' into the fresh blue air.

She paused a second to interpret where she was in the city & found she was actually on the same block as her apartment. All she had to do was walk a few feet & cross 1 street without being run over by 'nother train or having the street suddenly cave in, throwing her into the abyss.

Neither happened, so she made it to her apartment safely.

But when she clambered up the steps to her floor, she noticed that some unearthly form o' reconstruction must have happened while she was gone, for the floors seemed to go up forever, the 1st few floors having no doors to enter, followed by floors with tilted perspectives & uneven shapes, & then followed by floors whose configuration could not even be described with English—or any earthly—words.

“As a scientist, I would normally be intrigued by this apparent breakthrough in the very laws o' physics,” Dawn said with a half-smirk, half-frown; “but I just want to get home. These dumb stairs are going to make me miss the static show—& on this week, when the gray pixels are going to finally outnumber the white pixels.”

Eventually, she devised an idea just contrived 'nough to work: she climbed back down to where her door should be & grabbed for where the knob should be. She tried pulling back on the air that should be her doorknob, but nothing happened.

Dawn held her arms akimbo. “There has to be some way to get in...” she mumbled.

She climbed back down the stairs so she could see if she could try reclimbing them & resetting what was obviously a loading glitch.

“The Programmers should've known not to code the world in JavaScript & PHP,” Dawn muttered to herself.

But as she clambered downward, she saw that the stairs now went underground, into some square dark hole in the pavement.

Shrugging, she continued downward.

Once 'gain she found herself venturing through a void o' pure darkness, relying on her hands to lead her where her eyes couldn't see. When she reached the bottom, where the ground flattened, she could see li'l tinges o' light seeping in through a few corners.

As she stumbled round toward 1 area o' light, she noticed a familiar sweet scent o' sweaty socks, artificial fruit, & warm metal. She squinted & what li'l mo' she could see round her only added to that intimacy. She felt her way over to where she thought the light switch would be, & indeed, found 1 there. When she clicked it on, her guess was confirmed: she'd found an alternate entrance into her room.

She moved over to the window & twisted the blinds open to see the same skyline she saw whenever she looked out that window. She looked up @ the moon for answers & saw it briefly scowl @ her 'fore scrutinizing some ice cream shop 'gain.

She twisted the dial on her li'l old television & turned the lights off 'gain. The screen was the color o' the sky 'bove the port in *Neuromancer*.

She sat back gainst the cushions, covering herself with blankets, as she watched the fizzing gray & black pixel ants scurry round the screen, filling the room with a low glow & a monotone sizzling.

Her mind was so enthralled with the phantasmaorgasmic show that it took a while for her to realize that her pillow was missing. Since 'twas obviously o' inferior concern, it took her even longer to realize a blanket was wrapping itself round her, holding her tightly gainst the couch. How it did this seemingly by its own volition, she couldn't answer; but when you've climbed a series o' physics-defying stairs & watched the moon glare @ you, you start to give up on the emotion o' surprise almost altogether.

Then 'gain, she was a li'l concerned over how to get out o' this

puzzling trap she'd found herself in. For 1, having that wooly blanket hold her down made her feel awfully warm.

"Aww, look: now it's the poor *human* who's in danger, now. *Now* we have a tragedy, don't we?" she heard a voice say, from where she had no idea.

"Who said that?" Dawn asked, turning her head left & right.

"Who, indeed!"

"No, truly," Dawn said.

"Hmph. Well, you can't see our kind due to your inferior eyesight, but despite that we do very well exist."

"OK, then *who are you?*" Dawn asked.

"O, you don't know me? You had no problem slaughtering millions o' my friends & relatives."

Dawn's eyebrows furled & her head turned round faster, even mo' desperate to see who this maniac was.

"What are you talking 'bout?" she asked.

"All those, what you humans call, 'molecules' you devoured, all for your petty sandwich. I was 1 o' the few that 'scaped your vile genocide gainst my people & you can be rest assured, I shall get my vengeance!"

Dawn stared blankly.

"O. Why didn't you say so earlier?"

She scratched her head, itchy from the smothering heat. 'Cept she couldn't reach her head with her hands, as we've recently acknowledged her being locked down by her possessed blanket, so she didn't truly do this, actually. The narrator lied once 'gain, & he is deeply sorry for whatever inconveniences it may have caused.

"So, uh... How do you plan to get your 'vengeance,' then?"

"By covering you with blanket over blanket I will slowly raise your temperature to unbearable levels till you slowly die o' heatstroke."

“O.” Dawn looked down & saw ‘nother blanket wrapping itself round her. She had to admit that she was beginning to feel rather uncomfortable.

“So, are you moving the blankets round?”

“I & my colleagues are, yes,” the bitter molecule said. “Now shut up & sweat to death already. I have other things to do tonight.”

“Truly? What? What is it that molecules do in their free time? Do you guys work? Uh, I apologize if these questions are offensive. I’m sorry, I don’t know much ‘bout molecule people.”

Dawn struggled under her thick cage o’ blankets—which was now adding a 3rd layer—beginning to find the itchy heat to, indeed, be unbearable. Nevertheless, that was no reason to be rude & end the discussion prematurely.

“If you think you can trick me by suddenly developing empathy, save your words. We are far less naïve than you humans take us for.”

Dawn shook her head. “No, that’s not what I’m trying to do. I’m just curious. To be honest, I’ve never met a cognizant molecule before. I’ve always thought you were all inanimate.”

“Yeah, that’s an excellent ‘scuse for you humans to ignore us, isn’t it?”

“Have you thought ‘bout having marches or trying anything else to get public recognition?” Dawn asked. “Cause I bet these would be much better methods to getting your rights acknowledged than stifling random people to death with lots o’ blankets.”

“Hmm... No.” The bitter molecule shook its head, though Dawn couldn’t see this. Also, molecules don’t have heads, so this was only on an abstract level, technically.

The molecule continued, “Nice try, but it’s too late. It is time for you humans to take responsibility for your war crimes.”

Dawn looked down, where she saw a fifth—or was it sixth? She

was so distracted by their intriguing conversation—layer being added to her blanket cage. Though the burning, suffocating heat still held a prominent place in her mind, what she truly wondered was where all these blankets originated—she certainly never bought this many.

Hmm... I wonder if I could pull my phone out o' my pocket & call the police. Perhaps they would answer just from a call, even if I say nothing—make them think someone has me in a desperate position. Then they would have to break in when nobody answers & will see with their own eyes what's happening, Dawn mused. I do feel bad 'bout ruining this poor li'l guy's perfect plan; but I'll go coconuts if I don't get out o' here soon.

It seemed to be such a simple solution; she marveled @ the molecule's inability to consider it. Then 'gain, she figured molecules were probably almost as ignorant o' humans as humans were o' molecules.

Just look @ what trouble such simple misunderstandings can cause, Dawn thought as she pulled out her phone & began dialing, all hidden under the thick wall o' blankets.

"You getting close to death yet?" the molecule asked in a cross tone.

"I'm getting a li'l thirsty, if that's anything," Dawn said.

"Hmph. Not good 'nough. How long will it take?"

"It shouldn't take much longer," Dawn lied. "You just have to be patient."

"If you're so close to death why aren't you screaming in agony?"

"That would be awfully rude."

"Rude? To whom?"

"To my neighbors. It's late now. Many o' them are probably trying to sleep, probably have to get up early to go to work. I wouldn't want to wake them," Dawn said.

“Hmph. I guess that makes sense...” Dawn could tell by his tone that he was still unsatisfied by the explanation, however.

Poor guy, Dawn thought. I can tell he's nervous. This is probably his 1st human he's getting vengeance gainst. I'm sure he'll become mo' confident in himself as he gets mo' experience.

The room was hereafter filled with an awkward silence, their amicable conversation tapering off. Dawn could tell by her new molecular acquaintance's silence that he didn't want to talk anymore; so she 'stead turned her head back to the television & resumed watching the static show.

O, good; I didn't miss the best part! she thought as she leaned in as much as the blankets would allow, her widened eyes staring straight @ the bright screen.

But her show was interrupted by knocking @ the door.

“Who's that?” the molecule asked in a demanding tone. “I thought you said you humans usually sleep @ night? Why is someone knocking on your door? You don't have friends who should come over @ this time.”

“I said *some* humans have to sleep @ this time, needing to go to work early in the morning,” Dawn corrected. “Not *all o' them* do. After all, I'm still awake, aren't I? & I'll have you know I do have friends & they do stop by @ stupid hours just to annoy me. It's probably just Scratch with mo' o' his conspiracy theories & criticism o' sound theories 'bout conspiracies.”

The knocking continued.

“You're lying,” the molecule said.

Dawn shook her head. “Cross my lungs & hope to become comatose.”

They heard ever mo' knocking, & then a loud voice rang in, “This is the police! Open this door @ once or we'll break it down!”

“The police! How did they know what I'm doing?” the molecule

shouted.

“That’s what happens when you have cameras in everyone’s home,” Dawn lied.

They heard a loud bang that caused the apartment to shake as if attacked by an earthquake. After a few mo’ violent shakes, Dawn heard a crack ’hind her & heard the loud voice from before bellow, “OK, where is the violent criminal?” Dawn twisted her head back as far as she could & saw a woman in a police uniform with shades. Her name tag said, “Captain Margaret Napoleon.”

“Captain, he’s trying to slowly kill me by heatstroke by covering me with this fuzzy blankets!” Dawn exclaimed. “You can’t see him because he’s a molecule, but he’s there all right!”

“She’s lying!” the molecule shouted back.

Captain Napoleon turned her head round herself. “Who said that?”

“I told you: that’s the murderous molecule!” Dawn shouted.

“Murderous?” the molecule yelled. “I’ll tell you what murderous is! Murderous is the genocide you committed gainst my people!”

Napoleon turned to Dawn & said, “Well, that wasn’t very nice o’ you. Did you apologize?”

Dawn looked down, shamefaced. “No... I’m sorry, Sir Molecule.”

“Well, that’s not... I mean...” The molecule paused for a second before replying, “You truly mean it?”

Dawn nodded. “I honestly didn’t know you guys were living in my sandwich. If I did I would have been careful to eat round you guys.”

The molecule responded, “Well... Gee, I’ve never had a human apologize before. You know, humans don’t think a lot ’bout us living molecules. They think we’re all dead & inanimate, so they can just step over all o’ us.”

Though neither Dawn nor Captain Napoleon could see it, the molecule had his face low, his face twisting in its desperate struggle

not to sob.

"Now I want you 2 to hug & make up," Captain Napoleon said with her hands on her hips.

The molecule sobbed, "O, human, I'm sorry! Here, let me take those blankets off!"

Dawn felt the blankets loosen round her, dropping 1 by 1 down to the floor till she was uncovered, feeling with relief the cool night wind still rushing in through her open front door.

Dawn opened her arms. "It's OK. I'm truly the one who should apologize. Come here."

She could feel the tiny speak touch her chest & she wrapped her arms round him, cuddling him like a microscopic Chihuahua. She could feel the tiny shaking o' his sobs in his arms, which she responded to with a few gentle pats.

"It's OK," she cooed. "It's a tough world out there, isn't it?"

"Nobody... nobody understands what it's like," the molecule sobbed.

Captain Napoleon watched this scene with a tilted head, swelling with pride @ 'nother good job done.

But then she was interrupted by a buzzing in her pocket. She took her phone out & listened to it for a second before hanging up with a grunt.

"Ha. This punk thinks he can trick me with this scam. 'Nutcase has us locked in basement; forces us to watch stupid toy show. Multicolored house deep in mustard mountains.' If I had a dime for every time someone tried to use that old scam on me, why, I'd have twenty cents."

"You know how kids are," Dawn said.

"Yeah," Napoleon said as she shook her head.

She looked up from her phone & said, "Well, it looks like your problems are solved, so I'll be going now."

“Thanks,” Dawn said with a wave.

She turned back to the molecule still in her arms, much calmer than before.

“You want to watch the static show with me?” she asked.

“I... I would like that, yes,” the molecule said in a low voice.

However, they were interrupted once 'gain when they heard someone step in through the front door. Dawn turned & saw that 'twas the religious kid from before.

“OK, I'm ready to play 'gain, Sir Minister,” Adam said.

“Kid, isn't it a li'l late to be breaking into my house? It has to be @ least eleven,” Dawn said.

The molecule turned to Adam & said, “Kid, I lied 'bout being a minister, or whatever. I was just trying to use you to get back @ this human here. But we're done with that now, so you needn't worry anymore.”

Dawn nodded, as if to confirm this.

Adam's eyes twisted in confusion. “Wait... So, you mean you're not from the Heavenly Parliament?”

“Nope. Sorry, kid,” the molecule said. “I'm just a living molecule, too small for your human eyes to see.”

“O,” Adam said, looking glumly down @ the carpet. “Well, I guess that makes a lot mo' sense. Gee, sorry 'bout interrupting your alone time.”

“It's no problem, we were just going to watch the static show,” Dawn said. “You want to join us.”

Adam looked up @ them, his face distracted.

“No. Mom says I can't watch that show. It's too violent, what with all those gray pixels attacking the black pixels.”

“O, that's too bad,” Dawn said. “Well, I understand. Anyway, have a good night.”

Adam nodded. “You too. May the Heavenly Republic bless you

with a bill favorable to your special interests. O, & thank you molecule for giving me a name. My mom kept telling me she was going to give me 1, but she's always been busy, with work & all..."

Dawn nodded. "Yeah, being a mother is hard work."

Adam nodded, too. "Yeah... Well, see ya."

The moon glared down @ them all as Adam left through Dawn's now-permanently open door with a wave. The moon had been glaring @ them all for a while now. How was he s'posed to look down on his favorite shops as he's s'posed to do in all o' those insipid children's books when these idiots persisted in bringing their maternally-incestuous ruckus?

#BOSK-BB160D-UNDERGROUND

SECRET UNDER THE CITY AND THE CLOUDS AND THE STARS AND THAT AIRPLANE THAT KEEPS MAKING NOISE NEAR MY HOUSE I HATE IT

J. J. W. Mezun | 2014 August 1



I.

Twas just after noon when Autumn walked through the shadows o' the tight alleys 'tween the copse o' buildings in Eastern Boskeopolis. She had someone to meet, & it needed to be in a concealed space o' secrecy: they both agreed that the alleycaves were the best choice.

Even in the sunny midsummer, the “caves” lived up to their name in regard to their flashing darkness, contrasted against the incubating sun. While this offered shade from the heat, it offered no cure for the way the steamy air brought out the rancid odor o' the trash strewn 'long the ground—trash which probably told as much 'bout contemporary culture as ancient tombs did for their time period—& melted it till it stuck to whatever unlucky shoe happened to step in it, which was as impossible to avoid as stepping in bog water in the middle o' the Spinach Swamps.

Her guest was already there, sitting cross-legged & leaning her back against a brick wall. She looked as if she were praying, & considering what Autumn knew 'bout her pretend-religious beliefs, Autumn wouldn't be surprised if that were exactly what she was doing.

Autumn had never seen her real face under her orange bird mask—or the other disguises she wore.

Probably to prevent identification. Can't blame her.

As Autumn entered, Heloise said without tilting her head upward, “You come earlier than expected, Madame Springer.”

“I don't like to waste time,” Autumn said. She remained standing in the middle o' the open concrete, looking down @ Heloise with

slumped shoulders & hands in pockets. A thin rectangle o' light beamed down on them, which made their cave look like a stage.

"O, but it's inevitable for everyone," Heloise said. "For any time you save now will only be squandered in the future."

Autumn tilted her body's weight from 1 leg to the other. "You said you had info on a good place to find treasure."

"I do. Have you heard o' 'Boskeopolis Underground'?"

"I have now."

"Legend tells o' a secret residential cave deep in the labyrinth o' sewers & storm drains under the city. It says that years ago a large swathe o' the city was destroyed in a fire, & 'stead o' rebuilding from the rubble, the government built over it, leaving the literal caves o' steel 'neath. Though @ 1st the government allowed people to reside there, they later condemned it due to the danger o' cave-ins, toxic chemicals, & sexy drug parties. 'Twas here that the late Fitzgerald J. Chamsby, in his tenacious attempt to protect his wealth from taxation, hid a hefty 'mount o' money in the form o' gold & jewelry—for he was suspicious o' Boskeopoleon currency."

"Yes, his son shares his goldbuggery," Autumn said.

"It's folly to put much faith in any materials, fear," Heloise said.

A message 'bout me as much as him, I s'pose, Autumn mused.

"If it improves your mood, most o' this money'll likely go to some poor kids, anyway," Autumn mumbled.

"If you find it."

"You've no map or mo' info on where specifically this treasure bunker may be," Autumn said not as a question, but a guess.

"I don't, 'fraid," Heloise said; "but then, what fun comes from learning everything from someone else?"

"I s'pose you have a point," Autumn said. "Well, anyway, thanks. I s'ppose you want a portion."

"I want only a certain large rainbow opal for my art projects," Heloise answered. "It'll be impossible to miss."

“Can do,” Autumn said. “S’all?”

Heloise nodded.

“Well, thanks for the help.”

& with that, Autumn left, ready to begin what she hoped would be a fruitful venture.

II.

Autumn returned home to find Edgar exactly where she’d left him: in the kitchen, baking brownies, his chef’s hat flopping over the side o’ his skull, which Autumn had to admit she quite adored.

“Edgar, are you busy?”

“Nope. Just finishing up these brownies. Want to try 1?” he said as he walked toward her with a tray o’ them.

“Mmm, thanks,” she said ’fore taking 1 & giving Edgar a kiss.

“I have intel on where we can find a stash o’ treasure,” she continued as she ate.

“Where?” Edgar asked as he walked the tray to the kitchen.

“Somewhere deep under the city. I don’t have much detail other than that we should start with the sewers.”

“Will we need anything in the way o’ preparation?” Edgar asked. “Should I pack us any food & water to take ’long?”

“That’d be wise,” Autumn said. “I can handle the rest. You ready to go this afternoon?”

“I *am* a busy person...”

Autumn nodded. “Then we’ll go as soon as we’re done packing.”

III.

They searched the city for an entrance to the sewers. Edgar reminded Autumn o’ their former home, only for her to inform him that she’d already considered it.

“We can’t go from there; it’s abandoned, remember? It’ll almost certainly lead to a dead end. There must be a better entrance somewhere nearby.”

So they wandered mo’, eyes glued to the streets & sidewalks for man covers, manholes, or storm drains poking up from a curb. While this journey began in the open, their legs absentmindedly led them into a short alley ’tween 2 Victorian-looking buildings. They only stopped when Autumn felt herself bump into something large & heavy in front o’ her, making Edgar right ’hind her bump into her, & causing the reporter stealthily stalking them to bump into Edgar.

Autumn looked up & saw a fat, rusty pipe protruding from the ground, slightly bent. ’Twas so tall, she had to grapple the top edge & pull herself up a foot off the ground in order to peek inside. While she hung on by an arm, she unpocketed her flashlight & aimed it inside to reveal a ladder made o’ the same rusty metal leading down to a slowly sloshing river. Everything was painted in the same dingy grays, ’cept the slight glow o’ the flashlight reflecting off the water.

“Bee, I wonder what this pipe’s doing letting its fly hang out in such an extra esoteric alley? You guys don’t think people actually use this for dumping their dumps, do ya?”

“Edgar, when did your voice rise in pitch & when did you start speaking in stupid diction?” Autumn asked without turning round.

“That, uh... That wasn’t me,” Edgar said as he turned alternately ’tween Autumn & the journalist. “It’s, uh... Would you mind if I asked who you were, Sir?”

The journalist tipped his hat, which impressed Edgar, for the journalist wasn’t wearing 1.

“I hope you don’t mind, Madame, but I just happened to overhear the conversation ’tween you & the masked woman.”

“I do mind,” Autumn said, turning her head to look @ the journalist. “Get lost.”

The journalist continued, “You see, Madame, I heard you say

something 'bout exploring Boskeopolis Underground. I had heard it in legends 'fore; but never had I captured it with my own optical nerves. Do you think it truly exists?"

"Aren't there government records that can prove that?" Autumn said. "What kind o' journalist are you?"

As if by cue, the journalist spun round in place, then halted with his body leaning 1 way & an arm held out the other, as if he were trying to shoot down a plane with a literal hand gun. But 'stead o' shooting finger bullets, he adjusted his li'l red bowtie & said, "I am Thursday O'Beefe, globe-famous, audacious reporter!"

O'Beefe stopped, awaiting the wonderfully tragic heart attacks that'd afflict the 2 from the immense shock his Holy Hand Grenade o' knowledge must've given them. He received none—not even a bout o' sudden high blood pressure causing them visual discomfort! 'Stead, the scene was pumped full o' a stale silence, in which all O'Beefe could hear was the hot wind blow stray leaves against the ground. He turned 'tween the 2 & saw only blank blinking stares.

"I've never heard o' you in my life," Autumn said.

"You mean you've never heard o' a li'l newspaper called *The Boskeopoleon Daily*?" O'Beefe said with a penisy grin.

"No."

"O." O'Beefe's upright stature melted into a slouch under the weight o' his disappointment.

He machinegunned through the bag slung over his arm till he pulled out a stack o' gray papers wrapped round each other. As he held it out to Autumn, she skimmed over the cover, 'fore finally snatching it & flipping through it.

"This is a trash tabloid," Autumn said. "For sun's sake, don't you have any story that isn't accusing some famous person o' being a communist?"

"We tell the stories the mainstream media's 'fraid to tell," O'Beefe said with a wink, aiming his hands like pistols & flinging them up &

down as if shooting down tiny planes.

“Fear o’ embarrassment?” Autumn asked, still staring @ the paper.

“& ink stains. Always spill it on my suit. Those are the dangers o’ roughing it through the jungle o’ reporting.”

“Huh,” Autumn said as she handed him back the paper. “Well, now that that’s settled, your presence is no longer useful—if it ever was.”

O’Beefe shook his head. “Uh, uh. I’m not leaving with such an amazing scoop o’ journalistic butternut swirl right before me. I’m following right ’hind you guys.”

He leaned closer to Edgar, causing Edgar to lean back a centimeter with a crumpled frown, put an arm round Edgar’s shoulder, & said in a slow, crunchy whisper, “Right ’hind you.”

“I’d thank you to cease molesting my partner,” Autumn said.

O’Beefe stepped back ’gain. Then, as if performing a magic trick, he whipped out a pad & pen from nowhere.

As he peered down @ it with his pen ready, he asked, “Now, are either o’ you communists?”

Autumn turned back to the pipe. “Come on, Edgar: we’ve wasted ’nough time.”

As she began climbing down, Edgar followed ’hind with his head slunk low.

O’Beefe started scribbling in his notepad.

“OK, I’ll just put you 2 down as democratic socialists.”

Much to her pleasure, Autumn had already sunk low ’nough that the reporter’s voice had become muffled, tinny, & hollow. She looked up to ensure Edgar was following her, & was confirmed, only to see O’Beefe climbing down ’bove him.

“Damn it. I told you to get lost, kid.”

“You need’nt worry ’bout my safety, Madame; I’ve been venturing into these kinds o’ dangerous reporting environs for hours,” O’Beefe

said as he slowly took the ladder step by step.

Autumn felt her feet splash into water & then felt solid ground a few centimeters below. A moment later, she heard Edgar hit the water 'hind her. She extracted her flashlight 'gain & swooped it round, seeing brick walls stained with moss. Seeing that these walls covered all other sides, she started walking rightward. Edgar—unable to see Autumn, but able to see the beam o' her flashlight partly blocked by her silhouette—skipped after her, making li'l splashes @ every step.

“Don't worry 'bout me, guys; I'm almost @ the bottom, I think,” O'Beefe said as he centimetered his way down the ladder, his voice reaching Autumn & Edgar as echoes bouncing round the walls.

Edgar, who had caught up to Autumn by then, turned to Autumn. She shook her head & whispered, “Let's hope we'll lose him.”

“Do you think he might be trying to get the treasure for himself—that his claim o' being a journalist is all fake?” Edgar whispered.

“I'm not sure,” Autumn whispered. “I just didn't want that obnoxious douchebag dragging us back with his obnoxious douchebaggery.”

As they trudged forward, Autumn repeatedly waved her flashlight left & right to check for split paths. The same brick walls stretched onward, arching together @ the ceiling. They only varied in moss locations, as well as 1 area that was graffitied with the names o' famous artists in blue, purple, orange, & red.

They were surprised to find that the odor inside barely registered, smelling mo' moldy than scatological. Since the water appeared grayish, Autumn assumed the water they were currently splashing through was mostly excrement-clear—probably street runoff.

Meters later, they reached a wall with a circular hole in the middle, narrowing the path into a dark tunnel. Autumn could see by the way its lit exit on the other side dipped that this tunnel dropped @ a gradual slope.

Only a meter inside, they heard splashing steps 'hind them. Edgar heard a familiar puff o' air: an annoyed exhale escaping Autumn's nose.

They heard a familiar voice say, "Hey, guys; sorry 'bout the delay. Those ladders sure are tricky, aren't they?"

Autumn released 'nother puff o' petulance. This pushed Edgar into the most traumatic o' conundrums: would it be ruder to dispose o' Autumn's desire to ignore the young journalist as dropping a kid's crayon coloring in a soggy puddle or to ignore the young journalist, providing the 1st step toward his long journey o' gradually decreasing confidence, possibly ending in an addiction to alcohol, wrist-cutting, or thumb-sucking?

"So, I knew a guy once," O'Beefe said.

A hefty silence.

"I also knew a mailbox, but he was rude. Not only did he never reply to my letters, he never even *opened* mine. He just savored them in his mouth like pelicans do."

All anyone could hear was the splash-splashing o' their footsteps, the drip-dripping o' liquid from thin pores in the ceiling, the creak-creaking o' the pipe floor under them, & the exhale-exhaling o' Autumn's nostrils.

"That's all right, I understand now," O'Beefe said with a wave o' his hand. "The toxic fumes must've constricted your language cords. I understand. That's OK: the good news is I can speak for all 3 o' us." He raised his voice into a falsetto. "'Gasp! That's important to know, Sir O'Beefe, Sir.'"

Edgar turned to Autumn to see her cold eyes & flat mouth as solid as diamond. He knew she packed her immense stores o' ire not in gunpowder, but in cement blocks.

They finally left the tunnel to be drenched in dingy yellow light from the light bars hanging from the ceiling. Edgar watched 1 loosely tip back & forth, expecting it to fall & bonk them on their heads. Here

the walls were no longer comprised o' bricks, but o' cobalt metal, splotched with rusted browns.

O'Beefe leaned in extra close to them—so close that they could smell his raddishy heavy breath & feel his saliva bacteria glide into their mouths & Autumn's nostrils.

"So, what is your relationship, exactly?" he asked.

The silence ate a large chocolate cheese cake, causing its heft to grow even mo'.

"Are you 2 seeing each other?"

Edgar couldn't stop the confused expression from forming on his face.

'Course we can see each other; we're right next to each other, under a room-filled light.

"Is this just a casual relationship, or does it go much deeper, if you know what I—Ow!"

Edgar jumped back @ the sight o' the loose lamp fixture falling on O'Beefe's head. Certainly, such a heavy hit would kill numerous brain cells—all o' which would be forgotten, without any proper burial or funeral or even names on a wall.

O'Beefe stared up @ the broken cords hanging from the ceiling while he rubbed the bump on his head. "I truly wish these rude lamps would wait till people aren't under them 'fore they go sewer diving."

As they continued, Autumn noticed a hole emerge to the right; as they neared, she saw a ladder poke out. She figured 'twas likelier that the way down led to the secret stash than farther down the stream, which she knew 'ventually led to the rivers, so she turned.

"Ah, I see we're taking a detour now. Sufficiently important," O'Beefe said.

She bent next to the hole & pointed her flashlight in. @ the bottom was dry concrete floor. No light seeped out; if there were light fixtures down there, they must've been meters in. Since she still

preferred this path to the straight, she grabbed the sides o' the ladder & descended, followed by Edgar & O'Beefe, the latter o' whom babbled incoherencies all the way down.

When Autumn waved her flashlight round the lower floor, she found that the brick walls returned, though they were somehow ever dirtier than the last set, to the extent that you could barely see any red-brown under all o' the dust, sewage, & spiderwebs. Plussur, she could feel a large fan blow from 'hind the bottom o' the ladder. Most likely this was meant to deal with the fumes swarming the room, which blocked out the few light fixtures so as to make the room a dim gray, explaining the lack o' light seeping out.

Also different from the previous rooms, rather than being empty, this floor was cluttered with trash: TVs with cracked screens, cannibalized fridges, soggy cardboard boxes covered in rat bites, & hunks o' plastic & metal that Autumn couldn't even interpret. She rued such a waste o' perfectly good material that could be sold for scrap metal; but 'cause she anticipated greater wealth, she decided not to waste her limited pocket space nabbing any o' it.

Trailing 'long the ground was a puddle o' brown liquid that thinned as it stretched toward them so that 'twas shaped like a needle near their feet. Its scent was notably sourer. All this & the putrid fog indicated to Autumn that she had entered the sewage section.

Since their path was covered with crap, they begun by climbing the TVs & vacuum tubes. Farther in, the heaps o' debris reached such heights that Autumn had to shove it all 'way, breaking the flimsier pieces apart when they wouldn't budge as wholes.

Edgar stopped when he saw that Autumn wasn't in front o' him anymore, the light stationary. He turned round to see Autumn piling monitors & radios to cover the hole they'd just squeezed through. When finished, she turned forward 'gain, picked up her flashlight, & scampered 'way. Edgar scratched his chin for seconds 'fore

following.

“What was that for?” Edgar whispered. “Were you trying to protect us from the grumpy green ghouls living in trash cans, threatening to assault our positive feelings?”

“If by that you mean ‘that obnoxious journalist,’ yes.”

Edgar glanced back with jaw half-open. He’d forgotten that the reporter was with them no mo’. He just noticed now that his steady stream o’ tongue sludge had become smothered in the distance.

Autumn led them through mo’ mounds o’ trash, quickening her pace so as to add space ’tween them & their pest. As she & Edgar worked, she noticed a bright dot zip past her eye & heard a quiet sizzle. She turned & saw a drop o’ yellow liquid drip from the ceiling & land on a pile o’ scrap. The spot it landed on blackened & dented, releasing smoke.

“Careful round the falling acid, Edgar,” Autumn said.

Edgar gazed round till he found the dripping & then looked up @ the ceiling to see its source. Oddly ’nough, there didn’t seem to be any source, other than the barren concrete ceiling itself: a drop would just emerge from some invisible pore.

“Where d’you think this acid comes from?” Edgar asked.

“You know,” Autumn said as she stopped in the midst o’ moving a toaster, “I don’t know much ’bout sewers, but I don’t think this area is much like one @ all—and I certainly don’t think sewers usually have acid fall from the ceiling. & what ’bout these fumes? I mean, I’m wearing glasses, so they’re just fogging them up—I’m not sure how their affecting your eyeholes—but even without eye pain, shouldn’t this harm our health? You’d think we’d be hacking as if a million cigarette-smoke clouds were being blown in our faces.

“& why all this junk here?” She looked down @ the toaster still in her hand. “Since when were sewers repositories for a bunch o’ broken appliances & apparatuses that appear eerily similar?”

“What do you think’s the reason for these oddities?” Edgar asked.

Autumn paused. "I have a very fitting guess, but I loath to accept its reality. We already have 1 pest to deal with."

"Where's the pest?"

Autumn & Edgar turned round to see O'Beefe standing 'hind them, his business suit now much mo' ruffled & covered in sewage. His body sagged & his chest breathed deeply, but his visage appeared as cheery as ever.

"If you're going to burden us with your existence so much, you might as well help us with the work. Go over there & help us move this junk out o' the way." She pointed over to the spot under the acid drips.

O'Beefe frowned. "Zee, I don't know if I should tamper with my research. This is s'posed to be your venture, not mine. I'm just an objective witness."

"Whatever," Autumn muttered as she returned to her work.

So O'Beefe stood back & watched as Autumn & Edgar hefted detritus back & forth with his hands clasped 'hind him, his head tilting left & then right @ the magnificent work o' art performing 'fore his eyes. Then he got bored with the whole thing & started searching in other directions for any other form o' visual stimulus, when he saw the yellow drops falling from the ceiling.

"Ooo, I wonder what this cool-looking liquid is," he said as he moved over to it & held his hand out under it.

He stared up @ the ceiling & watched the newest drop as it grew from the ceiling & plopped, following it all 'long its trail toward his han—

"Ow!" he shouted as he pulled his hand back, curling his other hand round it & holding it closely to the top o' his chest as a wounded moth with low self-esteem.

"O yeah, watch out for those acid drops, I s'pose," Autumn said without looking back, her voice 'bout as far 'way from chalance as possible.

Edgar, however, handed him a guilty glance.

"You, uh... you OK? I think Autumn might have some 4th Aid supplies on her."

O'Beefe, whose expression now looked frightened, only squeezed his hand closer to himself & said, "No. That's OK."

"Uh, are you sure? That stuff can burn metal. It, uh, can't be good for your hand."

O'Beefe shook his head. "No, I, uh... I have mutant regenerating powers. See." He released his hand & showed it palm-out. There didn't appear to be any form o' skin ruin whatsoever, as if it weren't burned @ all.

"Well, uh... I guess the laws o' physics decided they didn't want to work this time," Edgar said as he scratched his ear. "They do that sometimes, I've noticed."

O'Beefe nodded. "Satisfactorily significant."

"I opened the way. Come," Autumn said as she put a leg into the hole she made.

"O yeah: & watch for the rats. 1 o' the bastards bit my ankle," she added.

"Um... Autumn?"

"What?" Autumn asked, turning her head back @ Edgar, only to see to his side O'Beefe on the ground, being attacked by rats, skittering all over his body with blood-clotting squeals.

"Don't... don't worry 'bout me, folks. This is all part o' the experiment," he said.

Autumn shrugged. She looked @ Edgar & said, "If he says so himself. Come."

After that she fully dived in, squeezing through almost a meter o' rubbish, crawling up through a thin hole in the pile @ the front. "Be careful 'bout the roof o' rubbish round here," she said in a voice grunting from the pressure o' her movement through the gap.

When she finally 'scaped out the other side, she exhaled heavily,

ignoring the reek round her, but quickly regained her composure. However, now she saw an even greater obstacle in her way: the wall in front o' her was covered entirely in the same boxy broken equipment. A'least, this would've been a problem if she hadn't turned her head round & saw a doorway on the right wall. Her eyes moved upward to the neon sign hanging 'bove the door frame—its smooth, bright lights a jarring contrast to the murk o' the rest o' the sewers.

It said, "Welcome to Chamsby's Gulch."

IV.

When Autumn stepped through the doorway, she saw that the term "Boskeopolis Underground" was no misnomer: before her stretched a concrete street covered in dust bordered by a row o' buildings on each side, their upper portions cut off by the ceiling as if they were hares popping their heads up holes.

Sitting 'long the curbs were dozens o' people in eclectic clothing indulging in various activities: reading, drinking, writing, potato peeling, talking, cellphoning, tossing cards in a fez, lapping, blowing bubbles, & mo'. The bubble-blowing was done by a short but tubby toad with dark teal skin in thick wrinkles; the bleary gaze & dilation in its yellow eyes hinted that it may have taken too many tanuki leaves 'fore blowing said bubbles.

Autumn glanced @ them warily, wondering if perhaps she was too late & someone else had already found the treasure.

But as she walked by, she heard a familiar voice call out her name. She turned to its source & saw Dawn in 1 spot o' the curb, waving in her direction.

"What are you doing here?" Autumn mumbled as she walked over to her.

"We heard 'bout some secret town underground 'bout a week ago

& decided to check it out,” Dawn said.

Autumn & Edgar suddenly felt something bump them from their right & left, respectively, & then saw O’Beefe pop his head out ’tween them.

“So, how long have you 2 known each other?” O’Beefe asked as he pushed a microphone in front o’ Dawn’s face, & then Autumn’s, & then Dawn’s, & then Autumn’s ’gain.

“Where did you even get that?” Autumn asked as she shoved it ’way from her.

“I found it in the pile o’ junk while I was trying to take my mind off the rat bites.”

“Who’s that?” Dawn asked.

“Don’t know, don’t care,” Autumn answered.

As if by cue, the journalist spun round in place, bumping Autumn & Edgar over. He then stopped, his body leaning 1 way with his arm on the other side pointing up the other way.

“I am Thursday O’Beefe, earth-eminent undaunted reporter!”

Someone near the back in opaque black shades frowned at him & said, “Hey, aren’t you the 1 who manufactured a bunch of exaggerated stories ’bout what we do down here? I’ll have you know, we *don’t* have sloppy, drug-crazed sex parties involving moose-decapitation or listening to Thankful Deceased albums; our sex parties are, in fact, very tasteful. Last week we had one based entirely off the story of Hamlet.”

“I’m sorry you misinterpreted the story that way, Madame,” O’Beefe said with a short bow. “I can tell you right now, I have no opinions ’bout your li’l hovel myself—I have no opinions ’bout anything, actually. I just... I just report it and let the people think what they want.”

The woman raised a newspaper and said, “I don’t care if you have opinions ’bout it or not. The point is that you straight made stuff up.”

O’Beefe shrugged. “Hey, we all see what we see, I guess.”

The woman's eyebrows arched. "So, what, did reality just show itself differently to you than us? In places where we see gas stations do you see giant pink elephants?"

Dawn turned back to Autumn & asked, "So, are you here for the legendary treasure?"

Autumn arched her eyebrows, her eyes flying in in every direction.

"How did you know 'bout that?" she said in a low voice.

"The same reason I know 'bout this place," Dawn answered. "As for these people here, I wouldn't worry, since they seem to be distracted by other activities; but I do know you have competition from a'least 1 guy."

"Who?"

"It's the Chamsby son we met @ that mansion, Lance," Dawn said.

"O, great..." the rings that appeared under Autumn's eyes indicated that she, in fact, did not consider this fact to be great.

"Why is it taking you idiots so long to find it?"

Autumn turned to the source o' that voice & felt her facial features sag farther when she saw Lance Chamsby walking down the street toward them holding a cellphone to his ear.

"I would like to leave this cesspool as quickly as possible," he continued. "My beautiful free utopia has been tyrannized by these raving communists."

Someone from the crowd laughed & said, "Remember, Chamsby: slavery is freedom."

Lance's eyes twisted into a deeper ire. He turned 'way from the phone & shouted back, "Only the most totalitarian o' mindsets would make the mistake o' thinking A is corncob!"

The other guy just shook his head, laughing.

Lance returned to his phone, only to stop when he saw Autumn.

He said into the phone with a gloved hand rubbing his forehead, "Hugo Chávez. That looter's here already. Get to it."

He pocketed the phone & walked up to Autumn, causing her frown to dig deeper.

"& what do you think you're doing here, looter?" Lance said with his chest puffed up & his hands on his sides.

'Fore Autumn could devise a reply, O'Beefe shoved a microphone in Lance's face & asked, "How long have you known Madame... uh..." He turned to Autumn. "What's your name 'gain, Madame?"

"Piss off."

O'Beefe scribbled into his notepad & repeated in a low, slow voice, "Piss... off..." Then he added as he put it all 'way, "Got it."

"I'll have you know that this looter has been harassing me for years," Lance said with an indignant index finger raised.

O'Beefe nodded & then shoved his mike into Autumn's face. "Do you have any comments on Sir Chamsby's comments, Madame Off?"

"He has it backward, but whatever," Autumn said as she shoved the mike 'way.

Then she turned & examined the microphone closer.

"Why do you even have a microphone that isn't connected to anything?" she asked.

"It adds flair to the whole thing," O'Beefe said.

"Anyway, I don't have time to deal with all o' your neuroses," Autumn said as she pushed past them, Edgar squeezing in 'hind her. "I have business to attend to."

"Ha! Never has such a beautiful word been used to describe something so far 'way from its true nature!" Lance said.

When he saw Autumn moving forward without any response, Lance ran after her & continued:

"I'll have you know that treasure is the rightful property o' my father's, & thus is now rightfully mine."

"The way I see it, the treasure's held by no one currently, & is thus free for grabs," Autumn replied without turning her head. "Unless you want to run 'way to the socialist government to stop me."

Lance gritted his teeth so hard that his face turned red & steam rose from his ears, which he had oft found to be an excellent way to heat tea.

“It doesn’t matter anyway, ’cause I’ll be the 1 to find that treasure 1st.”

“We’ll see,” Autumn said.

V.

Lance repeatedly halted on his way toward the secret hole his henchmen found on an earlier search when he kept thinking he’d heard movement ’hind him. However, every time he’d turn back to look, he’d see nothing.

“Must be some strange acoustics,” he mumbled to himself. “Who knows what the savages did with this place. I know 1 thing: once I get that treasure I’m going to—

“Ooo! Are you following Sir Chamsby in hopes that he’ll lead you to the treas—?”

Lance swung round, only to see nothing yet ’gain. But this time he was certain he’d heard someone speak, & so he went forward, turning his head left & right as he wandered the vicinity.

After a few minutes’ search found nothing, he turned round ’gain & returned to his original path.

“I’ll just have to keep my ears open & see if I hear it ’gain,” he mumbled as he glanced ’bout.

In the corner o’ a dark alley, ’hind a dumpster, hid Autumn, Edgar, & O’Beefe, Autumn holding O’Beefe down with 1 hand while the other pressed his mouth shut, leaving nothing but soft muffles. Her eyes, meanwhile, stared out the alley, waiting for Lance to return.

After five minutes without a response, Autumn whispered for Edgar to sneak out & check outside. He nodded, stood up, &

scampered out, 1st looking round the corner o' the wall on the left side, & then the wall on the right. After a minute or so mo' o' checking, he returned & whispered, "I see nobody nearby."

"It's probably safe," Autumn whispered. "But it'll be a hassle tracking him down 'gain with the distance he must have gained by now." She glared @ O'Beefe. "Perhaps if somebody took a hint & jerked it, we'd have a better chance; but clearly fate has afflicted us with a handicap."

She released O'Beefe & immediately shut off her ears to the yapping his mouth released. As they continued through the underground city, Autumn with a hand on her aching forehead, snared an idea.

She grabbed Edgar, moving the area o' his skull where an ear would be if he were human right up to her mouth, & whispered, "We're going to run as quickly as possible round these buildings & see if we can 'scape our leech, OK? You don't mind being dragged a li'l, do you?"

Edgar shook his head.

"Great," Autumn said with a foot raised, just 'fore dropping it & scampering @ full speed, taking every turn she reached without thought, just trying to make as much distance & as unpatterned a path as possible 'tween them & O'Beefe.

After 10 minutes o' this—moving out to the edges o' the underground city, round, & then nearing the middle 'gain, only to return to the edges soon after—they finally stopped to catch their breaths. Autumn's eyes wandered for signs o' a bowtied suit, but found none.

"The only problem now is that we've probably lost Lance for good," Autumn said in a low voice. "Then 'gain, it may not be a significant matter. @ 1st I wanted to trail him to avoid searching the same places he'd already searched; but it's possible he overlooked where it is, anyway. Who knows how clever his henchmen were."

Such sentiments gave Autumn li'l comfort, however. She'd remembered how well they were able to find those jewels @ Heureuse Manor. When she considered both the greater #s on Lance's side & the highly-likely time advantage he had, her probability o' success was low.

O well. Never stopped me 'fore, she mused.

"So, should we just search by ourselves?" Edgar asked, jolting Autumn from her thoughts.

"Huh? O, yes."

Autumn squinted & slid her eyes left & right, moving her index finger in front o' her face.

After a short pause, she pointed in front o' them & said, "That's the direction Lance ought to have gone. Even if we can't find him, we might find areas he or his minions haven't uncovered yet."

So they went forth, sorting through every pile o' equipment or rubbish they found splayed on the ground & investigating every building they passed. Oft during their trip, Autumn would have her eyes closed tightly with her hands on her head & her mouth muttering silently.

OK, think... If I were a megalomaniac trying to hide a huge pile o' treasure where no one would think to find it, where would I put it?

Essentially, where in this place would I would hide my treasure, if I did?

She looked all round, trying to absorb as many ideas as possible while the fans in her head steamed from all o' the electricity racing through her head.

Well, to start, he wouldn't hide it in anyplace obvious: buildings, trashcans, alleyways... But he would likely hide it in a cluttered area full o' hiding opportunities so that all the noise would better conceal it. People generally have a certain time limit for how long they want to search an area 'fore moving on, regardless o' how many hiding opportunities each area has. In cluttered areas, the searcher is likely

to become so exhausted with the obvious places that the real hiding place would slip under her nose.

It'd also be best to hide something in an area that appears identical to many other places, since people generally think in patterns & naturally point their attention @ the most disparate elements 1st. The likelihood that one might sloppily look through similar areas due to following these patterns is high. After all, there are possibly billions o' hiding places here, & it'd be impossible to find all o' them without wasting years. You have to cut corners in some ways.

Autumn's eyes widened. She could feel her nerves buzz with excitement as if she were injected with 20 cups o' coffee.

"Think o' something?" Edgar asked, but Autumn only waved his question 'way.

Now, I'm not sure 'bout this place, but I would guess that the entrance would be the busiest place, right? It's the busiest now, 'course; but was it always that way? & would not that be the 1st place one would check, & then soon leave when nothing is found? Granted, on 1 scale, the 1st place to look would be the time when the searcher has the most energy & might put the most energy into this area; but on the other scale, with so many other areas open, the searcher might move on mo' quickly than if she were in a later area, knowing there are less options left. It is also the last place anyone would expect it to be, being so clumsily obvious, so that the searcher is mo' likely to abandon it for what she expects to be golder mines. Moreover, 'cause it's so close to the entrance & so near crowds, Fitzgerald's disappearance here would've been less attention-grabbing than if he'd moved all the way through empty areas 'lone.

It's not a solid fit, & I could be way off; but if it's the right place, it'd immediately flip the chairs on Lance.

She checked the clock on her cell & saw that 'twas 25:178 pages.

Hmm... it'd probably be too late for this to turn into a failed venture.

Autumn considered for a few words.

Finally, she said, "Edgar, let's turn round. I think I know where ol' Fitz's hiding place may be."

VI.

Autumn held a tenuous hope that the crowds would've left from the entrance by then, but saw this return false when she returned.

O well, she thought. If they cared 'bout the treasure, they'd probably be searching for it. They're probably too distracted to recognize what I'm doing, anyway.

1 person who was not, however, was Dawn, who waved @ them 'gain & said, "Back so soon."

"Yup," Autumn said without looking @ her. 'Stead, Autumn shifted her eyes left & right @ the building 'hind Dawn.

She moved toward the entrance while her eyes stared @ the building, trying to avoid making eye contact with any o' the crowd members. She saw nothing by the time she reached the end.

No, it wouldn't be somewhere so obvious, remember, she thought. She rotated, her eyes darting all over like a wild bouncing turtle shell.

Then it hit her—not the bouncing turtle shell, 'course, which actually hit O'Beefe's kart just 'fore he was going to hit a jump, causing him to fall into 8th place, but the idea. She was thinking once mo', *What would be the last place one would be expected to search?* 1 o' her ideas was to consider the similarity 'tween the city 'bove & the city down here: maybe Fitzgerald put the hideout in the region corresponding to the place where the pipe entrance was 'bove. That was when she thought 'bout a *difference* 'tween the city down here & 'bove & found the answer to her earlier question: the ceiling! In the city 'bove, o' course, nobody would think o' searching *the sky* for a hideout; but down here, where there was no sky, that was a different

level. Indeed, she'd never even looked @ the ceiling since she'd been down there, 'twas so far from her mind. *How could I be so naïve?*

She looked up & saw that the ceiling was covered in a twisty maze o' pipelines, ending @ heads tilting downward. 1 o' these heads appeared to be rusted over; but Autumn knew better: she could see by the way the light shined off it that 'twas truly bronze. Furthermore, 'twas a li'l bigger than the others—just big 'nough for a human to fit through.

'Twas such a brilliant idea. *He or a trusted associate could just pretend to be a plumber or some such & dink round with the pipes 'bove while nobody even blinked. They wouldn't even notice if he went through the pipe—after all, don't plumbers go through pipes to fix some obscure apparatus or warp to world 4 all the time?*

Autumn looked for a way up when she saw a dumpster leaning against a wall full o' windows, having a smoke break.

"This way, Edgar," she said in a low voice as she waved Edgar in its direction.

"Hey. Nice weather we have down here, ri—Hey! What are you doing?"

Autumn hoisted Edgar along with her.

"Are you sure we should be doing this?" Edgar asked as he looked down @ the dumpster. "It seems kind o' rude."

"It is rude!" the dumpster shouted. "I'm trying to have a friggin' smoke here & you're ruining it. How would you feel if I just waltzed up & stepped all over your head?"

"You know, smoking's kind o' ba—"

But Autumn interrupted Edgar with a nudge & motioned for him to latch onto her back. He nodded & wrapped his arms round her neck, hanging on like an extra backpack, while she proceeded to climb the windows.

When they reached the top, Autumn could see that the pipelines were still 'bout 2 meters 'bove them, which caused Autumn to cringe.

“Do you think you could give me a boost?” Autumn asked.

“Here?”

“Yes.”

Edgar nodded & bent down. Autumn climbed onto his shoulders, her eyes still up @ the pipes. She could feel Edgar below her lurch a li'l & then gradually raise her up.

Unluckily, when she stretched her arms & stood on her arches, she found she still could not yet reach the pipes.

“OK, do you think you could, for a brief moment, hold me up higher with your arms?”

“I’ll try,” Edgar said enthusiastically.

She felt herself rise a li'l mo', even mo' gradually than 'fore. She stretched her arms as far as her sockets would allow, till her fingers finally reached the top o' a pipe. She clamped her fingers down on the pipe & put full force on them, feeling the bones in them burn from the pressure. However, she was able to raise herself high 'nough to grab onto the pipe with her hands properly & pulled herself off Edgar's hands.

“OK, now grab on & climb back up to my back,” she called down to Edgar, her eyes still cringing @ the pipe. 'Twas beginning to lurch under her weight, & she wasn't sure it'd be able to handle Edgar's as well, despite his lightness.

He did so, causing the pipe to dip even mo'. Deciding not to give the pipes any mo' time to break than necessary, she immediately moved leftward, her eyes following 'long the pipes 'head to find the way to the bronze opening.

Out o' nowhere she felt a violent itch on her hand, tenderizing her composure. She looked up & saw a plump rat sitting on her hand, just 'fore it took a great bite o' her finger.

It took a great effort not to yank her hand back, which would surely make her lose her grip & fall off. 'Stead, she merely continued, flicking a finger or 2 whenever the rat followed, & muttering 'bout

the plague.

After that distraction, they finally reached the bronze pipe end. Upon closer inspection, she saw that, like the pipe entrance, this had a ladder inside. She squandered no time 'fore climbing, sighing in relief @ its sturdiness.

3 meters up, they reached the top, & entered into a wide atticlike room, seemingly vacant, 'cept 2 piles o' innocent-looking bulky pipes, their grayness matching the cement floor so that they almost blended in. They immediately netted Autumn's suspicions.

Sure 'nough, when she walked over & peered inside, she saw that they were stuffed with ingots & jewelry o' various shapes, sizes, & colors. Ever the multitasker, Autumn reached in to scoop the treasure into her pockets while she tried to formulate a mo' efficient way to transport the whole mass.

However, the second her arm brushed gainst the inside o' a pipe, she heard whirring. She turned her head, & Edgar emitted a worried squeak, just in time to witness a crane hand reach down over her. 'Fore she could move, it clamped itself round her stomach & lifted her off the ground.

While Edgar usefully held his hands to his head & shivered, Autumn attempted to squeeze her way out o' the mechanical mandible, pressing her hand down gainst the top as hard as possible to push her way out.

She was utterly shocked to not find success.

When Edgar had finally calmed down 'nough, he said, "You want me to go get Dawn for help?"

Autumn shook her head. "It's probably operated by a switch. There has to be some way Fitzgerald kept it from attacking him." She didn't mention that this way could have been a handheld remote, which could be anywhere—including outside this room, or even outside the whole sewers.

Their eyes combed through the room, only to be interrupted by

the heavy thunking o' weight gainst metal emerging from the pipe entrance. They directed their eyes @ it & watched when they saw a familiar face pop in like a Venus fly trap.

"Ah, good. I see you're still here. Well, I'm not surprised to find you still here, 'course."

Lance looked @ Autumn with a grin that could run an All-You-Can-Eat-Feces restaurant out o' business. Autumn returned with a bitter glare. Just a bitter glare. It couldn't do as amazing a trick as Lance's grin, but 'twas quite formidable by itself, in a traditional way.

Edgar, meanwhile, stepped back to the wall 'hind him, hoping to hide in a shadow while he continued looking for a way to drop Autumn.

Lance stood up straight, with his hands on his sides, while his tuxedoed henchmen in drama masks with white left sides & red rights entered 'hind him.

"So good to see you... to see you..." Lance turned to a henchman who was already standing 'side him & barked, "Agent Granny Smith Apple: supply me with a witty riposte."

Autumn narrowed her eyes. "Riposte to what?"

"Would 'I would give you a hand, but I see you already have 1 big 'nough to last you a lifetime,' be to your pleasing, Sir?"

Lance rubbed his hands together swiftly. "Excellent." Then he stopped rubbing them together when he felt them burn.

"Owie!" he owied just 'fore waving his hands & blowing on them.

"Where's the voodoo skeleton?" Lance demanded with a threatening finger aimed @ Autumn—OK, mo' like "insolent finger."

"I think he's trying to hide in that li'l shadow next to the pipes, Sir," Agent Burnt Sienna said.

"I can see that," Lance said as he turned his eyes over to Edgar, causing Edgar to shudder even mo' than he'd already been doing.

"All right, skeleton, make this easy & crawl into the cage," Lance said as he pointed to a li'l pet carrier Agent Laser Lemon held out.

Edgar considered refusing, figuring it'd be rude to leave his duty without a fight, 'specially to help such a mean person; but then he saw Lance aim a burning stare @ him. After squeaking, "Ouch!" in response to the burns from Lance's magical stare, he trudged into the cage. There he just sat with his body curled together & sighed while the minion closed his cage.

"Golden," Lance said as he strode forward. "Now, whatever you idiots do, don't touch any o' those pipes." He pointed @ the pile nearest Autumn, & then @ the other. "As Madame Looter here has wonderfully demonstrated, touching them will set off father's brilliant trap. Now, he said there was a mechanism to turn it off somewhere. We just need to find it."

"Is it that button up there on the ceiling?" Agent Razzmatazz asked. Everyone—including Autumn & Edgar—followed their eyes up Razzmatazz's finger to the large red button with the words, "Turn Off Trap," right next to 1 that said, "Release Captured Looter."

Autumn smacked her forehead. *How could I fail to look @ the ceiling twice?*

Lance snapped his fingers. "Well, you idiots know what formation you'll need to reach it."

The minions nodded & formed a human ladder, with Agent Razzmatazz @ the top, given the honor o' pushing the button for finding it.

"Hey, every peoples, did I miss anything relevant?"

Everyone turned to the pipe entrance to see Thursday O'Beefe sitting in a li'l red go-kart being carried up by a fishing pole held by a spectacled turtle floating in a cloud.

"Sorry I'm late," he said to the speechless crowd. "While I was stunned by a blue shell, someone knocked me into a lava pit, which is why this polite turtle's helping me up here."

"Last time I checked, there weren't any lava pits anywhere here," Autumn said with eyes narrowed in deep hatred.

O'Beefe shrugged as the turtle lowered him to the ground. "Hey, I just report the world as I see it. Everyone's free to form their own conclusions."

"Um... If he... retrieved you from a... lava pit, shouldn't he return you to the... track?" Edgar asked, pausing many times, unsure if he heard certain words correctly.

"Shortcut glitch," O'Beefe said.

Everyone nodded in understanding.

The turtle released him & flew 'way, back down the pipe entrance. O'Beefe dismounted his kart & beamed an enthusiastic smile round @ everyone with hands tied 'hind his back.

"So, is this where the treasure is hidden? How are you all going to divide it?"

"We're not dividing it @ all," Lance said. "The woman & her skeleton are looters o' the 1st degree, & have received their just wastelands by being imprisoned—hopefully for life. The treasure is my father's, & thus belongs to me. My workers here"—he swooped his hand toward the minions, who were still standing in ladder formation, considering it rude to interrupt the conversation by noisily getting down—"will be paid in wages for their help, 'course."

"Eightch, that rat may have a different opinion," O'Beefe said as he pointed to his right.

Everyone turned to see a hand-sized rat on its hind legs step toward the tower o' henchmen with a radiating green fang protruding.

"What is that?" Agent Purple Mountain's Majesty cried.

"It's straight out o' a bad comic book!" Razzmatazz shouted.

"I'm 'fraid o' mice!"

"I'm 'fraid o' hand-sized things!" Then Agent Granny Smith Apple gasped as he looked @ his hands. "Including my hands! Ahhh!"

The minions toppled over in their scramble to get 'way from the rat & Agent Granny Smith Apple's hands. Then everyone saw a net

jump on them, covering them like a blanket. They struggled against it, but felt it attach its edges to the ground, holding them inside.

All eyes traveled through the path the net shot from to see O'Beefe standing there with a Creamsicle-colored plastic pistol pointed @ the trapped guards, O'Beefe's mouth & eyes in the same optimistic shapes as usual.

"What do you think you're—"

O'Beefe tilted his pistol nozzle @ Lance & silenced him with a net shot, trapping Lance to the ground just like his henchmen.

O'Beefe looked up @ Autumn, whose eyes were so wide, they were 'bout to fall out their holes, & said, "I forgot to mention something when I introduced myself. 'Course, everything I said was true; but there were some true things I neglected to say, such as that my favorite food is raddish bagels. Part o' journalism is deciding what truths are worth telling, & which are better kept 'way from the public, after all.

"Well, the truth I neglected to mention was that, in addition to being an internationally-illustrious journalist"—O'Beefe twisted round & formed his tilted pose with the arm aimed up in the sky 'gain—"I am also an internationally-illustrious thief, myself.

"You're also probably wondering 'bout where the mutated rat came from," O'Beefe said as he paced. "You may recall me being attacked by a bunch o' rats or burning my hand on dripping acid, leaving no burn mark whatsoever. Well, those were admittedly full-on, Heavens to Margaret, aggregately lies. These were just ruses so I could collect the acid & rats in superbly concealed containers. I knew from my research that the acid had radioactive powers and, in addition to the rat, would make a perfect ingredient to a stalling tactic I might need. Betcha didn't expect that twist, now didn't you?"

After a second o' stunned silence, Autumn finally replied, "Why bother with such a convoluted setup? Why not just pretend you needed these elements for proof or research or something? You're a

journalist. Neither I nor Edgar would have thought anything o' it."

"&..." Edgar butt in, "& wasn't going through all that just to make a rat that would... distract people kind o' much? Surely there were simpler ways, right?"

O'Beefe shrugged. "We all think differently, I guess. I just never thought 'bout any alternative way o' doing this. This way just seemed obvious."

"& what 'bout the light fixture falling on your head?" Autumn asked. "How was that part o' your plan?"

"O, that was just an accident. Truly hurt like the darwin, too."

He stood back & readjusted his bowtie. "& now, with you 2 out o' the way, I'll record the tale o' my amazing find o' the legendary Chamsby treasure, & I'll leave you all to keep the tale o' how you might 'scape to yourselves."

Lance, however, had a few mo' words to say to O'Beefe as he proceeded to scoop nuggets & jewelry into a leather sack:

"This is robbery! You can't just take my rightful treasure! I have property rights!"

"Doubleyew, you are a lollipoppingly perceptive man, Sir Chamsby. Have you thought 'bout becoming a journalist? I hear *The Pacific* is looking for up-&-coming journalists, so long as you give them your rent money every month."

"Those Marxists? Never!" Lance said with his arms crossed & his face akin to a pouting child.

"I'll tell you what, Sir Chamsby," O'Beefe said as he began filling a 2nd bag: "I'll give you 1 jewel, just to be fair & balanced."

Lance, who still had his arms crossed & face pouting, said, "I get to choose which jewel."

"O, I think I know exactly what *you* want..."

O'Beefe stopped & pulled his arm out the pipe to reveal a large, rainbow-colored egg-shaped jewel.

Autumn stared @ them both with wincing confusion for a second

'fore her memory uppercutted her.

That's the opal that witch in the mask wanted. Damn it, it probably must be worth almost as much as the rest o' that loot combined. "For my art projects," my esophagus...

Lance stared @ the opal with frozen wonder, himself. O'Beefe tossed it to him, & Lance scrabbled for it as it fell to him. He continued clawing for it when it landed in his hands till he managed to squeeze it through a net hole.

With the opal safe in his hands, Lance felt safe 'nough to glare @ O'Beefe & say, "This is still theft, even if not as bad as the ponytailed Marxist's."

"I'm not a Marxist."

O'Beefe nodded. "I put her down as a democratic socialist," he said as he pointed to his notepad.

Lance's face scrunched together as if he ate a giant lime or sniffed rotten meat. "That's almost worst."

"Anyway, I think I've collected all the treasure I need," O'Beefe said brightly as he walked back to the pipe entrance with five bulging bags hanging over his shoulders. 'Fore he began his descent, he turned to Lance 1 last time with a playful stern look, as if he were going to lecture Lance on not shitting on the carpet.

"Now, you take care o' that outrageous opal there, Sir Chamsby. We wouldn't want it to fall into dangerous hands, now would we?"

Autumn thought she could see O'Beefe's glasses shine in the light—which was odd, since O'Beefe wasn't *wearing* any glasses.

O'Beefe faced the pipe entrance 'gain & snapped his fingers. The turtle in the cloud returned with O'Beefe's red kart still attached to its fishing pole.

"Return me to the race track, Sir Turtle Cloud Turtle Sir," O'Beefe said as he climbed inside. "This time I'm gonna aggregately win that feather cup."

The turtle silently floated downward, till neither it nor O'Beefe

was present anymore.

After a full minute o' silence—during which Lance continued to struggle futilely in his net & his minions sat round reading *Heathcliff*—Autumn said, “Well, how the hell do we get out o' here, now?”

Edgar shrugged.

“Hey, boss, could you do that heat trick with your head 'gain to cook us some tea,” Agent Razzmatazz asked. “I'm thirsty.”

“Hey, stop hogging the book, Agent Purple Mountains' Majesty.”

“I didn't. I'd never. You did.”

“Sir Chamsbyyyy, Purple Mountain's Majesty's not sharing...”

“If it's his book, then he shouldn't have to share if he doesn't want to,” Lance said. “You should've bought & brought your own *Heathcliff* book. This is the only way the invisible hand will teach you.”

“Aww, come on, invisible hand...”

Autumn laid her cheek on the cold metal mandible, lids limping, & sighed.

#BOSK-BC120E-CAT

ALLEY CAT INDUSTRIAL PUNK RAP

J. J. W. Mezun | 2014 September 1



I.

1 night, when Autumn & Edgar woke from troubled dreams, they found themselves transformed into cats. Don't ask me how it happened: I had nothing to do with it. Everyone just assumes I'm responsible for every li'l problem that happens round here, & it isn't true.

Anyway, they were pawing through the rainy streets o' Boskeopolis after midnight in search o' precious fish bones, as they did every night. Since the streetlamps were still on, they slunk near the walls o' the brick buildings round the streetlamps to avoid its spotlight as much as possible.

Despite it being so late, she could hear a cacophony o' cat hisses & dog barks surrounding her, muffled by the pattering rain; & though the moon was only a slivered crescent, laying down li'l light, the streetlights still seeped toward them, which troubled her.

"Meow meow meow meow," Edgar murmured. However, translating that into English, he said, "D'you have any ideas for what we should do 1st?"

Autumn stopped. She glanced over to her left @ the shop 'cross the street. Its sign said, "Mel's Archaic Deli." Though its windows were impossible to see through due to the yellow light shining on them, Autumn knew there'd be a treasure trove o' treasure inside.

She tilted her head @ the deli. "That way," she whispered.

They looked down each side o' the street to ensure a lone car wasn't driving by @ that moment, & then bolted to the other side. Autumn stopped just in front o' the deli & looked it up & down, examining it for any possible flaws. Then she paced round the deli,

over the fence to its side, fading into the darkness from Edgar's sights.

Meanwhile, Edgar stood in the middle o' the sidewalk, shaking in the cold rain & sliding his eyes 'long the rest o' the city for clue o' cat or dog. Trying to forget these fears, Edgar licked his bony paws & started rubbing his face clean, only to be interrupted by Autumn's voice:

"Psst! Edgar, over here!" she whispered.

Edgar stopped his bath & crouched for a jump, hesitant.

I hope I don't mess this up as usual.

When he leapt, his upper body barely made it over the fence. He scrambled the rest o' the way over, teetering 'long the leaf-thin fence top.

He looked up & saw Autumn on the roof, standing next to a boxy gray pipe, its yawning maw puffing smoke into the air like a cancerous toad. After a short struggle hopping onto the roof, he scampered over to her.

"I think this will lead us inside," she whispered.

"Will it be safe?" Edgar asked.

"I don't see why not. What's the worst that could happen?"

"Well, I mean, it's blowing steam. Doesn't that mean there's probably something hot inside?"

Autumn flicked her paw. "Bah. I'm not letting a li'l temperature-based discomfort restrain me from my riches. Actually, though, perhaps you should stay here & guard."

"You sure? I mean, I'll go in if you want—"

"No. It'll only be a minute," Autumn said.

With that, Autumn sprung into the mouth o' the metal monster, hitting the flimsy tin bottom 'bout a meter below. She tried to go forward, but hit a wall, forcing her to turn round to continue. 'Twas oil-black inside without light, so Autumn had to feel her way

through.

Occasionally she would feel her paws trip over grated bars split by holes, opening her to somewhat fresher air than the cramped stale haze saturating the rest o' the vent. The dim blue lamps below were just bright 'nough that a drop o' light spilled in, granting her a vague gaze into the room below &, mo' importantly, a glimpse @ the grate itself.

She could faintly see that 'twas screwed down tightly. She poked a claw in a screw & twisted hard till she felt it loosen. She did the same for the rest, causing her timeless, quiet void on the outside to suddenly awaken, slamming down against the ground without a beat. She backed 'way for a minute, just in case there was a witness. Not a shadow stirred—though some shook for a while.

She surveyed the place @ an ambling pace. Though the fridges were all shut, she could still sense the icy air permeating them. She went up to the nearest fridge, pressed her face against the fogged door, & gaped @ the honeyed hams, T-bone steaks, & woolly-mammoth burgers.

She hopped up, snatched the handle o' the door, & kicked the frame o' the door, pushing her & the door back. As it opened, it released a flurry o' frigid air like a flood.

Then sirens blared.

"INTRUDER! INTRUDER!" buzzed a speaker she'd neglected to see 'bove.

She heard metal scratch metal & rotated to see a door she'd also failed to see flip up, revealing a black room. A moment later, she watched a robot a foot taller than she was zoom toward her with its C-shaped pincers stretched straight in front o' it. She couldn't discern what color 'twas s'posed to be, for everything appeared cobalt in the dim tinted light; but she did know that 'twas sloppily constructed from what seemed to be objects its inventor happened to find @ the

time: bent tin cans, vacuum tubes unseen since the 1960s, sewer pipes, microwaves, toasters, & old boxy gray heaters. Its head was an old cathode monitor with 2 beads glued @ the top for eyes. That which was not soldered together with screws & bolts was wrapped together in tin foil & black electrical tape.

Its eyes glowed red, but unmoving, as if unaware o' Autumn. However, its legs tilted in her direction as she moved so that it always followed her, gliding forward like a vacuum.

When she realized it wasn't going to stop by itself anytime soon, she decided her only choice was to halt it herself. As she aimed 'way from the corner in which she was headed, she stared @ the robot & analyzed it: she inferred by the strips o' tape & foil hanging off, the shaking screws, & the way certain parts would wobble as it moved that the robot would not be difficult to break apart. She just needed to target the right parts.

She rushed @ the tumbling bot & snatched @ the piece o' tape hanging off its right leg with her mouth, pulling it as tight as possible as she backed 'way. The tape caught, throwing Autumn & the bot into a tug-o-war battle the bot was likely unaware of.

Though the robot was fast in its forward motion, 'twas sluggish in rotation, & by the time it turned round, Autumn had already been pulling on its tape for a few seconds. It finally zoomed after Autumn 'gain, only for her to zip past it yet 'gain, yanking hard o' the tape once mo'—so much that it flung off the object that 'twas attached to: the can that comprised the robot's right calf. With it gone, the robot's right leg fell into itself like a broken Jenga tower. Nonetheless, the robot was still able to propel itself just as well, just with its right side leaning in farther than its left.

As it ran after Autumn 'gain, she paced back & examined it once mo', trying to decide where she should strike next. That was when she saw that the robot wobbled the most near the left side o' where

its head connected with its body.

She charged toward it & bounded @ the spot, only for the robot's left mandible to reach up & grasp her round the stomach tightly. She clawed frantically & hissed, but its brass hand was much too hard to be damaged, & its ears were immune to hisses.

The robot skid toward the door & said in a monotone voice, "THE BAD INTRUDER SHALL NOW BE SENT AWAY FROM THE PREMESIS."

It stopped @ the door & pressed the button next to it with its free hand to make the door flap open automatically. Then the robot lifted Autumn up to toss her out.

As it did, Autumn found her face rise right beside the robot's head. She made as hard a swipe as she could gainst the wavering gap 'tween its head & body. The head rocked rightward with a crackle, revealing a nest o' colored wires. Autumn quickly clutched them with both hands just as the robot was flinging its hand to throw her.

However, its throw turned out to be a flop: its hand stopped mid-swing, & only loosened 'nough for Autumn to struggle free. When she reached the ground 'gain, she looked up & saw that the robot was motionless, its beady eyes a dull red.

She scampered back inside & went straight for the fridges, opening them & nabbing as many steaks & hams as she could drag.

She returned to the door & called outside, "Psst! Edgar! You out there?"

She heard something plunk on metal, & then heard the creaking o' wood. Seconds later Edgar was trotting toward her. He stopped just in front o' her to catch his breath.

'Fore he could speak, Autumn whispered, "Grab some o' this meat & let's scam."

* * *

II.

After Autumn ate the heaviest piece o' meat—since Edgar was a skeletal cat, he didn't need to eat—they both dragged the rest o' the meat with them down the lonely streets o' Boskeopolis. Both o' their ears drooped & their whiskers sagged—& Autumn's fur flattened—under the pour o' rain still harassing the city. Though she found its chill mildly annoying, what stressed Autumn the most was the risk o' spoiling her treasure; so she tried to speed them 'long to their hideout as quickly as she could.

The streets were mute, save a few stray candy wrappers blowing in the storm. Not even a single car passed. This silence did not sooth Autumn, but in fact heightened her anxiety 'bout the dangers that were lurking in the shadows 'hind trash cans & in the wind-rustled bushes. Silence was eerie; silence was suspicious.

Not far in their long trek, she heard a creaky rattling 'hind her & swung 360°, ready but edgy for battle. 'Stead, she saw that 'twas Edgar's shivering that caused the noise.

"You cold?" she whispered.

Edgar shook his head.

"I think we may not be the only ones round here." Autumn could detect strain in his tone.

She scrutinized their surroundings & sure 'nough, the shadows appeared to move on their own, without light's guidance. She continued twirling round, looking @ everything, till she glimpsed a pair o' yellow eyes gazing @ her from the void o' a close alley. They neared till they entered the light, revealing a broad gray face 'hind them.

"I see you're bold, trespassing on my property despite your past transgressions—& with riches, too!" the cat creaked in a meow that

sounded like clamping bear trap.

Autumn didn't reply in words, delivering only a hiss in his direction. Having done that, she continued her walk, ignoring the gray cat.

But as she feared, she soon witnessed cats o' various colors, sizes, & species emerge from the gloom, pacing toward her slowly. She turned her head left & right to see that they were coming from every direction, circling them.

Edgar's bone-chattering worsened. He leaned up to Autumn & whispered, "What do we do now?"

Autumn turned back to the gray cat, who was now lying front-paws forward on the opposite sidewalk with his face resting on the ground & a smug smile.

"So I s'pose you're too much o' a 'fraidy, uh..." Autumn paused to better plan her words. "I s'pose you're too much o' a coward to fight us fairly, so you rely on a gang o' thugs to do your work for you."

The gray cat yawned, waving a paw in front o' its widened mouth.

"Success is for those who play wise, not fair," he said. "'Sides, it is by their own volition that they fight you—that is, if they want that food you've got there hanging from your mouths. I'm just glad to show them the opportunity in return for the sight o' a transgressor finally getting her rightful punishment."

Translation: too bad, eat a dick, Autumn mused. This will be a problem.

They were closing in, & Autumn was just beginning to get edgy, when she felt a pair o' paws drill into her from her left in a diving charge, knocking her down on her other side.

"Autumn?" Edgar cried.

He was silenced by 'nother cat jumping into him & pushing him down. His assailant wasted no time digging into Edgar's meat, while Edgar used the delay to slink 'way.

Meanwhile, 2 cats were scratching & biting @ Autumn while she tried to pull the meat 'way from them & claw them back @ the same time. The mo' they fought, the harder she found it to keep this up.

Then, as her eyes flitted up @ her environment, she glanced a few cats surrounding Edgar, causing him to emit a low squeak. She scrambled to devise a way to protect him without losing her meat when she saw them all attack Edgar @ once. @ that she dropped the meat & bit her way out o' her 2 assaulter's trap, & then pounced @ the 3 attacking Edgar.

The rest o' the cats joined—all save the gray cat, who began licking his paws as he watched the scene in amusement—& a brawl was sparked, leaving an unintelligible mess o' wrangling fur & claws in the middle o' the street. During the madness, Autumn felt tufts yanked out o' her fur, the edge o' 1 o' her ears bitten off, & 1 o' her eyes slashed.

She realized the tangle had a good side to it, too, though: 'twas so impossible for any cats to see anything that Autumn was able to drag Edgar—yanking him by 1 o' his bony ears—out o' the fight in secrecy & 'scape.

The 1st one to notice their flight was the big gray cat, whose eyes glazed 'way from the tumble @ the sight o' movement in the corner o' his eyes. However, by the time he called for the others to stop them, Autumn & Edgar had already disappeared.

“You idiots! How could you let them 'scape?” he shouted @ the others.

“Who cares? They left the steak 'hind,” 1 o' them said as he started biting into the steak, only for 'nother cat to tackle him & start biting into the steak, too. 'Nother battle was soon lit.

The gray cat was 'bout to continue chiding them while they fought, lecture them on the importance o' punishing those who mess with them, but soon gave up & lowered his head on his paws, drifting

off to sleep.

III.

The rain was so heavy now that Autumn could barely see in front o' her, the city engulfed in an opaque gray mist; & with every step she committed, leftover water splashed straight into her face. They trudged so slow, they may as well have been swimming.

She repeatedly looked 'hind her to ensure Edgar was following, & every time let out a sigh o' relief when she saw his friendly black eyeholes stare back @ her.

1 time she turned to look @ him, he said with a voice hoarse from the cold, "So... Where are we going now?" just before a sneeze.

"@ 1st I was just trying to get 'way from those other cats as fast as possible; but now, I s'pose, would be the ample time to search for shelter."

Such search was difficult when the whole city appeared to be painted in gray upon gray. They did, however, manage to find a grass patch in the back o' an alley with a flat hole @ the end. She sniffed inside & discovered a tart odor similar to that she'd encounter in dumpsters or trash cans, but stronger & less varied.

It's worth the risk, considering the situation we're in.

She squeezed inside, hoping whatever was in that black abyss would be safe. Her paws hit concrete. She decided 'twas safe 'nough.

While calling Edgar to join her, she carefully moved closer to the hole till she found the wall. She curled up gainst it & whispered for Edgar 'gain. He answered & soon curled up next to her. Then they drifted off to sleep.

* * *

IV.

Autumn had hoped to sleep till deep in the night tomorrow, but awoke with light, albeit dim, still oozing in through the opening. With the new light, she could glimpse 'nough inside her hideout to see that 'twas a sewer, with opaque green-brown water slogging in the direction she faced.

She did not spend much though on that feature, for she soon saw a new portion o' her environ much mo' urgent: the cats she met last night were surrounding them, visible only by their tall, jagged shadows spread 'cross the ground before her.

There were many actions she could perform: run, wake Edgar, charge after them, run; but she did none. 'Stead, she found her body paralyzed, her yawning eyes staring straight @ the shadows. Oddly, they seemed to do the same; the shadows flickered due to wavering light coming in, but nothing else. She waited for them to spring, but they remained still; she waited for them to speak, but they said aught.

She stepped forward an centimeter. Then 'nother centimeter. & then 'nother. She concentrated on the shadows & detected that they appeared askew. @ 1st she figured 'twas just due to the way shadows were naturally distorted by light; but now that she was nearer, physically & attentively, she realized that they didn't truly look much like cats @ all.

To be sure, she paced the remaining way, a li'l less cautious than before. When she reached the shadows, her body blocked all illumination from passing through, causing them all to merge into 1 puddle o' darkness. What she felt there was a lump o' concrete contorted into the form o' many protruding points & plates that she couldn't interpret.

But what she did understand was that this was the source o' the shadows, & that she & Edgar were still alone. She let out a sigh o' relief & returned to her spot next to Edgar.

She rested her head on her paws & pondered over where they should rob that night, knowing she'd never be able to get any sleep.

However, she had li'l time to ruminate, for Edgar woke soon, too.

"O, good morning, Autumn," he meowed as he stretched. "What're we doing tonight?"

"The same thing we do every night, Edgar: collect mo' meat. We'll have to wait till it gets darker, though."

Edgar nodded & proceeded to lick his paws.

After a few licks, he stopped & turned to Autumn. "How's your ear doing, by the way?"

"It's fine," she muttered. "You didn't get seriously damaged, did you?"

"No. Just a li'l scuffed up."

"Good."

They waited a few hours, resting their eyes & bodies, but not their minds. Finally, when the light inside dimmed to the point o' almost total darkness, Autumn rose & leapt for the hole out. Edgar easily heard this & followed right 'hind.

They wandered round the city 'gain, sniffing for 'nother shop to pilfer for precious meat.

Hopefully, this time we'll actually be able to keep it, she thought.

She turned her head in every direction, looking over every sign: "Soulless Shoe Store," "Barter's Everything," "Smokes 11 Cheap," & "Clever Simon's Signs." It wasn't till the end o' the street that she saw the same deli she tried last time.

Figuring success was likelier in experienced areas than unfamiliar locales, she repeated the operation she used to get inside before, climbing the roof through the fence. Unfortunately, this time

they didn't make it that far: as Autumn scrambled up the fence, she heard a door slam open 'hind her & heard Edgar meow her a warning.

"What are you mangy cats doing round here? Were you the li'l bastards who broke in & stole my steaks last night?"

"Run, Edgar!" Autumn shouted as she jumped down the fence.

They both bolted down the street, hearing the store owner's shouts droning 'way in the distance. Neither considered where they were going; Autumn merely focused on getting 'way as quickly as possible, & Edgar only followed.

There seems to be a risk I failed to foresee, Autumn thought: obviously the lost meat would be conspicuous to whoever ran the deli, & thus the owner would be extra on-guard. How could I make such an idiotic mistake?

Confident that they'd 'scaped the irate owner by then, she slowed, returning her attention to the shop signs for signs o' 'nother building that kept meat.

Fortunately, she saw a few fast food stores round that she thought ought to have a'least some meat, even if not the highest quality.

The only problem is they'll probably have much stronger security than some guy's local deli.

She hopped up the dumpster standing next to the 1st restaurant & shoved her face into the tiny hole 'tween the lid & the dumpster itself.

For some reason, this did not seem to help her lift the lid @ all.

Their scavenging was interrupted by 'nother human coming by & shooing them 'way with loud, stern whispers. Once 'gain, Autumn had to quickly surrender her operation, dashing 'way with Edgar to avoid a possibly worse form o' retribution than a denial o' service.

They stood in the road once mo', Autumn turning her head left & right to find 'nother building to try, when they heard footsteps rising

'hind.

They turned round to see a woman in a white uniform with a vacuum nozzle in her hand & the pink vacuum pouch labeled, "Popstar," held in the other by a handle.

"O, come on, now," Autumn meowed as she smacked her face with 1 o' her paws.

"Easy, kitties," the uniformed woman said as she edged closer.

A second 'fore the cat catcher flicked the switch, Autumn & Edgar ran for the closest alley.

Such was an action o' instinct—the desire to find the 1st place that seemed most concealing—& thus when Autumn finally did enter it, she realized she had no idea where to hide from there. The dumpster was still shut, & it'd take far too long to reopen 'fore the catcher caught up; the space under the dumpster was too small; & the buildings round them were far too tall to reach from the dumpster.

The best this alley had to offer were pieces o' a soggy newspaper lying in the corner. Seeing no better option, Autumn led Edgar under it, slinking together tightly so that the newspaper would fall over them completely. Then they carried it as far back into the black corners they could.

That was when they felt the paper stir 'hind them, & then rise so that it wasn't even touching them anymore. They glanced 'hind them to see the cat catcher's face, her toothy smile dimly lit by dregs o' the moon 'bove.

"So, you thought you could scape from me, kitty cats? That's bitterly rude."

But 'fore she could crank the motor o' her old-fashioned vacuum, Autumn & Edgar had bolted 'gain.

The catcher raised a fist into the air. "Gosh it, that's unfair. I caught you; the least you could do is wait for me to catch you."

This time Autumn knew not to try 'nother alley, aiming 'stead for

the park blocks 'way, which she hoped would create 'nough distance to lose the catcher completely.

They ran though the park in zigzags for a bit 'fore leaping into a bush, shrouding them in the dark corners 'tween its leaves.

Though they couldn't keep from shivering in the many wet drops still covering the leaves from earlier rains, they were confident that they had finally lost the catcher.

& they truly did. No, truly. The catcher wandered round the block for 'bout a half hour mo' &, when she still hadn't uncovered them, went home & watched baldness-remover infomercials. Much later, when Autumn & Edgar were sure she was truly gone for good, they—

“Bad, sad, hairy cats,” they heard a syrupy voice say 'hind them.

Once mo' they slowly glanced 'hind them; but this time, the darkness completely cloaked the catcher 'cept for her round white eyes shining on them like headlights.

Autumn's hair stood up, as well as walking out the door with its suitcase & hat. They heard the clicks o' the catcher touching a plastic touchscreen, followed by a droning beep.

They tried scaping 'gain, but the vacuum's inhalation caused the leaves to tangle their direction, blocking their path long 'nough to trap them in the vacuum's current.

Moments later, they were slurped inside.

V.

Autumn was closed in on all sides by hard gray walls. Only 1 side was slightly open, through the holes 'tween the metal bars blocking her from freedom.

Though the world immediately outside her cage appeared empty, 'twas full o' the cacophony o' 1,001 different meows, which made Autumn's fur stand up & take a large shot o' rum.

There's only 1 cat I get 'long with; a thousand others could hardly be beneficial.

She'd hoped to find Edgar's voice 'mong the thousands; but if his were present, 'twas drowned out.

Occasionally, a human would walk past. Sometimes they would stop by & go through all o' the cages. When they opened hers, they slid in a bowl o' brown mush & 'nother bowl o' water. She could not comprehend why humans would have an interest in keeping her fed & watered, but partook in them both all the same.

With nothing to do in this compact cage & no evident way to 'scape, Autumn remained curled-up in the shade o' a back corner with her eyes shut, either sleeping or devising possible methods o' 'scape.

During this, she would also listen in to the humans' conversations as they crossed.

Her ears perked up & 1 eye opened when she heard something she thought was particularly relevant:

"I think we're going to have to euphemize him."

"You mean euthenize?"

"Shhh! You want the cats to hear us & start a prison riot?"

"Don't be zany. Cats don't start prison riots; that's rabbits."

"Anyway, I don't know... He looks to be a rare breed—a'least, I've never seen a living skeletal cat before."

"He's half *dead*. He won't eat, he won't drink, & he sits huddled in the corner in fear all day."

"So, you think he's just some temporary freak accident, like that headless chicken in North America?"

"Yes. The fact is we need mo' space & this cat's living is almost certainly worse than dying. It's the obvious choice."

Autumn heard the loud click o' a cage—she recognized it as the same sound made when hers was opened—& heard the humans coo,

“Come here, li'l guy. It's OK...”

As if a grenade going off, Autumn charged @ the bars o' her cage, reaching her arms as far out the holes as she could, & barked loud, haggard meows.

The humans didn't seem to notice.

They stood & walked in the other direction, past the cages. Just 'fore they left the edge o' Autumn's sight, she glimpsed Edgar curled in one o' the humans' arms, his face locked into terror. Then he disappeared, followed by the rusty squeak & heavy clatter o' a metal door opening & closing.

Autumn resumed scrabbling out the cage bars & meowing. For some reason, it still had no effect.

After a half hour, it began to tire Autumn, so she grumpily returned to her corner in the back & curled up in her usual position, pondering what they might be doing to Edgar.

'Twas certainly not good. In her own experience, humans never helped her kind. Perhaps some would utterly ignore them; but most tried to get rid o' them. 'Twas simple survival o' the fittest: the mo' food they ate, the less food the humans could eat, & vice-versa. These cages were obviously meant as a sophisticated way to restrain them so they could no longer pilfer the humans' wares.

But then why were the humans feeding them, voluntarily giving 'way their food to the cats? 'Course, this food appeared radically different from what she'd mostly seen, so maybe 'twas specially made for cats & inedible for humans. But even then, the humans would have to put extra labor into making it or collecting it, an extra burden.

& that was when Autumn had discovered the answer: they were evidently fattening the cats up so that the humans could eat them later. It'd be the optimal way to use the otherwise useless cat food & still benefit themselves in the long run. It certainly wasn't a stretch

in her mind: if humans—as well as cats—could eat cows or pigs or iguanas, why couldn't they eat cats, too? Indeed, it'd be a mo' efficient way to eliminate cats then just continually shooin' them 'way or keeping them in cages for eternity.

This also explains why they chose Edgar as their 1st victim: they knew they weren't going to get any extra meat on him. Better get him out o' the way quickly 'fore he wastes anymore resources needlessly. They even talked 'bout how he was bony & wouldn't eat, too.

It all added up.

Well, I'm sure as hell not going to let them eat me without a fight 1st.

The urgency o' her mental scramble for an exit only increased as she counted the minutes likely left till Edgar was stewing round in those vile humans' digestive systems, having his amino acids just outright jacked as if he didn't still need them. She hoped @ the very least that Edgar would give them indigestion as 1 last heroic form o' protest.

Hours later, she heard the humans walking through 'gain. *Must be mealtime.* Autumn popped her ears up & kept 1 eye slightly open to whet her senses, but otherwise kept still so as not to attract suspicion 'fore she had a chance to pounce. Now she was grateful the humans had missed her protests earlier, for it'd likely make them suspect her already.

Or had they heard her & only pretended they hadn't to give her the false sense o' an edge on them?

Well, there was nothing she could do 'bout it, either way. She'd just have to resume her plan & hope it went well.

After a few minutes, 1 o' the humans finally stood in front o' her door with 2 bowls o' sustenance in-hand & a sunny smile on-face—as if she'd fall for such acting. Then 1 o' its hands gripped the door handle & slid it upward with a creak. Autumn crouched back like a

slingshot band pulled back as far as possible when she saw the hand open the door.

The millisecond the hand moved the bowls inside, she shot forward, sinking her fangs into the nearest hand as deep as possible. As the hand flew back, its owner shouting in agony, she zipped through the hole left open, & as she did when escaping through the city, ran 1st toward the area in the shadows.

“Where did she go?” 1 o’ the humans called out.

“She must be hiding,” ’nother said.

Autumn slunk back even further into the darkness, only her yellow eyes shining through. Unfortunately, this was not a mere graphical trope for the viewers, but some aberrant authentic behavior o’ her eyeballs, & so the other humans were also able to see them.

“O, there she is.”

“Do cats’ eyes normally glow like that?”

“No.”

The human in charge o’ feeding her slowly stepped forward & said in a soothing voice, “Come here, Pumpkin. I’m not gonna hurt you. Shhh, it’s all right.”

But Autumn was wise ’nough to know a trap when she saw 1: humans would harass her even when unbothered; there was no way this 1 would want to do anything positive to her after she outright attacked it.

The appendages crept closer. Autumn responded to them with a serpentine hiss, though she knew this warning would go unheeded.

So she dashed ’way to the side not blocked by anything, only to soon reach ’nother wall. She began to realize that the prospect o’ ’scape was low; the prospect o’ finding a way for Edgar to ’scape with her had almost 0% probability.

But I must do it, nonetheless.

& though she knew she was physically weaker than the humans, she also knew that she was a'least faster than them & that that would be 'nough to keep them @ estuary for now.

Since she knew Edgar was 'hind the door left o' the cages, she targeted it 1st. Unluckily, as she headed for it, she noticed 'twas closed. She knew 'nough 'bout human constructions that 'twas a door that could be opened—if she were able to reach the handle, which she also knew she couldn't reach to save her life. Sadly, that was the very reason why she needed it open.

She leapt for the handle all the same, only to smack into the door a foot below.

'Fore she could move 'gain, she felt the rubbery palms wrap round her back.

To her surprise, however, the human wasn't leading her back to her cage, but remained in front o' the door. With her limbs all netted together in the human's left arm, the human used its right hand to open the door. Inside, Autumn saw nothing but shadows.

I s'pose my time has come already.

The human carried her inside. Partway through, she heard a click & then blinked when she saw the room fill with the same white light as the previous room. She heard a thud & knew 'twas the door closing 'hind them.

Looking round the newly lit room, she saw the other human standing next to a table covered in white paper. 'Round it, 'long the walls, were desks full o' closed drawers. Lying next to the other human was a black plastic bag.

"'Nother one?" the other human asked.

"This 1 just behaves so badly; nobody's going to take it," the human holding Autumn said as it panted. "& we're running out o' space."

The other human nodded sadly.

She was pressed down against the table, the sandpaper hands still clasped round her. Glancing up, she could see the other human holding some needle-shaped object.

Was this how they were going to do me in? Stabbing me to death?

“This isn’t going to hurt a bit, OK, li’l guy?” the other human said as it moved the needle closer to Autumn.

Autumn rumbled with growls, shaking her limbs as hard as she could, & turned her head to bite 1 o’ the hands holding her.

It remained clasped, & movement was still possible.

Then she felt the needle penetrate her skin. However, as the human had promised, it didn’t hurt @ all—it didn’t feel like anything. In fact, Autumn felt the rest o’ her senses begin to melt ’way as well. Suddenly, she felt exhaustion take hold o’ her, her eyes drooping & her limbs quivering till she dipped down onto her stomach & her eyes closed, the outside world disappearing ’hind a black void.

#BOSK-BD0B0F-DISTURBED1

DISTURBED RESIDENCE, Part I

J. J. W. Mezun | 2014 October 1



I. A Welcome Burden

Fall: the season o' change, the both sad & happy age o' brushing 'way the decrepit to prepare for new blooms in the subsequent spring. In that spirit, Edgar spent that early night in late October dusting the corner-crowding cobwebs & defragmenting scattered papers already yellowing with age while Autumn was 'way. 'Twas something that would've been a better time-spender, Edgar thought, if their home wasn't just an approximately 4-meter-wide living-room/kitchen hybrid & an even smaller bathroom.

Still, he basked in the task as it lasted. Though he couldn't put a foot on it, there was something 'bout providing time & mind for their apartment that set it apart from just a box in which they spent most o' their time residing.

Not long after, Edgar heard the front door open 'hind him & turned to see Autumn enter.

"O, hello Autumn. I thought I'd dust while you were gone," Edgar said still holding a li'l black & pink duster hanging out his long robe sleeve.

"OK..." Autumn said with the kind o' expression one would give if he'd said he were raking the windows¹. "Anyway, I found this Muerteween contest that promises a hefty reward."

"O, cool. What do we have to do?" Edgar asked.

Autumn lifted the pamphlet up to her face. "Says we must stay @ some s'posedly scary mansion for a few days & that there's hidden treasure inside. Doesn't sound too difficult."

1 He'd already finished that long 'fore Autumn returned home.

“Uh... what’s the catch?” Edgar asked, wringing his sleeved hands. “It’s not... it’s not haunted, is it?”

“Doubt it,” Autumn said; “& if it is, well, the ghosts had better not bother us while we’re trying to sleep.”

Then Autumn added, eyes returning to the pamphlet, “Also, it says we’re s’posed to wear costumes; but I don’t have anything, so I’ll just say I’m going as a thief.”

Edgar looked her up & down & then scratched the top o’ his skull.

“I don’t know if anyone would find sweat pants or a T-shirt that says ‘PHAT LOOT’ scary,” he said.

“One should tell them that someone o’ that description can hold a knife or gun just as well as anyone else,” Autumn said.

“Don’t you still have that 1 witch costume?” Edgar asked.

“What witch costume?”

“You know, when we explored Wasabi Woods for gold for that 1 witch. Remember? She gave us those robes & wands...”

Autumn shook her head. “Doesn’t light a bulb.”

“I think she was the same person who stole from you & we had to follow her, only to be captured ourselves & forced to watch toys fight each other.”

“She never gave us any robes or wands.”

“I could’ve sworn she did,” Edgar said, staring down @ the carpet. “I swear I remember us fighting some dragon for her.”

“I think you just dreamt that,” Autumn said; though in the back o’ her head she, disturbingly ’nough, felt as if she remembered such an event, too, though she knew it had never happened.

“What ’bout that pirate suit you had? Or your circus clothes?” Edgar asked.

Autumn rubbed her chin. “I s’pose I could poke holes through a sheet & say I’m a ghost. It’ll be a capital cost; but hopefully we’ll win ’nough to make up for that.”

So they did just that: she yanked a baby-blue striped sheet Edgar had left in their sleeping spot after finding it while cleaning, put it on, & cut holes in front o' her eyes & next to her arms.

But as they went to the door, Edgar asked, "Um, what 'bout me?"

Autumn turned to look @ him with imbalanced brows. "What 'bout you?"

"Shouldn't I have a costume, too?" Edgar asked.

Now 'twas Autumn's turn to examine Edgar 'long his height—@ the dark robe covering every part o' him but his graying, dusty skull. As she looked up @ his face, she could see him staring blankly @ her with his yawning black eyeholes.

"I think you'll be fine as is," Autumn replied.

II. The Game

The sky was full o' fog & smoky clouds on the late night o' October 30 when Autumn & Edgar left the city sidewalk onto a wide grassy hill toward Heureuse Manor.

Though one might expect that on a night like this the moon'd be full, I panic that real life is not so accommodating—even when said real life is truly fiction—& the moon was merely waning gibbous. 'Twas still a large, lustrous waning-gibbous moon, splashing blue-gray light down all round them, though; they just didn't have to soil themselves 'bout werewolves attacking them in the middle o' nowhere (ghosts, goblins, serial killers, possessed trash cans, & giant piles o' vomit were still fair share, however).

The wind was heavy 'nough to whip the fringes o' their clothes & Autumn's hair. That didn't make it right, though: just 'cause the wind's stronger than someone doesn't mean it should be a bully.

Both could hear its sharp whistling, which was truly just some bloke emitting whoosh noises.

Sorry, but this story is on a tight budget.

Ventually, they found the mansion, which 1st appeared as a small roof peeking up from the top o' the hill, only to grow into a massive square structure. Its ol' stone texture gradually became sharper, till they were so close they could see every pixel.

While Autumn stepped up the stoop to knock on the front door, Edgar stood back & gazed @ the lawn as a rat in a lab. He calculated that 'twas approximately 128 blocks wide². To his vision, everything appeared menacing: the rusty gates guarding the sides o' the mansion with sharp spikes atop & aside; the prickly, dark, sick-colored ivy hedges circling the lawn, with blood-blue roses here & there; & the wind chimes clinking gainst each other, each drum like a death toll. Even the out-of-place pink flamingo lawn ornaments looked as if they may rise to life & charge @ Edgar, pecking out his empty eyes.

Edgar was so distracted by these worries that he hadn't noticed how much time he'd wasted till he was finally snapped back to focus by Autumn walking up to him.

"No answer," she said.

Edgar looked up @ the side o' the building. Under the dim yellow light o' an old-fashioned lantern hanging gainst the wall was carved "6358."

"But this is the right address," Edgar said. "Did we arrive too early?"

Autumn extracted her phone & checked.

"No. In fact, we're 'bout a minute late."

"Uh oh. You don't think that disqualified us, do you?" Edgar held his sleeved hand up to his jaw, ruminating over the punishments that could befall them—such as being forced to tell a 5-year-old his picture smells wacky or being forced to throw 'way a whole

2 A block is 16 pixels & approximately 40 cm.

perfectly-good cake.

“I won’t accept ‘no’ so easily,” Autumn replied.

Her eyes weren’t on Edgar, but on the mansion’s side. She walked to a window that led into a still-lit bathroom to see it open a crack. She lifted the window higher, releasing the odor o’ artificial chemicals to mix with the woodsy scent o’ the wind. After turning her head left & right for signs o’ trouble, she raised her right foot onto the sill & tried hoisting herself.

“Edgar, are you still ’hind me?” she whispered as she cringed @ the pressure o’ holding the pane for so long & o’ her legs’ struggle gainst gravity.

“Yeah,” he said as he scampered to her side.

“Good. Could you give me a li’l push up, please?”

Edgar scratched his head as he looked @ her, trying to see what she meant specifically. Finally he realized the problem & ducked down to hold her with the back o’ his shoulders, cringing under her weight. ’Twas less than a minute, though, ’fore he felt the pressure on his shoulders vanish.

“Thanks,” Autumn whispered. He looked up to see her inside, head poking out the window. “Now, grab my hands & I’ll pull you in.”

He did so, lifting his own foot up on the sill, & scrambling his other foot up with Autumn holding him up to prevent him from falling. The window she kept from falling with her shoulders; thus Edgar had to duck his head to fit through the small hole ’tween the pane & the sill.

“Are you sure this was a good idea,” Edgar whispered, voice strained. “I’m sure they probably heard us thumping & bumping.”

“Then we’d better move,” she said as she strode to the door.

She opened the door a crack & peeked through to see an empty hall dimly-lit by archaic lamps hanging from walls plastered with dusty, tearing, striped indigo wallpaper. She couldn’t see much, other

than a few closed doors on either side o' the hallway by shifting the angle in which she stared through the crack; but 'twas the best she could expect: she knew they couldn't stay in this bathroom all night.

"Looks clear," Autumn whispered. "Let's move."

"Already?" Edgar asked, only to see Autumn already sneaking out the door. Feeling that being caught 'lone in this leering bathroom would be worse than being caught with Autumn, Edgar decided to follow.

As Autumn slid down the hallway with her back pressed to the wall, she felt the temperature jump: compared to the chill outdoors, & even in the bathroom, the hallway felt cosily warm—so much that Autumn began to sweat under her jacket & sheet.

The sudden warmth was the 1 thing Edgar didn't notice. Maybe 'twas the way he could feel the cheap wallpaper crumpling 'hind his back as he rubbed it that distracted him; perhaps 'twas the flickering o' the outdated light fixtures; or maybe 'twas the sharp tickle he felt in his femur, which upon examination turned out to be the work o' a green spider hugging it tightly. Edgar shuddered as he shook off the li'l beast, trying to do so as silently as possible.

Autumn was relieved to see that, though the hallway did turn into 'nother going perpendicular from just in front o' the bathroom door, said hallway was also empty. Looking left, she could see that the hall ended on the other side @ a large room, which also seemed empty.

She wasn't as perceptive as she thought: though she couldn't see anyone nearby, halfway down the hall, she heard a baritone voice like clanging pots say, "Ahh, I see we have our first guest. Please, come right in."

Autumn hesitated for a second while Edgar bit his fingers in panic.

This could be a trap, Autumn thought.

Then 'gain, she did invite people here, so it'd make sense for her to

invite us in.

Then 'gain, perhaps the invitation itself was a trap.

& yet, Autumn realized she didn't have much o' a choice, anyway. The woman had already spotted her: to flee'd only make her suspect.

'Sides, no risk, no reward: if she's trying to yank the shoes off our feet, we'd better run her marathon for now, anyway, till we can find safe footing.

She turned to Edgar & waved toward the room 'head.

She led him into the room: a circular chamber with walls covered in magenta curtains & off-kilter portraits, the magenta carpet replaced by linoleum silver & gold checkers. On 1 side rose carpeted chairs that led to a door, & on the other Autumn could see the familiar double doors o' the entrance.

Autumn glanced @ the woman, examining her in secret. Said woman's brown hair was wrapped in a bun 'hind her & cut short over her round forehead. Everything but her head & hands were wrapped in a maroon cloak bulging @ the bottom like a dress, with her feet covered by thick black boots. Her face was full o' contorts & dusty gray.

"We tried knocking, but nobody answered," Autumn said.

"I know. You entered through the open window in the bathroom, correct? That was part of the test," the woman said. "This contest requires bold contestants—not the type who would easily be dispatched by my simply not answering the door. It appears you two were the first to pass that test.

"Whilst we wait for the others—if any others qualify—I might as well introduce myself: you may call me Madame Heureuse, the owner of this mansion for the past century."

I have to admit: the ancient accent does add strength to this fib, Autumn thought.

Madame Heureuse reached her thin hand out. Autumn stared @

it dully & slowly met it.

After a pause, Heureuse asked, "And what, may I ask, is your name, Madame?"

"Autumn." Then Autumn pointed @ Edgar & added, "He's Edgar."

Suddenly, they both heard knocking 'hind them, causing Autumn & Edgar to turn their heads. Edgar looked back @ Heureuse only for her to answer his silent question with a shake o' her head.

The knocking continued for the next minute, only to be followed by muffled shouting: "Hello, is anyone here?" Next they could hear a couple mo' footsteps, followed by mo' knocking.

Heureuse looked up @ the dripping, melted analog clock hanging @ the top o' the back wall over her shoulder & said, "You two may want to take a seat. We still have ten minutes remaining afore we begin."

Autumn & Edgar saw 'tween them & the front door a cluster o' maroon armchairs & a couch arranged in a circle. They sat together on the left end o' the couch facing the front door, Autumn hanging her left arm over the couch's arm, sinking into it with her eyelids drooping. Edgar curled up to Autumn while she rested her right arm on his lap. As they waited, Edgar's eyeholes vacillated 'tween Madame Heureuse & the door.

They could hear muffled voices from 'hind the door that sounded like arguing. Edgar thought he faintly heard a nasally voice say, "Well get on with it already!"

The door clicked, & then creaked as the 2 heavy doors wrenched open to reveal 5 people on the stoop. Autumn & Edgar couldn't recognize the 3 in the back, but were surprised to find that they could recognize the man in the black top hat with a golden dollar sign on the front & a cloak, & the woman in the red-and-blue baseball cap & spectacles. Lance's only costume variance was the raccoon mask over his eyes; Dawn, meanwhile, had the most

elaborate costume o' anyone there: a lab jacket long 'nough to be a dress with red splotches there & here, fish nets with li'l spider ornaments attached, & fuzzy orange claws for shoes. Her hair was even dyed gray.

Dawn blinked in surprise when she spotted the 3 in the living room watching them. "O, hey, here's some people. Uh, sorry 'bout breaking in, but we didn't think you could hear us through the door. We were knocking for quite a while."

"A rather sloppy way to entertain your guests, I must say," Lance said with his eyes closed & his arms crossed.

"That is perfectly fine," Madame Heureuse said slowly as she spread her arms out. "I intentionally neglected to answer the door. It was a test to see if you were bold enough to enter without being specifically told you could. I must say that I am impressed by your ability to unlock doors like that."

"O, thanks," Dawn said, scratching her head nervously. "I'd always lose the keys to a restaurant I used to run, & so I figured out how to unlock doors with paperclips laced with dihydrogen monoxide & boskeopium." She held up the unraveled purple plastic paperclip she used on the door.

"So you're saying this rude welcoming was all on purpose, as a form o' a ruse?" Lance said, his voice rising. Then his eyes narrowed as they locked on Autumn; she replied with the same droopy expression o' boredom she had already been wearing for the past 10 minutes.

"I s'pose this was likely the idea o' the looter you seem to be associating yourself with there on the couch."

"Ah, you mean Madame Autumn and Sir Edgar. I see that some of you are acquaintances," Heureuse said. "No, they were the first ones to enter, by breaking in through the window, which I intentionally left open a crack, as I had expected some to do."

“Hmmp, that figures,” Lance sneered.

“Well, anyway, come in and have a seat, you all,” Madame Heureuse said as she waved her hand toward her.

The 4 in front shuffled in & took their seats. Dawn waved @ Edgar & Autumn & said, “Should’ve known you’d be here, considering how much you 2 love searching for treasure & stuff,” ’fore sitting next to Edgar. While Edgar returned a tepid wave, Autumn gave only brief eye-contact, hoping that sufficed for social rituals.

The person who appeared to be in a cat costume & purple sweater remained on the front stoop, staring @ the threshold o’ the door with anxious puzzlement, as if ’twere a dangerous force field.

“Uh, Madame?” Madame Heureuse said. “You in the cat costume: you want to enter?”

“I don’t know if I should,” she said. “You said we were s’posed to break in to prove that we were bold, but I was actually going to go home till the woman in the jacket-dress thing unlocked the door. ’Cause o’ this, I think I should be disqualified.”

“Oh, that’s no problem. You may enter, anyway,” Madame Heureuse said.

“O, you don’t have to let me in out o’ pity,” the one in the cat costume said, now looking up @ Madame Heureuse with wide, golden eyes. “I’ve been kicked out o’ houses lots o’ times. In fact, when I lived with my parents, I spent every night since I was 3 on the roof ’cause I reminded them too much o’ their crushed dreams.”

Lance puffed himself up in his armchair, his arms tightly gripping its, & said without turning to look @ the cat-costumed woman, “Would you hurry up so you can close that door? It’s freezing in here.”

“O, sorry,” the cat-costumed woman said as she closed the door ’hind her. As she walked toward the circle o’ chairs, she said, “I annoy people a lot, so don’t be ’fraid to tell me when I do something

annoying—or when I’m just annoying by being here.” She stopped & sat on the floor 5 centimeters outside the circle.

“Uh, you know there’s room for 1 mo’ person on this couch here,” Dawn said as she patted the empty space on the rightmost side o’ the couch.

“That’s OK. I wouldn’t want to make you be close to me,” the cat-costumed woman said. “& anyway, I don’t think I truly deserve to sit on a chair or a couch, since I’m really mo’ like an im... imamanent? ... An object that a real person o’ importance.”

“Hey, if you want to be an inanimate object, would you mind coming over here & being my foot rest for a doubloon?” Lance said as he stared down @ his feet floating awkwardly over the floor with disgust. “In addition to being too ungracious to give us a proper greeting, it seems our host was too cheap to offer such things as ‘footrests.’ I feel like I’m living in the boonies in this mansion.”

“That’d be a great idea,” the cat-costumed woman said as she crawled over to Lance’s chair & stood there, bent over, on all 4s. Lance laid his feet on her back & shifted in his seat for a few seconds ’fore lying back in his chair with a serene expression.

“Knock it off,” Dawn said with a finger pointed @ Lance. “You can’t just use this kid as a footstool.”

“I’m paying her a whole doubloon for it. You know how much those are worth?” Lance said with the cranky look o’ someone who has been disturbed from his paradise. “I’m sorry if I expect my employees to actually do the work I pay them to do, Comrade Karl Marx.”

Autumn staring forward into space, mind occupied by memories o’ all the comfy times she had not being surrounded by people.

“Shall we start then?” Madame Heureuse said as she walked forward over to the armchair with its back turned to the front door. It stood out ’mong all o’ the seats for some reason. Maybe ‘twas

'cause 'twas covered in cobwebs, or had a green glow round it.

Either way, when the 5 came in, they all avoided it.

She sat in the chair & leaned back into it with her right leg crossed over her left & her hands clasped together & held out over her knees. They all watched—even Autumn, though still with bored stupor—as the chair's glow grew when she sat in it, as if 'twere being electrified.

"I must say that I truly enjoy all of your costumes—especially yours, Sir Edgar," Madame Heureuse said.

Edgar raised a weak finger up—though all anyone else could see was his raised sleeve—& began to say, "Uh, actually, this isn't a—"

"And your cat costume is amazing," Madame Heureuse said as she leaned down to face the woman still standing on 4s under Lance's feet. "It appears so real in every way. How did you make it?"

"It looks nothing like a costume @ all, does it?" the cat-costumed woman said, staring down @ the floor.

"No, it does not," Madame Heureuse said with a laugh. "The only problem with it is that you appeared to forget the tail."

"Yeah, I used to have 1 a long time ago, but then when I was in middle school some nice kids helped me cut it off. Everyone was so inconvenienced by me being in this costume all the time, but I always had trouble getting it off."

"Well, I am sorry to hear that," Heureuse said with a concerned tilt o' her head.

"Yeah, I'm sorry I failed so badly," the cat-costumed woman replied. "I gotta warn you that I fail @ pretty much everything I do."

"May I ask what your name is, Madame?"

"O, you don't have to waste your valuable time learning my name; my parents didn't even waste their time giving me 1. You can call me by the nickname they gave me, though: Worthless Waste o' Air."

“Hmm... That is a bit long...” Madame Heureuse said with as much politeness as she could muster, not trying to offend this new acquaintance.

“I know. I’m sorry for inconveniencing people so much.”

“And what, may I ask, is your name and your costume supposed to be, Sir?” Madame Heureuse said as she raised her head up to look @ Lance.

“Hmmp,” Lance said—not in the way one might say it in real life, but the exact sound “hmp” that one might say in a cartoon. “I can’t believe you don’t recognize me—though I admit my costume is quite deceiving. I am Lance Chamsby, the richest man in Boskeopolis, & I am dressed as Ragnar Denneskjold from the brilliant book *Atlas Shrugged*—the superhero for the 1%.”

“Well, my silly old self shall admit that she knows nothing of this ‘one percent,’ but it sounds like a very nice club,” Madame Heureuse said, & then she turned to Dawn & asked, “Now, what are your name & costume?”

Dawn said rapidly, “Uh, I’m Dawn Summers & I’m an irate scientist who accidentally spilled an elixir on myself, causing me to slowly turn into a fuzzy monster.”

Madame Heureuse turned to Autumn & Edgar & said, “Now, I already learned that your names are Autumn—a magnificent season, I must say—and Edgar. And you are a ghost and grim reaper, respectively, correct?”

Autumn nodded, followed by Edgar.

“Well then, with that settled, I suppose I should explain what this contest is, just in case some of you do not already know.” Madame Heureuse cleared her throat ’fore continuing. “Hidden within this mansion are treasure chests; anyone may keep whatever he or she finds within the next few days—if he or she can survive that long.”

Madame Heureuse sat up from her chair, causing it to spark in

the empty spot she left. Her expression hadn't changed; but everyone else was gazing @ it.

"Now, I fear we only have a few rooms, so you will all have to draw cards to decide who shares a room with whom," Madame Heureuse said as she pointed an upraised palm toward a table outside the circle with 10 face-down cards arranged in 2 rows o' 5.

Lance Chamsby crossed his legs with a look o' discomfort. "You're expecting us to share rooms? What is this, a prison camp? I absolutely refuse to degrade myself to such low-class treatment!" He pounded his fist gainst the arm o' his chair, but 'cause 'twas so soft, his fist only released a *puff* sound.

"The way this game will work is that whosever numbers are the closest will room together," Madame Heureuse said with her hands folded together in front o' her. "Now, who wants to start?"

Autumn nudged Edgar. Edgar turned to look @ her. She nodded.

Edgar turned back to Heureuse & raised a tepid hand. "Uh, I guess I'll go 1st."

"Excellent. Step right up," Heureuse said as she backed 'way from the table with her hands pointed toward it, showing it off.

Edgar stepped up to the table & looked @ each card carefully. They all had the same squiggly carnation-colored patterns bordered by thick white lines. He held his hand up in the air, frozen, till he finally picked the middle card in the top row. Edgar stared @ it for a moment, trying to decide if there was something else he was s'posed to do. 'Ventually he just turned round & walked back to his spot on the couch.

As Edgar made his way back, Autumn sat up off the couch & walked over to the card table in the same bored slump she carried herself as throughout this night. However, as she passed Edgar, she made sure to sneak a quick glance @ his card.

11... 11... 11... she repeated in her head so she could remember

it.

When she stopped @ the card table, her expression turned to the twisted look o' uncertainty as she held her hands a few centimeters 'bove the cards, much as Edgar had done before.

But unlike Edgar, she was doing it for a purpose: she held small plastic illumination plates in each hand that glowed over all o' the cards, allowing the black ink o' the other side o' each card to show through. Autumn quickly glanced over all o' the #'s, comparing them all in her head, till she finally concluded that the card 2nd-to-last on the bottom row was correct.

'Fore Autumn could turn back to the couch, Madame Heureuse said with a wry smile, "That's thirteen, the closest number to your partner Edgar's. That must be convenient."

Autumn only shrugged.

"Now, now, Madame Springer; there's no need to disparage your own skills," Heureuse said with a wink.

The others all drew their cards the fair way, & compared them. Lance, finding his farthest 'way from all the others, claimed 1 o' the rooms for himself.

"I guess we're roommates, Felix," Dawn said as she walked up to Worthless Waste o' Air Felix. "I hope you don't find my snoring too loud or my subplots too unmemorable."

"I'm sorry if I'll get in the way o' your snoring & subplots & everything," Felix said. "If you want, I can just sleep outside the door—or even outside the mansion. I'm pretty used to it already."

"Uh, no, that's OK." Dawn said with a nervous laugh. "I'd much prefer you stay inside."

"You don't need to bother yourself for me," Felix said. "Truly, I'm used to it."

& so the round'bout conversation continued...

Madame Heureuse looked up @ the melting clock & yawned.

“Well, it appears to be getting late,” she said. “I had better show you to your rooms so that you can get some rest. Tomorrow will be a big day.”

She led them up the steps & through the large double doors into a hallway that looked to Autumn & Edgar similar to the other 1, only with blue-green & yellow-green striped wallpaper.

Madame Heureuse stopped them before a row o’ rooms & told them to sort out who gets what ’mong themselves—they were all the same, she told them. As Heureuse continued down the hall past them, each pair—& Chamsby—chose the closest door to them, sorting it all out in less than a minute.

Autumn opened the door & slowly walked into the room as she examined it all over. Her experience as a thief who oft snuck into others’ buildings instilled in her caution whenever she entered an unfamiliar room. This was no different.

The room looked no peculiar, though: it had the same green wallpaper as the hallway, as well as an old mahogany dresser & 2 baroque white beds on either side o’ the room. The white-curtained window was also open, which Autumn could discern just by the feel o’ the cool breeze rushing into the room. Madame Heureuse evidently didn’t concern herself with the prospect that someone dangerous might break into her mansion without her request.

Edgar closed the door ’hind them & they both sat on the edge o’ the rightmost bed with their eyes to the other side o’ the room. Without turning to Edgar, Autumn asked, “D’you think we should try sneaking out later @ night & getting a head start on finding some o’ that treasure?”

Visions raced through Edgar’s mind o’ monsters o’ all different shapes, sizes, colors, & blood types attacking them ’lone out in the large, deep darkness o’ the mansion.

“I think we’d better not waste our energy,” Edgar said. “Madame

Heureuse said she planned to give us a ‘big day’ tomorrow. She’ll, uh, probably give us information we’ll need to find the treasure, which’ll probably be o’ better use if we’re well-rested, rather than being tired-out from a nightful o’ fruitless searching.”

Autumn paused to ruminate over Edgar’s argument. She stared forward @ the opposite wall—though, truly, into empty space.

“That is probably best,” Autumn finally said with a nod.

They both stared awkwardly @ the 2nd bed ’cross the room from them—a rare encounter for 2 who were used to sleeping on the floor, or even in the middle o’ storm drains. These habits usually put them in the habit o’ sleeping together; but with this 2nd bed, each wondered if that norm should change.

Finally, Autumn tossed her ghost sheet & shoes off onto the floor, lay down, & slid under the sheets. But when she opened her eyes a minute later, she saw Edgar was still sitting on the edge, shivering.

“Uh, you want to come to bed?” Autumn asked, looking @ him with concern.

Edgar looked down & asked so quietly, Autumn could barely hear him, “Uh... You don’t mind if I—”

“Course not. We’ve kept this arrangement for years. Why stop now?”

Edgar slid under the covers, brushing gainst the mix o’ hard plastic & soft cotton that was Autumn’s jacket. Despite Autumn’s point ’bout this being a long-held arrangement, Edgar for some reason felt a jitter rise through his nervous system that threatened to make him giggle. In contrast, Autumn sounded so quiet with her arms round him that he’d think she were a golem if he couldn’t feel the warm air o’ her breaths.

It didn’t take long for them both to drift to sleep to the lullaby o’ the curtains fluttering in the wind.

You have to give the bloke credit: he’s got some lungs.

III. Haunted

This is futile.

Autumn sat up, hand pressed to her forehead as she glared @ the surrounding blue darkness. She glanced down @ the soft mass that hid Edgar for a second, & then slid out from under the covers.

I should let him rest.

'Sides, I probably won't be out long.

When she entered the hallway 'gain, she noticed that the antique lamps were still on, filling the room with stale light that'd be a bother with which to read, but was adequate for wandering the night—which mollified Autumn, having just remembered that she'd neglected to bring her flashlight.

From what she saw o' the mansion's outside earlier that night, she estimated that it had many mo' floors & many mo' hallways on each floor. It'd take forever for Edgar & her to track down every treasure; & the mo' time they took, the mo' time the competition had to snatch them all 'stead.

She still hadn't decided yet whether she should skip searching the too-obvious spots, or whether those would be the most likely sites in which the treasures would be hidden. She still hadn't gauged how crafty Madame Heureuse was.

So occupied was Autumn by these thoughts that it took her a while to notice something peculiar: by this point, she was already in the hallway on the 1st floor that the bathroom she'd entered the mansion through was in; she remembered 'twas through the door @ the end o' the hall corner, straight 'head from where she was walking. & yet, it seemed to take longer to get there than she remembered. No matter how long Autumn walked, the door still appeared just as distant. @ 1st, she concluded that such an idea was

ridiculous; but as the door persisted in its refusal to appear nearer, her concern worsened.

She watched the doors on the sides o' the hallway to count those still left & those passed. The end o' the hall was so far, she could not see the last few doors distinctly. Still, as she proceeded to pass doors, she noticed that there was no shortage o' doors emerging from the blurry distance. Such phenomenon did not seem consistent with the laws o' physics.

Autumn stopped & turned. The opening 'tween the hall & the living room was right in front o' her, all o' the doors she passed seemingly vanishing.

Autumn held her arms akimbo & thought, *Huh... Must be to keep contestants from cheating.*

She turned back round to examine the bathroom door 'gain, only to suddenly slam her back gainst the wall with her arms held out. Something changed since the last time she looked down this hallway. It wasn't subtle, either: while it took her a while to notice the ever-distant door, she took no time to notice the floating yellow raincoat with a single eye poking out the neck hole & a long tongue stretching out over the front.

She stared @ it with bulging eyeballs herself, unable to even categorize this creature, much less figure out how to react to it. The creature, meanwhile, merely stared @ her, floating in its fixed position.

Soon, Autumn did think o' a brilliant plan for how to deal with this monster: run from it as fast as she could. She slowly & carefully took a few steps backward as she aimed a cool expression @ it 'fore suddenly twisting & bolting up the stairs o' the living room & through the 2nd floor hallway up through her room door, which she made sure to slam 'hind her with her body blocking it.

Edgar, woken by the noise, sat up & stared @ Autumn.

“Is something wrong? Where were you?” Edgar said.

’Fore Autumn could respond, childish giggles emerged from ’hind the door, followed by the sight o’ 2 o’ the floating raincoats.

While Edgar attempted to cower under his blankets, Autumn merely vacillated ’tween the 2, blinking rapidly. Though Autumn was a skeptic when it came to the supernatural, she was not so much when it comes to what she saw right in front o’ her face.

’Sides, whether a trick or not, she had an inkling this was not a good sight either way.

Autumn jumped & turned round as if ready to karate chop someone when she heard & felt pounding on the door ’hind her. But she relaxed a li’l when she recognized the voice ’hind it call, “I hope I’m not interrupting anything, but is everything all right in there?”

“Uh...”

Autumn cut off when she noticed the ghosts converge on Edgar, who had completely dug himself under his blankets so that he almost looked like a ghost himself.

“Guys?”

Dawn entered with a hand over her eyes, asking, “What’s wrong?” only to drop it immediately when she saw the ghosts surrounding Edgar, floating his blankets ’bove his head. When he finally noticed his protection gone, he pulled his hood over his head & buried his face into the bed like an ostrich.

While Autumn so far was calm—’twas not as if there were anything she could do ’bout flying coat ghosts—that changed when she witnessed the ghosts now levitating Edgar up to their level, which was decimeters ’way from the ceiling, & flipping him upside-down.

“If this is a gag...” Autumn said.

“Maybe I should go get Felix,” Dawn said as she awkwardly turned her body to the door, twisted ’tween the 2 opposite directions.

“Should I wake up the others, as well?”

“Don’t bother getting that idiot Lance,” Autumn said.

“What ’bout the other 2? Neville & Weston I think they called themselves.”

“Who?”

“You know, those other 2 guys who are in the same room.”

“I don’t remember any other 2 guys.”

Dawn turned all the way toward the door & said, “Well, I’ll just get Felix then,” ’fore rushing out the room.

She was just going through the door to her own room when she bumped into Felix on accident.

“O, sorry, Felix,” Dawn said as she backed ’way to leave space for Felix to go out the door.

Felix gave Dawn the same wide-eyed stare she always seemed to give her while saying, “I don’t know why you’d apologize when I should be the 1 to apologize for ruining your nice lab coat with my germs.”

Dawn paused to register what she said ’fore saying, “We truly need your help with something, please.”

“If you say so; but I don’t see how you could ever get much use out o’ me, since I have only ever made the world worse since—”

Dawn interrupted her by grabbing her hand & pulling her toward Autumn’s door, saying, “O, you’ll do great.”

But when they entered Autumn’s room ’gain, they saw that Autumn was no longer standing where she was before. While Felix stared @ the ghosts with stoic fascination, Dawn looked all round the room till she finally spotted Autumn hanging upside-down in the air just like Edgar, ire on her face.

Autumn could tell by the feeling o’ the ghosts’ magic suspending her in the air that trying to struggle free would be honeyless, so she just let her arms droop limply, reserving her energy for planning, in

case the ghosts tried anything legitimately dangerous.

Meanwhile, the ghosts maintained their mirthful cacophony.

All Felix could say was, “Gee, it seems unfair that these 2 are being attacked by these ghosts when I’m probably the 1 who deserves it the most.”

“That will probably be arranged for both o’ us, soon,” Dawn said, feeling a sweat drop drip down the side o’ her head. “Uh, by chance, are the ghosts actually hurting you any, other than making you both feel head rushes?”

“They’re being pains in the ass,” Autumn answered civilly.

“Here, hold your arms out: Felix & I’ll help you down,” Dawn said, turning to Felix only to see her being held upside-down now, as well.

“I’m sorry...” Felix said. “I told you I always mess up ever—”

“Uh... that’s no problem. That’s not your fault.” Dawn turned back to Autumn, “Well, I guess I’ll help you down.”

Autumn floated there inertly, letting Dawn yank on her arms as much as she wanted. As Autumn predicted, this failed.

She might as well be pulling on rope tied round an anvil.

Dawn stopped & said with heavy breaths, “I don’t think this’ll work.”

“It won’t,” Autumn said. “You’d better not bother; you’d have a better chance ripping my arms off than grounding me.”

Though ‘twas hard to discern, it seemed to everyone as if the ghosts’ laughter had gotten louder.

Lance Chamsby burst through the door, yelling, “Can you proletariats spend 1 night without sounding like a marching band?” He paused to survey the room & saw Edgar, Autumn, Felix, & now Dawn hanging upside-down from the air. “I see you all are having your frat rituals from college. Aren’t you all a li’l too old to be playing games @ 3 in the morning & giggling like school children?”

“I’m sorry,” Felix said with a deflated look on her face.

“You should be,” Lance replied.

“It’d be nice if you could tell Madame Heureuse ’bout the ghosts,” Dawn said.

“I’m sure she already knows & is ’hind it as some cheap, manufactured thrill,” Autumn said.

Lance put his hands on his hips & said, “Phh! I don’t know ’bout you leftist mystic freaks, but I’ve outgrown fairy tales ahead—what the hell?”

Lance felt the world turn upside-down as he floated up in the air, his head a meter from the ground.

He scrambled his arms & yelled, “What is this goofery? Get me down this instance!”

“It’s not us; it’s the ghosts,” Dawn said.

“I refuse to believe that,” Lance said with an accusatory finger pointed @ Dawn. “Ghosts only exist in fiction.”

“This is fiction,” Autumn said.

“Yeah, but...” Lance blinked in astonishment. “Wait...”

Autumn turned to 1 o’ the ghosts, who was eying her intently, & said with a flick o’ 1 o’ her wrists, “I don’t know if you can hear us from these, Heureuse, but I was just wondering how long we’ll endure this game?” She yawned. “I’m tired.”

The ghost didn’t answer; & Autumn could tell that, unlike the other ghosts, it wasn’t laughing. ’Stead, it continued to stare @ Autumn, its white pupil swimming in figure-8s inside its black eye. Autumn began to feel her temperature gradually decrease till it felt as if her blood were full o’ ice, causing her to compress her body together & shiver.

The others began to notice, shifting their attention to the sight o’ Autumn shivering & her skin, which was paling.

“Autumn, are you all right?” Edgar asked.

“Yes. I was wondering, just out o’ curiosity, if anyone else felt

immensely cold all o' a sudden," Autumn said.

"Uh, no, but it looks like you do," Dawn said.

"Poker," Autumn said. "Cause I do, & I suspect it's 'cause o' this fellow."

"This is quite an exquisite game you're playing, *Madame Springer*," Lance said; "but I think we've had our fill."

Autumn was too absorbed in having her warmth absorbed to waste her energy on a retort; all 'twas on the desire to keep from freezing to death, which can be rather difficult when one has no direct control over one's own temperature. All she could do was what she was already doing, as well as breathing heat on her arms.

"When I see Heureuse, I'll ring her neck," Autumn muttered through chattering teeth.

The others, save Edgar, were too preoccupied to pay any mo' attention to Autumn; they had their own ghosts to contend with now, & could all feel their temperatures tumble, too.

"The second I get the chance, I shall report both you & the terrible host o' this terrible mansion to the proper authorities," Lance said with lemon eyes.

"So, uh, is this how these guys, uh... dispatch their enemies?" Dawn asked.

She looked over @ Felix for a response & was surprised to see that she was the only 1 not cringing or compressing her body together. In fact, if not for Felix's hair standing up on end, one would be unable to tell that Felix was feeling cold @ all. She simply aimed the same blank gaze @ the ghost as it did to her.

"Uh, Felix, are you all right?" Dawn asked.

"O, yeah," Felix said. "You truly shouldn't worry yourself with my well-being, though, since there are people whose lives are mo' valuable who are being harmed."

"Yeah, like mine," Lance said. "When shall we be done with this?"

Lance, whose body was sensitive to every aberrant tickle or itch, could not stand the seemingly never-ending sensation o' sheer frigidness being forced upon his body.

"Is everything all right? I keep hearing nois...es..."

All turned their heads to the door to see Madame Heureuse standing there, embarrassed.

Heureuse snapped her fingers & said, "That's enough, you two. Put them down."

Each ghost's pupil spun in circles 'fore they both disappeared in puffs o' green-gray smoke. With the ghosts gone, gravity could finally resume its job & caused the other 5 to fall down on their heads. As they stood, they could feel warmth return to their bodies—'specially as they attempted to rub more o' it into themselves.

Autumn was particularly attentive to this, since her skin was virtually gray, her eyes blank. While the others—save Edgar—were watching Madame Heureuse, Autumn's eyes bore into the ether as if she'd recently completed a tanuki-leaf-eating spree, sitting with arms round her raised knees.

"You may want to check on the other 2 to make sure the ghosts aren't getting them," Dawn said with chattering teeth.

"They should be safe," Heureuse said with a raised hand; "kappa-obake can only attack humans who are awake." Heureuse frowned. "Sorry about that. They sometimes escape from their... chambers. It does not happen much, but it does happen at times." She tilted her head like a concerned owl. "You kids are all all right, right?"

Dawn & Felix nodded. Edgar continued to focus on Autumn, unsure if he should wrap his robe round her to warm her or if she'd rather he wait till everyone else exited.

Rudewhile, Lance, strode over to Madame Heureuse.

"No, we are *not* all right!" Lance said with a finger still shaking in chilliness pointed @ Heureuse. "Is this how you treat your guests? I'd

have better treatment in North Korea or Sweden.”

“I am deeply sorry for all that I have put you five through,” Madame Heureuse said. “If anyone feels that he or she cannot stay here anymore, I would understand completely.”

Autumn looked up @ Madame Heureuse. *She is merely saying that to pick out the weaker competition. It's a trap. Only a fool would fall for such a simple trick.*

“Well, I might just take you up on your offer,” Lance said, & then stormed past Heureuse & down the hall.

Heureuse began to wipe her left eye as she peered down @ the floor. This caused Edgar, Dawn, & Felix to trade guilty glances.

“Gee, I’m sorry you had to waste your useful time saving me,” Felix said. “You truly would’ve been better off letting me be killed by the ghosts...”

“Well, uh, anyway, thanks for the help, Madame Heureuse,” Dawn said with a li'l wave. “Felix & I’ll be off to bed ’gain. Right, Felix?”

“Whatever you say,” Felix said. “You’re much smarter than me.”

“See you tomorrow.” Dawn waved @ Heureuse, grabbed Felix by the shoulder, & escorted her out.

Madame Heureuse looked down @ Autumn still huddled under her jacket & whispered, “Don’t let their actions pressure you into staying if you do not feel safe.” She had trouble keeping from cringing as she looked down @ Autumn’s still-pale skin.

Autumn simply said, “I won’t.”

Heureuse said, “Take care, then,” as she stepped out the door, & then shut it ’hind her.

Autumn stretched her arms out & yawned, only to quickly return her arms to her shivering stance just afterward. Then she stood up & walked over to the bed. “Well, I was thinking o’ sneaking an hour o’ broad searching round the area, but I think we’ll save that for tomorrow. All right with you?”

Edgar didn't know what to say, so he just nodded. Nodding seemed easy 'nough.

IV. Dehumanized

"If you want, you can borrow my sweater," Felix said.

A meter or so after she & Dawn left Autumn's room, Dawn had stuffed her hands into the pockets o' her lab coat & began to shiver.

"O, you don't need to do that. 'Sides, it looks cuter on you," Dawn said with an awkward smile. "Though you haven't seemed to be shivering much since the ghosts attacked us. Do you have a lot o' layers on or something?"

"No, but I'm used to the cold, since I spend nights outside in the cold, anyway."

"That's awful," Dawn said with an even mo' awkward frown.

"O, I know," Felix said. "I can't believe all the good things the Programmers give such a failure like me. Can I admit something?"

"Sure... You can tell me anything," Dawn said with a frightened half-smile.

Felix looked down @ the floor shamefully & said, "Sometimes I'd be so greedy that I'd steal some newspaper & use it as a blanket or even... I'd even sleep in a nice cozy dumpster. I know it's probably selfish to use these things that could be o' great use to other people for my own worthless wants."

Dawn paused, staring @ Felix as one would stare @ a run-over squirrel.

"Uh, is everything all right with you?"

Felix shook her head. "Nope. I wish I knew how to stop being wrong, but I can—O, I shouldn't make such 'scuses."

Then she slapped her hand.

"Uh, if this is a joke, it's not a funny 1," Dawn said.

Felix looked up @ her with those calm eyes.

"It looks like it, doesn't it. I'm so sorry. If you want, you can hit me when I do something bad..."

Dawn shook her head.

"Uh, how 'bout we both come inside & sit down?"

Dawn put her arm round Felix's shoulder & led her toward the rightward bed.

"You sure you don't want me to stay outside."

"Positive," Dawn said as she sat them both down.

Her arm was still round this stranger's shoulder. She wasn't sure if she liked it to remain there or not. If she remained consistent, Dawn doubted she'd balk even if she didn't like it—which only irked Dawn mo'. Contrariwise, she still wasn't sure if this was still some sick joke or if this woman truly had such problems.

"So, uh, what convinced you to come to this contest, anyway?" Dawn asked.

"I know, I shouldn't have come. Now I've ruined it for everyone," Felix said. "You don't want me to bore you with my stupid reasons."

"Yes I do."

"W... Why?"

Dawn paused, trying to rush her brain to think o' something to say.

Dawn smiled & said, "Cause your mouth looks better when it's talking."

Only to summarily ask herself, *What does that even mean?*

Felix stared @ her with twitching confusion, as if she were crashing from such an unexpected reaction.

"Well... if you say so..." Felix said. "I... I guess I wanted to finally be able to help someone for once, & so I saw this contest thing mentioned in a flier on the electric pole next to the alley I sleep in & thought 'twas the Programmers telling me how I could do something

good for once; but now I know 'twas a bad idea. No matter how much I want to be, I can't be anything but a bother."

"O, I'm sure that isn't true," Dawn said.

Felix paused in apparent confusion.

"If you say so," she said.

She isn't faking it, is she, Dawn thought, shivering 'gain as if an iron cloud swept over her.

She turned to Felix. "D'you have any family? Friends?... Lovers?"

"O, others treat me very nice," Felix said. "That's the problem. I get so much good & give nothing good in return. Luckily, most o' them aren't round me anymore, so I can't bother them so much anymore."

"Would you mind bothering me?" Dawn asked with a sly smile.

"I'm sorry. I can leave if you want..."

"What?" Dawn said in confusion.

Felix shrank in even mo'. "I'm sorry if I'm bothering you."

"No. No, 'twas a joke, see." Dawn laughed nervously. "Don't worry: I always muff them up."

"O, you don't have to try making me feel better. I'm sure I was just too dumb to understand it," Felix said.

"D'you truly feel that way?" Dawn asked with a frown.

Felix nodded. "I know it."

Dawn looked down @ Felix's hand & turned it over in her own, hoping this wasn't an invasion o' personal space, either.

"Did you make this costume yourself or did you buy it?" Dawn asked.

"Neither," Felix said. "I don't know where it came from."

"Just found it lying round?" Dawn asked as she looked back up @ her.

"As far as I know, I've always had it on." Felix shook her head. "No matter how much I tried, I couldn't get it off. Still can't. I can't even

do such simple things.”

Dawn eyed her incredulously. “So... so you just walk round in a cat costume all o’ the time?”

Felix nodded. “Terrible o’ me, right?”

Dawn shrugged. “Hey, it’s a free city. If you want to wear a cat costume everywhere you go, that’s your industry.” Then she added, “You don’t hate how you look, d’you?”

“Nothing ’bout me is good...”

“So, I take that as a yes,” Dawn said. “Is that why you always wear the costume?”

“I can’t take it off. If I could, I would. I’m sorry: I know that’s an awful ’scuse.”

Dawn looked ’head o’ her with crocheted brows.

I still can’t tell if she’s going full Andy Kaufman or not, & I feel terrible for being unsure.

She decided it’d be safer to assume the latter. She patted Felix on the shoulder & said, “You shouldn’t be so hard on yourself.”

“I’m sorry.”

“No need to be.”

“I’m sorry ’bout that, too.”

Dawn blinked @ her.

“Anyway, I s’pose we’d better get some sleep,” Dawn said.

“O, if you want, I can guard you during the night. I don’t really need the sl—”

“That’s OK,” Dawn said.

Dawn reached into the back o’ her jacket, pulled out a baseball bat, & tossed it next to her bed. Then she climbed into bed & covered everything under her head with blanket.

“Are you sure you don’t need an extra bed? I truly don’t need it; I’ve slept on the floor plenty o’ nights.”

“Don’t be ridiculous,” Dawn said, & then instantly regretted it.

Felix paused with her patented golden blank stare. Dawn noticed that Felix seemed to have perpetual rings under her eyes, as if the Programmers specifically designed her to look as wretched as possible just for cheap laughs.

“I’m sorry for being so unruly,” Felix said.

Dawn sighed. “That’s truly not necessary...”

“I’m sorry everything I do is unnecessary. I’ll stop pestering you.”

As Felix walked over to her bed with her eyes glued to the carpet, she thought, *Well, there’s yet ’nother person whose life I completely ruined.*

Dawn only stared forward in exhausted horror, unsure what she should do. *Should I try to get this complete stranger psychological help? This late?* The more she thought ’bout it, the goofier the idea sounded.

But what if she... does herself in tonight? Dawn shuddered as she forced her mind to suppress memories, felt her skin bubble with goose bumps @ the various gruesome images that rushed through her head: her roommate lying airless on her bed from an intentional overdose; or perhaps hanging from a rope tied to the ceiling, neck bent & eyes vacant; or with a sharp object stabbed straight through her chest—or perhaps just the emptiness o’ her silent disappearance, never to be found by anyone ever ’gain. Bile burned up Dawn’s throat as a volcano ready to erupt. She thought she’d rather die than see someone else die ’gain.

She peeked out from under the blankets to see Felix lying uncovered on her bed, staring vacantly @ the ceiling. She shuttered to think ’bout what thoughts might be ambling inside that quiet brain.

“Uh... Felix? You sure you’re not cold without the blanket on?”

“Yes, but I think I probab—”

“Surely you couldn’t have done something that terrible...” Dawn

said uneasily.

“I haven’t done anything good, either.”

“I doubt that,” Dawn said. “Just... Why don’t you just put the covers on & drift to sleep, comfortable & thinking pleasant thoughts.”

Dawn knew she’d make a terrible counselor.

“But why would you want me to enjoy anything when I’ve been such a rude roommate so much?”

“Uh... ’cause we’re partners, remember? & that’s how partners treat each other,” Dawn said. “Now just get some rest, OK?”

“OK.”

But while Dawn closed her eyes & quickly surfed on to slumber city, Felix merely turned her head to the side opposite Dawn & stared @ the wall just in front o’ her. The mad scientist woman seemed peculiar to her. Though she felt guilty ’bout it, since she was probably not s’posed to do it, she still couldn’t help wondering why the jacket-dressed woman was so strangely intent on making her be happy. Isn’t that the opposite o’ what she deserved? Wasn’t happiness s’posed to be reserved for the quality people, such as the mad-scientist woman? Why even have happiness if it had to be wasted on the losers like herself?

Must be ’cause she’s a mad scientist. She knows I’m a monster, & must like me ’cause o’ that.

Though she knew that only made the scientist woman wrong, Felix still couldn’t help feeling a... feeling o’ excitement ’bout her.

You shouldn’t be wasting your time on these thoughts, she chided herself. However nice she is, she still wouldn’t want her life to be ruined even mo’ by having to spent even mo’ o’ it round you.

She did say I was her partner, though... Nobody has ever said they wanted to befriend me before.

& nobody ever will. She was saying that out o’ pity—pity a spoiled brat like you doesn’t deserve.

& then Felix shuddered herself, in fear that she was passing way too far into the realm o' selfish waste. She shut her eyes, hoping sleep would stave off this feeling. As she waited for sleep to hit, she devised ways she could punish herself to make up for these scandalous indulgences.

V. Daughters o' Plunder

Darkness had transformed into dull blue light when Autumn's eyes opened 'gain. She could see by looking out the still-open window @ the dark trees & periwinkle sky that 'twas in the awkward period 'tween late night & sunrise—probably round 5 or 6.

Though 'twas still rather chilly from the outside air blowing in, she didn't feel anything she wouldn't normally feel on an early morning such as this. She raised her arm & looked @ it to see that 'twas no longer pale.

'Ventually, she sat up on the edge o' the bed, yawned, & put on her shoes. She turned back to Edgar & debated the cons o' hesitating too long when the morn was so fresh versus spoiling such a precious sleep.

Finally, she nudged him, & whispered, "Psst, Edgar."

Edgar turned on his other side toward Autumn & said in a low voice, "What's wrong?"

"I thought we could spend the few hours we have 'fore the others wake to get an early start. We'll just make a quick check o' each general area 1st, just to snap up any obvious treasures 'fore the others do, & then do mo' detailed treasure hunting once Heureuse's told us what she plans to tell us."

Edgar nodded & sat up, holding his robe tighter round himself to make up for the warmth lost from leaving the covers. Then he stood up followed Autumn out the door.

Thanks to the windows—giant stained-glass windows with rounded tops & yellow-crescent-moon & star patterns painted on them—the hallways were much lighter than last night, hazy off-black replaced by a cobalt tint that revealed as much as it hid. Though, unlike last time, Autumn remembered to take her flashlight, she still appreciated not needing to rely on its meager beam to see. As they say: Batteries saved today are batteries that remain for a future fray.

They searched through each door to the left o' their room, only to find a lot o' empty bedrooms, a bedroom-sized closet, & a bathroom.

Then 'gain, they did 'ventually find 1 notable in a room near the hall's end: a giant plum-colored rose with a mouth in its center, bordered with sharp fangs, as well as 4 brambled arms with sharp-edged yellow-brown leaves @ each end. Green drool dribbled from its lower chin petals as it emitted what sounded like a mix 'tween a growl & a squeak. Though it had no eyes, Autumn & Edgar could discern just by its lurch that 'twas hungry.

The plant appeared to turn to Autumn & released a squeaky sound that actually sounded somewhat like English—as if it said, “Water... Give me water... So thirsty...”

Autumn gently closed the door, & then they both tiptoed 'way while the rose monster continued its barks, only mo' loudly.

@ this point, Autumn rummaged through her pockets for a small spiral notebook & opened it to its 1st empty page. Taking out a pencil she scribbled out a simple diagram o' the hallway, adding notes on each room in the margins.

“This'll help us later,” she said.

Soon they reached the end o' the hall & saw a suit o' armor. Only, 'twas moving, clambering down the stairs from the 3rd floor. It stopped near the bottom o' the stairs, just as Autumn paused 2 meters 'way. Autumn couldn't confirm whether or not the suit was looking @ her due to its concealing helmet; but she could ascertain

that she'd seen it moving 'live.

Edgar, meanwhile, cowered 'hind Autumn, wrapping his arms round her waist as if attaching himself to a shield.

The suit said in a low voice, "Uh... Boss, I think someone caught me. What should I do?" He paused for a few seconds 'fore continuing, "Well, what should I do with her?" 'Nother pause. "Uh, OK."

Then he turned & bolted back up the stairs.

Autumn stared the stairs up & down, scratching her head.

"D'you think maybe we should go back, in case she starts without us?" Edgar asked, the chattering o' his teeth betraying the true reason he wanted to go.

Autumn checked her phone. "It's already 9." She looked @ Edgar. "She didn't say when we were s'posed to be up, did she?"

"No, I, uh, think she was planning to wake us up or something," Edgar said.

Autumn returned her phone to her pocket. "We might as well check if she's up."

When they entered the main room, they saw that Madame Heureuse wasn't there; but Dawn & Felix were, chatting 'bout something that held no interest to Autumn. Dawn's head poked up from 'hind the back o' the couch to see who was entering.

"O, hey Autumn," Dawn said. "Not much o' a sleeper, are you?"

"Have you seen Heureuse?" Autumn asked.

Dawn slid back to her seat. "Nope. We were just waiting for her here."

"Hmm..." Autumn bit onto her index finger. *Well, might as well not wait for nothing.* She released her finger from her mouth to say, "If you ever see her, holler for us."

"Where are you going?" Dawn asked, turning over the arm o' the couch to look @ Autumn 'gain.

“I have work to do,” Autumn said.

“Hey, you’re planning on getting a head start on searching for treasure ’fore us,” Dawn said.

Autumn decided there was no bread in replying to Dawn any further, so she quickened her pace down the other hallway, Edgar following just ’hind.

Dawn turned to Felix & said, “Well, I guess we’d better get going ’fore she takes everything. She’s the type who could find a hair o’ hay in a needle stack.”

To be continued...

#BOSK-BE1410-EXPERIMENT

**THERE IS NO MERRIMENT IN
EXPERIMENT AND WHY WOULD
YOU THINK THERE WOULD BE
CAN'T YOU SPELL**

J. J. W. Mezun | 2014 November 1



I.

Neither Autumn nor Edgar knew exactly how they got there; 'twas not as if they just warped there in 1 second—indeed, it seemed mo' that the prison they now found themselves locked in had 'stead been moved *to them*, 'neath their feet in such a subtle way that neither had noticed till 'twas far too late.

If Autumn had to pinpoint what she thought was the 1st sign o' the beginning o' the experiment, she'd choose 1 soggy fall day when the trucks drove by, their guttural motors shaking the whole district like catfish earthquakes. Pacing the sidewalks was a scientist in a spotless white coat & messy gray hair, rubbing his hand & crab claw together as he watched the trucks with a boyish smile. Autumn swore she'd seen the strange scientist before, but 'ventually chocked it up to déjà vu.

That brief scene had soon 'scaped Autumn's mind, though there were other signs that Autumn had not considered relevant till hindsight handed her all the puzzles: the construction workers making unknown adjustments to her apartment, as well as completely tearing down & rebuilding other buildings; the rivers blackening with spilt oil, which Autumn was alarmed to see made it to their faucets in all its inky wonder; the graying skies as they were filled with cloud after cloud o' fog. Autumn began noticing the scientist wearing a gas mask & felt her stomach lurch. A few weeks later, she & Edgar felt a lumpy pain develop in their throats, 1st as a small soreness, & then months later as a clog so thick they gasped for air.

The walls surrounding them seemed to shrink, closing in on

them. The windows appeared to shrink as well, slowly shutting them off from the air—as murky as 'twas out there. When they left, they discovered that the buildings being built 'pon the ruins o' the unbuilt were a litany o' shops peddling bizarre manufactured food, as well as other commodities.

Autumn went 'head & solicited the 1st shop she saw. As she gazed @ the prices on the long item list board, she discovered that the prices here were much cheaper.

However, when she received her food, she saw that it arrived in an odd li'l cardboard box plastered with colorful designs; & when she opened said box, she saw inside a festering pile o' green flesh with blue tentacles wiggling out o' it from various spots. So damp was it that 'twas practically swimming in a lake o' green liquid @ the bottom o' the box, sopping it to the point o' dripping. Accompanying this meal was a tall plastic cup full o' bubbling yellow liquid. On the label it said, "Acid Quench™."

Autumn wasn't going to let a li'l strangeness keep her from perfectly good—'specially for that price!—food, so she scarfed the flesh down without 'nother thought & sipped the Acid Quench on the way home.

However, when she returned, she felt a sharp pain brew in her stomach, as if 'twere lit aflame. @ 1st she tried ignoring it, figuring 'twas just some quick, random upset; but it had prolonged to the point that Autumn could only spend the whole day lying on the ground with her arms clutching her stomach, her face in a permanent wince.

Though she 'ventually became immune 'nough to the food that she didn't notice the stomach cramps anymore, she noticed it—or something—did seem to have other effects on her physique: her skin felt as if 'twere thinning & loosening, her bones becoming flimsier to the point that 1 o' her pinkies broke on its own. Her hair gradually

fell out. In addition to the difficulty breathing, full o' heavy gasps, she felt so exhausted all the time that she slept a'least 12 hours every day—& oft spent entire days @ rest.

Worse, she could feel her senses slipping: eyesight became blurry, hearing became muffled, & her nerves became weaker so that she had to muster extra effort just to move her limbs, while her mouth was naturally slack with drool dribbling down her chin.

Though he didn't eat any o' the food—being a skeleton who doesn't need to eat—Autumn could see by the looks o' Edgar that he wasn't in the best shape either: always tired, lax, & gasping for air, too.

Finally, Autumn gasped, “We... need to get out o' here... 'fore this hellhole kills us.”

They crawled to the door & Autumn used its knob to help hoist her to her feet, which shuddered @ the weight they could no longer bear to carry.

“Edgar... grab onto my shoulders for support.”

They pushed past the door as if 'twere a boulder & hobbled down the steps to the ground. Edgar shuddered as he saw what'd happened to the neighborhood; he viewed a farrago o' humans twisted by the spiked air & laced food: those with green or purple skin; those with long, sharp nails; those with melty stumps where their hands should be, or those who were missing entire arms; some hobbled with bent gaits & some crawled 'long the street, many being thumped to death by apathetic drivers.

Many were fighting 'mong each other with sharp objects & lasers, usually over vials o' bubbling liquid—the Sweet Juice Edgar had heard was introduced into the neighborhood through subtle means, which soaked its user's minds in euphoria @ the cost o' lost brain cells & further mutation.

The district seemed to go on forever, every extra step feeling like

an extra hot poker being pressed into Autumn & Edgar's now-crooked, awkward legs, as if each step sapped mo' & mo' energy from them till they felt as if they would collapse in the middle o' the road & wait for some kind night rider to crush them from their misery.

Luckily, they soon reached the end o' the district. They could see the jarringly different clean-cut, white wooden houses with smoke-filled chimneys & short-trimmed yards under a warm baby blue sky just a kilometer 'way.

Unluckily, they saw that 'twas closed off by tall wire fences with barbed wire @ the top. Desperate, Autumn made the leap up the fence, clanging it back & forth with rattles like bell tolls 'pon every ravenous grasp upward.

But even if she & Edgar could withstand the barbs @ the top, she still wouldn't make it that far: uniformed personnel in gas masks outside the gates caught them & pushed them off with long wooden sticks. Autumn was so weak now that after only a few prods, her strength gave in & she toppled back to the ground.

"Sorry, Madame, but to keep the rest o' the city safe, we must prohibit contaminated people such as you from leaving these gates."

Autumn gripped the gate, shaking it in her erratic hand accidentally.

"But we can't live like this... We won't for long..."

The official only shook his head.

"Sorry, Madame, but to keep the rest o' the city safe, we must prohibit contaminated people such as you from leaving these gates."

II.

Autumn wasn't 'bout to lie 'bout, waiting for her lungs to devolve into gills or her blood to transform into gas: she searched the

internet for information regarding what was happening in her district &, 'specially, who that strange scientist was.

Is he the 1 'hind this? Why? she wondered.

This was rather difficult, as Autumn's fingers had since merged into 1 hefty claw, & what she'd thought for a while was just a lot o' sweat from her illnesses was truly a slimy outer layer 'bove her now-scaly, bright orange skin. She also found it difficult to read the websites, still adjusting to seeing with 1 large eye since her 2 merged.

"How you holding up, Edgar?" Autumn asked, turning to him from her monitor.

"Fine," Edgar said in a muffled, gurgly voice caused by the swelling o' his larynx so huge, Autumn could see it bulge under his robe. It made her cringe whenever she witnessed it.

"So, what will we do when you find out who's 'hind all this?" Edgar asked.

"Stop them," Autumn said, only to end in a coughing fit, causing green mucus to ooze out her nose & mouth.

"How?" Edgar asked.

After Autumn finished wiping her nose & mouth on her sleeve, she answered, "Haven't figured that out yet. But we'll need to do it, 'sides."

Though Edgar didn't like the images this inspired, he disliked what he imagined would happen if their deterioration continued further.

"Here it is," she said as she tapped the down button on her keyboard. "The bastard's name... is Dr. Dysmas Equinox."

"I recognize that name!" Edgar exclaimed, which surprised Autumn so much that she immediately turned back to him.

Autumn nodded. "Me, too. He's the crook who turned me into a brain in a jar... & probably stole my diamond, the bastard. I thought I recognized him from somewhere."

“What’s he doing now?” Edgar asked.

“This site’s not the most... reputable. But, since they seemed accurate... ’bout Equinox’s involvement, I think we can trust the rest. No other choices, ’sides... since I can’t find any other sources.

“Anyway... this site says he’s performing some experiment with Parliament’s permission. Then it gives some buzzword babble...” Autumn paused, squinting harder @ her monitor, so she can read it ’gain & give her mo’ time to breathe. “...experimenting with the... elasticity o’ how... environmental factors influence... social... whatever...”

“Why would... someone do such a thing?” Edgar asked.

Autumn dug her forehead into her claws. “I don’t understand what any o’ this crap means. I can’t even think anymore. So tired... I just want to lie down & wait for my body to just liquefy already.”

“It’s all right,” Edgar said. “I’m sure if we tell people ’bout this... everything will be fixed.”

“How? You don’t actually expect anyone to believe this website, do you? & the government’s certainly not going to do anything ’cause they’re *’hind* it—& even if that’s accidental... you know they’ll want to cover it up mo’ than act to fix it. No. If we want to fix this... we’ll need to do it ourselves.”

This time ’twas Edgar’s turn to ask, “How?”

“We’ll need to track down where this Dr. Equinox is... & force him to reverse all this nonsense.”

“O.” Edgar looked down in worry, but knew that to do nothing would have a much scarier outcome.

“Does that website say where he is?” Edgar asked.

“No,” Autumn said. “& I have no idea where I’m going to find it. If I could still think like a normal human, this would be simple... But I can’t.”

“You need me to help with anything?” Edgar asked, his body

sagging, from either distraught or exhaustion, Autumn couldn't tell.

Autumn shut her laptop & lay down.

"No... We'll continue this later... For now... let me just rest a li'l..."

III.

Dr. Equinox's shining glasses were all they saw as he entered the dark office.

Funny: he wasn't sure why the office lights were off in the 1st place.

The rest was all a blur. He faintly remembered Dr. Equinox passing round papers explaining some procedure that required parliamentary approval, parliament all looking on as they sipped their paper cups o' water.

He didn't remember exactly what it said. 'Twas a long day, that was. He couldn't keep from yawning, which he was sure offended Dr. Equinox.

That innocent smile never left his face, though. He wasn't sure if Dr. Equinox was just that polite or if he was just hiding his offense.

He knew it was a long day when he saw most o' parliament's lax posture & yawning. They all agreed to ajourn early. 1st thing he did 'pon returning home was go right to bed.

IV.

'Twas pouring—a neon yellow rain that burned slightly @ touch—when Autumn & Edgar went out 'gain to find Dr. Equinox. The city was covered with a deep gray-brown cast. As they examined their environ, they could see the effects the experiments were having on the district. What they assumed were trees appeared as mere twisted

parodies, tangles o' boughs & trunk so tight they couldn't tell which *was* the trunk. The wood was cracked & caked, with shreds o' bark lying 'long their feet; & from within those shattered holes they could see glowing red, as if they were chest cavities filled with blood. What leaves they still carried on their mangled arms—for most had withered & dropped to their trees' feet, crumbling into dust soon after—fluttered limply in the wind, sepia.

The rivers were bubbling rainbows from the innumerable chemicals soaked into them. Autumn & Edgar could see thin arms stretch out from them into land in many places: a forecast o' floods. 'Long the edges o' the lakes, they witnessed stray sea life flopping desperately: a dull gray fish with half a jaw, a permanently shut eye with thick white liquid oozing, & fins twisted in shapes unseen on fish & a squid with only one tentacle, flopping uncontrollably, leaving purple liquid everywhere it moved.

Edgar pulled his robe & hood tighter round himself to protect himself from both the shivering wind & scorching rain.

The buildings appeared to merge closer farther east till trying to squeeze through them felt as if exploring a maze—1 full o' trash scattered 'long the floor, glowing chemical spills, & a feral mammal o' unknown origins here or there. Whether or not any o' these mammals used to be human or not, neither could discern. In this context, however, they were glad for the clutter, for it gave them a perfect way to hide themselves. They were unsure whether the mammal would have attacked them or not; they didn't want to find out.

This also gave them a'least 1 reason to be thankful for the darkness they were subjected to in the deeper copse o' buildings: it made it impossible to see most o' the manufactured litter surrounding them. They could certainly smell much o' it—though they couldn't identify the cacophony o' odors—& these smells

inspired unattractive images.

If the scenery's freakish features didn't damper their trip, their bodies' slow degeneration did, ensuring that they would have to stop a'least every block to catch their breaths. It didn't help that Autumn's legs seemed to slowly lose their structure; & every time Autumn turned back to make sure Edgar was keeping up, she thought, any minute now, he was going to just dissolve into a puddle o' liquid, by the look o' the waving in & out o' various parts o' his cloak.

"I don't know... if we'll ever find the bastard," Autumn said with a wheeze, steam sprouting from her mouth in a heavy exhale. "We may as well just give up & wait till we slowly devolve into protoplasm."

Edgar said nothing. He didn't have the strength to, nor did he think he had anything useful to say.

Autumn answered her own question, anyway: "No, there'd be no use in that. 'Sides, sitting round here waiting to croak would be no mo' enjoyable than carrying forward, so we may as well go on for the .1% chance o' success."

& so they did, trudging through the same narrow paths 'tween the same crumbling brick buildings, on & on. If she'd brought a light with her, Autumn would've checked the map she downloaded to ensure they were going the right way. She didn't, so she didn't waste any mo' time thinking 'bout it.

She only knew they were getting close when she saw a dim light below her. As they walked farther, the light grew brighter just a li'l, till she could see it seeping out the edges o' the bottom o' a building.

"This is it," Autumn said in a voice croaky from lack o' use & a long litany o' obscure diseases.

Edgar merely nodded. *A'least he can still do that*, Autumn thought.

But they weren't yet finished with their journey, for they still had to find the front door, which was difficult with the illogical

arrangement o' paths round the buildings. They wandered nearby paths, trying to circle the building, which was when they realized 'twas not a rectangle with 4 horizontal sides, but a boxy shape with a few mo' sides, going in zigzags—& @ 1 side the building was so close to 'nother that it seemed as if they were 1 long building, 'cept for the crack 'tween them, much too thin for any human, or probably even any atom, to fit through.

I bet the door's on that side, Autumn thought.

But after going all the way round the other side—rounding a few other buildings, as well—they 'ventually found the door.

'Course, when Autumn twisted the knob, she discovered it locked. But this lock was no match for her needle-shaped claws.

Even with both the smog & the buildings blocking so much light, there was 'nough light was able to get in to dimly see inside. She saw a small, boxy room, similar to the average apartment room: carpeted floor & plaster walls with baseboard 'long the bottom. Everything was covered in a dim blue cast, which made identifying everything's natural color impossible.

Then 'gain, Autumn had much mo' pressing issues for which to fret.

For 1, what else was there? She leaned her head in & squinted, but couldn't see anything but bareness—not even a chandelier 'bove. Then she entered, swinging her eyes in all directions. She slowly moved 'long the walls, hoping to find a hidden door.

But after minutes o' searching, she found nothing.

"I think that door led us into a dead end," Autumn said as she sat crouched near the back wall, scrutinizing the baseboard. "I see no way to go farther in from this room. Then 'gain... both my mind & eyesight are going, so perhaps... Edgar, how's your eyesight doing? Any better than mine, probably?

"Edgar?"

She was 'bout to turn round to see if something was wrong with Edgar—'bout to 'cause, 'fore she had a chance, she felt cold claws clutch her face from 'hind, keeping her head still &, mo' importantly, blocking her nose & mouth from oxygen. She knew struggling would be futile, with her physique so weakened by her innumerable illnesses; so she just waited as her brain starved to sleep, accepting whatever fate her strangler had in mind for her.

V.

Autumn woke from the black void 'hind her eyelid to see a dark gray void outside it, blurry & hazy as ever in her malformed eye. She slowly scooted herself up, despite the deep exhaustion in her bones & the overall unnamed crumminess felt all over—in her head, her throat, her stomach, in her joints: the perpetual hangover.

She saw bars in front o' her, & nothing else to her sides, 'hind, 'bove, or below. Through them she could see a wider room full o' stuff—stuff she could hardly recognize, & which was so numerous, it'd take days to account for it all. She discovered the source for the constant scratchy buzz she heard as she woke: on some computer terminals were diodes glowing with yellow light, streams o' zigzagging white electricity crossing 'tween them.

In addition, Autumn saw a convoluted mechanism o' vials & test tubes pouring multicolored chemicals round each other, all ending their unnatural stream in a bulbous black pot. What 'twas for, Autumn had no idea.

Perhaps she preferred it that way.

She scooted even closer to the bars, clutching them in her claws, & gazed out them, when she saw someone in a lab coat walk in. It had been such a long time since Autumn had seen a human with human appendages or organs that her eyes widened, as if she were

watching an alien walk toward her.

Sure 'nough, she could see by his familiar mustache & goatee that he was Dr. Equinox.

“Ah, I see you’re awake, Madame Springer,” he said.

“How do you know my name?” Autumn asked dully, for she was far too sapped o’ energy to do anything as strenuous as emit emotion.

“We met before, remember? Let me just say that I’m proud to have you, my 1st test subject, here with me ’gain for further experimentation,” Equinox said.

He pointed a friendly finger up in the air, as if a professor giving a simple lesson. Everything ’bout him appeared friendly, ’cept the dark red stains on his coat.

That was what made Autumn’s pulse run.

“Where’s Edgar?” she asked.

“Mmm, the skeleton who was accompanying you? He’s undergoing a different form o’ experimentation & examination. His transformation is much different from everyone else I’ve seen, & I simply must know the reason.”

“If you mean... ’cause he’s a skeleton, I can save you time: he’s naturally that way.”

Equinox rubbed his chin, unsure o’ whether to believe Autumn or not.

“When did I give you permission to lock me in this cage & perform experiments?” Autumn asked.

“When did I give you permission to invade my lab?” Equinox replied with a polite smile.

“Good point,” Autumn said. “You know I can break out, right? Let me see Edgar or I’ll do so... as well to your legs.”

Equinox chuckled lightly, as if she’d told a simple pun.

“Madame, there’s no reason to act hostile...”

“I’ll be the judge o’ that,” Autumn said. “Let me see Edgar, prick.”

“Mmm... It seems someone’s getting a li’l grumpy today. I s’pose we’d better get started with the 1st experiment,” Equinox said as he walked over to the table near the terminals with the diodes.

He dug through the mountain o’ trinkets, doodads, & even bauble, picking 1 up, tossing ’nother.

“You come anywhere near & I will... jab this claw o’ mine—thanks to you... right in your eye, you prick,” Autumn said, barely mustering energy in her voice.

Equinox merely tsk-tsked while he continued his search ’mong the gewgaws.

“Ah, here it is,” he said as he held up a golden key.

Autumn continued to watch Equinox with sullen eyes as he walked over to the terminals & put the key in a slot. A loud dinging erupted from it; the diodes glowed & sparked twice as fast. Equinox walked a li’l farther to the main computer deck, where the monitor was, & began typing on the keyboard.

She decided that trying to stop whatever Equinox was doing would be impossible, & so it’d be a better use o’ her time to try breaking out o’ her cage, ’stead. She scooped round her pockets, which reminded her that she still had that file in her shoe.

But as she attempted to drag it out, she realized she’d never be able to hold it, no longer possessing an opposable thumb. However, she did find a way to move the file round while on the floor next to a bar, slowly scraping it ’nough to begin cutting it. She thought if she could hold the file ’long the ceiling & do the same to the top part o’ the bar she could maybe cut her way out.

“1st, we’ll need to put you to sleep so that your... imprudence does interfere with our experiments...” Dr. Equinox called out as he continued his typing.

Put me to sleep? Shit! How long will that take?

Autumn's question was answered when she felt clouds o' lavender fog puff through her cage, which made her nerves buzz with exhaustion.

"Augh. You poker," she muttered.

Her cutting slowed to a stop, her body slumped down the bars like melted ice cream, & her eyes peeled shut till she was curled up in a deep pause. Just 'fore sleep sapped her o' all consciousness, she felt warm & serene, her pleasure sensors fed in a way they haven't been for a while.

In the back o' Autumn's mind her thoughts shouted in desperation in the last moments 'fore unconsciousness left her completely to Equinox's hands.

VI.

Autumn had not only lost track o' time; she'd also lost track o' the difference 'tween reality & dream, awake & asleep. The ensuing transformations challenged her deepest held convictions regarding reality & were surrounded by an endless restlessness & harassment, a mental chaos o' sights, sounds, & senses—unbearable heat closely connected with cold; loud whirrs, low beeps, & a cacophony Autumn couldn't recognize, certainly not in this state; blacks, whites, neon reds—all strung together in one uninterrupted mess; seemingly smooth transitions 'tween sleep & consciousness when everything else was a scatter o' disjointed events.

When, if, or how Autumn ate, drank, or used the bathroom within any o' these, she had no idea; then 'gain, considering the extremity o' Equinox's experiments, she wouldn't be surprised if he eliminated the need for any o' these functions.

She'd lost & regained limbs; lost memories & gained some she'd never had before—she'd even had her molecular structure radically

altered. Many modifications she could neither pin down nor name, though she sensed them deep inside. 'Course, Equinox didn't provide her with a mirror—& her eyesight had drastically been readjusted, as well—so she did not know how every transformation appeared.

She figured this was probably for the best.

What surprised her the most—& the alternate she feared most—was that, save a few tweaks here & there, her mental capacity remained mostly the same. She still kept the ability to recognize her own existence as a human & hadn't literally become a thoughtless animal, or even an inanimate object, a vegetable.

Not yet, a'least.

When she had the chance—when her body makeup was configured in a way that made it possible & when she was conscious 'nough—she continued scraping her file gainst the bars, slowly cutting them millimeter by millimeter, in the hopes o' eventual 'scape.

Every time she tried, she was surprised Equinox hadn't figured out what she was doing: he hadn't caught the file or the deepening cuts on the bars. Then 'gain, he was hardly ever near her cage, preferring to do all his work safely far 'way @ his computer.

The coward.

When she wasn't rumination over all o' this, she wondered what was happening to Edgar. *Probably something much worse*, she thought with bile rising up her elongated throat. She figured it most likely that Edgar wasn't even alive anymore—or wouldn't be by the time she finally 'scaped.

Dr. Equinox seemed happily unaware o' all these concerns, tapping 'way @ buttons here & there, pulling that lever every so oft, whistling & humming all the way, as if she weren't even there.

Every so oft he would take a break from his experiment to sit in his swivel chair & scribble down notes on his clipboard—not a *sheet*

o' paper on a clipboard, 'course; just the wooden clipboard itself. Autumn felt a chill—or, a'least, she would've if her blood had not been filled with molten lava—when she looked @ Dr. Equinox's eyes. There was no hatred, bitterness, violent glee, or any other emotion one might expect from someone who would commit such actions as he had only recently. All she witnessed was the calmness o' the average bag boy sorting groceries & wishing customers a good day.

Indeed, every night 'fore Equinox would leave—a'least, when she was still conscious to know—he'd turn to Autumn, wave, & tell her goodnight. @ 1st she thought he was taunting her: *The cottonswabber*; & yet, his eyes had that same polite calmness, which made her think that he was not doing this out o' enmity, but likely didn't even consider the ethical—or even just objectively harmful to her—effects his button presses had.

This only embittered Autumn further. She could tolerate being twisted & assaulted in the worse way out o' violent hatred, even if not her specifically; but she couldn't tolerate her existence being considered so frivolous that this bastard didn't even *recognize* that she'd despise him for it, that he should feel either bile or pity for her—or *something, a'least!* Not that plastic smile that so radically violated the reality o' the situation—that committed such crimes, & then pretended as if they'd not existed, just to add fire ants to the radioactive scorpions.

She had much time to ruminate over this, for the experiments were long & unbearably tedious—the sharp pain 'ventually becoming so common that her nervous system adjusted to it—though, probably helped by some experiment—& became just a dull pain, just a never-ending harassment. Though she still had lost all bearing on time, she still swore she'd been a subject for a'least a month, probably mo'.

Her fears did spike, however, when she felt simple language &

math “lessons”—ideas that were internally consistent, but contradicted the world she was used to—creep into her head that she knew she surely wouldn’t be thinking ’bout in a situation such as this. *Are they trying to force “knowledge” into me? & what limits would this have? Could they destroy knowledge, too? Could they replace ideas with those that are mo’ convenient for them?*

But there was nothing she could do, ’cept use what mental powers she still had to reject whatever they tried to input into her. Then, perhaps, she’d hopefully develop an immunity or a’least a stronger resistance. ’Twas not a prospect she considered likely, or even logical; but ’twas not as if she had a better solution.

Meanwhile, she continued her filing, ever fearful o’ being discovered any moment. But Equinox never seemed to; to do so would require he remembered she still had independent cognition, which she was beginning to think he didn’t do. In this case she s’posed it had an advantage after all.

All o’ her patience finally paid off when, in the midst o’ her absentminded filing, she felt her file hit a hole & looked to see the final bar fall, leaving a hole wide ’nough to move through.

This made her panic as much as it enthralled her, for now she suddenly had to consider what she should do. After a few minutes o’ consideration, she decided she would wait till Equinox left for the night, giving her ample safety to make her ’scape, & perhaps find Edgar—Edgar! How she’d missed feeling the cragginess o’ his bony hands or looking into the black voids o’ his eyeholes! She decided it’d be less likely that Equinox would notice the hole in her cage, if he’d never seen her cutting the bars; & even if he did ’ventually notice, then the time it took him to move over & fix it would be as safe a time to ’scape as now.

No, she succeeded with patience, & so she would continue to succeed with patience.

But lord, did it feel like hours 'fore he left! & all the while her 5 hearts stirred throughout, expecting him to turn to her & notice the hole—or even just push a button & have it fixed automatically 'fore she could even move! Her mind frantically sifted through various alternate plans o' action in case things went amok, but she found none that soothed her worries completely.

Luckily, she needn't worry, for 'ventually Equinox got up from his chair, turned to her, & told her goodbye. She expected him to notice the hole then, her nerves tightening in anticipation, but 'stead he just turned & walked out the door. Just to be extra sure, she waited a'least what she thought was an hour 'fore acting, becoming increasingly incredulous @ such unexpected success.

But then she decided that there was no time like now, & squirmed with her millions o' tendrils out the hole.

But when she touched the outer edge o' the cage, she felt the sharp shiver o' a shock rush through her body from her tendril, causing her to automatically pull it back. After a minute o' confusion, she tried 'gain, only for the shock to be so severe that it knocked her body gainst the wall @ the back.

'Fore she could get back up, Equinox's voice rang through the room:

He chuckled lightly. "How clever o' you to figure out how to break through those bars o' yours. 'Course, I was not so naïve 'nough to not notice you conspicuously cutting into them with that knife—or was it a file?—of yours, but I didn't want to tamper with this wonderful mini-experiment. However, I'm afraid I must step in when your mini-experiment might ruin the greater 1, & thus must use this force field to keep you inside, you naughty specimen, you."

& with that the room was left in dark silence once mo'. Autumn lay there for minutes, trying not to understand what had happened, but to accept what she knew had occurred. How could she ever get

through a computer-generated, electrified force field? What would she even use to get through it?

She spent the rest o' the night in a wakeful mental mire, even though she knew that getting out o' there was simply physically impossible. *For god's sake, I'm a barely mentally or physically functioning organism, whereas he has the power o' Star Wars technology! It'd be easier for a hamster to 'scape its own cage by its own doing—& when does that ever happen but in cute anime?*

She realized the only chance o' that happening was if the master himself made a slip—leaving the carrier open when feeding the rodent, for instance—which was what she had been operating under already. However, the kind o' person who recorded a message specifically to taunt her on her failure would not slip so easily, when he had no reason to ever release her from her cage, letting computer-operated tubes do everything for him.

Thus, the situation was hopeless. 'Scape was hopeless; her chances o' ever finding Edgar 'gain were hopeless—whatever they were doing to *him*. The visual made her shutter. It'd be better to forget 'bout all that forever.

She did not completely give up trying to think o' how to 'scape, 'course, for that would be an utter waste; but she knew in the back o' her mind while she concentrated on the problem that the solution was as impossible as a triangle whose angles only add up to 180° or lines that never intersect.

So she ended up spending mo' o' her remaining time thinking 'bout the unbearable harassment these experiments &, mo' importantly, wondering how long till she either died from complications or lost her independent thoughts & became a mental vegetable—which was, to her, congruent with death, anyway. Furthermore, she wondered if she should consider the latter a horrific or merciful outcome.

#BOSK-BF2011-HOLLY

HOLLY DAZE ARE THE HOLIEST OF DAIS

J. J. W. Mezun | 2014 December 1



I.

Autumn was scribbling down a map in her spiral notebook when she heard the door burst open. She glanced up to see a gasping Edgar dragging a cardboard box inside, followed by the noisily-whispering wind & a few flecks o' stray snow that managed to pass the eave outside.

"I hope you don't mind, but I got a few decorations I thought 'bout hanging up," said Edgar, his face still shrouded by his hood.

"It's no hindrance to me," replied Autumn. "Mind if I close the door, or do you have mo' to bring in?"

"O, no, that's fine," said Edgar as he dragged the box to a corner, out o' the way.

While Autumn stood to shut the door, Edgar opened the top flaps o' the box & sorted through its contents. The 1st he picked up was a fake fir tree the size o' his head.

"Look @ this li'l tree I found. Isn't it cute?"

"Hmm... Sure," said Autumn as she headed straight for her laptop & notebook without turning to Edgar.

He set it next to the box & began hanging ol', cheap, flat wooden decorations o' cartoon snowmen, colorful presents, & dirty-faced folk in ragged coats & Poor-Boys hoisting sickles 'bove their heads.

As he did that, Autumn cleared her throat, & then asked, "You, uh, need any help with that?"

Edgar shook his head. "No. This is just something I'm doing for fun."

What enjoyment one might find from an activity most would consider labor was lost on her. Then 'gain, the same applied to

Edgar's cooking.

"So, uh, I was thinking o' a special heist we might do tomorrow night for the holidays."

"We're not going to break into people's houses & steal everything just to ruin it for them 'gain, are we?" asked Edgar.

"No; this'll probably be a li'l mo' dangerous..."

"Uh O."

"This 1 will require traveling to Sherbet Slopes."

Edgar turned to her.

"You're not thinking of—"

"That's exactly what I'm thinking," said she with a nod.

"I... I never even thought you would've believed he existed," said Edgar. "Didn't you say 'twas all superstition?"

"I said I thought the whole smarmy, hippy, hugging-&-kissing bullshit was superstition. I once robbed Cthulhu working @ a grocery store; believing in some tubby red guy with a bushy beard wandering round the world babbling 'bout the betterment o' humankind isn't a yank in comparison."

Edgar slunk in hesitation.

"Doesn't robbing him seem... a li'l unethical?"

"I give most o' it 'way, anyway, don't I?" said Autumn. "It'll go to the same distribution in the end. I'd think what we're doing is completely consistent with the holiday spirit."

She had expected him to ask why she bothered, then. She wasn't sure, either. Her mind couldn't devise a logical explanation. 'Twas like his decoration or cooking.

'Bout a half hour later, Edgar had emptied his box, save a cracked-open ornament & a few wooden decorations without string in which to hang them. Strewn 'long the walls on the floor were short plastic statues o' Santa grinning & a snowman in a pink top hat clutching a candy cane to his chest, both o' whom had chipping paint

that didn't fall within the lines o' their features. 'Long the ceiling's edges crawled caterpillars o' furry silver tinsel, repeatedly drooping parabolically. In addition to the medley o' wooden, plastic, & glass ornaments, the li'l tree was covered with strings o' multicolored lights & crowned with a glittery red star.

As Edgar climbed down from the stepladder, asked he, "Well, what d'you think?"

Autumn's head briefly popped up from 'hind her monitor & then back down 'gain.

"Looks nice, I s'pose. Is there any purpose for any o' it 'sides aesthetics?"

"Well... No," said Edgar as he looked round @ everything. Then his eyes stopped on the mistletoe hung before the door. "Well, the mistletoe has this thing where if 2 people step under it they're supposed to kiss, I guess." He chuckled nervously as if trying to explain the "why did the chicken cross the road" joke to an alien.

Autumn followed Edgar's eyes up to it & stared blankly @ it for a moment, seeming to ponder it.

"For what purpose?" asked she.

"O, you know... it's just 1 o' those... what you'd consider a silly superstition," said Edgar.

"Huh," said Autumn as she returned to her work.

II.

'Twas a clear evening for winter when Autumn & Edgar left their apartment & took their 1st steps down the sidewalk toward Watching Airlines.

Boskeopolis was quickly dimming as the pinkening sun sunk 'hind the skyscrapers toward the west. This cold color cast was matched with a steadily dwindling temperature, causing Autumn to

clutch Edgar tightly to her to maximize their warmth.

The airport was packed with silhouette people, probably headed for greener countries for the holidays. Autumn still wasn't sure if this was good or bad.

When Edgar saw them approach the plane, he felt saliva burrow into the back o' his throat.

"Um, I just remembered: we didn't go over the plan in full detail. So, you already ordered tickets for our flight, right?"

"You should know better than that," replied Autumn.

"O. Right. It's just that... you know, isn't hijacking a plane a li'l extreme?"

"We're just cadging a free ride. It's not as if I'm Dan Cooper."

"They might not know that..."

"Well, they won't know, anyway, 'cause we won't be caught."

"How?"

"Wait & see."

While all o' the extra eyes might increase the chances o' someone spotting her sneaking onto the plane, it also decreased the chances o' someone *important* seeing her do so, with so many bodies to distract their eyes. She just had to hope that the narcs were too preoccupied by their own business.

Edgar's saliva hardened to stone as he noticed Autumn lead him to the left wing o' the plane. She stopped next to the wheel on the backside—so the personnel near the front would be least likely to see her, Edgar surmised.

"Climb," said Autumn.

"On the wing?" asked Edgar, his rising pitch revealing his uncertainty.

"No, on the wheel. Try to clutch it as tightly as you can."

"Um... OK."

Edgar slowly climbed up, wrapping his arms & legs all round the

leg 'tween the wheel & the bottom o' the wing. Autumn followed him, wrapping her arms all round him & the wheel bar.

"This may be a bit o' a bumpy ride," said she.

"That... I thought I remember seeing you bring a pack on your back..."

"&?"

"That's a parachute, right?"

"Course it is. I'm crazy, not stupid."

"Well, that's good..." said Edgar uneasily.

III.

The man known only as the Executive always felt uneasy on planes. Never knew when they might crash. Though he tried to tell his body to calm itself, it for some reason never listened. He couldn't keep his hands from tightly clutching the armrests o' his seat, couldn't stop the sweat from dribbling down his bald forehead, nor was he able to prevent his head from turning all round the plane.

"This plane isn't safe..." muttered he.

"What's that?" asked his seatmate.

He turned to his seatmate & said mo' loudly, "I said this plane isn't safe! What're we going to do?"

"What are you talking 'bout? You loony or something, pal?"

The Executive clutched him by his shoulders roughly & stared into his eyes with dilated pupils.

"You don't understand! I can't die! If I die, nobody will be round the mall to keep the Mammoth from destroying the city!"

"Well, that answers my question," said the other guy. He stared petulantly @ the wrinkles in his suit sleeves created by the Executive's tight grip. "Please release me, Sir."

The Executive did, but not without adding, "You laugh—you all do

—but I know what happened in the United States...”

“We all do. It’s hard to miss it.”

“Yeah, & when d’you think they’ll finally decide to ram 1 o’ these planes into the Atlas Tower, huh?”

“Yeah, I’m sure terrorists are itching to get back @ a country most people haven’t even heard o’.”

The Executive crossed his arms. “That’s what makes it the perfect plan. Nobody’d ever suspect.”

“You’re a true satellite-head, you know that?”

“That’s just what they want you to think.”

“You know, you can’t just say ‘that’s just what they want you to think,’ & have that be a legitimate argument, right, buddy?”

“That’s just what they want you to think.”

His seatmate shifted uncomfortably in his chair.

“OK. I think we’ve discussed ’nough, thank you. Let’s just be quiet now.”

The Executive turned his head back to the window with a smug grin, satisfied @ ’nother intellectual victory. Though he knew everyone still thought he was crazy for his brave brilliance, he was used to victory all the same. This was ’cause he could usually just fire anyone who disagreed with him.

That grin soon dissipated, however, when he saw—or a’least his eyes *thought they saw*—what appeared to be a bespectacled young woman in a red ponytail climbing up the wing. He shook his head & scrubbed his eyes harshly with his knuckles, hoping to wash this obvious mirage from his sight—a technique he learned from afternoons watching Tex Avery.

Unluckily, when he looked ’gain, he saw not only the same ponytailed woman, but also a robed skeleton climbing ’hind her.

That was when he recognized them.

He stood abruptly & shouted, “No! They’re back! They can’t be!”

His seatmate looked in as opposite a direction as he could, his legs crossed & his face hanging in his arm.

Just ignore him, Jack.

But, just as he'd unhappily expected, he felt a thick hand nudge his shoulder.

"Hey. Hey, Sir. Come look out this window."

"Let me guess: it's a gremlin, is that right?" said Jack as he begrudgingly turned his head to the window. "Uh huh. It's just some crazy hippies plane-surfing. Nothing to panic 'bout."

The Executive clutched his shoulders 'gain.

"You don't understand!" shouted he so open-mouthed that spittle landed on Jack's face. He thrust his arm toward the window. "I know those 2! They're after me! They're... they're the ones who caused the Mammoth to 'scape its cage & destroy the city last time!"

"Please quit grabbing my arms; this suit was just pressed," said Jack as he glared @ the Executive's fingers, stark white from pressure.

The Executive let go 'gain & Jack rubbed his arms, hoping to a'least smooth out the worst wrinkles.

"Funny story you gave there, pal—'bout the, what was it? The 'Mammoth'? Don't know what that is, but I find it funny that it destroyed the city, & yet the city's currently not destroyed; & I certainly don't remember Boskeopolis ever getting destroyed, a'least not within *my* lifetime. When did this happen, by chance?"

"2 years ago! Look, I don't know why the city's not destroyed, anymore—they rebuilt it—you just gotta believe me!" The expression o' pure horror painted on his face only increased *Jack's* horror.

Then he heard the Executive say, "I've got it: they wiped our minds so that we'd be unable to remember the city being destroyed, even though it truly happened."

"You're loony, pal," said Jack as he leaned 'way from the Executive

in disgust.

“You’ve gotta believe me! Those 2 are crazy dangerous!” The Executive shouted with his hands raised.

“I don’t have to believe anything,” said Jack, sour-faced.

The Executive walked out into the aisle & waved his arms round.

“They’re coming to destroy us! Everyone!”

A panic-faced attendant walked toward the Executive.

“OK, Sir, please return to your seat. What’s the matter?”

The Executive jabbed his finger toward his window.

“The left wing! The left wing!”

’Nother passenger stood & shouted, “Damn straight!”

The attendant stopped before the Executive.

“Sir, please calm yourself. You’re agitating the other passengers.”

But the Executive only continued to point @ the window.

“Look out the window! Look!”

The attendant bent in closer to see an empty wing rushing over a blurred sea & charcoal sky.

Then he looked back @ the Executive as one might stare @ a serial killer.

“Sir, I think you may just be having a case o’ FOFS—‘Fear-of-Flying Syndrome.’”

The Executive turned to Jack with pleading eyes.

“Tell him! Tell him ’bout the plane-jackers!”

Jack raised his face to look @ the attendant with the solemnest o’ expressions—1 anyone knew could be trusted to speak in the utmost honesty.

“The man’s bonkers, I’m ’fraid. I don’t know what to say.”

The Executive clutched the attendant by the front o’ his shirt & began to throttle him.

“I’m not bonkers! Don’t believe him! You’re all in on it! You’re all gainst me!”

Then the Executive stopped, seemingly surprised by his own recent actions. He slowly released the attendant & smoothed out the wrinkles he'd left.

He cleared his throat. "I must assure you that my sight o' vicious troublemakers on that wing o' the plane was no fantasy."

'Hind him, where the Executive couldn't see, Jack was twirling a finger round his ear.

"Sir, maybe you should sit down & get some rest."

The Executive's eyes widened, fearful o' what might happen if he were left 'lone by that window 'gain.

"Uh... I need to use the restroom, if that's OK."

"Uh, 'course..." the attendant answered while visions o' crazy & dangerous antics this man might get into if left to his devices swam through the attendant's mind.

The Executive stumbled down the aisle in the other direction while rubbing his throbbing temples, his breath heavy & his face saturated in sweat.

His veins began to throb harder when something familiar crossed his sight.

No! I couldn't be! You're imagining things!

But when he backed up to check 'gain, his past vision was confirmed. Sitting right there with her legs crossed & her eyes intent on some airplane magazine was the ponytailed woman, next to her skeleton partner staring out the window.

"Dreadful apparition, why do you trouble me?" murmured the Executive in a loud whisper as he stepped backward slowly, wrists shaking.

This time Autumn glanced up @ what was certainly an unexpected response. She turned to Edgar & said, "That reminds me... We need to change into our costumes 'fore we land."

Edgar had no idea what she was talking 'bout, but figured 'twas a

part o' some plan he didn't know; so he simply nodded & followed Autumn out their seats & down the aisle.

The Executive jumped back with a shudder as they entered the aisle, 'fraid that touching them would inflict him with a curse greater than broken mirrors, torched 4-leafed-clovers, stepped-under ladders, & spit-on big-people's feet combined.

Then he aimed a finger @ them & shouted, "Look out, everyone! They're inside! Run!"

"What is it, now?" someone groaned.

"I'm trying to watch these 2 movie stars awkwardly flirt for an hour here!" someone else shouted with a raised fist.

"& I'm trying to light this bomb here. D'you have any idea how complicated this stuff is?" said 'nother as she lifted a stack o' dynamite to everyone's sights.

"OK, everyone, let's all calm down now," said the attendant as he stepped toward the Executive with arms stretched to each side, as if holding off 2 lion prides ready to pounce.

He turned to the Executive. "Sir, could you please return to your seat."

"They're in the bathroom! You have to stop them 'fore they cause us to crash!" shouted the Executive as he jabbed his finger toward the restroom door @ the other end—which Autumn & Edgar had occupied by then—'gain.

"Sir, you can't just harass passengers trying to use the restrooms," said the attendant. "Believe me, I tried, & the executive wasn't happy."

"I'm not happy *now*," said the Executive. "D'you have any idea what will happen if I'm dead. I won't be 'live anymore!"

"Yes, yes, we all heard your lovely story 'bout the mammoth or the gremlin or everyone disappearing 'cause o' the rapture, whatever. Now, could you please return to your seat?"

The Executive clutched the attendant's shoulders. "You've got to check the restroom! For all o' our sakes!"

"Yeah, yeah, just sit down," said the attendant as he strode over to the restroom door. He stopped & saw the word "occupied" was indeed there.

He knocked & called in, "Is everything all right in there?"

There was a pause 'fore Autumn answered, "Uh... yeah."

"You're not... You're not making bombs in there, are you?" asked the attendant.

"No, I don't think I am."

The attendant's eyes narrowed.

"You're not lying are you? I've heard some people lie to me before, & it always trips me up."

"I can assure you, I'm not lying."

"Well, OK then. If you say so," said the attendant as he turned & went back down the aisle.

That was when the attendant saw the Executive still standing in the middle o' the aisle.

"Sir, I thought I told you to return to your seat."

"What are you doing? You're just going to let them get 'way with it?" the Executive shouted as he threw his hands up.

Suddenly, the plane jerked to the left, causing the attendant & the Executive to topple over. As they returned to their feet, an announcement rang, "We are experiencing some turbulence. Please stay in your seats."

"Sir, you truly must return to your seat."

"No, they're going to destroy us all! I must stop them!" shouted the Executive as he ran down the aisle—in the other way, to the attendant's confusion.

The Executive stopped before a seat & snatched the bomb out o' its passenger's hands.

“Hey! I was just ’bout finished with that!”

“Sorry, Madame, but I must use this. I hope you don’t mind,” said the Executive just ’fore running down the aisle in the other direction.

The attendant held a hand up as if he were a traffic cop & said, “Sir, you truly can’t be running round like thi—” only to be interrupted by the Executive pushing past him. He turned round & shouted, “Sir!” but this for some reason didn’t encourage the Executive to stop 1 byte.

“Begone, monsters!” shouted the Executive just ’fore flinging the bomb @ the restroom door. Everyone gasped & huddled forward, hopeful that this would somehow protect them from the blast.

Rather than exploding, however, the bomb burst into flames as it smacked the bottom o’ the door.

The attendant shouted into his walkie-talkie, “Security! We have an emergency here!”

IV.

Autumn & Edgar moved as far back as they could in their li’l space on the toilet & over the trash bin, up gainst the wall, while they held their mouths & shut their eyes to protect them gainst the poisonous smoke. Though they couldn’t see the shivering flame’s orange light target them, they could feel the wall o’ heat in front o’ them—an extreme change from the general cold they were so used to from just a few minutes ago.

Autumn had to admit, for as much as she planned for possible snags, this was not 1 she’d expected.

Her mind pumped for idea for ’scape, only to drop thin dregs o’ dust. The chances o’ survival appeared dim.

Still, she could see that there were 2 options they had: stay or run through the flames. Both would likely end in death; but the latter

was slightly less likely.

She clutched Edgar close to her, wishing she could whisper calming words, & then charged forward inside the fire.

It gladdened her that she hadn't had to inconvenience them with stopping to open the door, since it had already been melted to a hollow shell. 'Stead, they charged straight through into the aisle to an audience o' gasping faces, temperature rapidly decreasing in the opener air.

Both still felt the million-stinger burns swarm their bodies. Both dropped to the ground, rolling round & frantically slapping themselves over to quench the flames.

'Twas only when some passenger dumped her limeade on them that they felt the flames vanish. Now the 2 were simply left on the floor in a puddle o' sticky limeaid, staring up @ the staring crowds in awkward silence.

They slowly returned to their feet, & then Autumn slowly led Edgar to the nearest 'scape hatch. They could both see the security personnel clambering down the aisle.

Autumn looked out the nearest window & saw, to their luck, a large patch o' white. Sherbet Slopes.

She clutched Edgar in front o' her & pushed open the door. This almost caused them to be pushed backward themselves from the influx o' wind. However, Autumn steeled them gainst the edges o' the door & thrust them both forward 'nough to exit the plane,.

1 o' the security personnel—all o' whom began running when they saw what Autumn was doing—shut the door & turned round the plane to give the rest o' the passengers stern looks.

"Nobody open this door, OK?"

1 o' the passengers raised a tepid hand.

"Yes, Sir?" asked the security person.

"Um... How was she able to open that emergency exit so well?"

Aren't they supposed to be forcibly shut by the plane's gizmos & stuff?"

"Not if the plane's machinery has shut off, such as in the case o' emergencies in which the plane is malfunctioning—hence the emergenc...y..."

Her eyes widened as the implications finally reached her attention.

That was when everyone started running round panicking.

Everyone 'cept the Executive, who was sitting back in his chair with easy breaths. Those thieving apparitions o' his nightmares had left, after all.

V.

Sherbet Slopes was a Rorschach test o' stark contrasts: the black sky speckled with the white stars & moon matched the white snow speckled with black furs, all o' which was splattered by white flecks o' blizzard snow. Where in this visual mess slept Santa's workshop, neither knew.

They trudged through the flurries, all the same; both wrapped so tightly all one could see o' Autumn were her sharp eyes & red nose, & all one could see o' Edgar were the glows o' his red eyes poking out from 'hind the shadows under his hood.

To call the mounds o' snow under their feet a blanket would be trite. It'd also be inaccurate: blankets were not nearly as sharp & crunchy as that which Autumn & Edgar's half-numb boots walked through. Blankets also usually didn't jut upward in the distance like fangs.

One would also be wrong to assume 'twas as quiet as space; in fact, their ears filled with the watery whistling o' winds, rustling pines, & creaking wood.

But 'twas peaceful. That part o' the pattern turned true.

Till Autumn & Edgar both felt the ground lurch under their steps, heard a large snap, & 'fore they could react, all plummeted into a deep cavern.

The 1st thing they each did was call out each other's names to ensure each knew where the other was. Since the cave wasn't large, it didn't take long; though 'twas so dark, they had to rely on touch to do so—a'least, till Autumn was able to find the flashlight tightly lodged in her coat.

She swung the light to reveal that they were in 1 o' the many fabled crystal caves, whose walls sparkled with ice-white crystals.

She also revealed that the tiny opening still left was meters 'bove their heads. She began rummaging through her pack for her rope hook.

However, when she tossed it up, it only broke right through the snow & thudded back down to the ground.

Autumn stared down @ it in contemplation.

"You don't think it's too high for us to climb onto each other to reach the top, do you?" asked Edgar.

Autumn swung her light upward & squinted as she estimated the distance 'tween the opening & the ground.

"Yeah, I don't think either o' us would be able to reach up there."

"So, what do we do now?" asked Edgar.

Autumn exhaled. "Actually, there may be some good 'bout us falling down here. These walls offer far mo' shelter than we could hope to find round here. It should be safe to rest the night here without fear o' hypothermia, so long as we wrap up tightly & use all o' our blankets."

"OK."

So they did so; though with Autumn on the side nearest the wall so she could chisel @ the wall for crystal—a task she found rather

difficult since she'd turned her flashlight off, wanting to preserve its battery for mo' important tasks. Everything was by touch: Autumn felt round the hard wall—contrasted with the soft emptiness before it—with her screwdriver & bag-holding hand while Edgar hung on from 'hind with multiple blankets, which surrounded them so fully that only Autumn's hands poked out from 'hind them.

@ 1st, the only sounds were the winds still blowing outside & Autumn's minimalistic chiseling. After a few minutes, though, Edgar asked, "So, you getting much out o' that wall?"

"Some," mumbled Autumn. "I'm not sure if it's falling in, though."

"Need any help with anything?"

Autumn paused. "I may need 'nother bag later, but not now."

Both were silent once mo', focus heavy on the in-&-out o' each other's breathing. Autumn wasn't used to her attention being so free from work, the chiseling requiring li'l. Without being able to see 'nough to record anything, she didn't bother too much 'bout planning for future heists.

Perhaps you should make conversation with Edgar, then.

"So, uh, how's that cooking going?" asked Autumn.

"Uh... good."

Well, that handled that question. What else is there?

"So, uh, I was wondering if you had any ideas for any ventures we could try."

"Me?" asked Edgar.

"No. Sorry, I was talking to the crystal shavings in my bag. They're magic, you know."

"I wouldn't know anything 'bout that."

"Yes, I s'pose that is an absurd question to ask—like asking someone how they'd perform heart surgery."

"Thank you for asking, though," said Edgar.

"Neither o' us benefited from it, so there's no reason you should,"

said Autumn.

“You might not know, but I truly do,” said Edgar.

“Huh.”

“So, what plans do you have?”

“Other than the 1 we’re already doing, not much. I was thinking o’ crossing Baguette Bridge over to the Cinnamines, but that’s all I have so far—& I haven’t even looked into that 1 fully. It seems after only a few years, Boskeopolis is already running out o’ treasure spots.”

“Yeah... Actually, now that I think ’bout it, I think we’ve just recently hit the 5-year mark since we 1st met... though I guess you were probably doing this long before then.”

“Not these kinds o’ ventures, no. Mostly small-scale pilfering. Cell phones & that...”

“Well, I guess it’s a good thing we don’t give each other presents for anything, since that might mean 2 now.”

“3 if we include your birthday,” said Autumn. “Yeah, I don’t think I’m going to get much out o’ this wall,—& as I said, I don’t even know if it’s going in or not—so I think I’m done for the night. It’d be good to sleep early so we can wake early.”

She turned, letting the hole in the blanket mountain covering them close through gravity. With her arms no longer being used, she wrapped them round Edgar, too, tightening the cracks ’tween them even further to minimize chilly air seeping in. Edgar shivered as he felt the sharp iciness run from her gloves to the back o’ his neck & could feel her shiver gainst his ribcage, too.

“This reminds me a li’l o’ when we were in that sewer place,” whispered Edgar.

“I’m sorry.”

“O, it’s not so bad.”

“The conditions are actually worse, though. If we had to live down here for months, we’d have died—well, a’least I would’ve. I’m

only assuming by your shivering & shuddering that you react negatively to excess coldness, too.”

“It’s not so bad...”

“& why is that?”

“Uh... why, shouldn’t I think so? After all, you don’t take too bad to unhealthy environments like this.”

The rapidly pumping heart Autumn could feel through their touching chests belied that claim, she thought; though, now that she thought ’bout it, she was sure he could sense the same from her. In fact, she could sense it from both o’ them since they 1st slept next to each other.

Why haven’t I taken that as conclusive evidence?

Nervousness—perhaps even excitement—is a characteristic, but not a defining characteristic. It may be undesirable, too.

There’s never going to be 100% certainty, & the evidence is mounting, so you might as well try. You have plenty o’ free time here, too, so that ’scuse has been extinguished.

Fuck it. Might as well.

Autumn felt the familiar stab o’ energy—both fulfilling & uneasy—commonly found in the midst o’ a particularly dangerous venture.

It’s a risk no worse than any other... she reminded herself.

“Hey, Edgar... You still awake,” murmured she.

She’d halfway hoped he wasn’t, only to hear him quickly reply, “Yeah. Is something wrong?”

Autumn shifted uncomfortably. “Uh, I just...” She cleared her throat. “This is likely absurd, but I devised an idea for a present we could give each other @ the same time.”

“What?”

She inhaled. “If you don’t want me to do this ’gain, just say the word & I’ll apologize.”

“For what?”

He was answered when he felt strange skin—that which was both wet & dry @ the same time—press gainst his mouth. Warm air seeped inside his mouth like steam from boiled tea, gradually warming his insides as warm water added to cold.

All o’ this was familiar, for he remembered them kissing after a similar discussion years ago, when still in high school. What was unfamiliar was the much warmer & wetter creature that burrowed into his mouth & scurried all round the roof & sides inside, sticky slime dribbling all over his own tongue & palate like a mud monster.

A minute that felt like a second passed ’fore Autumn released him, both panting & flushed.

“Sorry,” she mumbled.

“I-it’s all right.”

“You all right with that sort o’ thing?” asked Autumn. “I don’t truly know what I’m doing here, but hey, nothing ventured, nothing gained.”

“Well...”

“I won’t do it ’gain if you’re uncomfortable with it.”

“No... It’s just that... I don’t know... I always thought you thought that kind o’ thing was superstitious or something.”

Autumn paused to consider.

“You mean the... What was it called? ’Missile Toe’? What the hell’s that s’posed to mean?”

“I don’t know. But, yeah, that.”

“Well, it is an absurd superstition, you have to admit,” replied Autumn; “letting one’s position relative to a sparkling plant determine what one should do without any reason given? It’s as absurd as celebrating certain days, too, honestly. What’s the purpose?”

Edgar paused.

To answer the question she’d guessed was in his head, “If kissing’s

purpose were to fulfill certain recreational needs, then it'd be logical to perform that function when it's most desired, which should be irrelevant to one's position relative to decorations—a'least it does for me, & you seemed to agree earlier. 'Course, you could've gained no recreational benefits from it @ all..."

This was followed by a pause that made Autumn regret saying the last part, till said pause was interrupted by his craggy lips pressing against hers.

I'll just have to take this as the optimal indication that he does, thought she.

VI.

Autumn had already set up the rope by the time Edgar woke, allowing them to climb back up immediately.

She was the 1st to pop her head out the hole, only to be smacked in the face by a wall o' wind so sharp, she could hardly keep her eyes open. Her nose had an instant itchy & runny reaction, as if bees had swarmed inside—a subject I am intimately experienced in, I must add.

She concluded that hurrying their trip as much as possible would be the quickest cure; so she clambered up as a yanked bandage & wasted no time pulling Edgar up with her.

As they travelled once mo', she noticed 'twas still dim—so dim that the firs were still black silhouettes—making her think 'twas still early in the morn. However, as the hours passed, the sky remained dusky—& in fact, appeared to grow *darker*. By this point, Autumn pulled her phone out to check the time & saw it say 3:22 PM.

She clutched her forehead. *Duh. This is still in Boskeopolis's time zone. Let's check Sherbet Slopes's.*

But when she checked it, she saw it say 4:22 PM.

She didn't worry much mo' 'bout it; a'least it didn't say 11:59 for eternity.

Later they began to see a glowing light 'bove the crest o' the hill they were on, rising into a small square o' multicolored lights.

Edgar gasped. "I think I see it."

Indeed, as they neared & its appearance grew, they saw it develop into a small gingerbread house covered in creamy snow & surrounded by glowing pink candy canes.

They stopped just before it to gain a closer look—Edgar to marvel @ its sight, Autumn so she could better plan how to sneak in.

She could find no better way than the traditional—ironic, considering the victim. Her eyes wandered up to the chimney poking from the white-chocolate roof, billowing smoke.

She waved Edgar 'long with her toward the side & had him hoist her up, followed by her clipping the rope hook to the chimney so he could safely climb after her. With both now on the roof, Autumn peered down the chimney to see, to her surprise, not a fire, but the bottom o' a metal vent.

"Well, here goes," mumbled she as she climbed down.

As she landed, she felt the frigid air that stabbed her through every hole in her clothes suddenly smothered by heat, said holes stickily closing as if her apparel were clutching her tightly for defense. She flung her hood back in a futile attempt to stifle the burning air.

By this point, Edgar had joined her, & she decided that the best solution, 'gain, was to hurry this process as much as possible. They wandered through the vents, looking through every stack o' slit openings they found.

Through them they saw, to their amazement, wide factories full o' whistling workers in bright costumes as they pulled levers, stacked conveyor belts, or wrapped bows. Autumn's eyes looped round the

twisting conveyor belts in hopes o' finding the sacks all o' the gifts were inevitably packed into @ the end; but after minutes o' searching, she realized they were so wound together, she couldn't tell where 1 belt began & 'nother ended.

Seeing that there were too many eyes in there, Autumn continued in search o' stealthier pastures, despite the unbearable heat. After a few meters, she saw 'nother grate, under which was mo' o' what she was looking for: a garage-like area with a reindeer-reined sled full o' gift-stuffed satchels.

Her mouth curled up into a Grinchy smile. *He packed it up for us & everything...*

She extracted her screwdriver & used it to open the grate. Just 'fore she dropped in, she poked her head in, swinging it all round her to ensure nobody was present. She was soon assured.

She dropped in, cringing as her still-snow-sodden boots crunched against the metallic floor. But when she checked yet 'gain, she neither saw nor heard any signs o' attention attracted by this noise.

She waited for Edgar to join her, & then hopped into the sled, grabbed the reins, & searched the front for controls.

"You're not actually thinking o' trying to drive this thing, are you?" asked Edgar as he climbed in after her.

"I don't see any other option."

"Ho, ho, ho. How did you pesky comrades sneak in here?"

Both Autumn & Edgar's faces stretched in surprise as their heads slowly turned to the source o' that speech, only to widen even mo' when they saw the familiar portly man in red & white standing just meters from them with a meaty pepper-colored beard, button nose, & twinkling eyes.

"Can it be...?" Edgar muttered. "Are you... are you..."

Their recent acquaintance slowly nodded his head with a grin.

"The... the... the Santa Marx!"

The Santa Marx clutched his fat belly as he threw his head back & chuckled.

“That’s right. Now, I hope you 2 have been good li’l proletariats & have been developing your class consciousness,” said he as he wagged a white-gloved finger mischievously.

“Yeah...” the 2 muttered as they stared down @ the ground shyly.

“Well, isn’t that radical...”

Autumn’s brows narrowed as she noticed Santa’s jolly smile turn sour just ’fore she felt the solidity ’neath her disappear. She & Edgar both looked down just ’fore falling down the black abyss, landing with a thud 4 meters below.

They looked up to see the Santa Marx’s face peer down @ them. Then he clutched his beard & hat & yanked back to reveal a much smaller, darker fuzz covering his chin & upper lip, & a bald forehead, with only a li’l hair to the sides. With the beard gone, his chin appeared much thinner & pointier than before.

Edgar gasped. “You’re not the Santa Marx! You’re the Santa Lenin!”

The Santa Lenin twisted his mustache maniacally. “That’s right, & it’s off to the labor camps with you!”

He threw his head back & laughed—much less jollily this time—as the trap door ’bove Autumn & Edgar closed, slowly squeezing the thin slit o’ light over their faces till it disappeared completely.

VII.

Autumn & Edgar had to repeatedly rub their gloved hands to keep themselves warm, which was hard when the warden kept shouting @ them to get back to work.

The thin metal walls were grimy & rusted, a patchwork o’ gray, brown, & green scraps. They hardly noticed a difference in

temperature 'tween inside & out. So cold was it that the leaky drips from the knot o' pipes attached to the ceiling were glued frozen to the bottom lip o' its pipe end.

Each realized that the best way to warm themselves was to keep working—in Autumn's case, sewing gaudy holiday sweaters with god-awful animal puns on them; in Edgar's case, wrapping boxes. Both struggled to find the happy medium 'tween going fast 'nough not to draw the warden's ire & not completely messing up, whether it be by cutting the wrapping paper too short or severing a thumb.

How tiring the work was was only surmounted by how tedious 'twas. Autumn could feel her mind ebbing into insentience as she followed the rote steps demanded o' her, as if she were mo' a simple code programmed into the conveyor machine than a human with any semblance o' complex thought.

Both had gotten so tired by the 13th hour that Edgar only noticed halfway through snipping that he was cutting right into his index with his scissors & Autumn had stabbed her thumb a few times by pushing too far into her sewing machine. When she sucked her thumb to stop the bleeding, the warden shouted @ her to return to work & to stop dripping blood on the clean floor.

"Clean? Look @ all the paper scraps & rat shit strewn round? For god's sake, there's an already-decomposed dead body still on the ground."

She was rewarded for this correction by having all meals taken 'way for 20 years.

"But I'd starve to death," said she, throwing her arms out in exasperation.

"Make that 30."

"I'd already starve by then, so that wouldn't be any worse."

"Make that 10."

"That's not even a larger #."

“Make that cake.”

“That’s not even a #.”

Speaking o’ which, 2 hours later was mealtime, the 1 time o’ the week they were allowed to eat—’cept Autumn, ’course, who was now banned from meals for the square root o’ cake years. This week they had bone soup, which was truly just chicken bones dunked into bowls o’ boiled water. This wasn’t ’cause o’ rationing or anything—they had plenty o’ chickens to spare; they were just dicks & considered it a creative exercise to devise hilariously mean meal options. For instance, last week’s meal was bowls o’ bricks.

“We have to bust out o’ here,” murmured Autumn as she sat with her chin dug into her upraised hands, struggling to keep her eyes open in exhaustion.

Edgar squirmed. “Gee, I don’t know... Didn’t the warden say walkouts were uncommunist or something? I’m guessing that’s a bad thing, right?”

“Who cares?” grumbled Autumn as she stood ’gain. “If we don’t do something soon, we’ll just be worked to death, anyway. What have we got to lose but our chains?”

“What ’bout our free parking spaces?” asked Edgar. “The warden said the demand for them was pretty high.”

“We don’t even drive cars.”

Edgar looked down with a long face. “Yeah, but they are rather nice...”

Autumn searched the vicinity for signs o’ a means to ’scape when her eyes stopped on a few wrapped packages still gliding down the conveyors, many o’ which were huge, headed straight for the sacks that, Autumn knew, would carry these hidden treasures ’way.

She nudged Edgar & whispered, “I have an idea.”

They snuck over to the conveyor belts, keeping their eyes grated for the wardens—who were much too busy planning HIV-infected-

needle-stuffed potatoes for next week's meal to notice any disturbances.

When they reached it, they snuck 'hind 1 o' its tall tunnels to hide & took the 1st large package they saw come by. Autumn ripped the paper off & opened the box.

Aha, I knew I'd find this in here, thought Autumn as she lifted a glowing, sparkling lollipop the size o' her head.

They both took licks & began flashing wildly. Their colors also shifted rapidly, which disturbed the others' appetites far less. Usually this would cause one alarm, as it usually indicated dangerous radioactive poisoning; but in the world o' Boskeopolis, flashing colors always indicated a beneficial effect.

& so it did in this case, wherein they charged through to the exit, shocking anyone who came too close to them so hard they were thrown backward, as well as exploding into cartoon poof clouds. While this occurred, intensely cheerful carnival music played. This was the natural symptom o' eating lollipops. Nobody knew why.

As they rushed out to the main lobby o' the workshop, the Santa Lenin rushed out & stopped before them.

"You dare think you can 'scap—ACK!"

They charged right into him, knocking him backward & causing him to puff into smoke just like the rest.

Autumn skid to a stop, with Edgar just after, as the sparkling flashes slowed, & then eventually stopped completely.

"Well, that part was broken," said Autumn. "Who just gives you an invincibility powerup right before the final boss?"

"O, ho, ho. He wasn't the final boss... I am."

From the shadows 'hind the doorway to their freedom flew out a bat-shaped robot so huge it could almost reach the 4-meter-high ceiling while less than a meter 'bove ground. Its wings were shaped as a mallet & sickle with rapidly-pinching black pincers 'neath. On its

head was a twin Santa hat with white puff balls at each end & covered in white stars; 'long its pink body in bright yellow army letters was "M4RX"; & through the still-shiny gray glass front sat 'nother plump man garbed in black boots & red suit & hat. Under it, though, was a much squarer face with a large right-triangle nose & bushy mustache sans beard.

Edgar gasped. "It's the... it's the..."

"That's right," he barked with a humorless smile. "I'm the Santa Stalin; & it's time to purge your lives from the history books o' the future!"

He pulled a lever back & the machine's hammer wing rose, casting a yawning shadow over them. Though it rose slowly like a bear yanking its arm out a honey pot, it struck the ground swift as sharp rain.

Unfortunately, the rising part was so slow that Autumn & Edgar had already dashed 'way long 'fore it could drop so quickly.

He tried 'gain with its sickle wing, this time ascending a li'l mo' quickly. But they still rolled 'way from it just as it started to fall.

"You won't last so long when I've turned into my final form," snarled Santa Stalin as he cranked a lever all the way back.

Autumn & Edgar stood back, gaping...

They continued gaping for the next few minutes while Santa Stalin kept cranking the level forward & back.

"Damn transformation problem," muttered he.

While he was doing that, Autumn & Edgar had dashed under him & ran into the dark exit.

"Hey, where'd they go?" asked he as he swiveled the body o' his machine left & right, rudely ignoring what I had *just said a paragraph before*.

"They have to be here somewhere," said he as he stupidly continued spinning. "They can't just vanish." He paused, rubbing his

mustache. “Less they have a Script Genie on them.”

’Course, if he’d just listened to me, he would’ve known they’d left down the dark exit long ago & chased them; but nope, he clearly doesn’t need my help. Keep up with that Mother Goose chase, Whiskers.

“I mean, I just *saw* them...” said he.

I mean, it’s not as if what I say is important, being the *narrator* & all...

“I know they were here...”

No reason to pay attention to what silly-ol’-me says...

Then he clutched the sides o’ his head with eyes sucked in like a gulped straw.

“Maybe... maybe I never saw them @ all. Maybe they were never here.”

He paused. His arms slowly fell & his face slowly relaxed.

“Well, if they were never real, then they couldn’t have even been a problem, & thus they can’t be a problem. I don’t need to do anything, then.”

With a satisfied grin, Santa Stalin yanked a lever & rode his machine into the work station to spy on the other proletariats.

It took a minute for him to settle in his place, where Santa Lenin stood before he was uncommunistically assassinated by... who killed him? He scratched his head as he puzzled over this. You know, ’stead o’ listening to what I *freakin’ kept telling him*—all right, ’nough. I know it’s hopeless to try. I’ll just let the flesh head figure it out himself.

“He couldn’t have just killed himself... Well, he *could* have, but he wouldn’t have, since suicide is uncommunist, & I was pretty sure he was communist.”

He decided not to stress himself too much ’bout it. They’d catch the bastard that done it, ’ventually. ’Sides, he had to admit he was

rather excited 'bout being the new Santa—and all he had to do was bury the Santa Trotsky far underground & use his hypnobeamers to make all o' these dumb stiffies forget he ever existed.

His eyes moved 'long the conveyor belt: bootleg consoles & Blue-rays being screwed shut, shotty pirates o' famous ol' NES games with Disney characters being rapidly programmed, balls o' yarn & cotton moving by unmanned sewing machines, going unsown...

Wait. Where's the guy that's s'posed to be sewing the sweaters?

Probably some layaround off in the bathroom 'gain, thought he sourly as his eyes rolled round the rest o' the belt.

He'd make sure whoever that was would never be able to use a toilet 'gain.

But then he blinked in shock 'gain when he saw a bunch o' cardboard boxes drop off near the bags unwrapped.

What is this? Where's the guy that's s'posed to be wrapping those? What kind o' joint we running here?

He maneuvered his bat machine over to the middle manager, sitting @ a desk & checking the databases twice to see what was causing all o' these errors. Just before Stalin stopped next to him, he slammed his keyboard & muttered, "Stupid Oracle. All I want to do is view all o' the records. I don't even know what a 'single-group group function' is."

"Santa Khrushchev, why is no one sewing the sweaters & wrapping the boxes?"

"What?" Khrushchev grunted as he looked up, only to lighten when he saw Stalin leering 'bove him, wiggling his Grinchy eyebrows up & down with an impatient glare. Suddenly, his bulky face paled, his hands wrapped all round each other as if trying to wash the nervousness off them, & sweat pored all over his naked forehead.

"Uh, S-s-sir, I... I thought you were chasing them, Sir."

“Chasing who?”

“Why, the 2 terrorists who murdered our great former leader, Santa Lenin.”

“Ah, so you’ve finally found out who did it?”

Santa Khrushchev stared @ Stalin as if he were kilometers ’way.

“Uh... You were just chasing them, Sir, weren’t you?”

“I was doing no such thing.”

Though, now that he thought ’bout it, Santa Stalin did have the strange déjà vu feeling as if he *had* just been chasing 2 rascallions.

“Remember? 1 had a ponytail & glasses; the other was a skeleton. They’re, uh... they weren’t exactly hard to notice.”

Stalin’s eyes darkened. “Are you calling me dumb?”

You could hear the gulp fall down Khrushchev’s gullet.

“Y-y-y-yes, Sir.”

“Good. That’s what I thought I heard, but I just wanted to check to be sure.”

Now that he thought ’bout it, he was gorgeously sure he remembered chasing 2 people who fit that description...

No... It’s impossible. Those 2 don’t exist. Otherwise, I would know where they went.

You do know where they went. *They went through the dark passage. I told you this multiple times.*

Wait, did I think that? Where did I get that idea?

I put it in your head, stupid.

Why would my mind call myself stupid?

’Cause you are.

OK.

So Santa Stalin shifted a lever back & flew his bat machine back out to the lobby & through the dark passage.

VIII.

Autumn & Edgar were just piling the 5th bag into the sleigh when they heard the doors burst open 'hind them & turned to see Santa Stalin in his bat bot inside.

“So, you thought you could trick me, did you?” said he.

“Um, I’m quite sure we *did* trick you for a while,” replied Autumn.

“Well, not this time you won’t,” said he as he hovered toward them, his shadow stretching over them like a yawning maw.

“Here, catch,” said Autumn as she turned the bag in her & Edgar’s hands ’way from the sleigh & chucked it @ the M4RX machine.

“Hey, don’t you dare—ACK!”

He leaned back just ’fore he saw the heavy bag crash into the glassy visor in front o’ him with a loud crunch, pushing it inward into cracking shards, many o’ which fell on his lap.

“Are you crazy? You want to hurt someo—”

He was silenced when he heard ’nother thunk ’bove, & saw the bag already in his visor fall in further, smashing into his controls—as well as his hand, causing him to wince in tearful pain.

“Ow! What d’you think you’re doing?”

But his pupils dilated even mo’ when he saw & felt the blue sparks wrap round his arms from the squished & stabbed machinery.

He knew what electronics like this did when ’twere damaged—& he could do nothing but gulp in wait.

It did exactly as he expected: burst into a giant fireball, only to transform into a pile o’ black ashes, all o’ which spilled onto the floor as an empty puddle.

There was 1 exception: Autumn & Edgar’s eyes fell ’long with the pie, which bounced up & down on its tin plate a few times when it hit the ground.

They waited, 2/5s-expecting it to get up & attack them or headbutt them in the face.

Autumn edged closer & picked it up, staring @ it curiously. Faint wafts o' steam billowed up from it, & she could smell a warm, citrus odor rise with it. She poked a finger inside, her nerves ignoring the burns it gave her, & licked her finger.

"It tastes lemony," said she as she turned back to Edgar.

"What color is it?" asked Edgar.

She peeled back some o' the crust & peered inside.

"It looks like a lightish, pale green."

"Must be lime," said Edgar with a nod.

"Well, should we take it with us?"

"No. Dig inside for a key."

"For a key?"

"Yes."

Autumn did so; & sure 'nough, she found a bronze key with a li'l hammer & sickle on the back end.

"& what're we s'posed to do with this?" asked Autumn.

"Use it to open the door holding the real Santa Marx."

"What? Screw that. Let's 'scape with the goods while we can."

"Autumn, it's Marxmas..."

Autumn waved a hand forward. "Bah. Murmurinsect."

But she knew by the teddy-bear look Edgar gave her with his eyeholes full o' unreachable brownies that she'd never feel right 'bout refusing this trifling deed & sighed.

"Fine. But let's finish packing the sleigh 1st," said she. "That way, if he tries to triple-dharmacakra us, we can rush 'way, anyway."

IX.

Santa Marx sat hunched in the corner o' his molding dungeon,

alternating 'tween jabbing his thumbs over the buttons o' his cellphone like spraying rain & waiting for it to beep in response to 'nother message from his text pal, Engels.

He just received 1 that said, "International committee's having a banquet. Wanna go?"

Santa Marx replied, "Need a polite way 2 decline. Dont wanna B seen round Herzel. Can you believe the way he shoved his way in & thanx me 4 the *invitation* i *never made* sorry I dont luv ol' eur"

He was interrupted with a start when he suddenly heard a click to his left & turned to see the door open. He raised an arm over his face vampire-like as the sliver o' yellow light widened, his eyes so unused to any light other than that o' his phone.

"Who's that?" said he with a gasp.

"Santa?" asked Edgar as he clicked on the light & turned to see Santa Marx blink painfully.

"We came here to rescue you," said Edgar.

"Yeah, you don't mind if we swipe some o' your gifts as restitution, by the way," said Autumn as she jabbed a thumb backward to indicate gifts unseen.

Santa Marx stared @ them, bewildered, as a wild animal.

Edgar reached his arm out, as if trying to hug the world.

"We came to save Marxmas."

Santa Marx snorted. "*Marxmas*. Just 'nother excuse for people to bask in their commodity fetishes while friendly polar bears sell Hero-Hero bottles drenched in the blood o' Colombian workers."

There was an awkward pause, followed by Autumn & Edgar throwing their heads back & guffawing.

"That wacky Marx," they said in unison as they pointed finger-guns @ him & leaned their shoulders back with zany smiles. Then they started laughing 'gain.

Santa Marx maintained his sour glare as the blackness

surrounded him, narrowing the circle inside o' it where you could still see him till it finally disappeared completely, leaving nothing but darkness, engulfing the entire universe in 1 bite.

#BOSK-BG0B12-DISTURBED2

DISTURBED RESIDENCE, Part II

J. J. W. Mezun | 2015 January 1



VI. Façade

Earlier that morn, a cabal o' men in identical—& constrictive—suits o' armor sat round the 3 legs o' the triangular table while the hypotenuse was reserved for their leader, a young man in a dark cloak, red cape, & black top hat. In front o' him was a laminated nametag that said, "Lance F. Chamsby."

Lance had his gloved hands clasped together on the table as he glanced left & right o'er all o' his associates. His eyes were full o' acid & his shoulders refused to remain still due to the sheer chill, the mugginess, & the smell o' the place. He couldn't help but notice every dreadful detail: the tan wallpaper peeling off all o'er the walls, revealing the bricks 'neath, & the dripping pipes hanging awkwardly everywhere, as if this were some mechanical jungle.

"Now, you are all probably wondering why I asked you to meet me down here in this cold, dank basement 'neath this seemingly random mansion..." began Lance.

1 o' his minions spoke with a voice muffled by his mask: "Actually, Sir, we were wondering why you had us dress like knights."

"That shall be 'splained in a minute," Lance said with lips pursed like the sourest o' felines @ this rude interruption.

"The reason we are down here is that I have entered a contest here to explore this maniac mansion & find any treasure I can. However, my experience staying in this rabid pit last night was so insulting, I simply could not stay; so I shall be operating from outside. Plus, I am sure that that looting ponytailed witch would have planned to have me purged.

"Anyway, you will be the ones to carry out my operation while I

can focus on the decision-making down here, without the distractions o' heat-sucking coats or that revolting looter."

He backed 'way a decimeter, scooting his chair back with him, & held his arm out to his right to showcase an assortment o' small TV monitors hanging off the wall. They all showed on their screens an assortment o' TV monitors with assortments o' TV monitors showing assortments o' TV monitors on their screens.

"I'll be able to see everything that goes on with these monitors, each o' which is linked to chips I've embedded in each o' your suits. & with this microphone,"—Lance turned back to the table, slid the microphone o'er to him with his face leaned toward it, & pressed the red button on its stand—"I will be able to communicate with you all." His minions heard this last part right in their ears, as well as from in front o' them.

"& when I turn on the speakers, I'll be able to hear everything you all say with the microphones I embedded in your suits, allowing us to communicate. Does everyone understand?"

1 minion raised his hand.

"Yes, Agent Screamin' Green?"

"Uh, is this legal?"

"Course it's legal," Lance said, smacking his hands against the surface o' the table. "There was no stipulation that I couldn't get help; & though I said I was 'leaving,' I said nothing 'bout forfeiting or leaving the whole mansion. I haven't breached a single verbal contact I made."

"But how is this gonna work, Sir?" asked Agent Purple Mountain's Majesty. "Are we just gonna knock on the door & just walk right in when she answers, saying, 'Hey, we're with Sir Chamsby, y'all.'"

"You won't be knocking @ all," said Lance. "She probably still hasn't learned that terribly-complicated etiquette yet. You'll just go in through the door upstairs."

He pointed 'hind them. They turned back to where he was pointing to faintly see what looked like a crookedly handmade door bolted shut from their side.

"If she has no problem with that filthy looter breaking in, then she should have no trouble with you all doing the same," said Lance. "Now, if everyone is done wasting time, you may all go & begin now."

"I've got a question, Sir," 1 o' the minions said with his hand raised.

"Make it quick, Agent Red,"

"I was just curious why you were bothering to go through all o' this just for some money that is surely a pittance compared to what you already have."

"How much I have is irrelevant," said Lance with a slam o' his fist gainst the table. Then he grimaced & started sucking on his fist to soothe the pain caused by slamming it gainst the table's hard wood.

"This is 'bout getting what I've earned," Lance said with his finger raised in the air, & then continued with a louder voice, "Mo' importantly, this is 'bout showing that looter that she cannot beat me! That Objectivist justice shall prevail!"

"Uh, no offense, Sir, but I don't think that's gonna work," said Agent Purple Mountain's Majesty.

"& why not?"

"Well, for 1 thing, the guy writing this is a leftist."

"Yeah," said Agent Screamin' Green, "Let's face it, Sir: you're pretty much just an obnoxious strawman. Even if you did get a 1-up o'er her, some li'l detail will surely come in @ the last minute & smack your victory 'way just like the hand o' the Programmers."

"I don't care much for that predetermined voodoo. The fact is that what happens to each o' us is merely an outcome o' our actions," insisted Lance.

After a pause, Lance said louder, "Well, what are you idiots

standing round doing nothing like idiots for?” Lance waved his hands forward. “Go on! Get on with your work already.”

His minions scrambled for the door, causing Agent Purple Mountain’s Majesty in front to smack right into it. They fiddled with the locks for a few minutes, trying to avoid looking back @ Lance’s poisonous stare. When they finally managed to open it, they stumbled up the stairs, making loud clattering sounds that bothered Lance’s ears.

When he saw that they were finally gone, he clasped his hands together on the table ’gain & twisted his face into the most diabolical expression he could muster. If he had a cat, he’d be petting it now; but he didn’t, so he made due with petting his trusty 20-kg gold nugget.

“Now we shall see who is the best man, Autumn Springer—I or you... ’Course, since you’re a woman & I said ‘best man,’ we can already pres’pose—”

Just then, Agent Screamin’ Green stumbled back down the stairs & o’er to Lance’s table, picking up a blue & yellow plastic lunch box with a picture o’ Pikachu & Ash Ketchum on it.

“Sorry, forgot my lunch!” he said as he dashed back o’er to & up the stairs.

Now Lance merely stared @ the empty spot @ the bottom o’ the stairs with such acerbic force that one would expect laser beams to shoot from his eyes. *1st they almost ruin my opening, & now they absolutely crush my amazing conclusion! What is the world coming to with workers such as these?*

* * *

VII. Forgiven

Dawn didn't want to tell Felix, for fear o' worrying her too much, but she was quite sure they were lost. She figured she was an authority on the issue, since she was technically the 1 leading them.

All she knew was that they'd started by going down the hall just to the left o' the main room, took a few turns, & then hit a dead end. When Dawn tried to lead them back the other way, she forgot which turns she'd made, guessed, & now she was still in the same hallway she was in before—a'least it had the same striped blue wallpaper.

"Yeah, I don't see Autumn & Edgar anywhere round here," said Dawn.

"I'm sorry," said Felix.

"Sorry for what?" Dawn asked, turning her head to Felix with a perplexed expression.

"For not making Autumn & Edgar appear here when you need them."

Dawn laughed. "What? That's ridiculous. You can't be @ fault for not bending the laws o' time & space."

"I can't?" Felix asked, stopping with a stare even wider than normal, as if she had just had an epiphany. "But isn't everything my fault?"

"No, 'course not. Who told you that?"

"Truly?" Felix's head tilted a li'l upward, as if she were hoping to see light shine 'bove her. "Like, what isn't my fault?"

Dawn threw her arms out. "Lots o' things."

"Could you... could you say exactly what isn't?" Felix asked, & then quickly said, "No, I'm sorry, I shouldn't bother you with that stupidity."

Dawn said, "For starters, any tragedy that you had no

involvement in wasn't your fault. For instance, everything the Protectors did wasn't your fault, since it probably happened decades 'fore you were born. If you can't control it, it's not your fault."

"What the Protectors did isn't my fault?" Felix asked, her hands clasped together o'er her heart like a kitten watching its owner open a bucket o' chicken legs. She didn't know who the "Protectors" were or what they did, but she could guess it must've been quite rude.

"No," Dawn said as she put her arm round Felix's shoulders & pulled her toward her. "Now, how 'bout we focus on looking for that treasure 'stead? There's gotta be some in 1 o' these rooms."

"O, yeah, 'course, Madame mad science lady," said Felix.

However, her mind was preoccupied. She clutched her hands to her heart as she repeated in her mind, *Not everything is my fault! There are some things that aren't my fault!*

VIII. Decadence

Autumn noticed that 'twas getting dark much mo' quickly than she'd expected. By the time she & Edgar were a row o' hallway down the 4th floor, she saw that the sky outside was already black. She figured 'twas 'cause 'twas nearing winter, & thus the days were withering. However, when she checked the time, she saw that 'twas a second before 12 AM.

"How long have we been looking for treasure?" Autumn asked without taking her eyes off her phone.

"I dunno, but it's getting awfully dark," said Edgar. "What time is it?"

"Almost 12 AM."

"Uh, I think you mean PM."

She turned to Edgar & flipper her phone facing him. "See for yourself."

Edgar leaned in to look. “What? But that’s impossible. We’ve been @ this for a couple hours @ the most.”

“Well, ’less my phone company & the sky are both yanking us round the bone, apparently not,” Autumn said as she examined her phone once mo’.

“You don’t think... you don’t think something supernatural is causing it, do you?” Edgar said with a furtive glance to his side.

“That’s impossible.”

“But... but there were ghosts who sucked the warmth out o’ us...” Edgar said with a finger pointed up in the air. “Remember?”

“That’s different,” Autumn said with her arms crossed. “That’s scientifically possible... I think. But you can’t just change the rotation o’ the earth just like that. That’d be stupid even for cheap fiction.”

“Yeah, but we had that hungry rose monster before, remember?” said Edgar. “That was pretty stupid. I mean, it didn’t even have any relevance to any other part o’ the story.”

“Yeah, but that’s crazy stupid,” said Autumn. “That’s the kind o’ inanity you’d expect from some 50-Pts horror novel you’d find @ an airport shop or *Goosebumps*. But changing the earth’s rotation to make it night earlier? That’s just stupid in a boring way. Why bother?”

“Gee, I never thought ’bout it that way,” Edgar said as he sucked on his sleeve in ponder.

“Anyway, let’s not worry ’bout it. It’s not as if the night itself is threatening; & ’sides, I brought my flashlight with me this time.”

She rummaged through her pocket & flipped out her purple handheld flashlight, clicking it on to reveal a tiny beam o’ dusty light in front o’ them. ‘Twas only with such vibrancy & such focus that they both—’specially Edgar—noticed the infestation o’ cobwebs & tearing on the wallpaper.

She opened the nearest door on her left & swung the flashlight

round to reveal patches o' the room that, when put together, did not seem all that much different from most o' the other rooms.

When I 1st imagined searching for this treasure, I expected a challenge; but I didn't expect it to be this dull, thought Autumn. *Did she just fill this whole mansion with hundreds o' identical rooms & concentrate the bulk o' it in a tiny place?*

But something caught her eye when the light briefly flicked past a certain spot near the ceiling. She immediately pointed the flashlight back @ the spot & strained her eyes gainst the blinding light to see in better detail. 'Pon deeper scrutiny she could see a line o' darkness scaping from a slit 'tween 1 o' the ceiling tiles, which was dipping downward on 1 side.

She slowly crept under the loose ceiling tile—all the while training her light beam on it so she could see it from many different angles—while Edgar followed.

“Edgar, could you lift me up so I can examine the ceiling better? I see a loose tile up there that looks suspicious.”

Edgar nodded & bent down on 1 knee while Autumn put 1 foot on his right shoulder & climbed onto his shoulders. As he slowly returned to his feet, holding her ankles to keep her steady, she saw that she still couldn't quite reach the ceiling, so she lifted her right foot off Edgar's left shoulder & onto his head, pushing herself up as high as she could on her tiptoes, holding her arms out to her sides in an attempt to improve her flimsy balance. Though this didn't keep her from wobbling left & right, 'twas slightly improved when Edgar raised his arms & held her still.

With this extra boost, she was barely able to reach the ceiling with her hands. She hooked her fingers round the edge o' the tile that was loosened from the rest o' the ceiling & made an effort to pull it down to widen the hole. Though it didn't want to budge @ 1st, after a while she felt it begin to shift under her fingers.

& then, 'fore she knew it, the tile suddenly plopped down to the floor, generating a loud thump gainst the thick carpet. The impact caused Edgar to sway backward in shock, almost losing his hold o' Autumn & causing her to fall off.

Well, that was easier than I expected, thought Autumn. *I was worried I'd have to spend all night trying to pry this open 'nough for me to fit my head through while I steadily crushed Edgar under my weight.*

She looked down @ Edgar & said, "Hey, Edgar, are you all right down there? I'm not breaking your back here, am I?"

"Uh, no... it's fine," Edgar said, even though he did feel as if his shoulder blades were going to cave in & his arms were going to fall off.

Autumn, who didn't believe him 1 bit, thought, *Maybe I should have had him stand on my shoulders, 'stead... but then would he have been able to pull the tile off?*

I guess it's too late to change now, anyway...

With her conscience temporarily mollified, Autumn aimed her flashlight up into the hole, tilting it & her head to see it from as many angles as possible from her limited location. She couldn't see much, but she could discern from the sight o' flat horizontal wood planks & vertical bricks that there was an extra room up there.

She could have easily concluded that 'twas simply an attic, & that such a room was hardly suspicious; but she knew well 'nough that this was far from the 2nd-to-highest floor. Why would there be an attic in the middle o' the mansion? & 'sides, she figured an auxiliary room such as this would be a perfect place to hide treasure, regardless.

She looked down @ Edgar 'gain & said, "OK, Edgar, if you can, could you try to step forward a bit so I can reach the inside o' the hole better?"

“Uh, OK,” Edgar said as he slowly clomped his feet forward, inch by inch as a golem, all the while trying to hold Autumn up from falling.

“OK, that’s good,” she said as she gripped 1 o’ the inside edges o’ the hole with the tips o’ her fingers. “Now I just need you to grab my feet & try lifting me up just a li’l so I can get a boost up in here, if that’s not too much trouble.” She looked down @ Edgar to see if his expression indicated any trouble he might have; but she could not see any sign o’ emotion @ all.

“Yeah, I can do that,” he said as he made an effort to lift Autumn’s feet up off his shoulders, which he thankfully found easier than he thought it’d be, due to the fact that Autumn was holding onto the ceiling for extra support.

With ’nough effort from both o’ them, she was able to get her elbows ’bove the ceiling, pulling herself up with her whole arms till her upper body was in the secret room, only her feet still dangling down in the other room.

This was when she noticed she could feel Edgar’s sleeve-covered hands round her ankles no longer. She looked down as Edgar looked up @ her & both saw that she was too high for him to reach her anymore.

Edgar scratched his head & asked, “Um... what now?”

Autumn cringed & felt her breathing tighten as she felt the pressure o’ her arms & stomach trying to keep her upper body up ’bove the hole while she flailed her legs round in a mad attempt to propel her upward.

Seeing that this had no advantage, she relaxed her legs & said with some strain in her voice, “Do you think you could go round the hall & look for a somewhat long object—like a broom, perhaps—that you could use to push me up farther?”

“But what if you fall?” asked Edgar.

“I’ll fall ‘ventually, regardless, if we don’t hurry & find a way to get me up here all the way. The drop isn’t too far, anyway, so it’s not as if I’ll break my neck.”

Edgar rushed out the room & down the hall in the opposite direction whence they came, looking for the next door down. ‘Twas only while Edgar was already dashing through the hall that he realized a flaw in her plan: Autumn still had the flashlight, & the lamps hanging from the walls were much too dim for Edgar to see much.

He considered running back & asking Autumn for the flashlight when his eyes caught a dark figure moving toward him. He stopped & backed up against the wall—which, if Autumn was present, she’d have considered a bad idea, since it’d only bring him closer to the lamplight—& watched the figure draw near, till it came close ‘nough to 1 o’ the lamps that it melted into view.

That was when Edgar’s chest began hyperventilating, as what he saw was ‘nother—or maybe the same?—suit o’ armor. It turned its head to Edgar, its metal mask hiding any emotion or life within it.

Lacking the most strategic o’ minds, Edgar simply turned & flew back down the hall without seeing or hearing what was in front o’ him or feeling the heaviness o’ his breath & the aching o’ his feet & legs, his whole consciousness focused merely on the existence o’ the threat ‘hind him while his body switched to automatic.

So much so that he didn’t see it when he bumped into someone else. As he hit the ground, Edgar covered his face & whimpered, resigning himself to whatever dastardly fate these monsters had planned for him.

However, he was soon soothed when he heard the familiar voice in front o’ him say, “Edgar, is that you?”

Edgar uncovered his eyes to see that ‘twas Dawn, who was putting some sort o’ big stick ‘hind her as she was rising from her

own fall & staring @ Edgar.

A thousand¹ thoughts rushed through Edgar's head—getting 'way from the haunted armor, what Dawn was doing there, & how to find something to keep Autumn from falling—when his mind pinpointed on 1 idea.

He stood & said with urgency, "Um... can you follow me, please?"

"Uh, OK..."

She followed him to a door that was ajar. As she followed him through the doorway, he said, "Autumn needs some help getting up somewhere."

Dawn stopped in the center o' the room & looked up to see what she recognized as Autumn's feet dangling from a hole in the ceiling.

"I was thinking maybe you could stand on my shoulders & with the extra height you could help push Autumn up," said Edgar.

Autumn glanced down & could see through the space 'tween her & the edge o' the hole that Edgar was below her, looking up @ her.

"Edgar, is that you? Who are you talking to?"

Dawn crossed her arms & said, "Well, well, well, if it isn't Li'l Madame Cheater getting herself stuck in the ceiling like always, & expecting the competition to help her so she can steal all o' the treasure she found for herself."

Autumn exhaled a heavy sigh o' petulance. "Edgar, I was hoping you could find me an inanimate object to help me."

"Well, gee, if you're going to be that way, maybe I won't help you after all," Dawn said, crossing her arms with a mild smirk, though turning to look 'way.

"Excellent," Autumn said with heavy breaths. "Now, Edgar, could you go find something to help me up, please?"

"But that evil suit o' armor is out there."

"Armor?" Dawn asked, turning her attention back to Edgar. "You

1 & by "a thousand," I mean "3."

saw haunted armor, too? Did it try to capture you, too?”

“Uh, I dunno...” said Edgar. His expression grew mo’ anxious. “Did he try to capture you?”

Dawn nodded.

This caught Autumn’s curiosity. She couldn’t help sensing that ever since they ran into that 1 possessed suit o’ armor, ‘twas following her—whether ‘twas the sight o’ ajar doors when they’d returned to hallways from other rooms or what she swore sounded like clanking metal always far ’hind.

However, Autumn had mo’ important issues to deal with now: how was she going to get up there with Edgar too pale to leave the room ’gain?

Suddenly, she heard a door close below.

“Edgar?” said Autumn.

“That knight’s coming right for our door,” Dawn said in whispered gasps. She was sitting back against the door with Edgar, both holding their knees & shivering.

“Poker. We don’t have time for this,” whispered Autumn. “Edgar, quickly rummage through the—”

Dawn rose to her feet. “We all need to get up there, so why don’t I just boost Edgar & you up & you can pull me up after?”

Autumn hesitated, but then finally mumbled, “Whatever.”

So Dawn bent down to let Edgar climb her shoulders & then lifted him up so he could push Autumn up. With this much greater boost, Autumn’s knees were easily able to reach o’er the top o’ the hole, & she easily climbed in.

Then she needed only to lie on her stomach—to the side, so that the bulk o’ her weight was lodged against the side o’ the attic area, making it harder to fall back out the hole—& reach down to pick Edgar up & pull him in.

That was when the complication revealed itself: how would she

pull the ditz inside? 'Course, she considered just leaving the sucker down there to rot—but she decided to a'least take the effort to think o' a way to help her. What li'l humor Autumn would derive from screwing o'er Dawn would only risk creating bitterness that she knew could bite her in the shins later. It'd be better to keep their relations a'least neutral—never knew when it could come convenient. Plus, she remembered that she was a friend o' Edgar's.

“Now, you're not going to bail on me, are you?”

When Autumn glanced down @ the noise, she saw that Dawn's expression was not angry, but distraught, like a puppy left out in the rain all night. Autumn had to admit it made her feel a li'l crummy.

“Autumn, I hear footsteps 'hind me,” Dawn whispered up to them, eyelines digging deeper in fear.

“Shit.” Autumn lay on her back & scooted o'er to the hole. “Edgar, hold my legs & hold me down o'er the side. She'll have to use me as a rope.”

“Uh... Are you sur—?”

“Yes. No time for questions,” snapped Autumn.

Edgar put his sleeved hands round her ankles, & with soft grunts, lifted them up as he slowly moved her forward, & down into the hole, causing her costume to fall to the floor.

Flashbacks entered Autumn's vision as she remembered Edgar's failed attempt to hold her up by her feet back @ Tangerine Tombs long ago—a rather confusing memory, Autumn thought, since it seemed as if she & Edgar ended up dying in the end, somehow.

Dawn stared up & watched as Autumn was lowered upside-down, dreading the obvious conclusion. Climbing on someone else's shoulders was 1 thing, but climbing all o'er someone as if she were a human rope seemed too awkward, even for Dawn.

But the strengthening footsteps outside the door reminded Dawn that there was no time for hesitation. So, with a short hop to gain the

li'l extra height needed, she grabbed Autumn's hands & began to climb up to Autumn's arm sockets, & then up to the bottom o' Autumn's drooping jacket. Autumn, meanwhile, gazed straight forward with worn eyes, trying to distract her mind from the indignity o' what she was going through—'specially when Dawn put her foot on Autumn's chin, pushing her head back so much it felt as if her neck were going to snap.

"Uh, sorry," Dawn said with a guilty glance down @ Autumn's face. "I don't know where else I can find a foothold."

"S'all right. Just hurry," Autumn replied, trying to hold back steep sighs like steam.

Meanwhile 'bove, Edgar's mind began to realize a flaw that Autumn had not considered in her plan, which he soon realized with the assistance o' his arms: Autumn, in putting their plan in the risk o' Edgar being able to hold Autumn long 'nough, forgot to factor in Dawn's weight. While Edgar doubted he could keep Autumn up for long, he knew he couldn't keep both o' their weights up for long. Already his arms felt like they were 'bout to fall off & he felt his body gradually shift forward gainst his will.

This also caused Autumn & Dawn to gradually droop lower, which Autumn began to notice. She looked up & said, "Edgar, how you holding up there?" with the kind o' inflection that indicated she did not expect the answer to be positive.

But Edgar only responded with a curt, "OK."

That was when Autumn & Dawn suddenly heard the sound of a turning doorknob. Dawn turned her head back to look @ it, while Autumn rolled her eyes down to do the same. Each could see that she was not imagining things: they could see the knob slowly turning counterclockwise.

By this point, Dawn had reached as high as she could atop Mount Springer; however, Edgar had slid down so low that her arms were

still a'least a foot 'way from reaching the top o' the hole.

Autumn, trying to ignore Dawn's assaults all o'er her person, said, "Edgar, do you think you could maybe try pulling us both up?" with her voice rising, since she knew this was far mo' hypothetical than likely.

& almost as if to unconsciously laugh @ Autumn's request, Edgar's upper body finally slid out the hole, causing him to tip vertically & fall, dropping Autumn & Dawn with him.

Just as they landed, they heard the door creak open. They only gaped in powerless anticipation as they awaited what the suit had in shop for them, only to sigh in relief when they saw 'twas only Madame Heureuse—albeit 1 who looked much mo' haggard & distant round the eyes, & whose slouch appeared much less powerful than her usual straight stance.

Heureuse stared down @ the new mess on the floor & said with a weaker voice than usual, "Well, I see you three are using team work."

Dawn was the 1st to jump back onto her feet. "We were wondering where you were all day."

"Sorry," Heureuse said, & then coughed. "I didn't feel well this morning. I just woke up a little bit ago, and... Well, I found something you probably don't want to see, but probably should."

"What?" asked Dawn.

Madame Heureuse hesitated with a deep sigh 'fore saying, "You had better come with me and see."

"Uh, OK." Dawn turned to Edgar, whom she quickly saw was just fine, & then Autumn, who was still holding her neck & still sitting on the floor. "Uh, are you all right, Autumn?"

"No, I'm fine. You only *almost* broke my neck, so I should be just fine."

Dawn shrugged. "'Twas your idea."

“No, my idea was to leave you down there.”

With Dawn’s mood properly squashed down to meet Autumn’s, Autumn put her costume back on & they followed Madame Heureuse out & down to the 2nd floor till she stopped @ 1 o’ its doors. After opening it & stepping inside, she stepped ’way to the side to allow the others to come in & see. Autumn was in front, & thus the 1st to enter.

That was when she saw what Heureuse was so distraught ’bout: there were 2 men hung by their necks on ropes protruding from the ceiling, dangling a foot ’bove the floor. Their eyes were bulging blank & their bodies were so limp, that they looked like ragdolls; their skin was so white they already looked like ghosts. Autumn’s eyes & mouth twisted as she looked @ them & she felt as if a large worm was squirming round in her stomach.

She turned to Heureuse with disgust. “Why are you showing us this? & how did this happen?”

Dawn & Edgar stepped in from ’hind her, & their reactions were worse. Both immediately left the room without a word. Autumn & Heureuse followed, Heureuse closing the door ’hind them.

“S-so I guess that’s what happened to them...” Dawn said, her skin becoming paler with sickness.

“Who the hell are they?” said Autumn, her own expression still wary.

“They’re those 2 guys who arrived with me, Felix, & that Chamsby guy,” said Dawn.

Autumn shook her head as she said, “What other guys? I don’t remember these 2 @ all.” She turned to Heureuse & said, “Well, how did this happen & why are you showing us it?”

“I know not how this happened, though I know plenty of ways it might have happened,” said Heureuse. “I wanted to show you this as a warning that I feel morally obligated to give you. I’m sorry to traumatize you all, and I hate to ruin what I hoped would be a fun

little contest. This type of thing hasn't happened in decades, and I thought it would have gone much better than this, but it seems now that all of the occult creatures that haunt this place had only held themselves dormant until a special surprise like you all showed up."

Autumn blinked @ Heureuse, not entirely sure if she understood everything. "So, what, are you saying these creatures are going to do this to us next?"

"No," said Heureuse. "I will personally make sure that will not happen. I shall accompany and protect you on your way out our yard, and then they will not be able to touch you once you are away from this property."

"On our way out...?" muttered Autumn.

Heureuse turned to the others. "Do any of you need to retrieve anything?"

Then it finally hit Autumn.

"Wait... Are you saying we're s'posed to leave?" asked Autumn.

Heureuse slowly turned round, giving Autumn a horrified gaze. "Of course that is what I'm saying. You are not... you were not planning on staying, were you?"

"Actually..." Autumn said as she rummaged through her coat pockets to pull out Heureuse's pamphlet, which she flopped in front o' her face so she could see it. "I believe it says here—I believe you promise in this pamphlet o' yours that we have 3 days to find the treasure. Now, 'less you're a weasel o' the highest degree, we should still have 2 mo' days left. You're not trying to scam us with false advertising, are you?"

"But... but you can't stay here..." Heureuse said with a shaky, gravelly voice. "I mean, sure, you *can* stay here if you choose, but... why would you? Don't you see how dangerous it is? It is not worth it."

"I see you're trying to trick us into forfeiture as you did with the

refusal to answer the door,” Autumn said with her arms crossed. “I would thank you not to insult my intelligence, Madame Heureuse, for I’m too wise to fall for such an elementary trick.”

Heureuse shook her head slowly. “This is no trick, Madame Springer. Look closer at those... those young men hanging from the ceiling. I would not do that for mere jest in a silly contest.”

“Hmm...” Autumn put her hand o’er her mouth & stared down @ the ground to ponder. *She does have a point there; & while I’d like to believe all o’ these occult activities are mere chicanery, I cannot conjure up any explanation for how she was able to make artificial ghosts that could drain one’s heat...*

She looked back @ Heureuse & said, “What kind o’ treasure did you hide here, anyway? Why would the ghosts be so intent on attacking us here?”

“I... I don’t know,” Heureuse said with her eyes pointed down in concern. “As for the treasure, well, it’s nothing worth losing one’s life o’er...”

“I’ll decide that for myself,” said Autumn. “How much we speaking?”

“What?”

“Could you give me a range o’ where this treasure falls? Are we talking hundred-thousands o’ Pts? Millions? Billions?” Autumn said, wringing her wrists in circles.

“You... you cannot truly be considering risking your life for mere wealth,” said Heureuse. She glanced @ Edgar & Dawn.

Edgar said, “Uh... I don’t think you know Autumn very well; she’s spent her whole life doing dangerous stuff for money.”

Dawn nervously raised her hand. Heureuse saw it & turned her head to Dawn.

“Uh, yeah... Not to interrupt, or anything, but have you seen Felix anywhere? I lost her a while ago, & now that you’re talking ’bout all

o' these dangerous activities going on, I don't want to leave her by herself for too long. You know how she is: if a monster tries to hang her, she'll probably help him construct the rope herself while telling herself out loud how 'twas 'bout time she finally got what she deserved."

Heureuse's brows twisted. "What are you talking about? Who's Felix?"

"Remember, the 1 in the cat costume? The 1 who hates herself so much?"

Heureuse's eyes widened as she glanced to Dawn's left & saw that the cat-costumed woman was nowhere to be seen. She clutched her chest & said, "Oh no... Look, we won't have time to go looking for her now. I'll quickly escort you three out and then I'll immediately look for the feline, okay?"

Autumn's eyebrows lowered. "What part o' 'I'm not leaving without me gold' do you not comprehend?"

"Look, I don't have time to argue," Heureuse said as she threw her arms into the air.

"Good, then let's not argue. I'm staying till our agreed time's up, & that's final."

Madame Heureuse turned pleading eyes to Edgar.

"I can't leave without Autumn," Edgar said with an apologetic slump o' his shoulders. "We're partners."

Heureuse looked @ Dawn next, who straightened up with her head tilted up, finding herself with renewed bravery after hearing cowardly Edgar's statement.

"& I can't leave without my partner," said Dawn.

"So, none of you are leaving?" Heureuse said with a hand slowly rubbing down the side o' her face, causing its skin to pull down a li'l, making its eye look even mo' tired.

All 3 nodded.

Heureuse gave a heavy sigh as she turned for the door. “At least follow me into the main room and let me get us all food and drinks. You must be famished after going all day without.”

Both Autumn & Dawn’s stomachs growled & their mouths felt twice as dry after they heard this. But while Dawn rubbed her stomach & was ’bout to agree, Autumn replied, “That’s OK; we don’t need anything.”

Dawn & Madame Heureuse both turned to look @ Autumn with bewilderment—Edgar did, too, but less with bewilderment, & mo’ with curiosity.

“What’s wrong now?” said Dawn.

“Oh, but surely you must be thirsty at least,” said Heureuse. “Now you’re just trying to be difficult.”

Autumn looked straight into Madame Heureuse’s eyes & said, “I once ’gain ask you not to insult my intelligence. I think it’s quite clear to anyone who is paying attention what your angle is: you hope to drug us to sleep so you can sneak us out without any struggle & deprive us o’ the treasure.”

Dawn glanced @ Autumn mo’ with skepticism than horror. She nudged Edgar on the arm & whispered, “Hey bro, I think your girlfriend might be a li’l paranoid.”

Edgar merely shrugged. He generally preferred not to have to make such complicated choices as these. After all, she *could* be correct; what she said was certainly possible.

“Surely you don’t think I would do something so ridiculous, do you?” Heureuse asked, voice becoming breathless with exasperation.

“I think I just indicated that I do & that there is nothing you can say to make me believe otherwise,” said Autumn. “Or else, let us go to the bathroom & let us drink from the tap. Surely, if you have no plans for harm, you would be fine with this.”

“Uh... of course not,” Heureuse said, expression still baffled. “But

what about food?"

"Show us to your kitchen & we can prepare it ourselves. You can even watch & tell us what food we can't use if you're saving some of it."

Madame Heureuse didn't say anything. Finally, she turned to the other 2 & said, "I'm not sure if any of you want any food or drink..."

Edgar piped up, "Uh, I don't eat or drink anything anyway..."

Heureuse's gave Edgar a stern look. "You do not have to lie to protect my feelings. I'll understand if you wish to go with your friend."

"Uh... no, truly, I don't," Edgar said, ducking his head a bit. "See, 'cause I'm a skeleton & all it just goes right through me, anyway."

"Forgive me if I am not in the mood for jokes," Heureuse said, which caused Edgar to look @ Autumn guiltily.

Dawn raised her hand & said, "Uh, Edgar's being truthful. As the 1 who used to run the restaurant he oft frequented, I can confirm that he never eats or drinks anything."

"I see..." Madame Heureuse said, though she didn't appear to believe any of them. "And I take it you don't want anything, either?" She was looking @ Dawn when she said this.

"Uh... Not now at least." Now Dawn wasn't sure if she wanted to trust Madame Heureuse, either. She did find her alibi for being gone so long rather sharky. 'Sides, she had 'nother reason why she didn't want to go 'way from Autumn & Edgar...

Madame Heureuse turned to look Autumn sternly in the eye & said, "I suppose you have won both times here; and yet I am afraid what you have truly done was lose dearly."

She waited to see how this registered with Autumn & was unsurprised when she saw that it hadn't registered @ all: Autumn merely stared right back @ her.

With that, Madame Heureuse turned for the door 'gain, but was

interrupted by Autumn, which Heureuse expected to be a change o' brain:

"I will say, though, that if you do want to assist us, you could tell us what kind o' monsters lurk round here, so we can be prepared—that is, if you *are* concerned 'bout our safety."

Heureuse turned back to them & said with still-heavy voice, "Well, there are many occult creatures that lurk around here. It would take forever to name them all."

"Well, let's narrow it down: I know I've already seen a glowing set o' floating eyes & lips, the 'kappa-obake,' a rose monster that seems to be able to talk & ask for water, & possessed suits o' armor. Do you know anything mo' 'bout these?"

Heureuse paused, unable to keep herself from shooting Autumn an incredulous look. "Repeat that last one 'gain."

"The possessed suit o' armor? Edgar & I ran into it this morn. He just walked down the stairs talking to some invisible 'boss,' & then fled when he glimpsed us. Edgar says he saw him not long ago, too."

"Felix & I saw him too," said Dawn. "But he didn't run from us: he flat-out tried to capture us for his li'l 'boss'—some creature 'hind this locked door we ran into. His attempt to capture us was actually how we were separated."

"Ah, yes," said Heureuse—though in the back o' her head she was thinking, *Either they're all lying to me or one of them is lying to trip the others up. I am almost certain it would be Madame Springer that would be doing the latter.*

"So, can you tell us anything 'bout them so we can better defend ourselves?" asked Dawn.

"All I can say is that they work in ways impossible to predict so that even I am often surprised and that there is no way you can defend yourselves, regardless, save for escaping."

& with that Madame Heureuse turned & left, leaving Autumn,

Edgar, & Dawn to fend for themselves.

IX. Overburdened

Agent Purple Mountain's Majesty was not having a good morn. He knew he shouldn't have volunteered to take the 2nd & 3rd floors. Well, no he didn't—he didn't think there was anything significant 'bout those floors @ all when he 1st chose them; & now that he thought 'bout it, he was pretty certain he didn't even pick these floors to begin with, but was assigned them by Sir Chamsby not long after leaving their meeting.

@ the least very, he knew now that his being assigned to floors 3 & 2 were bad news for him, even if the news didn't come to him till 'twas too late to do nothing, since he couldn't have prevented his being assigned to these floors, anyway.

1st, every room appeared empty, which caused Lance to get angry @ him for being assigned to hallways with empty rooms. The only room that seemed to interest Sir Chamsby was 1 that had a lime green backpack, which Sir Chamsby instructed him to search through. All they could find were bags o' trail mix, water bottles, a notebook, a phial o' some red liquid—he guessed 'twas perfume o' some sort—& a farrago o' tools.

All he remembered was hearing Sir Chamsby say, "These must be that looter's secret tools. Well, we'll see how bold she is without her wheelchairs!" & then instructed him to take the whole pack & deliver it to the hideout. What Sir Chamsby planned to do with it was blocked from Purple Majesty's mind.

& then there was the room with that terrible rose monster that squeaked & squealed & sounded as if 'twere asking for water—or was he only imagining things? When he 1st opened the door & saw it, he reflexively started to back out, only to be stilled by Sir

Chamsby's orders.

"Stop! Where d'you think you're going?" Purple could hear Sir Chamsby's crackling voice say. "This is 1 o' the 1st rooms with something different to see & you want to glide off like some kind o' union worker?"

"But, Sir, the thing that makes that room different is that it has a dangerous plant monster inside! What if it eats me?"

"Don't worry: if it does, then you can easily be replaced," said Sir Chamsby.

"Well... what am I s'posed to do in there, then?"

"Look round it for any clues or something—I dunno!" Sir Chamsby's voice was rising in indignation. "Obviously this thing is guarding some treasure; why else would it be there?"

"I-I'm not sure how it could be there al all, Sir. & furthermo', even if it is guarding any treasure, how would I ever get past it?"

"Don't you have any skills in anything?" said Sir Chamsby.

"Fighting venomous rose monsters was not on my résumé, Sir," said Agent Purple Mountain's Majesty. "I think that was Agent Red's that did."

Sir Chamsby grumbled. "Well, you could a'least go in there & see what it does. Maybe it won't expect you to fight it; maybe it'll give you a riddle or something to solve."

Agent Purple Mountain's Majesty was doubtful. Usually riddlers were crafty old men or cutesy animals, not semisentient vegetables dripping with blood & saliva. After all, why go through all o' the trouble o' getting such a scary monster & then just have it waste its skills talking to people?

But he wasn't 'bout to argue with Sir Chamsby & risk losing the only job he could find that offered a free health plan²; so he slowly cracked the door open & slid in, keeping his eyes trained on the rose monster that seemed to be eyeing him as well—which he thought was impressive, considering it didn't actually have any eyes.

He looked @ it with the pleading, guilty look one would give when one wants to tell one's grandparents one needs to put them in a retirement home, but doesn't know the polite way to introduce the subject.

"Uh... hey, Sir Plant. I don't know your name, so if you can talk, please tell me. I don't mean to be rude." He fumbled his fingers. "Uh, so I was wondering if you might give me a riddle I could solve to get whatever treasure you're guarding? Please?"

The rose monster squeak-growled 'gain & seemed to say once mo', "Water..."

"I just discovered the riddle!" shouted Sir Chamsby, which made Agent Purple Mountain's Majesty almost jump straight up through the roof, it surprised him so much.

"Wh-what?" he asked as he clutched his heart.

"It's obvious what you need to do to get past this plant: you'll need to go & find a gardener hidden somewhere else in this mansion & bring him here. It's a fetch quest."

Agent Purple Mountain's Majesty stood & blinked for a while 'fore saying, "O... O yeah, definitely. That's brilliant, Sir," while thinking afterward, *Whatever gets me out o' this place!*

Luckily for him, the 3rd floor was a return to bland sameness in all rooms, which he had now learned to cherish. The only detail he could possibly think might be important was some loose ceiling tile,

2 Unfortunately, he didn't actually read his employment contract, for if he did, he would've realized that said "health plan" was just the sentence, "Don't get sick."
—Sir L. F. Chamsby."

which he thought might have been hiding something.

However, when he asked his boss, Sir Chamsby berated him: “Don’t be stupid. This whole mansion is falling apart; if we check every li’l imperfection, we’ll never get anything done.”

When he finished through the 3rd floor, he was sure he was on Safe Street. Now all he had to do was wander back through the 2 floors to check for any changes that might’ve happened. He didn’t really think much o’ it till he was walking downstairs to the 2nd floor & he saw that the 2nd floor had, indeed, changed: now it had someone under a tartan sheet ’longside—worse!—a skeleton covered in a black robe.

Are these costumes or are these things real?

His eyes matched awkwardly with the ghost (?) while he could see the skeleton slink ’hind it.

Was he preparing a spell? Does he know magic?

Finally Agent Purple Mountain’s Majesty felt himself regain his voice & said, “Uh... Boss, I think someone caught me. What should I do?”

“Huh? Wha—Ah! It’s that vile looter come to foil my plans!”

“Well, what should I do with her?”

“Nothing! Get ’way from her immediately! You don’t want to be ensnared in 1 o’ her death traps!”

“Uh, OK.”

He didn’t need to be urged to turn & climb back up to the 3rd floor, flinging himself into the 1st door he could find, which, thankfully, led to a generic room.

“What should I do now, Sir?” asked he.

“Open the door a crack, peek through, & wait for the vile looter to follow up, & then watch her & follow her. Your new job is to keep an eye on this villain.”

I’m going to have to follow the ghost & skeleton? O, why did I ever

decide to major in Minionology in college? I knew I should've went with Forestry 'stead.

But he did as Sir Chamsby said, without a spoken word o' protest. When the "vile looter" didn't appear to come by, he said, "She doesn't seem to be coming, Sir."

"Keep waiting. She'll have to come through here 'ventually."

Purple wasn't sure that was so certain, but he wasn't going to complain. As far as he was concerned, boredom was the best he could hope for in this job.

This was sadly ruined by that stupid ghost woman actually showing up a mere 5 minutes later—1st as scary footsteps from his left, & then in the scarier form o' their actual appearance, since it now meant he had to actually do something that he could potentially fail at, which was always stressful.

& to add to this stress, as he watched them stand by the stairs & turn their heads he realized a flaw in Sir Chamsby's plan: what if she checked the room *he* was in?

& much to his horror, that was exactly where they seemed to be headed 1st. He watched helplessly as he saw the ghost woman near, till her stomach was right in front o' his peeking eye & he could smell her stench o' hemp, maple syrup, & sweat.

Suddenly, he heard Sir Chamsby's voice yell, "What the hell d'you think you're doing? Go hide somewhere?"

He wanted to ask, "Where?" but didn't dare speak, & didn't have any time to bother, anyway, since she was already turning the doorknob; so 'stead, he hid in the best place he could imagine: he stood up & backed gainst the wall just to the side o' the door, using the now-opened door to block him from their sight.

The ghost woman glanced left & right & muttered, "I s'pose this hallway will be filled with the same rooms, too," 'fore leaving.

Agent Purple Mountain's Majesty stood there for the next few

minutes, staring @ the spot the ghost woman had been standing in before, 'fraid to move for fear that she'd return. That is, till he heard Sir Chamsby yell, "What are you doing just standing round? Go follow her & see what she's doing!"

He didn't think this sounded like a good idea. But then, he figured he didn't truly have a choice, anyway.

He followed them through the 3rd & 4th floors @ a great distance, worried that if he got too close, 1 o' them would be able to sense him. 'Twas bad 'nough he had to wear this loud, heavy armor, which squeaked & clanked every step he took.

He'd carefully open & enter doors as he went 'long, to provide him with hiding places—which he later found was necessary when he saw the ghost woman turn back, forcing him to quickly pull back into his room & pull the door closed with him—but not all the way, so as not to make a loud clicking noise. He only considered himself lucky that 1 o' the randomly chosen doors to hide 'hind didn't end up to be the 1 with the rose monster.

While this plan kept him from being caught, it also oft caused him to fall far 'hind, which thereby caused Sir Chamsby to yell some mo'.

This was exacerbated by the day quickly turning to night—a li'l too quickly, Purple felt—which made it almost impossible for him to see his way round. On 1 edge, it did mean that he didn't need to bother trying to hide, since the other 2 would doubtlessly never see him; on the other, it also meant he had to stumble round using his hands as guides, which he feared would be noisy 'nough to catch their attention. This began with him smacking right into the hand rail o' the stairs 'tween the 3rd & 4th floors.

Luckily, from the clatter he heard far 'head o' him, he doubted they were close 'nough to acknowledge his presence—which only meant that he was failing @ his job, anyway.

I just can't win in this job, he wailed in his head.

& just to pour lava into his wounds, as he was walking down the 4th floor hall, just as he was thinking he was safe, a flicker o' white caught his eye to his left, & when he turned his head, he saw the skeleton standing there, staring right @ him.

Excrement, he's seen me! It's too late to hide now!

He was thankful when he saw that, rather than casting a spell on him & turning him into a beer mascot, the skeleton turned & scurried 'way.

He was surprised he didn't hear Sir Chamsby yell @ him through his communicator. *Must not have been watching the screen when the skeleton was there*, thought he. Still, he decided it'd be better to try following the skeleton; with the noises he heard before, he estimated they were probably finding treasure right now.

He soon found the room from which the noise originated, which was distinguishable by the light leaking from under its door. But when he put his ear to the door, he couldn't hear much o' anything; & when he ducked down on the ground & peeked through the slit under the door, he couldn't see anything inside.

"Agent Purple Mountain's Majesty, did you find them?" he suddenly heard Sir Chamsby say. Though he felt that Sir Chamsby's outbursts always came @ the most unexpected times, it had been happening so much now that it didn't faze him as much anymo'.

He made a thumbs-up sign in front o' his face as a soundless affirmative to Sir Chamsby's monitor.

"What's she doing in there?"

Unable to conceive o' a nonverbal way to answer, he moved a li'l ways from the door & whispered as quietly as he could, "No idea."

"Well, find out."

Purple gave Chamsby 'nother thumbs-up & then slunk 'way into the dark when he heard quickening footsteps emerge. He looked out from his hiding place to see the skeleton, followed by some woman

in a spooky lab jacket, go into the room he was checking, saying, "Autumn needs some help getting up somewhere," to the other woman as he went in.

When the door closed 'hind them, Purple tiptoed closer to the door so he could hear what they were doing in there.

"...ter getting herself stuck in the ceiling like always, & expecting the competition to help her so she can steal all o' the treasure she found for herself," he heard 1 o' the voices say.

"Did I just hear her say she found some treasure?" Sir Chamsby said, & then paused 'gain till he heard her finish. When he heard nothing else important being said, he continued, "Agent Purple Mountain's Majesty, stay there & make sure they don't 'scape. All others, immediately go to where Agent Purple is on floor 4. You 3 will have to ambush them as they come out & take whatever treasure they find."

Purple didn't relish the idea o' having to attack them, even if he had backup. He knew he couldn't voice any protests right now without being heard, however, so he simply stood & continued to listen in on the 3 inside, which worryingly included a mention o' him. *Do they know I'm here? What are they planning to do to me?*

His worrying was interrupted when he heard mo' important information: the 2 women seemed to be competing for the treasure, even though the ghost woman was not certain there was truly treasure "up there." All o' this pleased Purple, as they both made the possibility o' him having to do something gainst them less likely.

While he listened in on them, he'd oft glance round the hallway, impatient for the others to show up.

If I do have to fight them, I'd better not have to do it 'lone.

So 'twas with relief that he heard footsteps arrive from the other direction. However, when they neared, & thus sounded clearer, he noticed they oddly didn't sound like the clanking his suit made.

Maybe it's not 1 o' the other agents...

He decided, just to be safe, to go back & hide in the darkness 'tween 2 lamps. As he watched the dark figure emerge from the darkness before the door, he witnessed his fears confirmed: 'twas some tall woman in a red cloak with brown hair in a bun.

Sir Chamsby blurted, "That's Madame Heureuse; don't let her see you."

Purple had already made that decision, anyway.

He watched Madame Heureuse enter the door; but 'cause she left it open, he didn't dare come closer. He was still close 'nough to be able to hear them, anyway—though he wasn't sure if Sir Chamsby could.

This turned out to be a good idea, as he soon saw them exit the door & walk down the hall in the other direction. When he saw that they were far 'nough 'way to be unable to hear him, he whispered, "What should I do, Sir? Should I follow them or stay 'hind & guard the treasure?"

"Follow them. No one else will find this treasure; you'll be able to get it later. They're probably planning something important. Now hurry! Agents Screamin' Green & Red, are you still headed for floor 3?" Sir Chamsby paused, probably to hear the other 2 respond, which Purple couldn't hear. "Good. Stay there & look for the room—it should be the only 1 with the lights on. Search it, & if you find the treasure, send it to my headquarters immediately."

Purple tiptoed as fast as he could without making noise—which wasn't fast @ all. By the time he reached them, he knew he had missed something important. All he knew was that something dangerous was going to happen—so much so that Madame Heureuse was asking them to leave. This only worried him mo'; he was sure that whatever danger staying in this mansion may hold, Sir Chamsby would not let him go home, regardless.

But he was specially frightened when they mentioned him.

O crap, we've been spotted! Madame Heureuse's going to know we're not a normal part o' her ghouls—how else would she have never seen us for all those years till now?

& then 'fore he knew it, he heard her footsteps & turned to see her walking 'way from the door in his direction. He stood as still as he could, though his shot nerves made this difficult.

& anyway, it failed: as she passed him, she glanced rightward @ him—the kind o' suspicious glance that showed she *knew* some silly industry was in production. However, she did no mo', & merely passed.

But just when he thought he could relax, he heard the door creak, heard 1 o' them say, "Follow me: I know a better place for us to talk," & saw that the other 3 were leaving, in the same direction Madame Heureuse went. They, however, did not seem to notice him @ all.

As he watched them disappear round the hallway's turn, he sighed & thought, *Well, I guess I'd better follow them.*

Agent Purple Mountain's Majesty was not having a good night.

X. Guarded

Within the drawn-out silence that swarmed the hall after Heureuse had exited, Dawn stared down @ the floor, distraught.

"I can't believe these 2 were actually murdered in this place," said she. "What reason could these creatures have for doing it? Are they protective o' this place? O' Madame Heureuse? Why else would they let her live here so long without harming her?"

"Yeah, it's peculiar..." Autumn said, glancing in every direction, feeling awkward. She wasn't sure how to feel 'bout 2 gruesomely murdered guys she didn't even know. She felt she should probably feel sad, but it seemed so out o' nowhere that she couldn't muster it.

“Follow me,” she said as she walked down the hall. “I know a better place for us to talk.”

They followed her out & down the hall to 'nother room on the other side o' the hall, round the corner. 'Twas a room she & Edgar had found before: a study whose walls were lined with wooden bookcases full o' dusty books, a lamp that she had forgot to turn off when she checked it before, & mo' importantly, a couple arm chairs for them to sit on.

Autumn jumped backward on the leftmost 1, sitting sideways with her back against the left arm & her legs splayed o'er the right arm, so she could face the door.

Without taking her eyes off the door to look @ the others, she said, “I think it's quite clear that Madame Heureuse lied 'bout the occult creatures in this mansion being unpredictable & merely said that to avoid helping us. If they were truly unpredictable, she shouldn't be certain that she can hold off their powers any time, as she indicated earlier. 'Less she was lying 'bout that.”

“But why?” asked Dawn. “Does she think it'll diminish our resolve to stay here if we have no help? It seems kind o' hypocritical to act so concerned 'bout our health when it comes to having us leave, but then not help us when we decide to stay.”

“She doesn't care if we die; she cares if we take her treasure,” said Autumn. She held up a hand to stop Dawn from speaking, since she knew what she'd say. “Yes, I know we saw creatures that she obviously couldn't fake, & no, I don't think she killed those 2 herself or faked their deaths just to get us out; but why can't it be both? Perhaps this mansion is dangerous outside her control, but she still uses that lucky opportunity as a 'scuse to throw us out?”

“Why would she invite us here in the 1st place if she didn't want us to get her treasure? Why even have the contest?” asked Dawn.

Autumn admitted 'twas a good question; but she just couldn't

accept the argument that Madame Heureuse legitimately wanted to give all o' these valuables 'way to them, regardless o' whether 'twas by contest or not. Not her. But then, why did she want them here? What did she gain?

"Why invite us here if she knows the place is dangerous?" asked Autumn. "Even if the spike in danger seems surprising to her—though if that is so, I ask 'gain how she could know that she is still safe 'mong the monsters—she still shouldn't invite strangers here for contests, regardless, 'less she's callous."

"Maybe she hoped we'd just get a good scare," said Dawn.

"& yet, now they are so unpredictable that this is not the case—in fact, so unpredictable that she cannot even give us the broadest o' hints on how to deal with said monsters," said Autumn. "The only consistency I can find in this whole mess is that Madame Heureuse is untrustworthy no matter how you chop it."

Actually, there was 1 hypothesis she had that would be consistent with everything she knew; but it felt too farfetched—or, perhaps, too obvious in this circumstance—for her to have much confidence in it. Not yet, a'least.

"She did seem legitimately surprised when we mentioned the possessed armor, though," said Dawn.

"Yes. She apparently needed repeating for that concept—something hardly surprising compared to ghost coats sucking warmth out from under one's skin—but not the rose monster or glowing eyes & lips. It does seem to show that she truly cannot predict all o' the creatures here; but then, if this surprised her so much compared to everything else, maybe she could before. Maybe this was simply what made her think otherwise. If that's the case, then she should definitely be able to give us hints to most o' the creatures here. I know she's smart 'nough to realize that."

Dawn stood up from her chair & said, "Anyway, I think we'd

better go look for Felix before something happens to her.”

“We?”

Dawn’s shoulders slumped & her face became haggard. “I take that to mean you refuse to help me.”

“Not necessarily...”

“Lemme guess: you want me to agree to give up any treasure I find to you.”

Autumn held her hands together in an open triangular shape, her 3 middle fingers twiddling gainst each other as if powering Autumn’s thoughts.

“That would only be useful if you ever found any treasure.”

“What if I helped you up to that attic area ’gain?” said Dawn.

“If the cat agrees to give me any treasure she finds—which I doubt she will, but I like to hedge my bets as much as possible—then it’s a done deal. Shouldn’t be too hard, since her doormat mentality makes her liable to desire giving ’way any treasure she finds, anyway.”

“Fine, but we need to hurry ’fore something happens to her,” Dawn said, frown clearly revealing her displeasure @ this agreement.

“Whom do you fear most, the external or inner demons?”

“Internal.”

“Yes, I find those the most dangerous, too,” Autumn said as she stood.

“I don’t doubt it,” said Dawn.

“You mind if I return to my room for a sec to pick up my backpack I stupidly left ’hind?” Autumn asked. “We may need it.”

“If it’s quick,” Dawn said.

They followed Autumn out & through the halls till they were on the 2nd floor ’gain, moving toward Autumn & Edgar’s room. ‘Twas a trip much worse than any earlier time they’d spent wandering round

the mansion in this now dire situation, ‘specially since Autumn didn’t have her flashlight anymo’, having accidentally left it up in that secret ceiling room from before.

Still, they were able to get through well ’nough with hands touching walls & the li’l light offered by the lamps.

However, when Autumn looked round the room for her backpack, she didn’t see it. She walked o’er to their bed & moved the blankets & pillow round, but still couldn’t find it anywhere.

“Well, splew,” said Autumn. “Someone—or something—must’ve taken it. Bastards. I had a couple thousand Pts stashed ’way in there.”

Edgar panicked. “But my personal journal was in there.”

“Why would someone take your backpack, though?” Dawn asked, her face slumped with the knowledge that she was going to still be deprived o’ sustenance.

“So they can slowly starve us,” Autumn said as she stepped ’way from her bed. “Perhaps it’d be a funnier way to kill someone than mere hanging. There’s probably not even a kitchen anywhere in this mansion, either. Still, we can a’least get something to drink @ the bathroom faucet.”

They reached the bathroom without a loose thread, though Autumn thought there was something peculiar ’bout the 3rd floor: some o’ the doors appeared open. Most notable was that the room with the rose monster had its door open, which made Edgar shudder as they passed it. She also thought she could faintly hear someone whisper to someone else to shut her eyes.

Probably illusions, thought she.

When they finally reached the bathroom—which Autumn noticed was also left open, unlike all o’ the other doors in the 1st floor hallway—Autumn & Dawn took turns holding their mouths under the faucet while cold water gushed in, doing nothing for the next minute or so but drinking water by the gallon, hoping to hold it for

hydration for as long as they could, like camels.

As she finished her turn Autumn looked up @ the cabinet, thinking to look in there for a container to hold extra water in. She noticed 'twas left open, just as the door was.

Madame Heureuse must have popped some pills to help that sickness she claimed she had, thought Autumn. While she was drinking from the faucet, she had noticed some pills lying on the side o' the sink. 'Pon closer inspection, she noticed the words "Duermo Sleeping Medicine" imprinted on them & pocketed them out o' habit.

Hope it won't burden her too much if I take these.

As she rummaged through the cabinet, Autumn found 2 bottles decent 'nough—if not too small—& when Dawn finished, she rinsed them out thoroughly & then filled each o' them, handing 1 o' them to Dawn, & stashing her own 'way in 1 o' her pockets.

I'd better not put this anywhere in my coat, since I'm sure someone will find a way to steal my coat, too, thought Autumn.

"OK, so where did you 2 separate, so we know where to start?" asked Autumn.

"I don't know exactly," Dawn said to Autumn, who was now leaning o'er the sink for 1 last extra drink o' water while she still had the chance. "I think we were somewhere on the 1st floor. That was where we started, a'least. But then 'gain, I later somehow ended up on, what, the 4th floor?"

Then she raised her hand & said, "Wait! I know... The wallpaper was blue, so we were on the 1st floor. A'least if the wallpaper coloring is indicative o' the floor, which so far seems to be the case."

"Well, it's a start," Autumn said, her head still hanging o'er the sink with water dripping down her chin.

They left & continued down the blue-wallpapered 1st floor hallways. All 3 o' them would open every door, stick their heads in, click on the light, check round the room quickly, & then turn off the

light, leave, & close the door 'hind them. Since they divided the work 'mong themselves, it went much faster than when Autumn & Edgar had been searching through the mansion before.

Come to think 'bout it, I don't think I even checked the 1st floor, did I? thought Autumn.

The hallway—in fact, the whole mansion—felt quiet throughout most o' their work. None talked, focusing purely on their work. The cold, dark surroundings made them all uneasy, inhibiting their desires to speak. 'Course, it wasn't as if Autumn would've been eager to talk, regardless.

But the comfortable silence was soon cut open like heart-surgery when they heard what sounded like heavy cords bumping & crawling 'long the floor 'bove them, causing them all to tilt their heads upward. They stood & waited as they heard the thumping continue. Then they heard squishing, sucking, slurping, & growling, mixed with various other noises none could verbally describe—and then, most horrifyingly, someone yelled, “Boss, I have a li'l problem here!”

“Well, there's nothing we can do 'bout whatever's up there, 'cept hide; & there's not any good hiding places we've seen so far, so we'd better get going,” Autumn said, still staring up @ the ceiling.

They continued their search till they reached a door @ the end o' the next corner & noticed 'twas locked—or something was keeping it from opening, a'least. Autumn tried pushing in the doorknob @ 1st, to no avail, & then was 'bout to ram into it with her shoulder 'fore Dawn stopped her.

“Wait,” whispered Dawn. “I remember this door. 'Twas locked the last time Felix & I tried opening it. That was where that armored guy came by & chased us. It's the guy on the other side o' this door that I think was telling the armored guy what to do.”

Autumn turned back to the door & then leaned in & put her ear

gainst it. Sure 'nough, she could faintly hear someone's muffled voice.

"Let's have 1 mo' look round the place to be sure," she could barely hear the voice say.

Autumn thought she could recognize it. Something 'bout its squeaky tone—the way the voice always sounded like whining—felt familiar.

"Do you hear anything?" whispered Dawn.

Autumn nodded & waved for her to put her ear up to the door as well, which Dawn did.

"Try to move the trunk. Yes, I know you *checked* inside it already. I told you to move it. You never know what those looters could be hiding there."

That was when Autumn recognized who the voice was. There was only 1 person she'd ever met who ever called anyone a "looter."

"You never know what kind o' voodoo magic these people use in this mansion," said the voice. "OK, fine. But get o'er here as fast as you can, & try not to get your stupid selves eaten as well. Got it?"

Autumn clenched her hand into a fist & rapped on the door with the back o' her hand. This caused Dawn to practically jump back in shock.

"What are you doing?" Dawn said in a panic-stricken whisper.

"I know who's behind there," whispered Autumn.

"Who?"

Autumn didn't answer, but 'stead turned her head back to the door to wait for an answer from Lance. There was none: he was being completely silent.

Does he really think I won't know he's there? thought Autumn
Does he really think I didn't already hear him before?

As she considered this, she began to wonder what he was talking 'bout in there. Examining all o' the evidence she'd seen in this

mansion, she could guess that the “possessed” armor were his henchmen & he was somehow communicating with them. This was their “boss,” she s’posed. They were searching some trunk, & then he told them to come back here. That meant only 1 thing: they must have found some treasure.

“I don’t think whoever’s in there is going to answer, & there’s no way we’ll be able to break in,” said Dawn. “We might as well keep going.”

Autumn shook her head & opened her mouth to speak, but then her paranoia made her wonder if Lance could hear what they were saying now; so ‘stead, she walked ‘way from the door toward ‘nother door, waving for the others to follow her. She carefully opened the other door & went in.

Dawn watched Autumn carefully close the door ‘hind them to a small crack with a puzzled look on her face.

As she leaned down on her knees & watched out the thin crack o’ the door, Autumn whispered, “We must hide here for a while & watch: those suits o’ armor are coming, & I don’t believe they’re supernatural.”

“Are they that guy in that room’s henchmen or something? Who’s the guy ‘hind the door, then?” whispered Dawn.

“He’s that rich Chamsby poker who pretended to storm out last night.”

“Well, then why are we waiting here for his henchmen to show up?” Dawn asked with her hands on her sides. “Wouldn’t we want to get ‘way ‘fore they come here? I mean, you’re not actually planning on trying to get in that room are you? Who cares what that Chamsby guy’s doing?”

“His henchmen found treasure.”

“So, what, are you planning on just swiping it from them as they come by?”

“Yes.”

“& how are you gonna do that?”

Autumn paused 'fore saying, “I haven't quite planned it that far.”

Dawn was 'bout to protest, but then realized she did make a promise that she'd help Autumn search for treasure if she helped her find Felix. So she merely asked, “This won't take long, will it? 'Cause I'd rather we find Felix 'fore she's hung from a chandelier.”

“It'll take however long they take to get here,” whispered Autumn. “Since they're making straight for here, it shouldn't take long.”

With that decided, Dawn sat down gainst the wall next to Edgar—who was so still, he seemed as if he were asleep—staring @ the 1 wide window on the opposite wall, trying to use her extra time to contemplate where Felix could be. She noticed the sky outside the window was such a deep, dark blue that she could only tell it wasn't black 'cause o' the darker pine trees in front o' it. The moon was up, too, & was still in the waning gibbous state 'twas last night.

As she reflected on this, she noticed how long this night felt. It seemed as if it had been hours since it 1st became dark, making Dawn curious as to what time 'twas now. She dug through her coat pocket & pulled out her cellphone to check.

It said 11:59 PM.

Wow, it's getting late, she thought as she returned her phone to her pocket.

She opened her mouth wide & released a large but quiet yawn. Then she turned on her side & leaned gainst the wall as if 'twere a vertical bed, her eyelids drooping from the mix o' drowsiness & boredom.

Autumn, meanwhile, spent what li'l time she had left 'fore Lance's henchmen arrived trying to conjure up a plan for how to swipe their treasure. The problem was, she wasn't even sure what the treasure was or how it looked. Was it going to be so big they had to carry it in

their arms, or some other conspicuous, possibly even inconvenient, way? Or was it so small they could hide it in some secret compartment in their chainmail suits? If they could hide li'l communication devices in there, she couldn't see why they couldn't find a hiding place for treasure, either; & if that were the case, she'd probably never be able to steal that treasure.

Autumn's thoughts were interrupted by even heavier thumping 'bove, & then squealing & growling 'gain. It made Autumn's eyes point up @ the ceiling while the rest o' her body froze. She was now starting to worry even mo' 'bout when whatever that was would reach the 1st floor.

The noise also shook Dawn out o' her halfway rest, causing her to sit straight up & widen her eyes. *O, crap, I hope that thing hasn't gotten anyone yet*, she thought as she felt her heart race.

Edgar, who was even closer to sleep than she was, was also scared 'wake by the clamor. He slid o'er to Autumn & latched onto her arm like a Metroid.

"You don't think, uh, whatever's up there will be able to find us in here, do you?" whispered he.

"I think I'd probably close the door by then," Autumn said, hoping to calm him. She could feel his shaking vibrate through her arm to the rest o' her body. "& if it's checking every door, it'll probably take ages for it to finally get here."

Dawn turned to look @ Autumn still sitting watch by the door—Dawn noticed by the dark rings under Autumn's eyes & her own drooping eyelids that Autumn seemed to be tired as well—Dawn now conscious o' how long 'twas taking for those armored henchmen to appear. She wondered what was holding them up—*Was it that monster? Was that why 'twas making those noises?*—when 'nother idea struck.

"Hey, Autumn, since you knocked on his door, how d'you know

Lance didn't tell his henchmen not to come anymo', since he'd obviously guess that you'd try to steal his treasure?"

Autumn paused to consider the question. *It'd be the logical thing to do. But then, Lance wasn't exactly the logical person, either; & yet, he'd be the type to o'er-suspect me, not under-suspect. This isn't an error he'd make.*

She'd have concluded it still better to wait, even if it took much longer than expected, rather than take the risk if all o' that water she drank earlier wasn't now asking to be released. She decided to give 1 last large check by opening the door all the way & sticking her head out, looking down both ends o' the hall to see if anyone was near.

She saw nobody.

She stood up & said, "Fine, but I must use the bathroom 1st."

"For what?" asked Dawn.

"For what people normally use them for," Autumn said with the kind o' expression a teacher would give a student who flunked her class for the 4th time.

Dawn chose not to respond to this rude rebuff.

They followed her back to the bathroom, Edgar & Dawn now trudging @ a much less energetic pace—their arms hanging low & their heads bobbing down every so oft. They sat outside while Autumn went in & leaned gainst the wall, returning to their half-sleep.

That was when they heard the thumping & squealing, even louder than before. Now they knew 'twas on their floor. It shook them out o' their half-sleep once mo', & they both sat & watched down the hall in the direction from which it seemed to originate. From the other end, emerging from the main room, they could see a dark figure moving toward them.

Dawn knocked on the door & said, "Autumn, you might want to hurry up."

“Is it Lance’s henchmen?” she heard Autumn’s echo-filtered voice say. “Do you see them holding anything?”

“I... I don’t know...”

Autumn leaned close to the door & whispered, “Try to distract them ’way from the door & I’ll sneak attack them, OK?”

“Uh, I don’t think this this thing’s them,” Dawn said, beginning to stand on her feet in case she needed to dash.

The dark figure grew enormously as it neared. When it entered the light o’ the lamp 5 meters from the bathroom door, its face melted into view: an eggplant-tinted bulb o’ leaves that resembled the shape o’ a rose—’cept roses usually didn’t have gaping black holes inside that held sharp, yellow fangs. Dawn looked down & saw tangles o’ vines wriggling round the carpet, much closer to them than where rose’s head was.

Edgar clutched the hood hanging from ‘hind Dawn’ & snuck ‘hind her.

“It’s the rose monster...”

“What?” Autumn called out.

Dawn & Edgar both backed ’way from the monster & then, seeing that ‘twas still getting closer, turned & sprinted ’way.

Autumn poked her head out the bathroom door & turned left & then right to see the rose monster skulking ’way in that direction. She was thankful that it didn’t seem to notice her, continuing on in the other direction; but she slunk her head in & closed the door lightly, anyway.

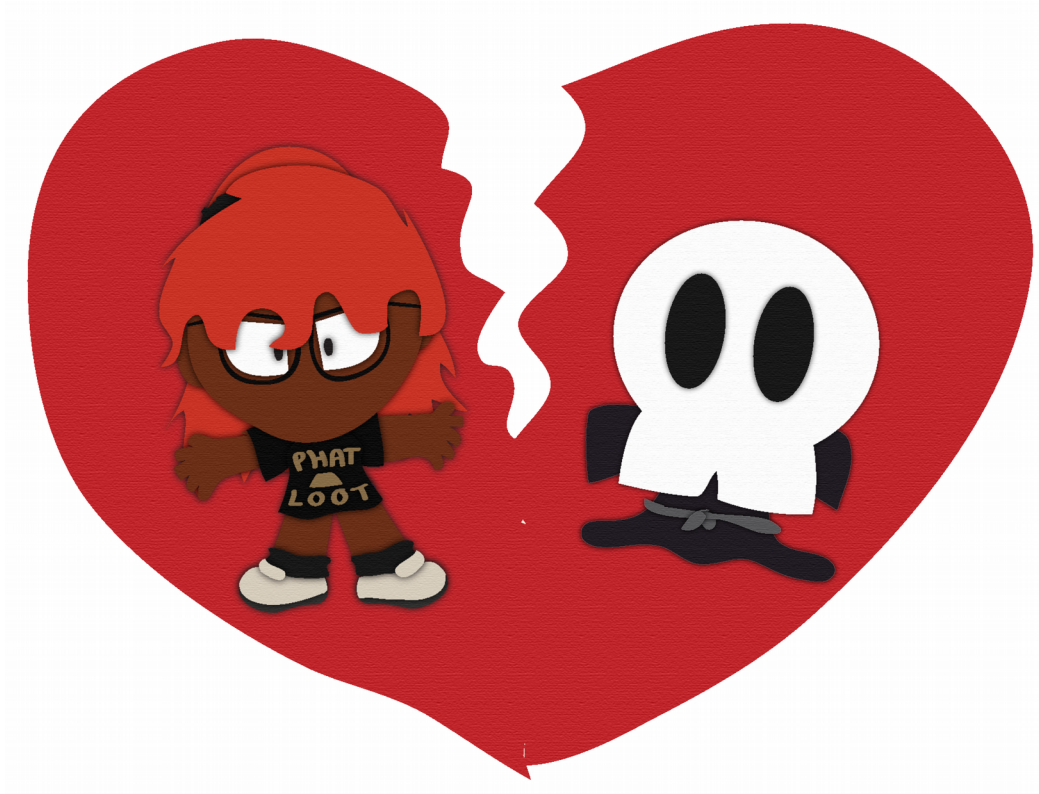
As she stood with her back gainst the door she thought, *I have a feeling trying to figure out how to keep that thing from eating them is going to be harder than merely stealing treasure from some Renaissance-Faire rejects.*

To be continued...

#BOSK-BH0A13-SEPARATION

SEPARATION OF HUMAN AND SKELETON

J. J. W. Mezun | 2015 February 1



I.

Autumn woke with a curious feeling o' content. Not bliss or ecstasy; just the warm sentiment o' acceptance for her situation, which was the best she'd e'er recalled feeling—her primary goal. Despite her numerous ventures, excitement was an alien emotion, as the bustle o' said ventures only e'er managed to imbue her with a mild content.

She carefully sat up & slowly slid her laptop o'er to her, not desiring to wake Edgar, & resumed her research & planning from the past few days.

Though she felt as if she were only panning for pebble dust for the last few months, she still felt content. After all, she was still safely 'live with shelter & food, providing her an illusive infinity to build her empire, e'en if it took months just to build the 1st brick. That made up for all o' the signs telling her for years that said empire would ne'er rise beyond a flag on a rock.

3 hours later, she went out to check the mail. 'Twas early in the month, & Autumn always made sure she paid her bills as early as possible, to avoid the late fees she knew her creditors just itched to slam on her.

By then the weather was an autumn parody o' a sunny day, with the sun poking out from 'hind the bushes o' clouds, covering the city with blue shadows. It failed to match summer's warmth, however; shivering in the breeze, Autumn hurried down to the mailboxes, hoping to pay as li'l time outside as possible.

As she flipped through the letters, Edgar's name caught her eyes. She examined it mo' closely & saw that it lacked a return address.

Then she pressed her hands gainst it.

Hmm... Doesn't feel like there's anthrax in it; though the perpetrator may have learned a mo' subtle way to send it.

Then 'gain, those were in my name. Is that 'nother example o' his slowly growing subtlety?

When she returned inside, she noticed Edgar now sitting up.

"Sorry if I woke you."

"That's all right."

"Apparently, you have a letter." She set it on his lap as she continued into the kitchen. "You'd better turn your head 'way from it as you open it, though, in case it's mo' anthrax."

He did just that. But as he tore the letter's mouth open, he failed to hear a single guitar strum or drum beat. He felt round inside & felt a sheet o' paper. He pulled it out.

Dear Edgar Winters,

I've seen you round the Rock Lobster by yourself every so oft & noticed you always looked pretty lonely. I myself have been feeling pretty lonely these past months, having just moved to this big city by myself for a new job, & I wanted to know if you weren't too busy to meet me for a cup o' coffee next Friday night @ the Rock Lobster, 7:00 PM.

You can call my cell @ 512-816-2254.

Thanks,
Rebecca Liberty

"Is it soliciting you for anything?" Autumn asked as she walked back to her spot next to him, her voice muffled by the apple she was chewing.

Edgar jumped when he heard her voice so close, but then simply said, “Uh...”

Then he heard crunching right next to his ear & saw Autumn’s face right next to her shoulder. @ 1st she twisted her brows in confusion, but then replaced this with a smile.

“Nother? You reel in these bees like honey,” she said with a jab o’ her elbow.

“I’ve ne’er e’en heard o’ this person till now,” he said as he continued to stare @ the note.

Autumn sat criss-crossed & took ’nother bite o’ her apple. “Yes, I s’pose she could be a nutjob—’specially if she just sends utter strangers notes euphemistically asking to bounce your bones.”

She was also confused by the statement regarding Edgar’s sitting by himself, since she always thought Edgar hung out with the owner; however, she could see no benefits & many downsides to mentioning this.

“Still, you ne’er know ’less you try,” continued she.

The ne’er-ceasing editor in Autumn’s mind informed her o’ the hypocrisy o’ this statement. She mentally waved it ’way. *It’s not hypocrisy if it’s someone else.*

She continued, “I still have some smoke bombs in my jacket in case she tries tying you to a chair & forcing you to watch her play with toys.”

Edgar turned to her. “You... you truly want me to go? You won’t need me for any venture or anything?”

“I don’t have anything planned yet. No, I was just going to sit @ my computer all day in my nightshirt. Don’t waste your time lying ’bout here doing nothing for my sake when you have fuller coin blocks to punch.”

Edgar turned back to the paper, only to lower it to his lap just after.

"I'd just mess it up."

"You can't screw it up worse than not showing," Autumn replied just 'fore sipping from her mug o' coffee.

"What would I wear?"

"Your robe. If this letter's accurate, she should know you always wear it; so she should expect it," Autumn said. "Sides, the goal is for you to take it off @ the end." She gently shoved Edgar. "Here, if you want, you can prepare by taking a shower."

Edgar stood & walked toward the bathroom, blushing.

Autumn, meanwhile, returned to her keyboard, only to cringe @ the same incomprehensible map she'd already gazed @ for hours.

Well, @ the very least 1 o' us is having some modicum o' success.

II.

Since the seasons were in the awkward September transition from summer to autumn, the time o' day @ 7 PM was in the awkward transition 'tween day & night: when the sky was a deep cerulean, the sun was just a sparkle on the edge o' the horizon, & the trees & far-'way buildings were beginning to blacken.

Edgar hesitated 'fore entering the Rock Lobster. He peeked through the glass to see if he could find her; but all he could see was the familiar guy with the guitar in the northwest corner, his usual seat blocked from view.

He took a deep breath & then spilled through the door like a funnel. Inside, he backed up into the nearest wall as if he were a burglar. He scanned the room till his eyeholes reached the table in the southwest corner where he usually sat: there sat a young woman with shoulder-length hair, a weary face, & sunken-in eyes with dark circles 'neath. She was staring down @ her shaking, bony arms.

When Edgar neared the table, she noticed his movement & looked

up. When she saw him—a figure wrapped in a dark cloak, with his face blacked out, save for two glowing red balls o’ light—her nerves were not lulled @ all. *Is this the man?* she thought. They both stood silently, neither looking the other in the eye.

Finally, the woman breached the silence with a dry, somewhat shaky voice: “Are you Edgar Winters?”

“Uh, yeah...” Edgar said with a weak nod. “& you’re, uh, Madame Liberty.”

“Yes,” she said with her own nod. “Yeah, sorry, I’m a li’l nervous. I’ve, uh, I’ve ne’er done this before, and, uh, I remember you looking a li’l different.”

“O, uh, do you want me to take this hood off, then?” Edgar asked as he sat in the seat opposite Rebecca.

Edgar pulled off his hood, revealing his chiseled skull. Rebecca couldn’t help staring wide-eyed @ the gaping black holes that were his eyes or the crooked shape o’ his upper jaw.

I knew this’d happen, Edgar thought as he squeezed his hand so hard it burned: *she must not’ve gotten a good look @ me before, & now she’s horrified to see I’m a skeleton.*

Rebecca looked down guiltily. They spent the next few minutes staring down @ the table, speechless for fear o’ ruining the already tarnished beginning to what both could sense would be a disaster.

Ventually she cleared her throat & said, “Er... Edgar—do you mind if I call you by your 1st name?”

Edgar shook his head. “No. No, not @ all. Please.”

“Edgar, it seems there isn’t much to do here for us...”

Edgar’s nerves spiked @ this. *Was she already calling the whole thing off? Was I that terrible?*

Rebecca continued, “Would you mind, uh, going out for a movie or something?”

Edgar felt a swollen balloon o’ anxiety ease as he heard this. So

she still wants to continue this. I guess I still have a few mo' minutes 'fore I completely screw this up.

"Yeah, that'd be fine," blurted Edgar. He scratched his head for a second 'fore throwing the offending hand down. It appeared now that e'en Edgar's own body was unconsciously conspiring gainst him.

She led the way out, Edgar staring down @ the bottom o' his robe as usual. Though from the outside he appeared inert, on the inside his brain churned like a fruit mixer for ideas 'bout what he should do when he inevitably needed to talk, or look @ something, or do anything that wasn't stupid.

A few blocks onward, Rebecca stopped in front o' an alley blocked off from the moonlight. Edgar wasn't sure why—'specially when night was nearing & the streets were emptying.

"We're going to take a huge shortcut through this alley here. Is that all right?" Rebecca asked.

"Uh... sure..." Edgar said as he followed her in.

Edgar hugged himself as he delved deeper into the pit, gazing round the darkness for signs o' threat. The walls sandwiching them loomed 'bove them as giants scrutinizing them, able to crush them @ whim.

Suddenly he heard Rebecca whisper softly, "I'm sorry I have to do this to you," 'fore feeling a damp cloth latch o'er his face like a squid. As he tried to cry & struggle free, his brain hazed & his energy drained till drifting off into unconsciousness.

III.

Zeus scribbled a jagged white line o' lightning down to the ground while the gods o' music & sound effects pounded on hollow drums 'bove the sky, creating loud popping sounds.

Lance Chamsby paced round his bedroom @ the top o' his tilted

tower o' trauma, admiring the work he paid Zeus to do for him. It made great ambiance while he waited for the next phase o' his plan to be completed.

I bet you thought you were truly clever 'scaping all o' my traps, didn't you, Queen Looter, he thought as he stared into space through his ruby carpet; e'en when I sent you mail filled with anthrax, doctored evidence that you'd killed people & gave it to the government, & e'en sent a barrage o' negative emails to you in an impressive campaign to demolish your self-esteem & lead you to commit suicide! Why is it that such dangerous criminals get 'way so easily? & why does the government sit round stealing money from hard-working people like me 'stead o' taking these criminals to justice?

He stopped & swiftly turned toward the window with his finger pointed straight out, his cape swinging with a second's delay.

But no longer!

He sat on his golden racecar bed & tapped a few random keys on his keyboard—not 'cause he was actually using it, but so he could fool you fools into thinking he was.

I've figured out your 1 weakness: your skeleton defender. I bet you think I would be tricked by his meekness act. Ha! I bet you didn't think I would figure out his voodoo powers.

Earlier that day, when he was conjuring up this plan, he'd questioned this prospect @ 1st. Objectivists weren't s'posed to believe in such superstitions.

& yet, there is no other explanation for how my amazing traps haven't been working; I'm too brilliant to have made a mistake, he thought @ the time. It must be voodoo magic.

Lance continued to laugh @ the prospects o' his plan while Zeus & the gods released 'nother flurry o' thunder & then took a sip o' his goblet o' cherry cola, when he was interrupted by a knock.

"Who is it?" said he.

"It's me: the one you hired earlier. I've got the skeleton," answered a dry voice.

"Ah, come in," Lance said with a snap o' his finger.

The door opened, & in came a woman with eyes twisted in anxiety. She lugged a black plastic garbage bag up to the middle o' the room 'fore dropping it onto the floor.

Chamsby jumped down from his bed & opened the bag as if 'twere a Marxmas present. Inside was Edgar's still-unconscious body.

"Excellent," Chamsby said as he rubbed his hands together. He had no idea where that bag's been, after all, & didn't want its gross bacteria loitering round his nice clean gloves like they always do, the bums.

"Great. So I did the job, right?" asked the woman.

"All right, all right," Chamsby said as he pulled a wad o' cash from his pockets. "Now, all you have to do is keep your mouth shut for the remainder o' your life & you're set," he continued as he handed her the money.

She nodded. "Thank you, Sir," & then turned & left.

With his distraction now gone, Lance returned to Edgar still lying on the ground. Lance leered down @ him.

"Now, to get you to a place where you'll be safe—safe from 'scaping, that is."

Outside Zeus released 'nother rumble o' thunder & lightning.

IV.

Autumn couldn't help remarking the hole next to her where Edgar habitually lay as she woke the next morn.

Hmm... Must've gotten to that bonus stage, after all, thought she. Well, that's good.

She sighed. *Time races by.*

She mused o'er how the night must've gone, being unable to imagine him in such a situation.

Can skeletons e'en have sex? I wonder how that'd operate.

A minute or so later, she shook her head & dragged her laptop before her.

You don't have time for such distractions. It's time for you to complete your mission.

V.

Edgar awoke to find himself in a void almost fully engulfed in blackness, save for the li'l light gleaming in from a single window. By the light bleeding out from the window he could barely see dark gray bricks making up the wall 'hind the window; though what was in the other 3 directions, he had no idea.

He sat still, curling his arms together & sniffing from the harsh frigidness he had woken to, having nothing but his robe to cover him. When Edgar finally did creep o'er to the window to look outside, he could see that 'twas not a bright morn @ all, but a dark cerulean dawn, with the far-off trees o' the nearby forest still black—not unlike how the sky looked when—

& that's when Edgar recalled the events that had led him to this place. *Did she only attack me so she could lock me up here? Why?*

Most important: Edgar needed to think o' a way out o' here.

He trudged through the room with his hands out, feeling for walls. E'en @ his sluggish gait, it didn't take long for him to learn that this cell was small, all walls comprised o' the same scratchy brick texture. This a'least purged his mind o' fantasies 'bout huge dungeon mazes filled with ne'er-ending random encounters.

Edgar still felt uneasy. E'en if he were safe, how long would he have to stay in here? There was no reason to assume that his

abductor wasn't keeping him here for a long time—if she wasn't planning on killing him outright. Edgar couldn't imagine 'scaping by himself: the window was barred down, with the holes 'tween the bars too thin to fit through. There would be no use in throwing all o' his limbs down there while still being a lonely skull & body inside; & no matter how much he budged, the door he barely found in the darkness wouldn't open. His only hope was for Autumn to rescue him.

But how would she e'en know I'm here? Did my abductor send her a ransom note? & if not, how long will it take her to find me? How long will it take her to realize I'm missing?

With nothing to do, Edgar stood wallowing in his wretchedness, trying desperately to conjure up a scenario in which Autumn charged in & rescued him. As the minutes, & then half hours, & then hours went by, the sky outside brightened in a pink glow as the sun slowly climbed its way up & the trees outside began to regain their color.

Mo' importantly, the light grew in Edgar's dungeon till 'twas finally filled with a dull dark blue tint in which everything could be seen—not well, but could still be seen. This only made him mo' uneasy, however, as it only highlighted his loneliness.

& then his heart collapsed as he heard knocking. Edgar sat staring intently @ the door; though what he would do if something dangerous came in, he couldn't e'en contemplate.

His nerves buzzed then as he heard scraping wood & saw a panel he had not noticed yet slide 'way from a hole near the top-middle o' the door. From 'hind it he could see the eye o' a pale-skinned man poke through. Edgar could also barely see the bottom edge o' a top hat o'er the man's head.

"Ah, good: you're awake," said the man.

Edgar's jaw hung upon as he found himself abruptly incapable o'

speech.

Seeing this, the man laughed a sinisterly snicker, which he practiced for a half hour yesterday afternoon. "There is no use keeping up the act, looter apologist. I'm 'fraid I am far too wise to fall for your subtle trickery. Now it is the time that *I* shall use you to crush *my* enemies."

Edgar's fear evolved into confusion, which only intensified said fear. Though he thought he recognized the voice somewhere, he couldn't remember who 'twas, to the point that he wondered if 'twas just his panic-stricken mind hallucinating. His terror @ this man's obvious misunderstanding outweighed his initial terror & compelled him to speak:

"Who... who are you?"

The man's eye twisted in anger. Edgar could gather that this was not good.

"Don't play games with me, fraud. You obviously know who I am."

Edgar carefully shook his head, 'fraid that any erroneous movement would only kindle his fury further.

"I'm s-sorry... I think you have the wrong person," said Edgar, & then instinctively spilled out mo' in the hopes o' delaying this man's rage: "I've ne'er met you in my life. See, I was... I was with this person and, uh, we were going somewhere—I don't remember where—& then we went through this alley, which she said was a shortcut, & when I went through there I was... I don't remember exactly how... I just know that I was put to sleep somehow, & then I woke up here. I was just wondering if you knew how I got here or why."

"You are here so I can use you to finally dispose o' that vile looter," said the man.

"I... I don't know what that means," Edgar said with a weak voice. *What is this strange man talking 'bout? I ne'er stole anything from*

him...

"Wait, looter?" Edgar said with a sudden rise in his normally quiet voice. "You mean... you mean—"

"That's right, you looter accomplice: I mean that worm, Autumn Springer, whom you've been e'er-so-keen to help attack me," said the man. "Do you not now recognize who I am?"

Edgar paused to better collect his thoughts. "Uh... no. No, actually, see... Autumn kind o' steals from a lot o' people—I mean, she did. She doesn't do much o' that very much anymo', though. So you could be a lot o' people. I know recently this mob was after her, but I thought we got rid o' them. Would you happen to be part o' them?"

He gulped.

"I affiliate with no one but myself. You do not remember the many times you have sabotaged my attacks gainst the vile looter with your voodoo magic? Please, do not be modest; today shall be the last day you will be able to rejoice in your success."

"Voodoo magic?" asked Edgar, while in the back o' his head he could hear himself think, *This man is crazy. He's e'en mo' dangerous than I could e'er imagine.* "I don't... I don't know any magic."

"Ah, yes. Sure you don't. I know how you communist looters like to hide your special powers so well. I also know very well how spiritualist communists are, with all o' their nature rituals & smoke bongs."

"Uh..." Edgar was rendered incapable o' human speech once mo'. *Surely he doesn't think 'cause... But how would he e'en know that?*

Maybe Autumn wasn't exaggerating as much as I thought when she talked 'bout the possibility o' us being spied on...

"Your persistence is trying my patience," said the man. "Fine, I will treat you like a drooling baby, as you are acting: does the name Lance Chamsby ring a bell?"

"That's, uh... that's your name?" asked Edgar. He was feeling

rather dumb right now.

“Course it’s me!” he thundered. “I am only the richest man in the city? How dry a desert did you live under to not recognize that name—to not recognize me? But surely, you’ll come up with some explanation, I am sure.”

Edgar puzzled o’er who this crazy Lance Chamsby was. *He seems to be a businessman, but I don’t think I’ve e’er seen someone like him ’mong the businesspeople in the Rock Lobst*—& then it hit him.

“You’re that guy who talked to me in the Rock Lobster, & who Autumn tried to steal from when she received an email talking ’bout some easy-to-invade castle. &... &...” Edgar paused under the weight o’ so much conflicting info. “Didn’t you get eaten by bears?”

“I’ll have you know that the Great Chamsby does not get done in by a mere bear’s digestion tract.

“No matter,” continued Chamsby. “If your precious thief isn’t dead yet, she shall be soon, & you will be the one to drive her to it. So sit still, you wimpy socialist, & don’t try any o’ your tricks to ’scape—for they shan’t work.”

“What are you going to do with me?” asked Edgar.

“You will stay in that prison for a very long time; “& in that time the vile looter will be vulnerable without her magical li’l buddy to back her up. We shall see how bold she is without her crutches!”

“You’re... you’re not going to hurt her are you?” Edgar asked weakly.

Chamsby laughed. “Our discussion is o’er for now. You can go back to doing what you truly excel @: being useless. Tchau for now.” & with that Edgar saw the panel scrape back o’er the hole.

Now there was nothing for Edgar to do but to sit in that same spot he’d been sitting for hours. It didn’t take long for him to go up to the window & spend the rest o’ the day staring out the window, sighing heavy-heartedly as he prayed for Autumn to somehow find a way to

rescue him, while keeping out o' danger herself.

VI.

I s'pose I'm just shocked that Edgar's doing so well that he hadn't needed to text me to blubber 'bout some inconspicuous mistake he made, thought Autumn on the 3rd day o' Edgar's absence. It does seem odd that he'd be busy all o' the time, though.

Then 'gain, what do I know 'bout these tribalistic norms.

She tapped her knees absentmindedly as she stared off into the air in concentration.

No, that's... that goes beyond the suspension o' belief. What are the odds?

Much higher considering the enemies I've made. Perhaps the mob isn't completely off my shoulders & have captured him for some ransom.

But if they're after me, they should contact me 'bout him in some way.

She pulled out her phone & stared @ it.

I s'pose I could call him.

& say what? "Hey, just called to check to make sure you haven't been kidnapped or killed. Thanks." He's an adult; he can take care o' himself.

Why should he call you, anyway? It's obvious he's busy with mo' interesting territory, just as he probably assumes you're too busy to deal with your work to be bugged by him. We no longer need each other anymore, so the lack o' communication is rational.

With that settled, she returned to her work, trying to ignore the festering tinge o' worry poking holes through her blanket o' content. As she'd been uncomfortably predicting, her imaginary infinity had been laughably kicked 'way by the prospect o' death always hanging

close 'hind.

VII.

It only took 2 days for Edgar to completely break down, sobbing & blubbering on the floor in the dark o' the night, unable to sleep. He had spent all o' his time with nothing to do but lie round or stand by the window, with no one but his lonely thoughts.

During the long, dragging hours he couldn't sleep through—& he tried to sleep through most o' them—he tried to contemplate a way to 'scape. When his mind hit a road block then, as it always did, he tried to imagine Autumn rushing in to save him.

He kept telling himself, *She'll get here any time to rescue me. She must have noticed I've gone missing by now. Right now she must be thinking o' how to find me.*

...

If she still wants me saved.

Edgar shook his head.

Don't be silly. She's much too nice to leave you here forever.

He sighed.

Though maybe she'd be better off if she did.

VIII.

This is pathetic. Just leave it 'lone & get back to the work in which you're failing so spectacularly.

We're partners. I just want to ensure nothing dire has happened to him. After all, remember when he was jumped 2 years ago?

You didn't help him recover after that, anyway. Look, you can't be his constant respirator any mo' than you can expect him to sacrifice his needs for yours.

This quick distraction will ease the long-term distractions, making it mo' time optimal.

She dialed the # & held it to her face, breath held.

I'll just say... shit. I'll just say I lost a paper & ask if he has it in his pocket or something.

This is pathetic exponentially. This is the refusal to e'en acknowledge your mental flaw.

"Sorry, but the # you dialed is unavailable @ the moment. Please leave a message after the tone."

Autumn's nerves froze as she heard the alien bleep. Somehow, trying to talk to emptiness felt harder than talking to a live person.

Shit! Think o' something, you idiot!

"Uh... Edgar... I hope I am not infringing on anything you're doing, but I lost a document & just wanted to ask if you have it in 1 o' your pockets, since I can't find it anywhere—including in 1 o' your other robes—& I think I remember handing it to you." Then she blurted, "Uh... Hope you're succeeding, thanks," & quickly hung up, as if it'd turn off her failure mo' quickly.

She breathed heavily. *Well, I did the best I could. It's not as if I have a radar I could track him with. If he's being killed right now, I'm useless to him; if he's doing fine, then I'm still useless to him, & there's no need to worry. Essentially, there's no use worrying no matter what, so there's no rational reason to do so.*

She returned to her work, hopping website to website, scribbling random words in a notepad—doing anything to spark her mind—all the while feeling as a cancer patient injecting bitter medicine after bitter medicine for months, to no avail.

Autumn frowned as she reached 'nother epiphany:

Edgar's not the only thing I've lost... she thought as her hands fell from her keyboard, limp.

* * *

IX.

That afternoon, Edgar managed to force himself to sleep through sheer anguish. But it didn't last long.

Within that sleep the pulses in his brain created images o' Edgar sitting naked in the middle o' a small, boxy, gray room—the length o' his body stretched out in all dimensions—wrapping his arms round himself, shivering in the cold, only for the walls & ceiling o' the room to cave in closer, till they were tightening round him.

As he felt the pressure squash & suffocate him, all he could see was the window, & through it he could see a tranquil scene o' trees, a mountain, & a running river. Standing in the middle o' the scene was Autumn, but much paler skin, closed eyes, & nailed down to a tree through her stomach. Her scraggly mouth hung open & released a laugh track 'long with a man's voice saying, "Dad, can I get a li'l raise for this month's allowance—'bout 150,000Pts extra?"

Edgar pushed himself awake, back in his now-seemingly-much-roomier prison, panting & sweating. From outside the door he could hear a familiar male voice buzz from speakers, "I'll have you know I was very careful driving, dad; 'twas just the parking that was a problem," followed by canned laughter, & then real, voracious laughter from Chamsby.

Edgar decided he had 'nough sleep for the day, or few days, or week. He was thankful that he woke turned 'way from the window, as he didn't dare look through it. 'Stead, he merely lay back down on the floor, wrapping his arms round himself to protect him from the chill o' cold sweat. He did not close his eyes or shed a tear, but stared @ the wall in front o' him, wide-eyed with blank fear. He could barely acknowledge reality @ all, his thoughts overloaded with memories o' the dream, replaying o'er & o'er & o'er.

X.

Lance Chamsby didn't know how to feel. He did, indeed, see incredible results from his master plan; unfortunately, these results were all found in the kidnapped skeleton, who spent every waking moment sobbing on the floor. He was clearly weakened beyond any capability o' aiding the vile looter.

Chamsby was 'specially glad when he realized Edgar didn't need to eat or use the bathroom: 1, 'cause 'twas mo' convenient; but also 'cause Chamsby felt awkward whene'er he went in there, hearing that confounded skeleton's blubbering all the time. It almost made Chamsby feel bad for him; but then he remembered the evil that that skeleton had wrought, & the guilt vanished just like that.

On the other scale, the vile looter didn't seem to be affected @ all. He tried sending a robot to attack her when she opened her front door, but its knocks went unanswered. *How did she know 'twas a robot? She didn't e'en take 1 peek out her window.* He had Agent Purple Mountain's Majesty stealthily funnel methane into her apartment room while she lay in the middle o' the room, but she somehow alerted an authority to shoo him 'way.

Does she also have voodoo magic? Is that why she was lying on the floor like that?

It frustrated him so much that he felt he had to kick someone. So he kicked Edgar. But this only made Edgar release 'nother annoying whimper, so Chamsby left as quickly as he could.

Some prisoner he is, grumbled Chamsby. Not e'en fun to kick round.

XI.

Autumn spent the next week sitting in 1 spot like a rock in space without a planet to attach to, eyes staring straight through all material into a void.

Augh. Why can't you be happy with anything. We... I still have 'nough funds to keep me secure for plenty o' years, e'en if I hardly add anything to it within that time. I have plenty o' time.

She held her chin in her upraised hands.

Yes, but time is not so plentiful. Am I truly going to kid myself for the rest o' my life? I haven't had a successful venture for o'er a year— & that last success wasn't e'en 'cause o' me. All I've done is almost kill myself on multiple occasions. It's a gambler's fallacy by this point.

But what should I do then? This... whatever this nonsense I've wasted my life doing is all I've e'er done. What else is there?

She gazed round her apartment so barren, it looked as if someone had just moved in, dim from curtains covering every window.

Who cares? Maybe I should just screw round: read something or jerk off to something—anything but sitting round doing nothing.

She winced. *O, who am I kidding? I'd just get bored o' that, too.*

She drummed her fingers on the carpet.

I think the trouble with me is I can't accept reality. Try to logically break down everything & I'm left with an empty core—& the irony is, I'm still left with my insipid superstitions. Must spend every second on work to squeeze as much out o' it, & still get nothing.

& now I miss Edgar—don't want to, but do ne'ertheless. I knew I would, but that didn't stop me from pushing him 'way, & now I've gotten the very conclusion that logically follows these actions. That's probably why he didn't answer my call: I practically demanded he

leave. I'd think, "Well, fuck that asshole then," if someone did that to me.

I should've just picked 1—I wanted him or didn't—but couldn't, just as I still can't pick whether I want to still do this inane "career" o' mine. I can't pin down what I want, so I receive exactly what I've pinned down: nothing.

She jerked to a stop, eyes widening, hands rubbing knees slowly.

You know, I'm still not sure if he's not in danger.

But what should I do if he is? He could be anywhere. & what would I do e'en if I knew where he is? Hunt him down like he's a slave?

She weighed the possibilities in her head. Finally, the panic o' uncertainty overthrew propriety.

God damn it, who gives a shit. There's nothing wrong with just checking on him to make sure he's not dead. He won't mind. Maybe he'd be a li'l embarrassed; but that'd be worth it.

She had to admit a sudden lift in her spirits. Her breath buzzed as she thought, *OK, I can accomplish this without disaster. Let's just consider a good way to do so.*

Perhaps I could try calling 'gain. Devise a different 'scuse. It's possible that he truly is in trouble & ne'er e'en heard the last call.

She rubbed her face vigorously.

God, I hope not. I mean, it's so unlikely, but what am I s'posed to think when I hear nothing from him?

She called, moving her hand quickly as one tears off a bandage.

"Sorry, but the # you dialed is unavailable @ the moment. Please leave a message after the tone."

Fuck. Now what am I s'posed to do. It's not as if I put a tracker on hi—wait a fucking minute.

She stared @ her phone. She brushed her bangs back, eyes wide.

I set up his phone. I remember when I looked @ the receipt: it comes with a #. You can track that, can't you?

She rose & dug through her files till she found the folder labeled, "Important Purchases." She quickly flipped through the various receipts till she found the 2 that matched the phones she got for them both.

It's a good thing I actually bought these, she thought with an uneasy laugh.

She rushed to her computer & went to her service's website. After a few minutes o' forms, she finally reached a page with a map & an input labeled, "Phone ID." She checked round her phone till she found the "Phone Info" menu & checked the 2 #s gainst it.

When she typed the other # into the input, her brows twisted in confusion to see the dot appear o'er Wasabi Woods.

What's he doing in the middle o' the woods? Wait...

She moved her finger 'long an invisible line through the forest, eyes wincing as she strained to recall something.

She zoomed in as much as she could to the dot.

Almost every part o' her body tightened—her fists, eyes, mouth—as she saw the tall golden castle appear. She clutched her forehead.

"That son o' a bitch! Why didn't I e'en consider that asshole?"

She took a second to throw on shoes & a jacket & then stormed out the door, not e'en bothering to lock it 'hind her. She ignored the freezing blue rain, her body warmed 'nough by a red fury.

This is your fault, you know, she told herself. *If you'd... if you'd stop doing the equivalent o' stabbing yourself in the hand, you wouldn't hospitalize others, too. Fuck! That's what I truly enjoy doing, actually.*

Well, might as well do it in a way that benefits me.

XII.

Lance Chamsby sat on his racecar bed sipping 'nother cherry cola &

rereading the 5 paragraphs that currently comprised what would soon be his magnum opus for the 50th time when he was suddenly interrupted by a beeping sound. He turned his head round in search for the source till he finally discovered it coming from his cellphone on his nightstand.

He opened it to hear Agent Purple Mountain's Majesty say, "Sir, I'm 'fraid your castle is being invaded by the ponytailed looter. We tried stopping her, but she charged right past us. We tried to follow her up the stairs, but she knocked us back down. My men are going after her, but I doubt they'll be able to catch up to her before she reaches your room."

Lance's eyes blinked @ his phone.

"Yes, it'll be fine. Tell your men to stand by my door till I call for them."

Lance closed his phone & grinned. *Ah, so the vile looter has finally grown the spine to challenge me directly, eh? We shall see how this ends.*

Lance jumped off his bed & pulled out his favorite weapon: a 13 kg gold nugget. He stood @ the end o' the room opposite the door, nugget hoisted o'er his head.

Then Lance started to get impatient—not to mention tired from holding that heavy nugget for so long—& sat back down on his bed to watch TV.

But then he heard his door slam open & scrambled back to his previous position. He turned to the door to see Autumn standing there as a statue, with her arm still out to her side. His smile increased when he saw not anger, but long-lidded wariness 'hind her glasses.

"Ha, ha! I see you came for your precious voodoo mage, huh?" said Lance. "Well, you'll have to force your way through the solid wall o' rational justice 1st!"

& with that he pulled his nugget back & tossed it with full strength @ Autumn. The nugget thunked as it hit the carpet 2 feet 'way from Autumn's stationary feet. Autumn's eyes flicked down to it & then back up to Lance.

During this interval, they heard a muffled voice call out, "Autumn? Is that you?" Autumn glanced in the direction & saw a door with a cardboard sign say in crayon, "Jail For Criminals."

Then Lance suddenly saw Autumn slowly walk toward him as a golem. He edged backward, shrewd eyes hiding his urgent mind, only to bump into the back wall. 'Fore he could think o' anything else, Autumn reached him, pinning him back against the wall with hands on his shoulders.

Autumn's face was right up to his. He could feel the warm air spout from her nose.

"Where's the key?" she asked in a low voice.

"You'd like me to say, would—Hey, stop it!"

Autumn yanked on his robe by the collar till it fell off, & then grabbed his hat 'fore turning & walking 'way, leaving Lance to stand by with his arms wrapped round him, shivering in nothing but dollar-sign-patterend boxers.

"I see that in addition to being a thief you're a sexual deviant," he said as he headed for his blankets. "It's as they say: those who commit some crimes can easily commit them all."

Autumn ignored him & searched all o'er the robe. She found a side pocket & rifled round through it. She exhaled when she felt a bumpy piece o' thin metal. She pulled her hand out to see a key.

By this time, Lance had ran back to his bed & covered himself with his blanket, still shaking.

"Just wait till my henchmen get here," said Lance.

Autumn checked the other pocket just to make sure there wasn't anything else she'd need, & then tossed it back to Lance.

Then she jabbed the key into the lock o' the "jail" door. She exhaled when she felt it turn.

She opened the door & saw Edgar standing right in front o' the other side, a gray void as the backdrop. They stared each other in the eyes for a second 'fore dropping them.

"Thank you for saving me," Edgar said quietly.

Autumn nodded.

Then they heard heavy footsteps. Autumn turned to see tuxedoed figures in drama masks crowd round the door.

Lance, who had already put his robe back on, jumped & pointed @ them.

"Ha! Now try & 'scape justice!"

Edgar looked @ Autumn. Autumn kept her calm eyes on the guards while 1 hand grabbed Edgar's arm & the other dropped into her coat pocket & pulled out a white ball.

'Fore anyone could guess what it was, Autumn threw it to the ground, filling the room with white smoke.

"Get them!" Lance struggled to say through his coughs.

"I think I found her, Sir!" said Agent Granny Smith Apple.

"Excellent! The looter couldn't e'en—"

"O... no, wait. That's just a statue."

"Drat that looter! I'll sue her for the emphysema I'm bound to catch from this!"

The smoke cleared 3 minutes later. By then, Autumn & Edgar were nowhere in sight.

"Well, it could be worse, Sir," Agent Razzmatazz said to Lance's steaming face. "You could—"

"Don't say it," said Lance.

They were eaten by bears, anyway.

XIII.

“So I take it your date didn’t go so well,” Autumn said as they trudged through the muddy ground o’ Wasabi Woods—what felt mo’ like a jungle under the dark & rainy sky.

“I guess not,” Edgar said weakly. “Sorry for all o’ the problems it caused.”

“It’s not your fault,” said Autumn. “I practically pressed you into going.”

“Only ’cause you thought I wanted to go.”

Autumn’s forehead creased as she stared down @ the leaf-strewn ground.

You ought to say something.

What?

Still don’t know.

“How did you find me, anyway?” asked he.

“Huh?” Autumn’s head jerked up. “O. I searched your phone on some map website. Lance clearly didn’t think ’bout this, as he stupidly left it in his castle.” Then she added in a mutter, “& I’m too stupid to pick it up ’fore leaving, now that I think ’bout it.”

“What you did do was mo’ than ’nough,” said Edgar.

“I didn’t think to start looking for you till after a few weeks, though,” said Autumn.

Edgar nodded. She glanced o’er to him, focusing on his eyeholes.

He’s saddened by the implications o’ that statement. Perhaps I should ’splain.

It’d feel mo’ just to leave him with the natural implications. Why should he care ’bout my ’scuses?

That’s the same method o’ thinking I elected to rectify, remember?

But ’fore she could finish, her thoughts were interrupted by

Edgar:

“D’you... D’you think I don’t like you?”

Autumn felt her blood thicken. Though she tried to stop them, her eyes widened.

That woman in the jacket’s been filling his head with dangerous thoughts—saying that so brazenly.

Then ’gain, maybe that was my doing...

She still wasn’t sure whether this was a negative or positive development.

“Well, if it makes you feel better, I thought you were glad to be rid o’ me, too,” said Edgar. “I mean, I don’t do much, after all.”

Autumn disagreed, but nodded, anyway.

Edgar laughed weakly. “& anyway, it may be safer if I didn’t try dating ’gain, anyway.”

Autumn nodded ’gain.

What a simple way to handle communication: just yeses & nos, ons & offs, trues & falses. Computers have no idea the enlightenment they’ve achieved.

“You, uh... you know I wouldn’t... throw you off if I did... you know, right?” said Edgar.

I don’t; that’s the trouble.

Ne’ertheless, she nodded ’gain.

“We are still business partners, I s’pose,” said Autumn.

“Yeah...”

“But since the joke I call a ’business’ is probably close to closing, I wouldn’t put much stock in that—’scuse the dreadful pun; ’twas accidental.”

“You seem to be doing well...”

“I disagree,” said Autumn. “Still, there’s other things I guess.”

What, I’m not sure.

This time Edgar nodded.

“You, uh... you need a partner for those other things?”

“If you want...” said Autumn. “I have to warn you: it’s quite a commitment. You ne’er know what those things might turn out to be.”

“That’s OK: you ne’er know, no matter what,” said Edgar.

“True.”

Edgar turned to her.

“Are you still in your nightshirt?” asked he.

“Yes. Sorry, I was in a hurry to rescue you, so I didn’t have time to put on my armor.”

“Are you cold?” asked he.

“Yes. You look like you are, too, so I’ll say it’s the weather.”

“Well, I was wondering if you wanted to...”

This is it, Autumn thought. Actions. Not words.

She pulled Edgar right up to her & wrapped her arms round him.

“Warm ourselves?” she asked, followed by a sniff from her stuffed nose.

“Uh huh,” Edgar said weakly.

“Course,” she said as she tightened her grip. “I’ll always be up for that.”

They continued the rest o’ their long trek in silence, Autumn’s face resting gainst the soft cotton o’ Edgar’s shoulder, content—the best she’d e’er felt, her primary goal accomplished.

#BOSK-BI2214-RACES

THIS STORY DRIVES ME TO WORK EVERY DAY IT'S TRULY POLITE

J. J. W. Mezun | 2015 March 1



I.

In today's race, our ballistic bicyclists are wounding their wheels through the molten muck o' Mustard Mountain.

There goes #3, Dr. Equinox in the lead in his Lifecycle, its colored chemicals spinning under its sleek gray plastic seat to feed it its supercharged energy.

& pedaling in 2nd is #2, Madame Heureuse in her Haunted Hearse painted in black with orange flames, using her spooky servants to put the freeze on Equinox... & he is frozen blue to a stop, stuck to the road like tongues to an icy metal pole as Madame Heureuse passes him!

& then, coming up from 3rd into 2nd is #6, Captain Napoleon in her Swiss Army Bike painted in olive camouflage with her blinkers flashing red & blue & her sirens blaring. Uh, oh... What's this? She's pressing a button on the front, causing a trap door to open on the back—& now a giant butterfly net is rising from it & slamming o'er Madame Heureuse, stopping her in her tracks! & Captain Napoleon passes her with a wicked smile!

But she better not get too comfy, 'cause #7, the Golden Macks, are speeding 'hind on their long, 3-seated Motorsickle, wheezing smoke in Heureuse's face like the gasps o' a murder victim & sputtering like gunshots.

& speaking o' gunshots, they're pulling out their big blasting bazooka & aiming it right @ Captain Napoleon!

"Arrest this, copper," says their leader, Fulgent Cambric, as he presses a button on his console.

A burst o' triangular orange light screams out their bazooka & a

fat red turtle shell shoots out with a whistlelike woosh.

As it flies through the air, the loose-skinned, haggard face o' its owner pops out & looks round itself in sullen confusion.

"Mmm... This doesn't look like Banana Beach," he says in a whimpering voice, somehow both high & low in pitch.

His eyes balloon when he sees where he's headed & pops his head back into his shell immediately.

But, uh oh, it looks like it's wooshing right o'er Captain Napoleon's hea—no, wait a minute... It's turning back round... & it's a direct shot! Captain Napoleon's Swiss Army Bike suddenly shatters into 7,000 shards, leaving her sitting stranded on the dust while the Golden Macks leave her in their dust, laughing all the way.

But they won't be laughing for long, 'cause here comes #8, the Fungi Diet in their Bisidio Bicycle with a frame o' tree roots & cover made o' red & yellow mushroom caps.

"Pedal faster, you shrooms! You go as fast as mold grows!" shouts their leader, Garicus.

Chanterella 'hind him, who's panting, says breathlessly, "We can't go any faster. There's no way we'll be able to catch up with them."

"Not if I have anything to say 'bout it," Garicus says as he presses a button in front o' him, emitting a strange squeak. He then turns to you—yes, you the reader, my good fellow—& says, "To be honest, I'm not sure why I spent the money to make it make that sound; but that's exactly what I did."

The ground's beginning to shake with bramble roots digging through the dirt in straight lines, rising up out o' & falling back down into the dirt in waves. Now its gaining on the Golden Macks... What's it gonna do? It's leaping @ them & wrapping round them!

"Oooch! Ouch! Ow! That stupids!" Cambric moans as the bramble thorns poke into them.

& they're wrenched to a stop! Looks like it's a wrap for you guys!

Do you get it? Ha ha ha ha ha!

“Yes, yes, I get it,” Cambric mumbles with a sour sneer.

HA HA HA HA HA HA HA HA HA HA HA HA HA HA HA HA!

Cambric stares @ the narrator—yes, I the narrator, my good fellow—with alarm. “E-e-easy down, boy. It’s not *that* funny.”

HA HA HA HA HA HA HA HA HA HA—AAACK! AAACK! AAACK!

“Hey bud, are you OK?” asks Cambric.

AAACK! AAACK! CCCCKKKKHHHH...

...

...

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Hello, everyone. New narrator here. I am sorry to announce that our beloved Oopsie has choked on his own horrible pun & has suffocated to death. Now, if it's OK, I would like us all have a silence o' words to mourn the death o' our beloved narrator.

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All right, now let's get back to the races!

When you last saw us, #3, Dr. Equinox in his Lifecycle, was chilled to a stop by #2, Madame Heureuse in her Haunted Hearse's apparition associates, only to be pulled o'er by #6, Captain Napoleon in her Swiss Army Bike, who had her seat sabotaged by #7, the Golden Macks in their Motorsickle, only to be tied down by the Fungi Diet in their Bisido Bicycle, who were then soon rammed out o' bounds by #9, Penile Perfection in his freakishly phallic Innuendo, only to be distracted by a strip club that just happened to be there & passed by #4, Dawn Summers in her Wheelie, a fat-wheeled living unicycle with a giant eyeball for a hub cap.

He glances @ the reader—yes, I'm talking 'bout you 'gain. No need to be so shy—& says in a voice that sounds conspicuously similar to that o' the turtle from earlier, "I'm the mascot."

'Hind her are #5, Felix & Violet pedaling carefully in the Meowmobile, a black & pink bike with a matching hot-pink basket @ the front 'bove a plastic feline face. They both look @ the damaged drivers they were passing with empathetic expressions.

"Harbor you the credence that we ought to terminate so that we might apologize for our scurrilous nescience in regards to their predicaments?" Violet asks.

Felix nods. "Uh huh. That seems nice."

& that's exactly what they do, stopping next to each paralyzed participant & saying, "Please indulge us in the possibility of exceeding your position, even though you are disadvantaged so," 'fore driving off to the next.

Finally, in the back, #10, Heloise Solstice, cycles slowly in her Simple Single, an aptly-named simple gray metal bike with a plain

hat basket in the front; & the serene look on her face makes it seem as if she doesn't e'en know she's in a race @ all! Hey, Heloise? You there? Hello?

Well! She seems to be completely in her own world!

Now, wait a minute, though. Something seems missing here... There are 2 mo' contestants. Where are those—

O, here we are... Here comes #00: our parasitic partnership, Autumn & Edgar in the Tenacious Tandem, painted in the putrid palette o' orange & black. Look @ the sniveling liar, Edgar Winters, give me that faux-sad look as if I'd believe him & his dastardly lies!

But the real focus should be on the criminal mastermind in front, Autumn Springer, who right now has her stoic eyes planted straight 'head o' her. But don't be fooled! Lurking within that head o' hers are swishing churlish cheats to sabotage the other racers & keep the trophy for her cheating self—unlike all o' the other racers do, 'course.

Well, it's a good thing right 'hind them is the #1, Lance Chamsby in his Golden Throne, a solid gold reclining bike, driven by his drama-masked henchman, Agent Razzmatazz; & right now he has his eyes set straight on those no-gooders.

He turns to the reader—yes, *you, already!*—but says nothing—so modest! He only lets out a hoarse snicker with eyes blissfully closed & a toothy grin.

Unfortunately, 'cause his eyes were closed, he didn't see the cactus right in front o' him & smacks right into it, stuck.

“What's the hold-up!” he snarls as he bashes the side o' his bike with his gloved fist, only to see the reason before him. “Why'd you run into that cactus?”

“I was... I was distracted by your distraction, Sir. It's awfully distracting, you must admit.”

“No 'scuses!” Lance shouts with a raised fist. “Just back out!”

& so Agent Razzmatazz does, quickly gaining speed in the opposite direction. Uh... Hey, guys, don't you think you're going a li'l *too far* backward?

Lance swiftly looks round them as he snarls, "What are you doing, you idiot! Stop already!"

"I can't stop, Sir!"

& now they're going backward @ blur! Whoops! Looks like the author wrote backing-up incorrectly. & look! Now their riding straight up a tall mountain! Looks like the author couldn't handle collision detection well, either.

& now Autumn & Edgar are hiding 'hind a rock, conspicuously painted in a different style from the rest o' the background, while they stared @ a line o' spikes stretched 'cross the road, waiting for the other racers to race by & whack their wimpy wheels. 'Course, how she ended up 'head o' them when she was in 2nd-to-last place just a second ago, I'll ne'er understand, since nobody e'er tells me, the jerks.

& here they come! 1st there's Dawn Summers in her Wheelie still in the lead... & she leaps right o'er it, thumping down gainst the dirt on the other side!

But let's see what happens to Felix & Violet in the Meowmobile... O! It looks like they're stopping! What's this? They're picking up the bike & tip-toeing 'cross the spikes. Androgyn, that's gotta hurt.

"It's no trouble," Felix says e'er-so-politely as she winces with every step.

& just look @ that rascalion Autumn Springer's face melt into a scowl! Looks like your terrible trick has been spiked! Look @ her cross her arms as if she can't hear me—I know you're listening!

Next we see Madame Heureuse in her Haunted Hearse, who was the 1st to 'scape her netty situation, turn into just a dashed-lined outline, transparent inside, as she drives o'er the spikes—& they

don't seem to be harming her bike @ all!

Then we see the Fungi Diet in their Basidio Bicycle tunnel down into the dirt just as they're 'bout to approach the spikes & then tunnel out @ the other side for a clean 'scape.

Next is Dr. Equinox in his Lifecycle. Unfortunately, the dirt had already caved into the hole, blocking it off; but that's no matter: he'll just pull 1 o' his levers, causing his whole bike to rise on tall li'l legs. They walk right up to the spikes & carefully step o'er them.

& now we see the Golden Macks in their Motorsickle heading for the spikes. I wonder what they'll do to avoid them... O... it looks like they just drove o'er it.

Fulgent Cambric turns to me with a grin & says, "These wheels are made o' pure steel."

Captain Napoleon in her Swiss Army Bike turns her sirens on, causing the spikes to jump up in panic & move out o' her way.

"Good morn, officer," they say in a wimpy voice as she passes with a salute.

Autumn only nods disgustedly. "Uh huh. Yup."

& last comes Lance Chamsby in his Golden Throne—and we can see by the way he leans back in his recliner & the smug look on his face that he's already prepared to foil Autumn's serpentine strategy.

"You got that right," says he. "I know she's up to something, & I'm gonna catch her in the act!"

But, Chamsby, surely you already know 'bout her spike trap.

He turns to me with irate surprise. "What spike trap?"

But 'fore I can answer, he's distracted by heavy rumbling from below & a sudden stop. He looks down to see his bike o'er a trail o' spikes, his wheels fully flat.

"Why weren't you looking where we were going, you idiot!" Lance shouts 'hind Agent Razzmatazz with 'nother raised fist.

"Well, gosh, Sir; you didn't tell me to stop."

“Didn’t you see the spikes?”

“Yeah, but I didn’t know you didn’t want me to ride o’er them.”

“Didn’t know you shouldn’t ride o’er them,” Lance repeats in disgust. “Do you believe this guy,” he mutters to himself.

Autumn shrugs. “Well, I guess I got *someone*.”

“Oooo! Drat you looters!” Lance grumbles as steam rises from his now-pink face & he clutches his fists to his sides.

But what’s this? I forgot ’bout 1 mo’ racer:—well, ’cept Penile Perfection, who’s still @ the strip joint & whom we won’t need to talk ’bout for the rest o’ this story, thankfully—Heloise in her Simple Single, pedaling @ a turtle’s pace with her eyes blissfully closed, slowly tilting her head left & right as she hummed.

& it looks like she’s doing the same thing Felix & Violet did: she stops just before the spikes, dismounts, picks up her bike, & slowly walks ’cross, murmuring, “Scuse me,” as she passes by Chamsby, still stuck in the teeth o’ the trap. Once ’cross, Heloise gets back on her bike & continues pedaling, still @ a sluggish pace. Hey, Heloise, how do you hope to win @ that speed?

But she doesn’t seem to hear me. She continues riding with her eyes closed & humming, as if this race weren’t e’en happening @ all.

We turn back to Autumn & Edgar, who are just legging themselves back up onto their bikes.

“Well, better try the next cheat,” says she.

Chamsby’s sour frown suddenly transforms back into a smug grin.

“I’m ’fraid it’s a li’l too late for that. It’ll take forever for you to e’en catch up with them, much less gain the substantial lead you somehow gained before.”

“That won’t be too much o’ a problem,” Autumn says as she attaches a green microchip to her bike, followed by 3 white 1s.

She puts a foot on the pedal... & then ’fore you know it, she zooms

forward in a blur, as if going through a warp zone! Just look @ that!

We can see by the twist on Chamsby's face that he isn't pleased @ all.

II.

When we return to our participants, we see them attacking each other in the most vigorous way: Captain Napoleon causes Felix & Violet to spin out with her giant canister o' pepper spray; the Golden Macks delay the Fungi Diet for hours with false litigation; & Madame Heureuse stops them with some contrived, cartoony slapstick violence.

Sigh. Look, can I let you in on a li'l secret? Just 'tween me & you—yes, I'm still talking 'bout you, dear reader. These races are all humbug, utter humbug. It's always the same: a bunch o' trite racers in their thematic li'l cars attack each other as they race toward some finish line, producing cheap laughs for their cheap slapstick, & then someone who isn't Autumn & Edgar—who don't e'en care whether they win or lose—wins. What do they win? Some plastic trophy & the smallest dregs o' self-satisfaction. What's the point?

I know, I know; I shouldn't be so morose. I... I still haven't recovered from the old narrator's untimely demise, you know. I know he cared so deeply for these races—'specially the way half o' the proceeds from tickets went to the orphanage down the road; but I must confess I still have some bitterness 'bout these li'l races. Don't let his kooky puns fool you; Oopsie was *brilliant*. I just read the thesis he was writing for his Masters in physics last summer wherein he synthesized the concept o' gradual character development with the concept o' "death o' the author" through analyzing authors as multiple people spread out through different time periods. I bet none o' you e'en knew he was a physicist, did you? O, he was so brilliant. I

told him he was too good for this job, but he wouldn't listen; & now it's thrown 'way all o' its potential.

Sorry, I'm still a li'l... no, it's OK. I can do this. For Oopsie.

Sigh. Anyway, those assholes, Autumn & Edgar, are once 'gain trying some insipid trick. You know, if you 2 can just warp up 'head o' everyone, why not just warp all the way to the finish line & get it o'er with?

Autumn turns to me & says, "What fun would that be? I already know I'm ne'er going to win; it's programmed into my character design. The purpose o' these traps is simply to demonstrate my intellectual superiority o'er these fools."

Yes, well you're not doing a very good job o' it.

"Who put an invisible block 'bove your jump?"

O... nothing. Just forget it.

She shrugs & turns back to the road from 'hind her mulberry tree, waiting for the other racers to drive by. But what those racers don't realize is that she had painted o'er the rest o' the road with brown paint & painted a new curve o' road onto the dirt toward a mountain, with a li'l cave painted on it. 'Course, only someone with no conception o' perspective could fall for such a trick, since the static image would only fit the proper perspective looking @ it from 1 particular spot.

Luckily, that includes all o' the racers, who... what's this? They're driving through the fake tunnel in the mountain. Ne'er seen that 1 before.

"Have you?" asks Autumn. "Pray tell, did you see the li'l gray lines I drew on the ground o' the tunnel?"

Gray lin—& the mountain explodes! & now they're rising up in the air with that squeaky whistle sound you always hear... & now they're falling back on the track far up 'head.

"Perfect," Autumn says as she rubs her hands together.

But... but that helped them!

"In every competition, 1 person's benefit always comes @ 'nother's loss," says Autumn.

But that's *your* loss.

"Nope," Autumn says as she shakes her head. "I told you, we're not winning, anyway, no matter what we do. The game's rigged against us. You're forgetting 'bout someone."

Who?

O. I see my answer coming up right: Lance Chamsby in his Golden Throne, way back near last. This time, rather than lying back & relaxing, he's turning his head in every direction like a dog sniffing out criminal activity. He instructs his henchman to stop when he sees it just to his left, poking her head out from 'hind a mulberry tree, & then dismounts & walks o'er to it.

"& what trick do you think you're up to, you vile looter," he states as he swings a glove-covered index finger up into the air.

"Would it benefit me to tell you?" says Autumn.

Lance twiddles his fingers together, the confidence sapped from his face.

"No... I s'pose it wouldn't." He looks up @ her, defiant. "It'd be upright, though."

"Do I look like someone who's upright?" asks Autumn.

"Course not," he announces, thrusting his finger upward once mo'.

She isn't responding. If anyone's face could look like a locked chest, promising riches inside, it's hers. Lance seems to be taking the hint, as he's turning his head all round, searching the vicinity for her, uh... let's see...

Ah! Treacherous trap! No... that's trite. Let me think for a minute...

"Aha! I see you've blown up that mountain the road leads to.

Terrorism! Unfortunately, you mistimed your evil explosives, & your plot has been plastic wrapped!" says Lance.

But as he turns to Autumn with triumph, he only sees her slowly shake her head, her face just as impenetrable.

"No, I've already succeeded quite a bit," says she.

Lance's eyes become bulging balloons. He frantically searched round & under his bike, but sees nothing amiss.

"How? I don't see anything?"

"O, it's not something you can see from any length o' exertion through *physical* search. It takes a meta mind to figure out my trap."

"What's that mean?" he asks as he stands back up & looks @ Autumn with puffed up shoulders.

"It's something that's easy to miss no matter how one searches, so long as someone thinks 'bout it in a simplistic manner."

"& who says I'm thinking 'bout it in a simplistic manner?"

"I am."

"O."

A long pause hangs 'tween them. For aesthetics, I've decided to punt a ball o' tumbleweed down past them. Look @ it go! Unfortunately, it seems the effect has been ruined by the tumbleweed sticking to Lance's pant leg, just shaking there like a mouse hiding from a colony o' cats.

"Try pedaling just a li'l—*just a li'l!*" Lance says to his underling.

"OK, Sir," Agent Razzmatazz says as he revolves his feet slowly. The bike slowly moves forward.

"I don't get it," says Lance. "How did you trap me? My bike seems to work fine."

"What's that have to do with anything?" asks Autumn.

"Well, what is it then?" Lance shouts impatiently.

"Think. What's the goal o' my trap?"

"To put my chances o' victory in a plastic bag, what else?" says he.

“As all socialists, you can’t create positive success, so you must take the success ’way from others to feed your wilting self-esteem.”

“& how would I do that? Just in general.”

“Why, you would... you would keep me from being able to move, duh.”

“& what are you not doing now?”

“I’m...” Lance’s eyes widen once mo’.

They’re collapsing back into anger. “You truly have no shame.”

Then he turns to his henchman & says, “Ride on, Agent Razzmatazz!”

“OK, Sir.”

But he simply sits there, tapping his hands gainst the handlebars.

Lance’s expression is beginning to fill with annoyance.

“Well, what are you waiting for?” snaps Lance.

“You to get back on, Sir.”

“No ’scuses.”

“Well, OK, Sir,” Agent Razzmatazz says with an uncertain expression as he lifts his foot.

Then he starts pedaling, racing out into the distance.

Lance turns to Autumn with his arms crossed. “Can’t get good help nowadays, it seems,” mutters he.

III.

Our ridiculous racers are now reaching the city, & the last stretch o’ their, well, ridiculous race. Look, we can’t all be witty wordcrafters. I’d like to see you try this narrating gig & see how easy *you* find it.

Anyway, it’s a fresh morn. The city is covered in a March fog, as well as the puddles & drippings from last-night’s showers, as if the city has a cold.

Now we’re @ the obstacle-course portion o’ the race, where our

ballistic bikers will have to zigzag round pedestrians & time their pedals so that they don't run into cars while crossing streets or hit front doors just as they're being opened.

Here we see Dawn Summers in her Wheelie trying to earn extra Pts for the bonus round by taxiing people round the city.

"Where to, pal?" she says as her 1st passenger gets on 'hind.

"Somewhere far back in Mustard Mountains," he says in a squeaky voice.

Dawn rides 'way till someone else waves her down, seeing that she's a taxi by the tall flag waving 'bove her that says, "TAXI."

"Where to, pal?" asks she.

"See that spot in the air right there?" Dawn's potential passenger points her index up in the air, her eyes wincing so she can see just the right spot.

"Got it," Dawn says as she waits for her new passenger to get on.

& now she's off. Now she's racing through Orchid Avenue, weaving 'tween cars to get through the heavy traffic clogging this busy Tuesday morning. Folks, don't do this @ home—& what I mean by that is, don't drive round Orchid Avenue on a Tuesday morn or else you'll run into a lot o' traffic.

& now she's 'bout to try a dangerous stunt: she's heading for the back o' a "Ramps're Yours" truck with a ramp that could be yours @ its back. She's gaining on it... & she drives onto the ramp! & now she's flying up into the sky! This... this is indescribable! I sure hope you're watching this & not just listening to this on some ol' radio, 'cause if you are, you're missing the sight o' the century!

(What's that? This is *only* on radio? You mean, nobody's taping this footage?)

Folks, you're all missing the sight o' a century!

"Thank you," the passenger says as she slides off her seat in mid-air, right where she pointed Dawn to take her. She didn't need to pay

Dawn; the Pts already rolled up on her counter in the upper-left—you see it, right there?

(What's that? Nobody can see the counter in the upper-left? "Remember, this is just on radio, no footage"? OK. I got it.)

Folks, you're all missing the Pts-racking-up o' the century!

As for the passenger, gravity plunged her down toward the hard concrete as usual, transforming her into a hilarious human pancake. The loosely-drawn face o'er this otherwise incomprehensible blob smiled wryly for some reason.

But we have no time to decipher this; Dawn is on the move for 'nother passenger, only to suddenly find a force thrusting her leftward off her bike. She looks up to see that audacious Autumn sliding onto her Wheelie, Edgar skidding on slowly afterward. Wheelie simply stares up @ them with curiosity, but silently acquiesces all the same.

"Sorry," Edgar mumbles shame-faced.

"Sorry," Autumn also says, though with a bored expression that doesn't look sorry @ all. She adds, "*Crazy Taxi's* been replaced by *Grand Theft Auto*."

Dawn frowns.

"O, all right," Autumn says snappily. "*Road Rage* has been replaced by *Hit & Run*. Is that better?"

Dawn's frown is flipped round, only for her to close her eyes & cough from the smoke left in her face as Autumn rode off with her Wheelie.

But Dawn can't stay there for long. She's shocked back to her feet by the abrupt loud honking happening all o'er her. She stares round to see many generic faces poke out windows, shaking simplistic fists.

She runs back to the street as fast as she can & searches round for Autumn & Edgar's Tenacious Tandem & finally finds it lying gainst a brick bread shop called "Pan's."

“Huh, I wonder why she left her bike for mine?” she says as she scratches her head & stands the tandem up on its wheel legs. She shrugs. “Must be ‘cause mine’s a faster motorcycle.”

But when she tries pedaling forward on it, she finds it won’t move. She peers down @ its wheels & sees that it’s flat! Why, those purloining, pocketing, pinching, pilfering, peddling, pedaling, petulant, pestilent... pernicious...

Gasp...

Gasp...

Sorry ‘bout that. Where was I ‘gain?

Anyway, the swabbers spiked their own bike just so they could sabotage Dawn’s chances o’ catching victory! How maddeningly mad! What do you say for yourself, Autumn?

“Wasn’t me.”

O, truly, & I s’pose this bike just got up & slashed its own tires?

“No: someone else.”

O, truly? You expect me to believe someone else would have had the... the... to be as much o’ a jerk to sabotage someone else as you?

“If I’m the one who’s being sabotaged, I could name 1 person.”

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We turn to Lance Chamsby, who appears to be leaning back in his Golden Throne, once mo’ with a triumphant grin.

He turns to me with a hand covering his mouth—a futile endeavor to keep our speech secret—& says, “Tween you & me, I hired someone to poke holes in those looters’ bike wheels. Let’s see them cheat now.” Then he lets out ‘nother wheezy, high-pitched giggle with a paw o’er his mouth & eyes blissfully shut. Watch out, Sir Chamsby! You don’t want to cause your henchman to crash ‘gain like last time!

He opens his eyes, only to cleanse them with his fists when he sees what he sees. When he sees ‘gain, his eyes widen, unable to

believe what they see.

“W-w-where’s the city?” asks he, panic ripe in his throat. He glares @ Agent Razzmatazz. “Where the Lenin did you take us?”

I’m ’fraid you’ve been going too fast trying to catch up to everyone, Chamsby, & you’ve outrun the write-distance.

“Write-distance?”

Why, yes. You’ve ne’er heard o’ write-distance?

“Would I be asking ’bout it if I had?”

Perhaps (I don’t know all o’ your idiosyncrasies). Anyway, the write-distance is how far ’head in the area the writer has written.

“That doesn’t e’en make any sense,” Lance grumbles as he watches his underling try turning his bike round through this phantom city, a bead o’ sweat dripping down Lance’s forehead as the raindrops drip from the roof edges o’ cement & brick buildings—a’least, as they *would’ve* if the author had had time to write ’bout them before Lance & his associate drove by.

Sure it does. Surely, you don’t think the Programmers can just write ’bout the whole universe all @ the same time. There’s only so much a few paragraphs can do.

“Can’t they just write, ‘The whole universe was purple’?”

Well, yes, they *could*, if they lacked imagination. But if you want fine detail that’s different for each piece—next-gen literature—you can’t just do it all @ the same time. What if each tree had its own unique type o’ foliage? The Programmers would have to describe all 400 billion trees! If they spent a short, 20-word paragraph describing each tree—once ’gain, all o’ its li’l details—you’d have 8 trillion words! That’s bigger than the biggest book in the world! That’s... why, for a 400-word-per-page book that’d be round 20 million pages! That would take the average reader almost 8 weeks o’ nonstop reading to finish! & all just to read details ’bout a bunch o’ trees! Do you get my point, Sir Chamsby?

“I think I do...”

Anyway, programmers must pace their work accordingly to allow themselves the words for describing the scenery properly. If they run the action by too fast, there won't be 'nough time to talk 'bout the scenery & all o' the characters will simply be wandering through empty voids.

“Yeah, uh, hey, narrator...”

I have a name, you know.

“Well, what is it, then?”

O, I can't tell you that. I'm terribly fearful o' having my identity stolen. I had a cousin once—

“Look,” Lance bursts out, impatience dripping from his mouth. “Could you Velcro your lips for 1 second so the Programmers *can* write their stupid scenery & we won't be riding through an empty void like 2 idiots?”

Lance paused to consider what he said. “Well, as if *I* were an idiot.”

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Just look @ the sun rise, shielded by the fog as if 'hind a shower curtain! Look @ the way its light reflects li'l white flecks off the puddles still covering the concrete streets! Look @ the raindrops drip from the roof edges o' cement & brick buildings!

Lance sighs. “Finally. Thanks to you, I'm sure I missed savoring the spoiled stench on those looters' mugs as they stood stranded in their failure.”

Uh, you know they found 'nother mode o' mobilization, right?

“What?”

Uh huh. They took good ol' Dawn Summers's Wheelie & left her with their troubled tandem.

Lance snaps his finger. “Henry George! No matter.” He reaches into his pocket & pulls out his phone. “I'll just have to try a different

plan.”

IV.

The race reaches a riotous pitch as our racers race their way through the final miles toward the finish line down Honey Hill in this race to the bottom! Our racers are wild, throwing everything @ each other to reach the top... I mean the bottom... I mean Marvin Gardens... I mean... You know what I mean!

This is anyone's game, folks, which means everything everyone did 'fore this point was pointless & we could've skipped it to get the same picture.

O well.

Dr. Equinox in his Lifecycle is in the lead, but then he's blasted by the Golden Mack's special weapon. Too bad for them, while they're busy laughing @ Equinox with their heads turned back, they run into a bomb masquerading as an item canister. When they land in an ashy pile, the fake item canister leaps onto its noodly legs & points @ them with its noodly arm.

“Ha! Gotcha!” it shouts with the voice o' a mad hatter.

Rudewhile, Dawn makes up for the loss o' her last type o' transportation by spinning round in the shape o' a blurry ball @ 80 kilometers per hour, knocking o'er every racer she rolls into.

She wasn't the only 1 who could morph her body into strange shapes to help her win: a human pancake was sliding its liquid self down the hill 'long with her, matching her meter for meter.

“Hello, Madame. Didn't expect to see you 'gain,” says she.

“Hey, I recognize that voice. You're the woman I transported to that place in the sky,” says Dawn.

“Uh huh. Many thanks for the help, too,” says the pancake woman.

& Lance Chamsby & Autumn & Edgar duke it out on the streets, 1st by bumping their vehicles into each other. Unluckily for Autumn, though, as they bump Lance for a 5th time, his vehicle suddenly starts flashing bright colors & causes Autumn & Edgar to be shocked far back into a tree. They slowly slide back down to the ground, hair sticking out o' Autumn's head in every direction, while Lance rides 'way laughing.

"That's right... I forgot he can just become electrified whenever he wants, the cheater," mutters she.

Dawn stops next to Wheelie, who had been staring @ her with a wide eye as if she were going to attack him.

"There you are," she says as she climbs back on. "I guess the other 2 swapped you for an e'en faster vehicle."

"For your information, Madame, no one is faster than me," Wheelie says with its eye closed indignantly. "They were knocked off."

"Well then, we'd better hurry if I'm gonn—hey!"

Dawn feels a familiar force push her leftward & looks up to see Autumn remounting her Wheelie.

"Gain?" she says with exasperation as she throws her arms out.

This time Autumn doesn't wait to answer, riding off immediately. Dawn shouts 'nother, "Hey!" only for it to end in harsh coughs as the smoke left by Wheelie clogs her throat.

"Androgyn, do you know how hard 'twas to get into that ball position," Dawn says as she returns to her feet.

But we'll quickly return to Autumn & Edgar, who are gaining on Lance Chamsby as we write this. But, huh? What's this? Why's Edgar leaning o'er the back? What are you looking for, Edgar?

Edgar looks up @ me shyly.

"Uh... are you talking to me?"

Well, I don't see anyone else named Edgar round; do you?

“Well, there’s Edgar Allen Poe o’er there,” he says as he points a thumb to his side—& there I see jolly ol’ Edgar Allen Poe riding his thin black bike in his all-black business-casual suit. He turns to me & smiles with his wiggling mustache.

“She had to have constructed some special abilities into this,” Autumn says without taking her eyes off the road before her.

“I think I see some red button round here...” Edgar says.

“Great. Push it.”

“What?”

“Push the but—Hey, that gives me an idea.”

As she says this, she sees the Golden Macks riding by in their Motorsickle.

“Um, Autumn...”

But he speaks far too softly for her to hear ’bove Wheelie’s gravelly engine as she steers Wheelie right next to the front window o’ the Motorsickle, where Fulgent Cambric is tapping the ashes out o’ his cigar—rudely polluting the streets, I might add.

“Good morn, Madame,” he says in his naturally raspy voice. “Haven’t I seen you from someplace?”

“That doesn’t matter,” Autumn says in her own naturally raspy voice. “Look, how much will you take to run ol’ Lance Chamsby out o’ the race?”

“Hmm... Let’s see...” Cambric says as he rubs his chin & looks up @ the still-misty sky.

“Autumn...”

“What?” says she, turning her head back not to better answer Edgar, but ’cause she did have an inkling o’ what he might be interrupting her for—she could hear & feel Wheelie’s engine shake mo’ violently than usual.

“I... uh... already pressed the button. Sorry,” he says with a guilty expression.

“O,” is all Autumn replies with.

“How 'bout—Hey, where're you going?”

Autumn looks down, noticing Cambric's voice sound farther below her than before. She's now seeing why: Wheelie, which had sprouted wings when she wasn't looking, was slowly rising into the air.

“Well, this isn't good,” Autumn mumbles as she continues to look down.

“Maybe if I press the button it'll come back down,” Edgar says. “Want me to try?”

“No: I meant we're getting closer to Lance & I have nothing heavy to drop on him.”

“I have some books in my robe,” Edgar says as he rummages through his pockets.

“No; the wind resistance gainst the paper would make it too tricky to time. I'll just use myself.”

“What?” Edgar shouts as he sees Autumn slide to a sideways position.

“You know how to ride a cognizant motorcycle plane, right?” says Autumn.

“Yes, but you can't just jump down from this high!” Edgar shouts with hands clutching the sides o' his head.

She opens her mouth to say something, but then quickly looks down. “No time to argue,” she says just before sliding o'er the edge.

Edgar rushes forward & peers down with panic painted on his face.

Below, Lance sits back in his Golden Throne with the same smug smile he always has, the obnoxious lout. Well, that all changes when our troublemaker, Autumn, falls 'tween him & Agent Razzmatazz.

“Hijacker! Thief!” Lance shouts as he throws his hands up into the air. “We don't have room for you, just as society doesn't have room

for welfare queens!”

Autumn says nothing. She merely clasps her hands to the frame just before her & wraps her legs round the bottom side, cringing a li'l from the uncomfortable position she was in right now, 'specially gainst the bumpy road they were going o'er.

Lance, seeing that words wouldn't work, leans his head round Autumn & shouts, “Agent Razzmatazz! Do something!”

“Y-you mean me, Sir?” asks his driving henchman.

“No,” Lance says dryly. “I mean the Agent Razzmatazz riding right 'side us.” He turns he his rightward @ the drama-masked rider right 'side them.

“Hey, do something, will ya?” Lance says to the other rider.

“But didn't you want me to drop this bomb on her?” asks the other bicyclist.

“No!” Lance shouts with dilated eyes as he waves his hands left & right. “Are you crazy? You'll blow us all up!”

“A bomb? Truly creative,” mutters Autumn.

“Would you get off, already!” Lance yells as he clutches Autumn's shoulders & tries moving her sideways, only to find it 'bout as easy as moving a mountain.

“This seems an inappropriate situation for that,” Autumn replies. “For one, I don't know 'bout you, but I usually only do that 'lone...”

“Ooo!” Lance grunts. He looks 'mong the 2 Agent Razzmatazzes. “Can't you idiots do anything useful?”

“I offered to drop the bomb on her,” the separate Razzmatazz says defensively.

“Why don't you drop it on her skeleton friend up there?” Lance says as he points up @ Edgar, still flying next to them—though @ a much higher altitude.

Autumn glances @ the other rider, mildly concerned @ this threat, e'en if she knew 'twas empty.

“‘Cause he’s ’bove me, Sir. I can only drop things below me or ’side me.”

“& why is that?” Lance snaps.

“Hmm... You know, that’s a good question. I ought to try it.”

& now we see the 2nd Razzmatazz dropping the bomb upward... Autumn gapes up @ it in horror, unable to believe it.

Unluckily, he didn’t seem to aim it correctly, ’cause its passing far ’hind Edgar—& now it’s disappearing into the hazy sky. We can see by the change in Autumn’s expression & posture that she’s relieved.

Lance isn’t, though. He sits back with his arms crossed & a pouting lip, muttering, “Can’t get this looter to stop mooching off my bike, can’t blow up her skeleton partner in the flying motorcycle. Nothing e’er goes my way. It’s not fair.”

“Perhaps you should stop whining ’bout not having everything handed down to you & pull yourself up by your shoelaces, Chamsby ol’ boy,” says Autumn.

A flicker o’ annoyance appeared in Lance’s eyes @ this sloppy strawman argument; but it’s quickly replaced by the open eyes o’ realization.

“That’s it!” exclaims he.

“What the hell?” Autumn grunts as she looks down & sees Lance grabbing her right foot & scrambling to untie her tennis shoes. “Erm... If you think I’m going to let go o’ this bike to retie my shoes, you clearly don’t know me well—which is probably for the best, truly.”

Lance is ignoring her. He releases her now-loose laces & slides off her shoe, throwing it ’hind his shoulder.

“You’ve succeeded in annoying me; but as we’ve seen by your own experience with that emotion, it won’t do a damn thing to stop me,” Autumn says with a raised eyebrow.

Now Lance is slipping off her sock. He throws it ’hind him as well.

“The cold will get me—that’s it,” says Autumn. “Crafty Chams-s-s-s-b-b-ha-ha-HA-HA-HA! W-what the h-h-hell do you think you’re doing?”

Autumn is interrupted by ‘nother hearty, tearful laugh as Lance continues to tickle her now-naked heel.

“If you think this is going to... hoo hoo hoo... If you think this will loosen my grip, you’re... f-f-fuck...”

Another word-blocking laugh ensues, this time wheezy & low as Autumn tries to restrain her throat gainst it.

“Come on, Autumn,” Lance says with a nefarious grin as his left hand joins his right in the terrible tickling. “You know you won’t be able to stand the discomfort for long.”

Autumn continues to laugh, only to thrust her left elbow backward as powerfully as she can. ‘Cause Lance was busy using his 2 hands to tickle her feet & not holding on tightly, the force easily knocks him off the bike & onto the rough dirt. It all happens so fast that it takes him a second or 2 to sit back up & stare bemused @ the bike quickly shrinking in the distance.

“Hey, you idiot! Get back here!” he shouts as he clumsily returns to his feet.

“You heard him,” Autumn says with a thumb aimed backward. “You better let me take o’er while you attend to his every need.”

“I’d better back up.”

“No, don’t!” Autumn says as she stands up straight in vigorous opposition.

But it’s too late; Razzmatazz has already started pedaling backward. As you may remember, you folks @ home, there’s a bug in the way backing up is handled in this story—caused by bugs getting in the way o’ the Programmers’ keyboards, causing certain button presses not to register. Anyway, the bike begins to rush backward, causing Autumn to smack right into Razzmatazz’s back.

To make matters mo' malignant, Agent Razzmatazz—the 1 driving the bike Autumn's still on, not the other 1—is aiming for Lance as he goes backward, hoping to stop closer to him, I would reckon. What he forgets is, he's going to have a hard time stopping @ all. & it smacks right into him, plowing him backward like stuck snow!

The race is getting rambunctious now, peeps! The Fungi Diet are running o'er cows & people gremlins for Pts; Autumn, Lance, & the 2 Razzmatazzes are settling their differences with a giant pie fight; Dawn's riding a giant running pig in warlock's wardrobe; 3 bears ride unicycles, but that always happens, so I don't e'en know why I brought it up; Madame Heureuse in her Haunted Hearse is neck-and-neck with a possessed fox doll; Captain Napoleon's Swiss Army Bike is being squeezed to pieces by violent vines; & now the narrator is racing through the track in a shopping cart!

"You?" asks someone in the audience.

Yes me. You see any other narrators 'bout?

"No..." the audience member says as he looks down in shame.

Well I do. I see the ghost o' the previous narrator riding round in his Spectral Sunken Ship right 'side me. Hi, Oopsie! & now I'm waving @ him.

Uh oh. Sounds like Captain Napoleon is trying to trick her way to 1st by turning on her sirens; but that doesn't seem like it'll trap anyone.

Hey, wait a minute... Captain Napoleon's Swiss Army Bike is still being devoured by the violent vines. Maybe these vines accidentally pushed a button.

Captain Napoleon turns her grim face to the screen—yes, your screen. Do you see any other screens 'bout?

I actually don't know the answer to that question. I don't poke round your life.

"That's not my siren," Captain Napoleon says when I finally give

her a chance to talk, after rudely interrupting her.

Wait! Then whose siren is it?

Uh oh. Why are all o' these cop cars here? O... 1's stopping right next to me. This is good. Hey, officer. Officer. What's this all 'bout?

Uh... What are you doing? I didn't do anything, officer!

"Were you not drag racing through the city?"

Well... yes, but this is a *bike* race, Sir.

"I can see that," he says with a short nod. "You know that's illegal, too, in the middle o' busy traffic, right?"

I did not.

"Please come with me, Sir; you're under arrest."

He moves me toward the car, opens the back door, & gently pushes me in.

Wait. This is a mistake! This is totally a legal race.

But the cop ignores me, shutting the door on me halfway through my appeal. I stare out my window like a dog curious @ the ruckus going on out back. I see the cops pull o'er a few mo' bikes. I see him place Dr. Equinox in the back o' 'nother squad car, & then Madame Heureuse, & then poor Felix & Violet, both with horrified looks on their faces.

V.

\We're all sitting in the same jail cell: #00 & #1, Autumn Springer & Lance Chamsby—as well as the 2 Razzmatazzes—both o' whom were absorbed in arguing with each other...

"I don't see why *I'm* in here," moans Lance. "I'm the victim here. This maniac"—he points @ Autumn whose expression yells, "Shut up!" far louder than her mouth could—"is the 1 who stole my bike & ran me o'er with it."

"That was your intellectually-challenged accomplice, actually,"

says Autumn.

“Well, it’s not my fault if the Programmers wrote reverse driving so terribly,” says Agent Razzmatazz.

“No, I said that,” says the other Agent Razzmatazz.

“I’m not the ‘other’ Razzmatazz; I’m the *original*,” says the same Razzmatazz.

“What’s that s’posed to mean? Am I just some inferior *copy*?” says the other Razzmatazz.

“Don’t call me the ‘other’ Razzmatazz! I’m just as good as him,” the same Razzmatazz says as he points @... the Razzmatazz sitting next to him.

“I say this looter should be the 1 in here for all o’ us,” says Lance.

Autumn, chin still resting on an upraised hand, says, “O, shut up & get eaten by those bears you always love already.”

& then Lance was eaten by bears, who are always hungry whenever they’re not riding their unicycles.

“Rassafrassansrassanlassanbassansassan...” grumbles Lance, his voice muffled by the thick walls o’ a bear’s stomach. Said bear looks down in confusion.

Anyway... Where was I? O, yes: #2, Madame Heureuse, no longer in her Haunted Hearse; #3, Dr. Equinox, no longer in his Lifecycle; #4, Dawn Summers, no longer in her... giant pig wizard. Um... Let’s see. Uh, #5, Felix & Violet, no longer in their Meowmobile; Captain Napoleon, no longer in her Swiss Army Bike—probably ’cause ‘twas already destroyed by the plant monsters. The Golden Macks were able to bribe their way out o’ jail time, so long as they ceased racing. Then there’s the Fungi Diet, all with sagging caps as they rest their frowning faces on their upraised palms. O! #9, Penile Perfection’s here—not for racing round in his Innuendo, but for being caught masturbating in a movie theater. Uh... who else?

Hey, wait a minute! Where’s #10, Heloise Solstice, in her Simple

Single? Where did she e'er go?

O, wait! There she is! I can see her out our jail window! Funny how ours has 1, when in real life, jails don't. Anyway, I see her slowly pedaling toward the finish line. I can't believe it! 'Cause she was riding so slow, she ne'er got arrested for racing. Who would've thought going *slow* would've had an advantage in this race?

"Mmm... I would've."

Who said that?

"Me."

O! Look who it is: it's the chubby, wimpy-voiced red turtle projectile from before. What are you doing here?

"Mmm... The police pulled me o'er for speeding & then put me in jail for flying without a license." He sighs. "I'm ne'er gonna make it to Banana Beach @ this point."

Well, I'd hate to interrupt our amniote associate, but it looks as if Heloise is just 'bout to cross the finish line, & we can finally end this insipid fu—What's this? It seems we have a new contestant joining us, carried on a fishing hook by a glasses-wearing turtle sitting in a cloud. Gasp! I was wondering where he was. I always thought he just o'erslept or hungo'er or was too busy crossing the border after accidentally killing someone by landing on his head as he tries to jump o'er a pit, causing him to fall in—look, it could happen to anyone; don't judge me!

Ahem. Anyway, here comes #11, Thursday O'Beefe, passing Heloise in his Turtle Troller... & he crosses the finish line! He won the race! I can't believe it!

Well, I wish I could congratulate Sir O'Beefe on his victory, maybe ask him how he did it or why he did it that way, but it seems the law is getting impatient with my sound team still being here when I should be grounded, so—wait! I'm not d—

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VI.

I know I shouldn't text & drive @ the same time, but I think this being an emergency makes it justifiable.

Autumn, please pick up...

Augh. There's no reception. Should've figured.

Sigh. Now what am I going to do?

Edgar was surrounded by silence contrasted against the constant rumbling o' Wheelie's engine. He was also surrounded by the darkness weighed against the millions o' white star specks crowding the sky & the bright, multicolored road below him.

Wheelie's fright-and-flight had automatically turned on in this confusing environment, making it impossible for Edgar to stop it.

So 'stead, he uneasily steered Wheelie o'er the thin rainbow streets without guardrails, trying his hardest not to fall into the empty abyss o' space, wondering when he'd finally be able to 'scape... the Star Light Zone.

#BOSK-BJ0B15-DISTURBED3

DISTURBED RESIDENCE, Part III

J. J. W. Mezun | 2015 April 1



XI. Run

Felix didn't care that they were obviously lost. She didn't care that she hadn't drunk or eaten anything for o'er a day & was feeling a li'l dizzy-headed ('sides, she had to constantly remind herself that such thoughts were selfish). She didn't care that it seemed to be getting dark & spooky so soon, e'en though they didn't have a flashlight or anything to make it easier to see. All she knew was that not everything was her fault, & that 'twas the happiest day o' her life.

That was when something odd happened: Dawn, who had been checking every door they'd passed so far, had stopped @ 1 that was gray with tiny bolts all 'long its edges. She was turning its knob & trying to push it in, to no avail.

She stopped & stared @ the door, puzzled. "That's odd. Why is this door, out o' all o' them, locked?" She rubbed her chin. "Well, it's obvious this room must be important in some way."

She dug through her pockets & pulled out her stapler. But when she put it in the keyhole & twisted it, she noticed it wasn't locked, & also staplers shouldn't be able to fit in keyholes. & yet, when she tried to push the door open, leaning her shoulder on it with all o' her strength, it wouldn't budge.

"Must be bolted down or something," she said.

Felix stepped closer, without daring to touch Dawn, & said, "Uh, I don't want to be rude, jacket-dressed woman, but—"

"Hey, what do you think you 2 are doing?"

Dawn turned back to the stuffy voice & saw to her shock a suit o' armor walking toward them. While Felix stood & stared blankly,

Dawn backed against the wall, gaping @ it as one would @ a tiger or tank, or anything else that was probably going to make you dead soon.

“I said, what are you 2 doing here?” asked the armor. “You 2 are trespassing. That’s not friendly. Get lost or else something unfriendly will happen.”

From ’hind the door, which Dawn’s head was right up gainst, Dawn could barely hear a muffled voice say, “Agent Screamin’ Green, these 2 are not as dangerous as the ponytailed devil & the skeleton wizard, so try to capture them. Perhaps we’ll be able to get some info out o’ them.”

As Dawn heard this, she eyed the armor, which had stopped as the voice in the room began speaking. Now she could see it begin to move its feet.

Before it had a chance, Dawn grabbed Felix’s hand & ran in the other direction. As they went, Dawn could hear—& feel—thumping gainst the floor below her feet. She turned & saw that the suit was on the floor, having probably leapt @ them. However, ’twas already scrambling back to its feet, causing Dawn to put mo’ pump ’hind her own legs’ sprint.

This proved problematic for Felix. She was not good @ running—she was not good @ anything, she reminded herself. The physical exertion o’ their movement made Felix feel breath-broken, & no matter how much she tried to stop herself from panting so loudly, which would only alert the jacket-dressed woman to her wimpiness, she couldn’t stop herself. Worse, her feet kept tripping under her, till she was down on the floor, practically being dragged by the jacket-dressed woman.

Dawn looked downback to see Felix on her knees, panting, her flushed face focused on the carpet. Dawn then looked up & saw the armor gaining.

“You truly should just leave me ’hind,” Felix said with troubled breaths. “I’ll only hold you back & make you lose your valuable life for my valueless 1.”

Dawn paused to think. Then she lifted Felix to her feet & stared directly into her eyes, causing Felix to cringe in expectation for punishment. ’Stead, Dawn pointed an arm ’hind her.

“Felix, go on ’head as fast as you can. I’ll stall this creep.”

“What, but—”

“That is an order. Do it this instant,” Dawn said with a stern stare & her arrow arm aimed out e’en farther.

Though Felix knew this would cause harm to the jacket-dressed woman, she daren’t disobey & make her despise Felix e’en mo’ than she probably already did. So, with a sagging heart, she scampered down the hall. All the while she fantasized ’bout wrapping herself in a bag & throwing herself to the sea e’en mo’ than usual for her usual cowardice.

Meanwhile, Dawn stood ’hind in the middle o’ the hall with her arms & legs stretched out. The armor, nearing, leapt @ Dawn, only for her to charge @ it with her shoulder, knocking them both back, & causing Dawn’s shoulder to shake with agony.

Since she was only knocked on her ass, she should have been able to get up ’fore the armor, which was thrown prone; however, ’fore she could stand, the armor’s hand reached up & grasped her foot.

The armor raised its head to stare @ Dawn—a’least she s’posed that was why. The mask o’ its helmet concealed all emotion; only by its mobility could she tell ’twas sentient.

It said, “Don’t think you can ’scape so simply: I’m promised a bonus if I capture you, & I’ll be damned if I’m giving that up.”

Dawn reached into the space ’tween her jacket collar & her neck & fiddled round with a Velcro latch inside, only for the armor to mutter, “Shit,” & then do what looked to Dawn to be a belly flop onto

the rest o' Dawn, holding her elbows down with his other hand. Afterward, it lifted its face & upper body off o' her a li'l while keeping her elbows & lower body held down tightly to the floor.

"Er... Sorry 'bout this, but I can't have you doing anything that might help you 'scape," said it, its voice sounding as if 'twere being sucked back into his throat.

Then it said mo' sturdily, "Boss, what do you want me to do with her? Well, yeah, OK, but I don't have any rope or anything to tie her with." It tilted its head upward 'gain & said, "Scuse me, Madame, but would you by chance have any rope or string or anything I could tie your wrists together with that I could borrow. I swear it'll be no discomfort @ all."

Dawn stared @ it for the next few seconds 'fore answering, "Sure, let me reach into my inner pockets."

"Uh, OK... uh, actually, the boss says, I say... you're just trying to trick me into releasing your arms so you can hit me something, aren't you?"

Dawn paused to consider how to answer.

After a long hesitation, she answered, "No."

"I'm 'fraid you might be lying," said the armor.

"Check my outside pockets; you won't find any string in them," said Dawn.

"But, Sir, how can I do anything if I don't have any string to tie her up with?" the armor said to the air 'gain. "I know, I'm sorry, Sir, but what am I to do?"

"How are you talking to that guy 'hind the door?" asked Dawn. "Is it some kind o' supernatural powers, or something? Who is that guy, anyway?"

"Uh, that's, that's... that's sensitive info, Madame," said the armor.

"I fail to see how the occult could be sensitive info," said Dawn. "What, are you 'fraid some competing ghosts will steal your ideas?"

“Yes.”

“Well, I can assure you that if I e’er talk to ’nother ghost, your secret will be safe with me,” said Dawn.

“I’m ’fraid it’s still impossible for me to say anything.”

Dawn was getting impatient with this roadblock. For 1, her arms were getting tired from being held in this same position for so long, which also caused her back to feel strained, & the rest o’ her body was feeling pain from this guy’s heaviness pressing down on it for so long. Mo’ importantly, she wanted to leave quickly so she could go find Felix, whom she was ’fraid would probably ’ventually rush back to try saving her—& then the whole thing would be for naught.

The problem was, the cream seemed to all be in the armor’s tea. E’en if it couldn’t find any string with which to tie her, ’ventually its boss would probably call for backup.

This made her wonder, why would the supernatural need string to tie someone up? The ghosts before could just make people levitate upside-down @ will.

All I need is for it to loosen its grip round my elbows.

She sighed. “OK, you know what: I lied ’bout not having any string. It’s in my right jacket pocket. Just hurry up with whatever you’re doing—your weight is killing me.”

“Uh, OK.” It took its right hand off her elbows, its left hand still holding them down, & then tried to push its upper body off o’ her upper body so it could reach her pockets, which caused her to cringe from the pain o’ its weight pressing her elbows e’en farther into the ground. It didn’t work without making the rest o’ its body rise, too; the armor seemed to make it impossible for it to bend its knees & use just them to keep her legs down.

So while ‘twas awkwardly trying to dig through her right pocket with the other hand, she bent her knees up & kicked him in the stomach area. It didn’t seem to faze him much mo’ than making him

say, “Hey!” but it did seem to faze him ’nough to loosen his hold o’er her so that when she shook rightward with full force, she was able to make it topple off her.

Now free, she quickly leapt to her feet & yanked her hands out from ’hind her back—’long with a cracked wooden baseball bat. Without wait, she slammed the bat as hard as she could down @ the armor’s hand as it tried to reach for her feet ’gain.

What the armor did afterward, Dawn didn’t know: she didn’t spend a single second lingering & ran down the hall. She was meters ’way ’fore she dared look o’ershoulder. Though ’twas too dark to see far, a’least she knew it wasn’t near, nor could she hear any footsteps, which she’d expect from such heavy armor.

Then ’gain, maybe it has magic to make it move noiselessly.

She then turned her head in loops to see if she could find Felix. She was ’fraid to actually call her name, though, for that would only attract mo’ attention from whatever other occult figures lurked.

’Twas while her eyes were ’hind her, ensuring for the 30th time that the armor wasn’t on her shadow, that she bumped into something from the front, its forward force felling her on her ass ’gain.

She reached back into her back as she swung her face back ’head o’ her.

Luckily for Dawn, though, this was an occult creature she didn’t mind seeing too much: the familiar shaking skeleton in his plum-colored robe.

XII. Innocence

A thought persisted in Felix’s mind: *Is this or is this not my fault?*

Mo’ significantly, Felix didn’t know what she should now do. ’Twas an awful long time since she left the jacket-dressed woman;

the jacket-dressed woman should've caught up with Felix by now. Maybe she was captured by the scary knight monster. Maybe she was captured by the scary knight monster & was expecting Felix to come back & help her.

It's my fault. I shouldn't have left her. I should've thought mo' 'bout doing what helps her mo' than what she says. 'Sides, what if I misheard her? Felix's breathing became mo' labored. *People always complain that I ne'er understand what they tell me to do right; maybe I did that here. She's probably far 'way right now, getting eaten by dragons & she's thinking 'bout what a horrible person I am.*

She stared down @ the carpet with her same blank eyes & slumped her shoulders, too tired from her constant disappointment in herself to will herself to tears, or e'en be sad. She always felt that to indulge in sadness would be to insinuate that she had something to be sad 'bout—that she had been wronged—when 'twas always the other way round: she had always been treated well—much better than her efforts were worth, she thought; she just wished she could do something that was useful 'nough to deserve such good treatment. & now, here was someone who treated her practically like a queen, & she failed her.

I thought she might like me, but I guess I failed that...

Her thoughts were interrupted by what sounded like squishing & slurping. She turned her head to both sides & moved farther down the hall till she narrowed it down to 1 door. Without fear,—for why would she have fear when the worst that could happen would be what she would expect, what she would deserve?—she turned the knob & opened the door.

Inside she saw a rose monster. It clearly wasn't just a regular rose: 'twas bigger than most roses, it had a gaping hole in the middle o' its petals with yellow fangs round it, & it had spikey leaf arms poking out from its dirt bed in its orange pot.

She figured she probably should've run 'way—that's what a smart person would've done, anyway. A smart person would've tiptoed back out the door, slowly closed it 'hind her, & then left in tiptoes that soon sprang into sprinting.

But Felix didn't consider herself a smart person, & 'stead, moved in closer to the plant, staring @ it with her usual blank gaze. After a cursory look, she saw a chair, which she pulled out & sat on, watching the plant with her head in her upraised hands while her elbows rested on the desk.

"How are you doing, Sir Plant?" asked she. She knew 'twas male—which was odd, since flowers are usually hermaphrodites.

Felix always liked plants. She liked them 'cause they always had much lower standards than people. She was almost certain that if she ran up to a garden o' tulips, none o' them would pull their rooty feet out o' the ground & walk 'way. She had ne'er experienced a time when she was smelling a sunflower & it spit in her face & told her to go shoot herself.

The rose monster made mo' squishy sounds & seemed to emit a squeaky growl. After a while, these growls e'en seemed to sound like actual English words—as if 'twere saying, "Get me water... I'm thirsty..."

Felix blinked @ it. She had oft held the suspicion that she could communicate with plants—a suspicion she kept to herself, 'course, since 'twas obviously stupid.

Still, e'en if she couldn't talk to plants, it'd be rude not to when said plant clearly made an effort to do so for her.

"Did you just say you're thirsty & you wanted some water?" asked she.

"Yesssss," the rose monster squealed & squished back.

Felix stood up from her chair & said, "Uh, I can get you some water if you want. Would you like that?"

“Yesssss.”

“OK, I’ll be right back.”

Felix rushed out the room & down the hall with renewed excitement, happy to be able to help someone ’gain. *This time I won’t let down my new friend*, she thought as she rushed through the hallway, checking all o’ the doors, not e’en bothering to be quiet in her work or to e’en shut the doors when she was finished with them.

She began to worry ’bout the long time ’twas taking for her to find someplace with water, & thought maybe the rose monster would get angry or e’en dehydrate to death if she didn’t hurry, when she remembered something she heard last night when she 1st entered this place: Madame Heureuse said that that 1 woman with the ponytail & her skeleton friend came in through a window in the bathroom.

The bathroom must be on the 1st floor!

Then she remembered that that was where she & the jacket-dressed woman went when they were caught by the spooky knight monsters. She debated whether she should go back down there when ’twas so dangerous. Wouldn’t the jacket-dressed woman get angry if she went back down there, probably disobeying her command?

But then she thought o’ the rose monster & vexed o’er how it might be furious if it dehydrated to death & ’twas all her fault.

So she decided to check the 1st floor, with the silent promise that she’d be super careful. She dashed all the way down to the main room & then through the 1st floor hallway. ’Twas near then she also remembered seeing a bathroom-like area when the jacket-dressed woman was looking inside each room.

After a few tries, she soon found the bathroom, only to realize when she reached to turn on the faucet that she had nothing to put any water in. She began to panic ’gain @ what would be ’nother glorious failure o’ hers when she noticed the cabinet ’bove the sink.

She opened it & grabbed a random bottle off the shelf.

1st, she rattled it to check if there was anything inside. When she heard that there were a bunch o' li'l things inside it, she debated whether it would be nice to steal this bottle that was clearly being used for something else.

After a while, she decided, yes: *Though I shouldn't take this bottle, I need to to keep the rose monster 'live, which is mo' important... I think. There's no other way to fix the problem—a'least I'm too dumb to think o' a better solution.* She squeezed her head & cringed as she thought, *Ooo! Why can't I e'er think like a useful person? Augh! I can't help being dumb! I can't control it...*

Then she remembered what the jacket-dressed woman had said: *If you can't control it, it's not your fault.*

Her eyes brightened & she felt the blood rush through her veins. *It's not my fault. It's not my fault! It's OK!*

With her spirits raised, she dumped the bottle's contents—a bunch o' small white medicine pills—in her hand & set them by the side o' the sink. Then she turned on the faucet & filled the bottle till 'twas almost full before twisting its cap back on & turning off the faucet.

Then she rushed out the bathroom & up to the 2nd floor, her eyes glued to the small bottle o' water she held lovingly to her chest, only to suddenly smack into something hard & metally.

"Hey, watch where you're going," said a muffled, stuffy voice.

"Oops, sorry, Sssss—"

The thing she bumped into turned round & revealed itself to be the haunted knight.

The knight jumped back, "Ahh! It's you!"

Felix didn't jump back, nor did her blank stare change; but her heart did start beating frantically, which she could feel under her bottle. Her fur also started to stand—what usually happens when

she's 'fraid, though she ne'er understood how, her fur merely being a part o' her costume & all.

But she wasn't 'fraid for her life, which wasn't terribly valuable, anyway; what she was terrified o' was that the 1 thing the jacket-dressed woman wanted her to do was to 'scape from the evil knight monster. That was why the jacket-dressed woman was captured. & now she had already failed that goal, & the jacket-dressed woman's brave actions would be for nothing.

"Sir, I ran into the cat person 'gain," said the knight. "What should I do with her?"

Felix raised her hand & said, "Um, 'scuse me, knight Sir... I don't want to rudely interrupt your talk, but could I ask what you did with the jacket-dressed woman?"

"That's sensitive information, Madame," said the knight. Felix noticed the knight, for some reason, look down @ its left hand & cup it with his other hand.

"Anyway, Sir Cham—I mean, the boss has instructed me to capture you 'gain, so... so try to be easy 'bout it, OK. This is not an easy job." The knight's voice began to rise into a whine.

"Um, I don't want to be rude, but I already promised the jacket-dressed woman I wouldn't be captured by you, & then I promised this nice li'l rose monster I would get it water."

"Listen, Madame: I don't have time to play games here."

"I'm sorry," said Felix, her voice weakening as she thought 'bout how she was totally musing this up, how she was being rude to the jacket-dressed woman, the rose monster, & now this knight monster.

"Yeah, I bet you are," the knight said as he leaned his head closer to Felix. "I bet you're a real wise guy... girl... whatever."

"What? No!" said Felix, her pupils for once dilating in fear. She could stand the risk o' being hideously mauled; but the prospect o' being rude to someone was too much for her to bear.

“Yeah, that’s what I—”

He stopped. He could hear stomps clambering by ’bove his head. With what he hoped would be lightning movement, but was truly mo’ like rainy movement, he grabbed Felix, turned her round, & then held her wrists ’hind her back while his other hand clamped o’er her mouth. Then he stepped o’er to the nearest door & quietly opened the door, quietly moved them both inside, & quietly closed the door, backing ’way from it just in case 1 o’ them decided to check inside.

He put his face close to Felix’s ear, which felt so cold to her that she couldn’t keep her ear from twitching. “Don’t you dare make a peep, you hear me?” whispered he. “Or else I’ll... I’ll... I’ll say something that will cut you like a chainsaw.”

Felix wanted to nod, but feared he might consider that something like a peep, & so ’stead decided to just stand there & do as much o’ nothing as possible. She wasn’t so sure she wanted to run into whatever was stampeding down the halls like horse ghosts—or maybe e’en ghost horses—so she couldn’t truly blame the knight monster for wanting to avoid them, too.

Unluckily, she actually found doing nothing surprisingly difficult to do: there were plenty o’ itches she wanted to scratch, weird feelings in her throat she wanted to swallow, & eyes she wanted to blink. Trying not to blink was hats-down the hardest, since it made her eyes feel so hot & painful.

The knight noticed this & thought she might be trying something funny, so he whispered to her, “What the hell d’you think you’re doing?”

Felix truly wanted to answer, but knew it would break his previous commandment not to speak, so she simply resumed doing nothing & hoped he would discover the answer himself.

“Hey, knock it off, ya idiot,” whispered he. “Blink your god damn eyes already!”

Felix shut her eyes as hard as she could.

“OK, now open them back up, you idiot,” whispered he.

Felix did so.

“OK, now just keep doing that every so oft, OK.”

Felix tried to understand his complex instructions & began to despair when she failed.

Soon after, the footsteps passed by their door & then became softer as they went off in the distance.

“Good: I think they’re gone,” he whispered as he turned his head to the door. Then he turned back to Felix & whispered, “Stay here.”

He went o’er to the door & opened it a crack—just ’nough to poke his head out & see down each end o’ the hallway. Fortunately for him, he saw no lives nearby.

Felix rubbed her wrists, which felt rather sore after being held so tightly by such hard, metallic hands. Then, as she looked down @ her wrists, she noticed the bottle & remembered her other promise.

“O no! I forgot I still need to feed the rose monster!”

The knight turned his head back & said, “What?”

Felix rushed o’er to the door & said, “Scuse me, please,” as she centimetered the door open just wide ’nough for her to squeeze through.

“O no you don’t!” he whispered as he grasped for her; but she slipped through ’fore he could grab her.

“Shit,” muttered he.

He took 1 last look round the hallway just to be extra sure no one was round & then slowly walked after her, ’fraid to make too much noise. Unfortunately, Felix was running so fast in her attempt to reach the rose monster as swiftly as possible that the knight found it impossible to keep up—& in fact, he was actually trailing ’hind.

Felix reached the door to the rose monster—which she found easily, thanks to her forgetting to close the door—& ran up to the

plant.

“I got you some water, Sir Plant,” she said excitedly, despite her diced breaths.

The rose monster made mo’ squishy sounds, & its leafy hands e’en seemed to rub each other greedily as the rose tilted its head downward, watching her twist the cap off the bottle. She lifted the bottle to pour it into the rose’s mouth, only for it to clutch her hand & pull the bottle o’er its mouth, dumping the sweet liquids into its mouth. It emitted slurping sounds, like water rushing down a sink drain, as it gurgled it down.

When the rose monster saw that the bottle had been emptied, it released Felix’s hand. She rubbed it with her other hand, eyes still on the rose monster.

“Sorry it probably wasn’t ’nough; this was the only bottle I could find,” said Felix.

The rose monster didn’t seem to pay much attention to her. ’Stead, it seemed to focus mo’ on itself. She couldn’t blame it: the fact that ’twas now glowing & twisting in weird ways made it the kind o’ thing one would be expected to pay attention to.

Then she noticed the plant was twisting in a way that made it grow, so that its pot burst open into many small shards, & from ’neath it spread thousands o’ vine-like tentacles. Soon the rose monster had grown so large that its head almost reached the ceiling.

It tilted its plum-petalled head up to the ceiling & released a squeal so sharp & loud that, it sounded as if ’twere trying to roar. & then it slithered down off the desk & out the door, its tentacles beating up & down gainst the carpet as it moved.

Felix stood by the door & watched as it went down the hall, suddenly feeling proud o’ doing something good for once. She clutched her heart, shaking with joy, hoping this moment would last forever.

Then she saw the knight she ran into just recently clomp to a stop in front o' the rose monster & yell, "Boss, I have a li'l problem here!" 'fore being picked up by 1 o' the rose monster's leafy hands & thrown into its bowl-like head, only to disappear inside. Felix could hear what sounded like snapping & chewing.

As she watched it continue its way down the hall, she thought, *Gee, I hope that guy was OK. I mean, I'm sure that rose monster knows what it's doing; & I probably shouldn't be trying to tell it what to do. It'd probably get mad @ me.*

& then Felix looked down @ her feet & slumped her shoulders 'gain, distraught @ probably losing 'nother friend. For now that the rose monster had evolved so much, it seemed that e'en it had grown into something much too valuable to waste its time with Felix.

XIII. Old Friend

Since he heard the knocking on his door—which he knew by looking @ his monitors was not any o' his minions, & told his minions to stay 'way for a while—Lance made sure to be utterly silent in the hopes that whoever 'twas knocking—*Probably that vile looter. She's always getting in my way*—would 'ventually go 'way.

Meanwhile, he still tried averting his eyes from Agent Screamin' Green's monitor, which showed intriguing visuals, wherever he was now.

That idiot's money-grubbing family better not sue me just 'cause he got his idiotic self killed on the job.

When he felt 'nough time had been spent without any mo' noise from the other side o' the door, he crept o'er to it &, after putting his ear to it for 1 last check, unbolted it & opened it a peek to see if his uninvited guests had finally left.

When he looked forward & right, he saw that there was no one

there, but was e'er conscious o' not just the sounds o' footsteps coming from his left, but also some weird squishing & growling sounds. He turned his head left & saw that 1 woman with the tacky jacket & stupid cap & the skeleton—but, strangely, not Autumn—running toward him, with some towering tentacle monster with a purple-red rose for a head straight out o' a cheap 50s horror flick lumbering after them.

Lance did the only logical thing he could: he slammed the door & bolted it 'gain. Then he waited & listened, his ear to the door 'gain, only to hear the same noises he heard before. As he heard them drift 'way in the distance, he unbolted & opened his door 'gain to get 'nother look, only to hear a loud *whump!* from the other side o' his door, as well as a loud voice say, "Ow! Fuck!"

Lance felt he recognized that voice—though mo' stuffy than usual. He peeked round the door to see Autumn sitting on the floor, cringing & holding her nose as blood dribbled down the sides o' her hand.

When Autumn reopened her eyes, she took a deep breath & said, voice still stuffy, "My fortunes improve. Tell you what: smack me in the face with that door 'gain & then immediately leave my presence. It'd be less painful for me."

"I should've guessed you'd be the 1 'hind this," said Lance, fingers tightening round the door frame. "Thought you could sic some crazy plant monster on me so you could break in & ruin my whole operation, huh?"

Autumn stood & said, "I don't have time to deal with your inane bullshit, though I do thank you for breaking my nose," 'fore running past him.

As he watched her go, Lance muttered to himself, "We can clearly see I won that round..."

He shut the door 'hind him, but didn't lock it. Then he made his

way back to his microphone & said into it, “Agent Purple Mountain’s Majesty & Agent Red, you 2 still have the treasure, correct?”

“Yes, Sir,” said them both.

“We decided to go up higher than the 4th floor, since they seemed to be the least-used floors,” said Agent Red. “We found this great, large room on floor 6 that is full o’ clutter, & perfect for hiding in.”

“Perfect. That will be my new hideout. This 1’s location has been compromised. While they haven’t been able to find a way to break in, I still cannot tolerate that ponytailed devil listening in on our communications, nor could we transfer treasure while she’s watching 24/7. Right now they seem to be preoccupied by some mindless pap, so now’s the perfect time to move. Get o’er here immediately so you can escort me there.”

“Uh, should we take the treasure & the hostage with us?” asked Agent Red.

Lance clutched his forehead. “Augh. I forgot you guys captured that idiot. Ne’er mind. Agent Red, you come & escort me. Agent Purple Mountain’s Majesty, you stay there & guard.”

“Aye aye, cap’n,” said Purple.

Lance spent the long wait pacing, e’er nervous o’ when something else might march by & make a mess o’ his plans. Though he intentionally left the door unlocked, figuring he would be leaving soon anyway, he went & bolted it, just to be extra sure, & as a way to distract him.

Then he took out his cell & called for mo’ o’ his minions to arrive, to replace Agent Screamin’ Green & to help him carry all o’ his stuff—including his monitors, which would take mo’ than a few hands. He feared he’d have to take multiple trips.

The 1 item he did decide to take himself was the backpack he stole from Autumn. He’d been so busy so far he hadn’t e’en looked in it yet; but, as he stared @ it sitting on his table, he realized he now

had plenty o' seconds to spend, & that now would be a good time to check through it & see what the dirty looter's secrets were.

He unzipped it & began pulling objects out, 1st finding the bags o' trail mix & water bottles he already saw before. *How can she eat this crap?* thought he. He couldn't e'en bear spending these few days without gourmet meals, which was why he arranged for his butler to drive by & sneak food in through his secret entrance every few hours—what he recognized as hours, a'least, he thought as he glared @ his cellphone clock 'gain.

A lot o' the other things in her backpack were rather rudimentary: rope, string, & various other vulgar tools. He also found a few wads o' Pts in a few different places, which he pocketed. He wasn't sure what the weird tissue-like things in some box were for, though; he thought they looked odd for tissues, but then he thought maybe that's the cheap kind poor people use.

Then he found it—the most important item in her backpack: a red spiral notebook with hearts & stars all o'er the front.

This must be where she keeps all o' her devious plans, he thought as he gripped it tightly. *Think o' all the thefts I'd be able to expose with this. Imagine if a court o' law saw this. E'en those looter-loving socialists wouldn't be able to acquit her.*

Just then he heard a knock on his door & heard Agent Red say in his earpiece, "Sir Chamsby, I'm here. Everything's fogless so far."

He said into the microphone, "I'll be there in a minute," & then quickly stuffed everything back into Autumn's backpack & slung it o'er his arms.

Augh. How can she bear to lug this bulky thing round all the time?

He unbolted the door & opened it just 'nough for Red to squeeze in & then shut it & locked it 'hind him 'gain.

"I thought we were leaving, Sir," said Red.

"I called for some extra assistance to help us carry everything, but

I don't know if I can trust them to find our new place, or not lead anyone else there," said Lance.

"Uh, I can take you there, Sir, & then come back here to help your other assistants, if you desire."

Lance paused, still on the steps, with his hand on his chin.

"That would be a good compromise 'tween these problems," said Lance. "Good idea, Agent Red. You know, you are surprisingly much mo' confident than the other 2 boneheads, e'en despite your unfortunate choice o' color name."

"I've ne'er been very creative, Sir."

"That's OK. I understand that red can mean many good things, too. A'least you're not like that 1 joker who came in calling himself 'Radical Red.' That is something up with which I will not put." Lance raised his index to demonstrate this point.

They both exited the room, Lance locking the door from the outside with his key. Agent Red carried 2 suitcases full o' his most important items while Lance only carried the backpack still on his back.

"Sir, I can carry that backpack for you, if you want," said Red.

"That's fine," Lance said with a wave o' his hand. After discovering the notebook to the ponytailed looter's secrets, he was determined ne'er to let it 'scape his grasp, no matter what unbearable conditions he would have to shoulder.

They both continued down the hall, Lance glancing all o'er the place, wary o' any monster that might try to attack him @ any moment. He ne'er wanted a repeat o' the fiasco with the ghosts last night.

But when they reached the 2nd floor, Lance suddenly had a bold idea & stopped @ the top o' the stairs, which caused Agent Red to stop as well.

"Hmm... It's getting awfully late, don't you think, Agent Red?" He

checked the clock on his phone, & then angrily put it back, just remembering that 'twas still, & would likely be for a long time, 11:59 PM.

“Don’t worry, Sir: you can rest when we reach your new hideout.”

“That’s not what I mean,” said Lance. “I want to check something real quick.”

He walked up to 1 o’ the doors & gently twisted the knob loose. Then he took a silent gulp & opened the door a crack to stare inside. To his excitement, he found his somewhat farfetched proposition to be true: Autumn & her minion were lying, eyes shut, on their bed, & the woman with the ugly hat & tacky jacket was asleep on the other bed.

Well isn’t that just precious. Too bad your cute li’l snuggling won’t protect you now.

“Forgive me for asking, Sir, but why are we checking in on these people?” Agent Red whispered into his ear.

“Agent Red, how strong are you?”

“Why, Sir?”

“’Cause I wanted to know if you could carry those 2 ’long with us, & then if you could come back & get the other.”

XIV. Monster

As she turned her head backward & forward, vacillating ’tween seeing how close the rose monster was & seeing where she was going, Dawn noticed that she & Edgar were gaining distance against the rose monster.

Sadly, in all o’ this she didn’t notice 2 o’ the rose monster’s vine appendages rise off the ground & leap forward. Its right vine wrapped itself round 1 o’ Dawn’s ankles while the other, being unable to clutch Edgar’s robe-covered feet, pressed down on the edge

o' his robe. Both felt a force jerking them back, causing them to collapse on the floor with a hefty thud.

They both turned back to see the causes o' their fall just before it lifted Dawn up by her ankle, hanging upside-down in a way, she felt, was reminiscent o' her run-in with the ghosts.

Edgar, meanwhile, tried to crawl 'way from the monster's grip, his hands digging backwards into the carpet like a rabid Chihuahua as a way to propel him backward. He soon found the piece o' his robe that was caught under the monster's appendage tear apart, giving Edgar release, only for the monster's appendage to leap forward 'gain, wrapping itself round Edgar's neck & pulling him up off the ground till he was now floating level with Dawn.

'Cept that by this time, Dawn had already reached into her back & pulled out her baseball bat. She spent solely a small sum o' seconds to aim so that she would hit the vine arm, but not her own leg, but before the monster saw & intervened. Then she swung, smacking it directly & emitting a noise that sounded both hard & squishy, as if hitting a bag full o' laundry¹.

The rose monster squealed as it released Dawn, which, unluckily for her, caused her to smack hard gainst the carpet on her back, as well as bouncing the bat out o' her grasp till it landed a meter or so 'way.

She sat up, ready to run, when 2 o' the monster's vine appendages wrapped themselves round her neck & torso & lifted her right back off o' the ground. 'Cept this time she could feel that the monster was furious: it clung to her much mo' tightly than before, to the point o' squeezing. Tiny spines on the appendages punctured her in various places. The squelching & stabbing in her neck in particular caused her eyes to bulge & throat to choke, struggling to keep oxygen

1 I oft take out my baseball bat & smack a few bags o' laundry for practice, so I know what I'm talking 'bout.

entering, her mouth hanging open to release empty coughs.

'Twas then that she noticed she was no longer holding her bat. She looked down to see it sitting down on the floor—what seemed miles 'way. So 'stead, she sufficed with grappling the vine round her neck—which only caused her to impale her palms, too—& kicking her legs in the air. For some reason, neither strategy worked.

Edgar was trying similarly—though he'd been doing so long before Dawn started, ne'er having the superior bat trick to try. He was lucky in that his success @ failing to 'scape from the monster's grasp temporarily did not cause the monster to be angry @ him, focusing most o' its attention & anger on Dawn, so Edgar merely felt an uncomfortable tightness round his throat, rather than outright choking.

He still wasn't sure what to do 'bout actually getting down. The monster was unlikely to hold them up in the air all night for cheap laughs—& e'en if that were the case, Edgar was uncomfortable with spending all night up there.

No, wait, he did know what to do—what he was already doing: panicking.

The rose monster released 'nother 1 o' its squealish roars as it moved its 2 preys closer to its bulbous, twisted face.

By this time, Autumn had caught up with them, & was now standing 'hind the rose monster, looking all o'er 'tween Edgar & Dawn suspended in the air by its viney grip & @ the dozens o' squirming, wormlike vine tentacles protruding out its stem body.

She could see by the frantic movement o' Edgar's hands & legs like a fly caught in a spider web or the way Dawn seemed to flop round under the monster's grip as a suffocating fish—her eyes bloated, her mouth hanging open, & her face blue—that she didn't have much time left to conjure up the requisite brilliant plan.

She dug through her pockets for any tools that might be useful;

but the only possibly-proximate were those sleeping pills & her li'l screwdriver. She didn't e'en have her flashlight anymo', which caused her to mutter while glaring @ the nearest window.

How long is this night going to go on, anyway?

Her eyes glided 'way from the window back to the problem in-progress when she faintly saw something lying on the ground next to said window. Squinting & holding her hand o'er her eyes like a visor, —which might not have actually improved her eyesight in any way— she could see that 'twas some sort o' wooden stick.

Should I go get whatever that is? It might help; but then it would also put me in this bastard's sight, too.

After a quick deliberation, she decided that there was no other option. Well, there was 1 option: she could run 'way. But Edgar was too valuable a partner to leave 'hind. Also, that other woman might not have been happy 'bout it, she s'posed.

Autumn crept quickly round the side o' the rose monster, tiptoeing o'er every tendril o' its vinelike arms wriggling round on the carpet as one would do round garbage in a messy apartment. During the final stretch, when she was in the rose monster's eyespace & could hear it roar, she dived for the stick, rolling as she grabbed it & jumping back onto her feet just after. Now she was standing 5 meters 'way from the monster, staring straight @ it.

She took 1 fast look @ the stick to see that 'twas a reddish-brown baseball bat with a colony o' rootlike thin cracks all o'er its rounded end.

She didn't waste any mo' time analyzing why there was a cracked bat lying on the floor. 'Stead, she held it tightly in both hands & stared directly @ the rose monster's face.

If this thing has sight, that is definitely where it would come from.

"There are only 2 outcomes I can accept," she said to the rose monster: "you can release the 2 you hold in your... whatever those

things are, or I will have to use whatever force necessary to induce you to.”

The rose monster didn't roar 'gain. 'Twas, in fact, quieter now than it had e'er been before. It continued to hold Edgar & Dawn up while a few other appendages hung loosely in the air in hook shapes. The petals o' its flowery head contorted in a way that appeared as if the monster were scrutinizing Autumn.

Autumn slowly paced forward, 1 careful step after 'nother, keeping her eyes raw for any movement from the rose monster.

'Twas halfway through this stroll that the rose monster's appendages began to snap forward. But Autumn, who saw that they were all converging toward her @ the same spot, rather than swing the bat, merely bounced sideways out o' their way, & then smashed them all together with 1 downward swing.

The rose monster screamed, & then flew all o' its arms not holding Edgar & Dawn forward @ Autumn. Once 'gain, Autumn jumped sideways out o' their way & bashed them all with the bat.

Surely it's competent 'nough not to fall for that trick every time, right?

Indeed, the rose monster did pause 'fore striking 'gain, seemingly confused by its failure, but soon after made the same attempt it made before, only to be struck by the same consequences as before.

By this point, Autumn was only a meter 'way from the monster & needed to devise a way to attack the particular appendages holding Edgar & Dawn up & then be able to protect them all from being captured 'gain. But how? Would they run round the mansion all night? She was already too tired for what she was doing now; the prospect o' her constantly running for the next infinity was simply impossible.

The only true solution would be to eliminate the rose monster entirely. She wasn't quite sure how that would be accomplished.

She looked up @ the vines holding Edgar & Dawn & followed them back to the monster to find the heart she'd need to hit. Now she just had to get close 'nough to hit them both & then get 'way fast 'nough.

Screw it, she thought, & then rammed forward, dodging the rose monster's next attempt to grasp her, but without bothering to hit these appendages with the bat. Then when she got close 'nough, rather than hit the weak point o' Edgar's captor, she rammed into it with her shoulder. The force caused the vine arm to fly back & the pain caused its grip to loosen, both o' which combined made the monster release Edgar from its clutches.

Autumn wasted no time heading for the arms holding Dawn, delivering a vertical chop gainst each 1 with the bat. But unlike the other 1, these 2 put up a tougher struggle; & now the other appendages were swarming round her. She made a few last swings gainst the 2 arms, causing 'nough damage to make them drop Dawn onto the floor for a 2nd time, before the others were all o'er Autumn, covering her like a sinewy blanket.

This time, Dawn had a much nicer fall, landing on her hands & knees, though her throat was still not pleased. Her mouth struggled to both gasp & cough @ the same time while her fingers ravenously scratched her neck, which was now covered in tiny blood-red dots where the spines poked through.

Edgar, since the time he fell, & who was lucky 'nough not to have such problems, had been standing back from the monster a distance & staring up @ it while Autumn continued her work. But when he saw that the rose monster hardly considered him anymo', & was now focusing all o' its energy on Autumn, he was mo' concerned 'bout watching Autumn.

"Autumn, watch out!" he called out just 'fore she was smothered by the aforementioned sinewy blanket.

By then, Dawn had recuperated 'nough to be able to stand up & turn round to look @ what Edgar's fuss was 'bout. Her 1st inclination was to hunt round the general area o' the monster, trying to find her bat, only to see it nowhere. She s'posed Autumn probably still had it with her under all the vines.

Before either could do anything mo', they saw the monster's appendages all rise, all wrapped together to form a cocoon shape that, they were sure, held Autumn inside. They saw that the monster was moving it closer to its bowl-shaped mouth.

Edgar turned to Dawn & said with breathless urgency, "What do we do?"

Dawn continued to stare up @ the monster moving Autumn e'er closer to its maw & bit her lip. She stuck her hand in her jacket through her collar, seeing what she had in her inside pockets.

While in her viney cocoon, Autumn found herself surrounded in darkness & sweating profusely from the lack o' space in her cramped, rubbery cage.

Then abruptly, she felt her container shake & felt herself sliding downward. As her head slipped out the rose monster's arms, she saw that she was now in its bulb-shaped head, sliding down into the black hole that was its mouth.

She thrust her arms out, clasping onto the ends o' its rosy head. This, combined with gravity, served to make her fall as far down the rose monster's enormous face as far as her arms could stretch out, till her head was a hair 'bove the monster's mouth, its teeth clicking against each other in anticipation right in her ear. She could feel the humid air emanating from its gullet, & thought she could hear it gulp, as well as digestive noises 'neath.

She tried pulling her arms up with all o' her strength to pull herself up, but could not pull herself high 'nough to get out, & merely slid back down.

The rose monster began shaking its head back & forth in an attempt to loosen Autumn's grip, but she held on, regardless. She did feel her hands beginning to slip off, thanks to sliminess o' the monster's lips. She made an effort to tighten her hold, but could still feel it slipping. This was when she felt something hard press into 1 o' her palms.

The bat.

She lifted her right hand off its petal & flipped the bat round so that she was holding it horizontally, in its middle. Then she pulled her right arm back & held the bat gainst the rose's mouth, going 'cross it from edge to edge like a 1-bar cage. With something solid now on the other side she tried pushing herself up—as well as the pulling-up she was already doing—by pushing gainst the bar.

Unfortunately, this did not work as well as Autumn hoped, due to the awkward position o' her right arm, so she released the edge o' the monster's head with her left hand and, instantly after, flipped round so that now she was holding herself up with both hands on the bar.

Now she was facing the monster's mouth, witnessing a close-up view o' its yellow teeth dripping with saliva, trying to chomp down, only for the bat pushing its inside-out cheeks apart to prevent it from doing so. From this close, she could actually see more o' the inside o' its mouth than total darkness, seeing bumpy tunnels spiralling down its throat that looked like human throats, only green 'stead o' varying values o' brown.

She watched as a dribble o' blood dropped from under the bandage on her nose & into the monster's mouth. She then heard some organs within the monster squirm, saw saliva dribble out from the rose's mouth hole, & felt the monster increase the force it used in attempting to chomp its teeth.

Then she felt a li'l bump from under her legs, from the other side

o' the rose's jaw. The rose monster roared—the audio equivalent o' having a knife jabbed in Autumn's ear from her position. Then she felt 'nother bump.

Finally, she felt the rose head tilt downward, causing her & the bat to slide down its mouth.

Must be turning its head to see what hit him, thought Autumn. *What an idiot.*

The rose monster must've noticed Autumn's chance @ 'scape & tried tilting its head back 'gain to make her fall in. But by this point, Autumn was already mostly off the monster's head, & the tilt backward merely flipper her all the way off.

She was expecting a hard landing, but was surprised to find it much softer. Soon after, she turned & saw Edgar's face next to hers & saw that she had landed on him, causing her to immediately jump off.

"Sorry 'bout landing on you," Autumn said as she stared down @ Edgar guiltily.

But then she felt a li'l better as she saw him get back up.

"It's OK. I meant to catch you."

Autumn next looked for Dawn & saw her standing back a meter, holding out a slingshot & plucking what appeared to be a rock. Autumn followed the rock & saw it strike the rose monster.

That was when Autumn remembered the rose monster & remembered it still had arms to grab them all with. But when she turned to look @ the monster she saw that all o' its appendages were tied up in white string.

Dawn, having just picked up her bat & returned it to her jacket, dashed o'er to Autumn & Edgar & said, "Are you OK, Autumn?"

Autumn turned back to her & said, "Yes—thank you, by the way. Did you tie up the monster?"

"Me & Edgar, yeah," said Dawn. "I found a couple yo-yos in my

pockets & used their string. You ne'er know when you'll need yo-yo string. Thanks for distracting the monster, by the way."

"So it can't get us anymo'?" asked Autumn, staring back @ the rose monster, which was roaring, shrieking, & squirming, but doing li'l else so far.

"No," Dawn said as she grabbed Autumn's shoulder & turned her toward her. "So let's vamoose."

Then she cringed & added, "By the way, what happened to your nose."

Autumn touched the bandage on her nose, remembering it 'gain after a long time o' forgetting it, & said with a sigh, "Nothing I want to remember."

With that settled, Dawn led them down the hall, Edgar looking back every so oft just to make sure the monster wasn't following them.

"I don't think tying it up was 'nough," Autumn said 'tween heavy breaths. "It might 'ventually break through, & then we'll be back @ triangle 1."

"So you're saying we have to kill it, or something?" asked Dawn, scratching her neck.

"Yes."

"Well, how are we going to do that?" asked Dawn.

"That's what we need to figure out," said Autumn. "My only guess so far is that fire burns plants."

"Great, so we're basing our strategy on the rules o' *Pokémon*," said Dawn.

Autumn decided to ignore Dawn's comment & 'stead spent her time silently recollecting what they had in this mansion that could be used to defeat the rose monster.

"I was thinking we could find something firelike if we could find the kitchen," said Autumn.

“Augh. Please don’t remind me o’ food,” Dawn said with her hand on her stomach.

Just then Edgar interjected, “Water.”

“I thought you don’t drink water,” said Dawn, turning her head back to Edgar.

“No, that’s what the monster was muttering when ’twas still in its weak form, remember?” said Edgar.

“Yeah, so you’re saying that’s probably its weakness?” said Autumn.

“Everyone knows water is not very effective against grass Pokémon,” said Dawn.

“Maybe,” said Edgar. “Though why would someone mutter what their weakness is out loud?”

“You tell me; it’s your idea,” said Autumn.

“I was thinking maybe the rose monster wants water,” said Edgar.

“I thought it actually wanted human flesh, but OK,” said Autumn. “Now we know what we should *avoid* putting near him; but what ’bout something that’ll actually weaken him?”

“Well, uh, I was thinking maybe if we gave it water, it’d leave us ’lone. It might e’en be grateful that we helped it,” said Edgar.

Autumn & Dawn both looked @ each other.

“It could work,” Dawn said with a shrug.

Autumn took a deep breath, & then said, “I’ll tell you 2 what: how ’bout I burden myself with the heavy thinking & you 2 just focus on walking, ’K?”

Dawn turned back to Edgar &, with a hand blocking her mouth from Autumn, whispered, “Psst, I hate to tell you, but your girlfriend’s kind o’ an asshole.”

Edgar didn’t respond. Autumn, meanwhile, was busy trying to think o’ a way to set the rose monster on fire, or some other way to kill it.

Maybe I could try freezing it: plants are immensely susceptible to cold.

The problem was, she was so tired, she couldn't e'en think beyond these simple ideas. She tried imagining where the kitchen might be; but whenever she imagined finding it, she couldn't imagine what she'd use that could create fire. Surely, she didn't consider picking up a whole oven & carrying it o'er to the rose monster. What she needed were matches or a lighter; but where would she find these?

& then her mind kept blanking out. Due to this tiredness, all 3 were now walking @ a turtle's pace. The mix o' drowsiness & hunger also made Autumn & Dawn both feel lightheaded, so that they felt as if they would collapse right there on the carpet @ any second.

Finally, Dawn, seeing that they were entering the 2nd floor, cast the line: she stifled a yawn & said, "You could probably think o' something better if you had some sleep." She pulled her phone out o' her pocket & checked its time. "Look, it's already almost 12 AM."

"We can't go to sleep; the monster might get us," Autumn said without wasting any precious energy turning to look @ Dawn. "& 'twas almost 12 AM hours ago."

"Yeah, I thought so, too," Dawn said as she scratched her neck & stared down @ her phone disconcertedly.

"I could keep watch if you want," said Edgar.

"Yeah, we can keep watch," Dawn said, turning to Autumn.

"No you can't, 'cause I wouldn't trust you as far as I could throw you & I can't just make Edgar stay up all night while I sleep," said Autumn.

"It'd be better for only a few to get li'l sleep than all," said Dawn.

"Yeah, well..." Autumn paused to consider what she said & was disturbed to realize she had a point.

"& I think you in particular should get some rest," Dawn said as she stared @ the bandages on Autumn's nose & hand. "You don't look

like you've been having much o' a good day."

"That's the usual pattern," said Autumn.

"I bet tomorrow would be much better, right Edgar?" Dawn said as she turned to Edgar. Edgar nodded.

"Fine. Edgar & I will take turns watching. That way we'll all get some sleep," Autumn said in almost robotic monotone, the tiredness sapping the energy out o' her voice. "Well, we 2 will get some sleep. I have no idea what you're doing, Dawn."

"I can help Edgar stand watch if he wants," said Dawn.

They reached Autumn & Edgar's room & Autumn led them in. She sat on the edge o' the bed, silently setting the alarm on her phone & forming 1 last debate in her head o'er whether she should do this. When the logic confirmed that she should, she kicked off her shoes & lay down to sleep, wrapping the blanket round her. Though she didn't notice any particular coldness any time before, now she recognized a comfortable warmth she hadn't felt since she left bed.

"Wake me in 'bout 4 hours, 'K," muttered Autumn. "That'll be 'nough sleep, I think."

"K," Dawn said as she sat on the edge o' the other bed. "That should be @ 'bout 11:59 PM."

Autumn chose to ignore Dawn's comment, already drifting off to sleep.

Edgar, still sitting on the edge o' Autumn's bed that Autumn wasn't currently occupying, looked @ Dawn & said, "You can go to sleep if you want. It would be a waste for both o' us to stay awake, & you'll probably need mo' rest than I will."

Dawn debated this in her head much like Autumn did, & then came to the same conclusion she gave Autumn before. So she shrugged & lay down in her bed, only to remember she still had her bat in her back. She pulled it out & tossed it somewhere on the floor 'fore collapsing back down.

For a skeleton, he's a pretty good kid, thought Dawn. Reminds me a lot o' Felix, actually. & that was when she remembered they still had not found Felix yet; but before she could panic much o'er what might have happened to Felix—*Was she the 1 who was screaming, eaten by the rose monster?*—she drifted off to sleep.

Edgar sat up gainst the back o' his & Autumn's bed, staring blankly @ the door opposite him. Though he forced himself to be upright & alert, he soon found himself gradually drifting down into the bed & his vision gradually blurring into darkness. Finally, he had slipped so far down that he was outright lying in bed & his vision was gone. Soon his consciousness was gone as well.

XV. Asylum

Autumn was startled awake by shrieking beeps 'bove, only for the noise to cease seconds later.

Sounds like my phone alarm. But then, why's the noise coming from up there?

She gazed sleepily round the room for the 1st few seconds when she finally noticed something peculiar 'bout what she saw: it looked nothing like her & Edgar's room.

She sat up, wrapping her arms round herself as the realization that she was cold came to her. She looked down & saw that there was no blanket o'er her; she also noticed that there was no *bed* under her, but a pile o' sheets that looked just like the blankets they *were* sleeping under last night. Mo' importantly, she saw that she didn't have her orange coat on anymo'—just her usual black T-shirt. Then she checked her pockets; as she predicted, they were now empty.

She saw that she was down in a basement-like area, with walls all gray-blue & seemingly constructed with cement. While most o' the room looked solid, the ceiling clearly had a large hole in it, which

was covered in a half-cocked way with large wood plank.

‘Twas not a particularly sanitary basement, either, as there were puddles o’ some random black liquid on some edges o’ the room, as well as a brown rat drinking 1 o’ them.

Slept in worse.

For a room that looked like a basement, it had a window on 1 o’ the walls. Looking out through it, Autumn could see that ‘twas still dark out, with the same waning-gibbous moon she saw last night hanging up in the air.

What time is it? If my phone’s alarm still works, surely time must be running ’gain, thought Autumn as she made to pull out her phone, only to remember ‘twas taken from her, as everything else.

She turned & saw that not only was Dawn still asleep, but so was Edgar. She s’posed this was what caused them to be locked in this place.

OK, what random ghost or monster did this to us? Then ’gain, she figured ‘twas better than being eaten by the rose monster, which is what she would’ve expected.

In addition to the sleeping Edgar & Dawn, Autumn saw Felix, sitting legs-crossed gainst the perpendicular wall.

“Good morn, ponytailed lady,” said Felix. “Are you all right? Your nose has a bandage on it.”

“Where are we?” asked Autumn.

“He said we’re all in prison for being socialist looters,” said Felix. “I didn’t e’en know I was till he told me. Truly nice o’ him to do that.”

“Who? Chamsby?”

“The guy with the black top hat & cape,” said Felix. “I don’t know his name. I’m sorry. I’m too useless to e’en remember 1 single name.”

Autumn turned ’way from Felix & back to the window—any ’scuse to avert her attention from the awkward cat. She spent the rest o’ her time debating whether or not she should wake the other 2, but

then decided there'd be no gain in wasting any rest they may need.

Well, a'least 1 good thing 'bout this perpetual night we seem to be in is that Madame Heureuse won't be able to kick us out till it ends, wherever that old witch went off to.

As Autumn looked out @ the buildings visible under the bright moon, she admitted to herself that she felt a slight pang o' longing to be out o' this hell hole.

Soon Dawn, & then Edgar, woke up. While Edgar, naturally, reacted with panic—though Autumn figured guilt might have played a significant part in that—Dawn was a lot mo' nonchalant than expected. She merely said, "I guess this is some ghost's work, or something." Then 'gain, Autumn had to admit she knew absolutely nothing 'bout this virtual stranger, so any action should seem just as surprising.

Dawn was mo' surprised when she turned & saw Felix sitting gainst the wall.

"Felix, you're OK," said Dawn in almost a gasp.

Felix turned her face down to her knees, awaiting chastisement for her failure to evade capture. "O, hello, jacket-dressed woman." She glanced @ Dawn & then looked up with a concerned expression. "You know you have a bunch o' red splotches all o'er your neck."

"O, it's nothing. I was just poked in the neck a few times is all," Dawn said as she scratched her neck. "We thought you might have been eaten by the rose monster."

"O, you mean Rosseau? That's the name I made up for him," said Felix. Then she looked down in shame 'gain. "It's probably dumb, though. You can give him a different name, if you want."

Dawn laughed nervously. "That's OK. 'Sides, he's not a li'l plant anymo', I'm 'fraid."

"O, I know," said Felix. "I fed him water like he asked & then he grew truly big. He was e'en able to 'scape from his pot & walk round

free. Did you see him? He doesn't hate me now, does he?"

"You should expect us to do that 'stead," said Autumn, turning a glare 'way from her window & @ Felix.

"Autumn, I'm sure 'twas an accident," said Dawn.

That was when they heard a scraping sound 'bove & looked up to see the wooden board moving; 'cept they could see by the heavy way it moved that 'twas not a mere board, but a large wooden block o' some kind—probably some furniture. Edgar, also naturally, clutched onto Autumn's arm; though all but Felix were anticipating what would come next. Dawn had already pulled out her slingshot while Autumn... well, Autumn realized she didn't have any weapons anymo', so she simply curled up her fists & hoped for the best.

"Greetings, filthy proletariats," Lance said through the newly-opened hole. "I hope you enjoy your new adobe."

"Um, why did you put us in a hole?" asked Dawn, scratching her neck.

"Where's my stuff?" asked Autumn. "Why'd you steal my coat? The invisible hand will surely put you in hell for this sin."

"I'm 'fraid we do not allow inmates to keep their stolen possessions in prison. Otherwise they may use them to try 'scaping."

"Well, I'm 'fraid you did a grotty job o' it," said Dawn as she riffled through the inside o' her coat.

But when Lance glanced toward her, what he noticed was the slingshot in her hands. He turned to her & said, "Hey, where did you get that slingshot?"

"That's that leftist mystical voodoo magic, or whatever you call it," said Dawn. "& if we're in prison, may I ask when our trial is to be held?"

"Trials are only reserved for upstanding citizens," said Lance. "Unlike with the looter-loving state, you will not find—"

"Yeah, yeah, we get it," Autumn said with a wave o' her hand.

“Hey, do you still have that treasure you found before?”

“You mean the treasure I rightfully found?” asked Lance. “Why, yes, I do still have it & you shall ne’er lay a hand on it.”

“Course,” Autumn said with a curt nod, while thinking, *We’ll see ’bout that...*

“What ’bout food?” asked Dawn, much mo’ seriously than before. “Or is that only for ‘upstanding citizens’?”

“O, so you looters think that you can commit atrocious actions & then be rewarded with free food, huh? Thought you’d be on ‘ol Uncle Chamsby’s dole, huh? Well, sorry to tell you, but this isn’t communist Canada. I won’t stand for you to treat me as your slave.”

& with that he left. From outside their view they heard him say, “Agent Purple Mountain’s Majesty, keep an eye on them so they don’t ’scape. They’re crafty li’l socialists. Agents Razzmatazz, Tickle Me Pink, Laser Lemon, Big Dip O’ Ruby, & Atomic Tangerine: go out & search for mo’ treasure.”

“I s’pose using the bathroom is out o’ the question, too,” Dawn said with her hands stuffed into her pockets bitterly. She turned to Autumn. “So he’s locking us in ’cause he thinks we’re part o’ the communist conspiracy or something? I’m confused.”

“He’s just butt-hurt ’cause I found—well, Edgar found—and sold 1 o’ his daddy’s heirlooms that he accidentally threw ’way or something,” Autumn said as she shook her head. “I’ve ne’er e’en stolen from him...” In the back o’ Autumn’s mind she added, *...yet*

Dawn riffled through her outside coat pockets, & then said, “Bastard. He stole my water. What kind o’ asshole just takes someone’s water? What, is he ’fraid we might splash water up @ him & make him melt?”

Autumn sat back gainst the wall to the side, outside the hole’s viewpoint, & waved for the others to join her. Edgar nimbly walked o’er to her, glancing up @ the hole to make sure he wouldn’t be

attacked or something, & then sat hunched next to Autumn. Dawn joined her on the other side with her arms round her drawn-up knees.

They all noticed Felix sitting in the same spot she was before, staring blankly @ them. Autumn pointed @ her petulantly & waved toward her while mouthing, "You too, dumbshit." Felix pointed to herself with a puzzled expression, which Autumn responded to with an annoyed nod. Finally, Felix rose & sat next to Dawn.

"Well, we'd better think o' a way out o' here. Ideas, anyone?" whispered Autumn.

"Remember, I still have my slingshot," whispered Dawn. "Nothing else, though."

"We could perhaps climb on each other's shoulders as we did before to get up there," whispered Autumn. "I'm not sure how they'd respond to it, though: probably either by covering the hole before we could get a chance to get up or by simply kicking the top person off."

"It doesn't look like we have any better options, though," whispered Dawn.

"You still have that bat on you?"

"Fraid not: it's still in the room we slept in. You think you'd be better with the slingshot? I'm not used to these kind o' situations..."

Autumn waved her hand. "I can suffice with fists. Now, I'm thinking 1 o' us 2 should go up 1st, since we're armed,"

"Since you've got the melee weapon, you should go up 1st," whispered Dawn.

"K." Autumn turned to Edgar & whispered, "D'you think you'll be able to hold me up?"

Edgar nodded.

"& you, Madame Air?" Autumn said as she turned to Felix.

"That's not her actual name," Dawn snapped.

"It's what she claimed," murmured Autumn. "Well, cat?"

"I'll try—but I have to warn you: I'm terrible @ e'er—"

"That's OK, I think us 3 will be able to handle this fine," whispered Autumn with a wave o' her hand.

Suddenly, up 'bove they heard a slightly squeaky, but also rather raspy, voice call out, "Hey, uh, guys? Uh, you need to move o'er here so I can see you, please."

"Bugger. We'd better hurry," whispered Autumn. She turned to Dawn. "Edgar will have to climb on your shoulders while we're still back here & then you'll need to carry him o'er near the hole, where I'll have to climb up as fast as I can. This likely won't work; but as you said, it's all we have."

Dawn nodded & then they immediately started. Autumn followed closely by them as Dawn carried Edgar under the hole. When they were just under the inside edge o' the, hole Autumn held Dawn's arm, signaling her to stop.

Then, without a delay, as Dawn bent down 'gain, Autumn scrambled o'er her & Edgar. In such a hurry, Dawn had already began rising before Autumn was e'en on Edgar's shoulders.

"Hey, you're not s'posed to be doing that!" the voice from before said.

But by this point, Autumn was already climbing up o'er the edge o' the hole. She quickly surveyed the room to see that 'twas a cluttered mess & that, mo' importantly, Lance seemed to have fled, leaving just his knight minion to hold his head in alarm.

This must be "Agent Purple Mountain's Majesty," thought Autumn.

Autumn stood 'way from the hole with her legs arched & her fists held out, staring down the knight.

Mmm: shrimp street rat vs. a guy in heavy armor. This ought to go well.

Agent Purple Mountain's Majesty stared @ what had been his deepest fear for a long time: the ponytailed devil, whom he could

now see was finally revealing the threat he knew she served all this time—as she leaned o’er the hole & helped Dawn up.

Augh, what should I do? thought Agent Purple Mountain’s Majesty. *I know Sir Chamsby’ll expect me to do something to stop them; but how can I when she’s got that scary grimace? Augh! Why is this job always so stressful!*

“Agent Purple, what is with this racket?” Lance’s voice called out from ’bove. “Can’t you see I need concentration when I’m doing my work?”

Agent Purple looked up & debated o’er whether it’d be better to tell Sir Chamsby ’bout their problem now & get yelled @ or try to handle it himself. Since he knew the only way he was handling it right now was by wishing they weren’t doing what they were doing, & since he knew Sir Chamsby was bound to figure out they’ve ’scaped ’ventually, he might as well tell him now.

“Um, Sir, we’ve got a problem down here,” he called up with a hand cupping the mouth area o’ his helmet.

The furniture covering the hole in this room’s ceiling shifted out o’ the way—I *should have noticed that*, thought Autumn as she looked up @ it—& Lance’s face ducked down in.

He started to say, “What is it?” when he noticed Autumn & Dawn standing on the middle level. He had just ’nough time to notice them when Dawn released the band on her slingshot, shooting a rock right @ Lance’s eye.

He covered his face & moved out o’ the way o’ the hole. Then he said, “Typical o’ you savages to use such vulgar violence. Now, Agent Purple, attack them!”

“Attack them?” Agent Purple stuttered as he watched Autumn & Dawn glare @ him. “How?”

“What do you mean how?” Lance’s muffled voice said through the ceiling. “I dunno. Tackle them, punch them, pull their hair...

Anything. Kick them in the crotch. That always works.”

Agent Purple looked back @ Autumn & Dawn, who were still watching him.

“I don’t think that’ll work very well, Sir.”

“Augh, can’t you do anything right?” said Lance. “Agent Red, get in here & help Agent Purple dispatch the 2 looters, please.”

Autumn & Dawn heard the door burst open ’hind them. They turned & saw ’nother person in armor in the threshold.

“Agent Purple, you go after the ponytailed woman; I’ll get the other,” Agent Red said as he pulled out a Taser.

“Uh, what?” said Agent Purple.

Agent Red didn’t waste any mo’ time with Agent Purple, & neither did Autumn or Dawn. Agent Red charged straight @ Dawn while Dawn flung a couple o’ rocks @ his face, only for all o’ them to bounce off.

“Shit, his helmet’s making my weapon useless,” Dawn said as she took a step back.

Autumn stood ready to punch him if he neared; but as she held her arm back, she felt a heavy, titanium force attack her from the back, causing her to collapse onto the floor. Next she felt a heavy weight pin her to the ground.

She heard the familiar squeaky voice o’ Agent Purple Mountain’s Majesty say ’hind her, “Sorry, Madame, but I have a house I still have payments to make on,” ’fore he put his hand o’er her mouth & nose, pinching her nose so tightly & covering her mouth so fully that she was blocked off from oxygen—as well as, painfully, causing her nose to bleed, which thereby caused her nose to fill up with blood.

What started out as a struggle to stop the pain o’ having her broken nose hurt ’gain turned into the same struggle, but now to fill her desperate lungs with air.

By this time, Agent Red had already reached Dawn. She tried to

sidestep past him to stop Purple, but was suddenly jolted in the side. Fire spread all throughout her nervous system, thrashing round from the inside till she felt a sharp pain in her heart as if it had exploded. Then she collapsed back on the floor, the consciousness knocked out o' her.

Autumn watched this with panic, seeing that 'twas 2-on-1 now. Red needn't join, though: by this time, her bluing, bloated head had no mo' energy to struggle—'long with her limbs—& her lungs soon gave up, knocking her out.

Agent Red was already rolling Dawn back into the hole, causing it to thump on the ground like a ragdoll. Seeing this, Agent Purple decided to do the same with Autumn.

As he stood back up, he looked down @ the 2 unconscious bodies below & said with a worried voice, "You don't think we killed them, do you?"

Agent Red merely said, "That's not my concern," before heading back to the door.

Since Dawn had climbed up after Autumn, Edgar & Felix stood back in the hole as mere spectators—'cept that their ability to do e'en that was limited by their small window o' vision into the 'bove room. @ 1st they were excited 'bout what they heard 'bove them, 'specially when Lance was shouting @ the 2, clearly having been 1-upped. However, after they heard a few thumps on the ground, & then some low buzzing noise, they were not so sure.

But then when they heard Dawn groaning, "Augh!" they knew something was going wrong.

"Uh... Autumn? Dawn? Are you 2 all right?" Edgar called up to them.

His question was answered only 'bout a minute afterward when he saw their limp bodies rolled into the hole, plunging down to the ground as anvils, producing a loud thump that caused Edgar to jump.

Edgar & Felix ran up to Autumn & Dawn, respectively. Edgar bent down next to Autumn & saw that her chest wasn't moving up & down as a normal human's would. He put an earhole up to it & heard that her heart was beating @ a slowing patter. He then shook Autumn by her arm & whimpered, "Autumn? Are you still 'live?" with his voice becoming higher with fear.

Felix, similarly, bent down next to Dawn & put her ear to Dawn's chest, only to hear no heartbeat @ all. But 'stead o' trying to shake her awake, Felix calmly tilted Dawn's head back.

She turned to Edgar & asked, "Skeleton man, do you know CPR?"

Edgar, who turned to Felix with a look as if he were shaken out o' something said, "What?"

"I asked, 'Do you know CPR?'"

Edgar shook his head in distress. "No. I should have, too. I have been practicing some simple health practices, like dealing with broken bones. I can't believe I messed up so much," he spewed out.

"O, it's nothing," said Felix. "Just gently tilt her head back, push down on her upper chest—the part 'bove the area where it caves in in her middle—30 times, breathe slowly into her mouth for a few seconds, & then keep repeating."

Felix then began doing so to Dawn. Edgar looked on @ her, his brain frantically scrambling to comprehend what she said. However, soon his brain began to panic mo' 'bout the precious time he was wasting doing nothing & he followed the directions Felix gave him as best as he could. As he repeated the steps once, & then twice, & then 3 times, his own heart began to beat faster as the prospect o' Autumn recovering seemed to wane.

But during his 4th try pumping her chest, he saw her eyes slowly blink open. He immediately stopped & said with a whispered gasp, "Autumn?"

Autumn blinked her eyes a few times 'fore lifting her upper body.

She clutched her throbbing temple. She sniffed a few times, feeling fresh blood dribble down her freshly-broken nose under its loosened bandage, which Edgar hadn't noticed yet in the shock o' everything.

"Autumn, you're all right!" Edgar exclaimed as he put his arms round her.

Autumn stared forward into space for a while, still not fully cognizant o' what was going on, when she abruptly put her hand to her mouth, wide-eyed. She gently pushed Edgar out o' the way, turned her head, & then puked on the cement floor while Edgar watched, his worry returning. When she finished, she turned back to Edgar with just a li'l mo' sentience in her eyes & held her temple 'gain with 1 hand while the other rubbed the dregs o' vomit from her lips.

"Augh, fuck," muttered she. "What happened?"

"Uh, you were put unconscious somehow & then thrown down here," said Edgar. "I used CPR to get you back to life."

"I didn't e'en know you knew CPR," mumbled Autumn. "Thank you, though."

"Uh... actually you shouldn't thank me; you should thank Felix for showing me how to do it," Edgar said as he pointed to Felix with 1 hand & scratched the back o' his head nervously with the other.

Autumn turned to Felix with eyes wide in shock. She suspected Edgar might've been lying to boost Felix's self-esteem, only for Autumn to see that she was, indeed, performing CPR on Dawn.

"O... Uh, thank you... Felix," Autumn said awkwardly.

She was expecting some 'scuse for why what Felix did wasn't truly good @ all—the fact that Autumn was able to live 'gain being the foremost on Autumn's mind—but didn't receive an answer @ all, Felix's attention fully rapt on Dawn.

"You, uh, need any help with that?" asked Autumn.

"No, thank you," Felix said as she continued her work, the same

blank, stoic expression on her face e'en though this was her 9th repeat through the steps.

So Autumn slowly moved o'er to the wall outside the hole's sight she sat @ before, lied down next to it with her head turned to look @ Felix & Dawn, & tried not to get too bummed out 'bout her precious rest being squandered. While when she 1st woke up, she felt perfectly fresh & energetic, now her head felt dizzy & throbbed, her stomach & chest feeling as if they'd been slammed by a minivan. She also felt a lump moving round her stomach & throat that made her feel as if she were going to vomit 'gain any minute now.

But what concerned her most was how she felt her breath slow as she watched Felix try resuscitating Dawn. Much as Autumn regretted it, she admitted to herself that she had somehow grown to like the twit, unfortunately.

Edgar sat next to Autumn, looking down @ her face with worry o'er what else might happen to her.

"Uh, do you think you'll need anything?" asked Edgar.

"Not 'less you have any water on you," Autumn said with a weak smile.

"Uh, no... Sorry," Edgar said as he looked down @ the ground guiltily.

'Ventually, Dawn's eyes blinked open, & she sat up much as Autumn did before. Unlike Autumn, she did not puke; however, she did feel a throbbing in her head & heart & her nerves still felt like liquid.

"What happened?" Dawn asked hazily.

"Some guy threw you back down here & I saw your breathing & heartbeats had stopped so I used CPR to try bringing you back to life," said Felix.

"O, thank you for saving my life, Felix," Dawn said as she scratched her neck. Felix couldn't help noticing the red splotches on

her neck seemed larger & darker than she remembered them being before.

Felix gave Dawn a look o' astonishment.

"I didn't do anything important. All I did was a couple steps o'er & o'er 'gain. Any idiot could figure it out... Not to say that those who haven't learned CPR are idiots, though... I mean, they could be; I just don't know..." She looked down @ the floor guiltily. "I should probably stop blathering idiotically now."

"No, you can talk all you want." Dawn put her hand on Felix's as she gently lowered herself back into laying position. "I can't thank you 'nough for your help, Felix. You're a good kid," she said incoherently as her eyes closed. Finally she turned her head, made 1 mo' scratch on her neck, & then drifted off to sleep.

Felix put her ear to Dawn's chest, but found that her heart was beating fine now. She was just sleeping.

Felix spent the next few hours staring down @ Dawn &, then her own feet. Though she was not thinking much 'bout the messages her eyes delivered to her. 'Stead, she repeatedly rolled through her mind what Dawn had said. She had saved the jacket-dressed woman's life. She had actually done something good, something useful. She was good. It made her heart feel warmer & e'en fuller o' caffeine than when she helped Jean-Jacques Rousseau become a real giant plant monster. It made her ne'er want this time to end—that she could just sit here & rest her hand on the jacket-dressed woman's hand for the rest o' her life.

Her wish was understandable: much later it'd turn out that all would've been much better if she had just let Dawn die down there in peace².

To be continued...

2 Sorry for spoiling the ending, by the way.

#BOSK-BK1A16-BOTTLE

DE-PHIALED WITH BOTTLE-Y HARM YUK YUK GROSS

J. J. W. Mezun | 2015 May 1



Violet Ajambo's 5th mug o' coffee shook as she raised it to her mouth to drink, only for it to spill half o' its contents onto her lap when their bottle hit a particularly rude iceberg on its rough aquatic path.

"Tabarnak!" she cursed as she stared down @ her lap & slammed the cup onto the table. "You would cogitate that they would contrive a manner in which locomotive phials would not vibrate from the interior!"

The black anthropomorphic cat 'cross from her, who called herself Felix Spero, nodded. 'Course, she had no idea what Violet was talking 'bout;—she was always confused by those big words Violet always used—but since Violet was so smart, she was sure Violet was being smart in whatever argument she was making now.

'Sides, Felix didn't want to be rude to her new work friend, 'specially since she was so nice as to invite her on this nice giant bottle ride, with its marvelous view o' the dark-gray seas, lit @ the edges by the sun peeking 'bove the horizon, & the sky full o' pink cotton-candy clouds. @ 1st, she worried that her body's rude shivering due to the cold might ruin everyone else's time; but then she heard Violet complain 'bout it being "hyperborean" & saw her wrapping her arms round herself & shivering, so Felix figured 'twas OK for her to find it cold, too.

Violet looked back @ the paper before her, staring down @ it intently with her cheek buried in her upraised fist. That was also something she was always doing—staring stern-faced into a piece o' paper or book, which was apparently from some college for smart

people Violet went to.

Once while @ work, when Violet went up to use the restroom, Felix had snuck a glance @ one o' her books to see if maybe she could learn the secrets o' wisdom it might hold; but when she looked @ all the words inside, she realized she could hardly make chutes or ladders as to what any o' it meant. She could understand a lot o' the words as English; she just couldn't understand what these particular words put together were s'posed to mean.

Also as usual, Violet's hand shook o'er the top o' the table, her knuckles repeatedly tapping it. She constantly readjusted her sitting position in various ways, none o' them seemingly just right. Felix, who didn't want to be rude, had ne'er built up the nerve to ask her why she did this.

Then 'gain, it's probably some secret I'm not smart 'nough to understand, like the books she reads. Like most people did, Violet deeply fascinated Felix; & though she knew it'd ne'er work out, Felix secretly held onto the hope that as Violet's official apprentice—so confirmed Violet herself—she would 'ventually learn all o' her secrets & perhaps be a pretty cool person herself.

"I am incapable of comprehending the feasibility of my studying such arduous compositions when the presentiment of assailments by purloiners inclines above my cranium akin to cinereal billows," Violet complained as rapidly & with as much jitter as usual. "You have perceived the extrapolations concerning the infamous Captain Springer, correct?"

Felix nodded—a task in which she felt she was truly becoming adept.

Violet's eyes widened. "You do not adumbrate her aiming her vehemence on *moi*, do you?"

Hearing her cue yet 'gain, Felix nodded.

Violet clutched her erratic heart.

“Please do not manifest such inauspicious augers! You are familiar with my cardiovascular enervations. Oh, arschloch! It is conclusive that I will acquire a round embedded into my cranium before this disconsolate nautical peregrination has terminated.”

This time Felix didn’t nod. She may have had no idea what Violet was saying, but she could recognize the difference ’tween informative facial expressions & fearful facial expressions. Violet was always fearful, & it made Felix sad that she wasn’t capable o’ actually doing anything to help her. E’en the 1 thing she was good @—nodding politely—would be useless here.

Felix ducked her head & said, “I know I’m not good @ anything, but d’you need me to help you with anything?”

“Do not be so egregious,” Violet said with a wave o’ her hand. “You are optimal at performing affirmative vertical oscillating gestures & substantiating every intimation I conceptualize.”

“O, I’m sorry,” said Felix, dipping her head e’en lower.

“You ought not be,” said Violet. “Uplifting such superlative apperceptions should nourish your endorphins.”

Felix shook her head. “It’s OK: you don’t need to waste your valuable time & air trying to make me feel better. I’ve come to accept my loserness, anyway,” Felix said with a tiny nod, a flash o’ pride flowing briefly from her face.

“Oh, but I quite—”

Violet was interrupted when she felt a violent shake—or, as she called it in her head, “an intemperate vibration”—causing her cup to spill o’er the side o’ the table. She gripped the edge o’ the table as if she were ’fraid she’d fall elsewhere.

“Oh, mierda! That is the defalcators, I would parlay! They will indubitably ambushade us from crepuscular crevices extensively!” Then she clutched her heart ’gain & cried, “That is, on the condition that my hypertension does not invalidate my vivacity antecedently.”

From the table 'head o' them, a red-caped, pale-faced young man with golden blond curls jutting under his black top hat had been conferring with his golden-tuxedoed, drama-masked associates, as well as intrepid reporter Thursday O'Beefe, who just waltzed into their table unasked & spent the next half hour praising him—which was, in addition to O'Beefe's promise to let him fix any problems with quotes O'Beefe recorded from him, the only reason he let O'Beefe stay.

However, when they felt the bottle rumble, Lance Chamsby stood & rubbed his white-gloved hands together with a Muttley grin.

"That must be Captain Springer now, ready to loot our fine bottle ship," he announced. "Well, we'll see 'bout that, won't we?"

1 o' his associates, Agent Purple Mountain's Majesty, took out a pad & pencil & took a second to scribble out some figures 'fore answering, "Well, let's see... I'd say there's a 48% chance o' success with a 2% margin o' error."

"I enjoy those odds," said Lance. "Now, let's stand purposefully so we can intimidate the vile looter 'fore we defeat her."

They did so, standing in the middle o' the aisle with their arms akimbo & their chins raised. Agent Granny Smith Apple, who was still new @ this whole helping capitalist vigilantes, had to fumble for a few seconds to get it right, & then spent the next few minutes despairing o'er how the others must be mocking him in their heads.

When Violet saw them stand so, she pointed @ them & cried, "Here they materialize to accomplish their dishabille enterprise!"

"You need not worry, dowdy shrieker," Lance said with an index finger raised. "We shall protect you from the scourges o' socialism!"

Violet's eyes widened, but she didn't reply. 'Stead, she leaned in closer to Felix, who had been looking round herself indecisively as if she were dropped into a Martian colony, & whispered, "It's incrementally deleterious than I originally perceived: they're

reactionary bedlamites, just as visualized on television.”

Lance aimed a positively negative finger @ Violet & said, “Hey, I heard that. You think I can’t hear you devising your deviously grandiloquent words gainst me? ‘Cause I can.”

Violet raised her own index & shouted, “Bulwark me, Felix!” ’fore hiding under the table.

This is it, thought Felix. Time to finally do something great.

Then she thought, *O, but how I do that?* Then she froze like an ancient computer trying to load a Flash website to think.

Grumpywhile, Lance turned to Agent Granny Smith Apple & said with a mouth distorted by annoyance, “This isn’t how it went in rehearsal.”

Granny Smith Apple shrunk a li’l & said, “Gee, I’m sorry, Sir. I—”

“Yeah, yeah, you,” Lance wrapped his arms together. “I hate to be harsh, but I must be stern if I’m going to raise you all well: I’m cutting your kibble by 1/4th.”

Agent Granny Smith Apple didn’t say anything; he merely stared down @ the dusty ground, shamefaced.

“’Scuse me, Sir, but you’re standing in the middle o’ the aisle...”

Lance turned & saw a clean-chopped man in a white uniform look @ him with pleading eyes.

“Are you daft, man?” Lance said as he puffed his shoulders. “Captain Springer shall strike any minute & drive us all into the work camps. Do you want that? Do you *like* work camps?”

“Do they provide health care?” the steward asked with eyes widening in sudden interest.

“Most definitely... the scoundrels,” said Lance, his eyes contrastingly wincing in hatred.

“Well, uh, gee... I’m sorry, Sir, but I don’t think I can just let you do this, ’less you can a’least provide evidence that this ‘Captain Springer’ will show up.”

“I have witnesses that will attest to my claim,” said Lance. He turned to his associates & O’Beefe & saw them all nod.

“I don’t think logic works that way, I’m ’fraid, Sir,” said the steward.

Lance rolled his eyes & then riffled through his pocket for a handful o’ golden coins, which he handed to the steward.

The steward looked down @ them as if they were a tiny Martian colony.

“Will a couple KG o’ gold make logic work that way?” asked Lance.

“Sir, these are doubloons.”

“Yes, I know that.”

The steward scratched his head. “I don’t think these count as currency in Boskeopolis.”

“Right; they’re better,” said Lance: “these will keep their objective value e’en after Captain Springer has conquered & soiled your flimsy currency with her vile inflation.”

“O,” the steward said casually, still staring @ the coins. “Well, OK then.” He pocketed them, turned, & left.

“Now that that’s settled, we can return to our work,” Lance said as he turned back.

So they stood in their akimbo position once mo’, staring expectantly @ the door—an enormous cork in the mouth o’ their bottle ship—’cross the hall for Captain Springer to burst in any minute. After 10 minutes, their purposeful stance gradually deflated: keeping their shoulders up started to tire, maintaining their chins’ upward tilt began to hurt their necks, & the ennui was becoming so unbearable that they could picture the tumbleweeds blowing inside—probably ’cause they had nothing better to do with their minds.

“Um, ’scuse me, Sir...”

Lance turned & shouted, “What now?”

The steward squirmed. "Well, it's just that... she's been taking an awful long time to get here. Are you sure you weren't mistaken 'bout something?"

"Course, I'm not mistaken," snapped Lance. "I'm ne'er mistaken 'bout anything. If I were, I'd change my ideas to those that aren't mistaken, duh."

"I don't think logic works that way, Sir..."

Lance turned to Agent Purple Mountain's Majesty.

"Rough him up."

Purple Mountain's Majesty glanced 'way from Lance uncomfortably.

"Isn't that kind o' illegal?"

"Not if it's for justice," Lance said as he crossed his arms.

"I don't think the law works that way, Sir," said the steward.

Lance turned back to him & said, "I've had just 'nough o' your rude interruptions. If I hear 1 mo' peep, quibble, or neigh out o' you, I'll have O'Beefe write a scathing review o' your business."

The steward scratched his head. "But I don't have a business."

"Well then, I'll just have to offer to fund an upstart o' yours & then have O'Beefe deliver it a nasty review in *The Boskeopolis Times*. Don't think they won't put up his work; they have absolutely *no* standards."

But rather than grovelling to Lance's feet, "No, please, anything but that!" the steward couldn't keep his mouth from widening into a grin or his eyes from sparkling just a li'l.

"You truly mean it?" he asked breathlessly.

"You think I won't do it, don't you? Well, I will. I'm willing to be strict when I have to. Right, Agent Granny Smith Apple?"

He turned to said associate only to see him wildly devouring a red plastic bowl full o' dry brown kibble. When Agent Granny Smith noticed Lance's eyes on him, he slowed to a stop, his wide guilty eyes

staring @ Lance.

“Granny Smith Apple! Bad boy! It’s not dinnertime yet!”

Lance extracted a newspaper from his pocket o’ cartoon convenience—everyone who is fashionable has 1—& began lightly whacking Granny Smith Apple on the head with it.

“That’s it: you get no kibble tonight,” Lance said as he returned the newspaper to his pocket.

Since she had hid under the table, Violet had been shaking under said table, hugging her knees—both out o’ fear & ’cause all o’ the caffeine she consumed made her unable to sit still—while she contemplated how she could use her superlative apperceptions to protect her from the implausible & jejune profligates invading the ship. Other than possibly boring them by reading them *A Shape of Things to Come*, she could think o’ nothing.

Magkantot mine ineffectual erudition. I envisaged that attaining academic proficiency would leave me tactically impecunious.

Minutes later, she gently nudged the bottom o’ 1 o’ Felix’s jean legs to get her attention.

“Felix,” she whispered. “Have you formulated an operable stratagem for dispersing our obdurate beleaguerers?”

Felix blinked @ her for a few seconds ’fore nodding & saying, “Uh huh.”

“Consummate. Promulgate it to me.”

Felix nodded ’gain. “Uh huh.”

“Well? What is it?”

Felix’s eyes widened in surprise. “What is what?”

“Your proposition.”

After a short pause, Felix asked, “What’s a proposition?”

“You know: a projection, a procedure. Oh, what is the noun?” Violet shut her eyes tightly & held her straining head. “You know: a program.”

“Aren’t those things you make with computers?” asked Felix.

“Yes; however, cognitive organisms are capable of concocting them, additionally—utilizing their cerebrums.”

“What’s a cerebrum?” asked Felix. “I’m sorry. I’m kind o’ dumb, you know.”

“This,” Violet said with mo’ strain in her voice as she tapped her forehead.

“O, you mean my head? Gee, I’m not very good @ thinking...”

“It is imperative that you endeavor.”

Felix turned to Lance & said, “Um, ’scuse me, Sir Monopoly guy...”

Lance turned to her & said in an exasperated tone, “What? Can’t you see I’m doing something very important?”

“Um, do you think you & your friends could... leave for a while, please?” asked Felix.

“Most certainly not. As a passenger, I have the right to use this ship as I wish just like anybody else—and I want to use it to destroy the vile looter. Don’t judge me.”

Felix looked back down @ Violet.

“Inquire him regarding the inexorableness of his positioning himself in such proximity to our installation.”

Felix’s voice shook in a slight panic. “I don’t know what that means.”

Lance aimed a negatively positive index @ Felix & said, “I can still hear your secretive li’l whispers, & I don’t like them. Trying to find a way to trick me into causing ‘unmediated’ aggression, huh? Well, try ’gain, ’cause the only aggression I shall be causing will be the justified version gainst the vile looter, Captain Springer.”

“Did you hear him?” whispered Felix.

Lance leaned closer to Felix with a snarl & said, “You tell that communist spy hiding under there to come out & show himself so I can report him to the proper authorities.”

Violet whispered, “You may elucidate to him that if he does not cease molesting us, we shall inform the ‘proper authorities’ of his legal perfidies.”

“Ah, so now I’m committing sex crimes, huh?” Lance said loudly with his arms akimbo. His associated ’hind him looked round the room nervously @ all o’ the stares he had attracted—all ’cept O’Beefe, who was too busy scribbling out the conversation in his notepad as if his pencil & hand were a spreading flame.

“Do you have no honor that you would try such pathetic—& obviously untrue—libel gainst me?” said Lance.

Violet whispered to Felix, “Presently, you may elucidate to him that he is an imbecile who does not even apprehend authentic terminology of the English language.”

Their argument was knocked out by yet ’nother rumbling o’ their bottle ship, accompanied by the sickly sound o’ scraping glass.

Lance practically jumped ’way from Felix.

“That must be the crocodilian Captain Springer now!” he exclaimed. “Come, henchmen, we’ll cut off her entrance from the beginning,” he added as he strode for the front cork.

His associated all stumbled forward in a messy herd, with O’Beefe scrambling blindly ’hind them, his eyes & hand still on his pad, scribbling every event down to its last detail—including the bald man near the back blowing his nose noisily with a pink handkerchief & the woman slurping her soup a li’l mo’ loudly than was customarily polite.

When she heard the cork close ’gain, Violet whispered, “Have they withdrawn?” as she peeked out from ’hind the table curtain. When she saw that they were, indeed, gone, she closed the curtain ’gain & said, “Exemplary execution, Felix. I surmised that entrusting my preservation in your adroitness would be efficacious.”

Felix nodded, still looking out @ the hall through which she had

just watched Lance & his posse leave. “Yup, they left.” Then she looked down & said, “I think it’s safe for you to come out now.”

Violet poked her head ’bove the table & glanced round herself to ensure that the estuary was transparent. When she saw that ’twas, she sat up & looked down @ her paper ’gain.

“I recall, now: this assignment abides. Presently, I hope that I may have the tranquility in order to appropriately complete this undertaking.”

She moved her hand for her pencil, only to see that ’twas nowhere on the table.

“♣%♪#£¢®, it must have cascaded onto the, this... the floor. Mallkuar, I am maladroit at educing incomplex words. You could not conceive of the covetousness I possess for your proficiency in breviloquence.”

She ducked under the table ’gain, only to rise & bonk her head when she heard a loud voice nearby shout, “What’s with the delay? I’ve got important places to be.”

She poked her head back up just ’nough to see a puffy white snowman in a green top hat, red scarf, & mittens holding a cigar just before his carrot beak. Though his eyes were large & egg-shaped, they had thick black lines under them indicating tiredness or bad health.

The steward ran up to him & said with breathless supplication, “I’m sorry, Mayor Sunday, Sir, but it seems a group o’ ruffians have stopped us to prevent this alleged ‘Captain Springer’ from o’erthrowing you & turning Boskeopolis socialist.”

“What?” grunted Herbert Sunday. “So are they drug addicts, or something?”

“I could check their urine if you want, Sir. Would you like me to do that, Sir? Would you like me to check their urine?”

Herbert waved his hand round him irritably.

“No one’s checking anyone’s urine. I just want you to get this bottle moving as quickly as possible. I have an...”—he aimed furtive glances to both his sides—“engagement to fulfill.”

By that time Violet had already ducked back under the table—not to hide from the mayor, but from his cancer stick, whose danger Violet had read much literature on. She yanked on Felix’s pants ’gain.

“Psst, Felix. Would it be feasible for you to inform the mayor that this is ‘No Smoking’ territory?”

Felix turned to Sunday & said, “Hey, uh, Sir Mayor, Sir?”

“I’m always delighted to meet 1 o’ my beloved constituents,” Herbert said with a strained smile & a mittened hand reaching out for Felix’s; “but I’m mightily busy right now, if you haven’t seen, so please make this quick.”

Felix was staring down @ Herbert’s hand as if it might strike if she went to touch it. Finally, she slowly met his hand & asked, “Uh... Thank you, Sir Mayor, Sir. It’s just that, uh, my friend wanted to tell you this is a ‘No Smoking’ zone.”

“O, right...” Mayor Sunday said in an awkward halfway ’tween pleasant & embittered as he stowed his cigar ’way in a li’l black box. “Is there anything else you need, Madame?”

Felix looked down @ Violet & whispered, “Anything else?”

“Negatory,” whispered Violet. “Only demonstrate my gratitude for his endeavoring on behalf of proper salubriousness & hygiene.”

“Uh... I’d like to... demonstrate my gratitude for—”

“I heard your li’l friend down there just fine, Madame,” Herbert said with a polite tilt o’ his hat & then quickly went ’way ’fore that stupid cat woman could disturb his peace any mo’.

Ugh, what is with these people? They always want to talk to me ’bout their problems, as if any o’ it had anything to do with me.

Just then, Lance & his crew galed in ’gain. Lance paced forward with his hands tied ’hind his back & his puzzled eyes staring down @

the ground.

"I tell you, she must be hiding somewhere. She's crafty that way..."

Herbert noticed, to his pleasure, that the ship had started dipping & rising 'gain, indicating that its travel had resumed.

He was 'bout to turn & leave, only to be interrupted by the steward turning to him with a hand pointing @ Lance & saying, "That's the nutjob I was talking 'bout."

Herbert's eyes widened as he noticed Lance look up @ him with consternated eyes.

"Uh, hello, Sir Chamsby," Sunday said with an uneasy chuckle. "I see you are up to some very important business..."

"You bet I am, & I'm glad you're here, Mayor," Lance said as he strode o'er to Herbert. "I'm sure you know that that looterish socialist Captain Springer plans to invade our bottle ship & suck us dry o' our valuables."

After a short pause in which Herbert's brain tried to confirm the message it retrieved from his ears, Herbert nodded & said, "Course. & uh... what am I s'posed to do in this situation, 'gain?"

Lance raised a gloved finger with a stylish swoosh & answered, "You must prove yourself to be able the other cronies in parliament & offer your legal support for my just venture."

"Right..." said Herbert. "& this will just require me to sign a piece o' paper, right?"

Lance nodded. "You can leave everything else up to me, Mayor."

Herbert smiled & clasped his hands together. "Excellent. I will do just that." Then he turned & headed back for his table near the back, where he would resume gazing @ the sunrise while he mentally prepared himself for all o' the constituents he would have to meet later that afternoon by flooding his throat with Le Désespoir.

Empowered by such official sanction, Lance puffed his chest out

like a bear & searched round the area for a proper table to use as a high point in which to send his message to the rest o' the ship. His eyes stopped on the emptiest table, which had nothing but a few papers on it. Then he turned to Agent Purple Mountain's Majesty wiggled his eyebrows & then turned back to the table.

Agent Purple Mountain's Majesty waited, expecting Lance to lead them o'er to the table he was staring at. After a few seconds, Lance turned to Purple Mountain's Majesty with a glare.

"Well?"

Purple Mountain's Majesty scratched his head. "Um, what do you want me to do, 'gain?"

Lance threw his arms up. "Isn't it obvious? Clean that table off so I can use it as a standing place. Didn't you see me wiggle my eyebrows?"

Agent Purple Mountain's Majesty quickly nodded & said, "O, yes, 'course," 'fore rushing for the table.

Violet was so sedulously scrutinizing her story for literary devices such as alliteration, point-o'-view shifts, & dramatic irony, that she hadn't noticed till 'twas too late the tuxedoed & masked man walk up to her table & sweep her papers off.

Violet jumped back in her chair & shouted, "Oye!"

"Sorry, Madame. Boss's orders," mumbled Agent Purple Mountain's Majesty.

Violet leapt under the table & yanked on Felix's pants.

"Felix, communicate to the guilt-tuxedoed personage that he has scurrilously contravened my human & individual rights, por favor."

'Fore Felix could say anything, Lance had already climbed up onto the table & began announcing to the rest o' the ship, with hands bordering mouth:

"Acquaintances, Boskeopoleons, citypeople, hand me your ears."

A man @ 1 table grumbled, "They always want us to pay.

Whatever,” just ’fore clutching his ear & giving 1 mighty yank, ripping it right off. Then he stood up, stumbled o’er to Lance, & slapped the ear down ’fore turning back for his table. The rest o’ the passengers groaned & then lined up with bloody lobes in their hands.

As they placed ear after ear onto the table, Lance scooped them into the inside pocket o’ his cloak.

“Thank you, thanks, excellent,” he said as he saw passengers come & go.

When he had pocketed the last auricle, he stood straight ’gain & cleared his throat.

“OK, now let’s get to the real reason why I am addressing you all —”

“What?” shouted someone in the crowd.

Lance paused, aiming an irritable stare @ the interrupter.

“As I was saying, the real reason why I’m addressing you all is—”

“What?” the other passenger shouted ’gain. “I can’t hear you ’cause I lost my ear & I can’t find it.”

Lance put his arms in jars—which was rather difficult, since he had to pick them up with his mouth.

Then he said, “Sir, that is not my problem. Perhaps you should do a better job keeping track o’ your possessions ’stead o’ expecting everyone else to do so for you?”

The interrupter stared down, shamefaced. “I’m sorry.”

Lance paused for a second mo’ to see if anyone else would interrupt him, only to feel a yank on the back o’ his pant sleeve.

He swung round & glared @ Felix, who shrunk into her chair.

“What? Can’t you see I’m busy here?”

“I’m deeply sorry, Sir. It’s just that my friend here—under the table—she says you, um...” She looked down under the table. “What was it ’gain?”

From below, Lance could hear a tepid voice whisper, “Explicate that he has violated my individual & human rights—”

“Lies! Odorous lies!” Lance shouted as he bent down toward the table with a shaking fist. “I have ne’er violated anyone’s individual rights in my life, & don’t plan to in death.”

“Felix, communicate to this specimen that his subordinate recently transported my documents distant from my possession and then he himself had absconded with our table to be utilized for his factitious propaganda.”

Lance crossed his arms—having already returned them to their sockets, ’course. “You are, indeed, correct that my ‘propaganda’ is based purely on facts, & thus it is warranted, as well as my temporary use o’ ‘your’ table, which you are actually just borrowing with limitations.”

Lance stood up & turned back to the rest o’ the audience.

“Now, if I may continue without interruptions—”

“Sir, I did not desire to implement this immoderate reaction, but I witness that you are destitute of civility, & thus I am compelled.”

Lance turned to the source o’ the sound & saw a face covered in bangs poke out from under the table, a shaky hand grasping the edge o’ the table.

She lifted a book whose cover depicted a shining white Roman statue holding up a sphere.

“If you do not grant us our solitude, I will read the bromidic grotesqueness that is *Atlas Shrugged*.”

Lance’s minions’ eyes ballooned, & they began vigorously shaking their heads & hands, silently mouthing, “No!”

Violet, the fire—OK, mo’ like cinder—in her eyes quenched, turned with confusion ’way from the minions & @ Lance’s face, only to see with horror a wide smile.

Lance materialized a chair out his cloak & scooted it in closer to

the table, resting his eager clasped hands o'er the top.

"Well, I guess Captain Springer can wait. Could you start @ the part when they're waiting for John Galt to appear? That's my favorite part."

Violet began flipping through the book's pages with an ill frown.

"Are you referencing the first seven hundred pages?"

"Yes."

"Uh, very well... We shall initiate upon the first page then, I suppose..."

Violet set the book down & took a pen from her pocket while fretting o'er how much o' her precious time he would waste on this procedure.

"This is the part where we learn 'bout the treachery o' bums asking for quarters, if I remember correctly—1 o' my favorite parts," Lance said as he leaned back in his chair.

"Spurious, spurious, spurious," Violet said as she shook her head. "You cannot simply contrive inferences so brusquely; the quintessential aspect of literary analysis is that one perlustrates the text for literary devices and then surmise the author's intent from them. In exemplar, if an author utilizes S's in a character's locution, that author is communicating that character is untrustworthy, or if the author depicts every female character as iniquitous or promiscuous, that author presumably possesses psychological issues."

"Such insipid, absurd asininity," said Lance. "Ayn Rand doesn't sneak her ideas in like some creepy propagandist, but tells it straight as it is, like a bold propagandist."

Violet shook her head 'gain.

"That is precisely what is erroneous with you reactionaries: you possess no sense of subtlety. One need only examine the extreme extents you perpetrate solely to neutralize this 'Captain Springer.'

Why cannot we have a balanced solution? You desire for her to be eliminated, she does not desire to be eliminated; why cannot we merely render her paralyzed from the waist down so that she is half-deceased, or traumatize her to the extent that she is deceased on the inside, but living on the outside—a hollow shell?”

“Such depravity,” said Lance. “Only half good is just as bad as evil—worse, e’en, since it’s not e’en consistent.”

By this point, Felix had already fallen to sleep, her mind o’erloaded by so much grandiloquent diction & tedious prose. Drool dribbled down the side o’ her mouth & onto the table—which will be a vital detail later in this story.

Just then O’Beefe burst in through the cork door.

“Sorry I took so long, guys: I wanted to tinkle, but the dolphins kept watching me & made me feel self-conscious, & then I had to spend a few minutes thinking ’bout what my purpose in life is.” He turned his head left & right. “I wrote some handsomely wondersome poetry, if anyone wants to read it.”

Nobody turned from their tables to look @ O’Beefe, as if he were a mere ghost.

“Did... Did you hear me, guys?”

Lance, who laid his head on his arm while staring down @ Violet’s copy o’ *Atlas Shrugged* grunted & said, “You’re still in this story? Don’t you know when you’re not needed anymo’?”

“No. May I see the rubric?”

Lance rummaged through his pocket o’ cartoon convenience, pulled out a sheet o’ paper, & held it out ’hind him.

“Here.”

O’Beefe snatched it & held it up to his face, his eyes gliding left & right as he scanned it.

“Hmm... so if I can be completely written out o’ the story without affecting the plot @ all, that is proof that I am a pointless character.

Intrig—Hey! What’s going on?”

O’Beefe noticed that his hands were gradually becoming mo’ transparent. He dropped the rubric & looked @ the rest o’ his body & saw that the same applied all o’er him.

“Everyone, help! I’m disappearing!”

O’Beefe’s voice tapered out, just as his appearance dropped to total invisibility. Though only abstractly, one could say that he was still present; ’twas just that any effects he might have on anyone else’s senses or the material configuration o’ the environment were neutralized.

Nobody paid any attention to O’Beefe’s disappearing act. Most had already seen other bit characters vanish in the same manner a’least 3 times, 50 attentions apiece. Science could easily explain this phenomenon: when a story’s setting held too many characters, the world’s memory began to run out, o’erloading its sprite limitations—that is, the limitations o’ the fairies whose magic keeps all these stories ticking on time, 30 LPS (letters per second). The Programmers programmed Boskeopolis to handle this the same way most stories handle it: by making impertinent sprites disappear. The only alternative is to allow characters’ appearances to flicker, which is annoying to read.

“Where were we in the story since we’d been rudely interrupted?” asked Lance, head still lying on arm as an elementary school student indulging in story time.

“Permit us to visualize...” Violet said as she held the book up. “While promulgating her intentions for operating the John Galt Line atop a table to a coterie, Dagny Taggard fortuitously slips on the sputum Felix secretes onto the table after succumbing to slumber. This represents an exemplary example of a literary device christened ‘Chekhov’s gun,’ wherein the author establishes a detail, which will be rendered pertinent subsequently in the story.”

Lance slammed his fist on the table. "That doesn't happen in the story! I've read it half a dozen times, & I sure don't remember that dumb cat being in it. For gold's sake, this book was written mo' than 50 years ago! What, did Ayn Rand have a time machine? Did your stupid cat friend?"

"It is notarized precisely in this page," Violet said as she turned the book toward Lance, a finger pointed @ the passage in question.

Lance crossed his arms. "Well then, you must have a tampered copy, 'cause I sure as Sweden know there aren't any anthropomorphic cats in *Atlas Shrugged*."

"Look, 1 side says that *Atlas Shrugged* has anthropomorphic cats in it, the other side says it doesn't," said O'Beefe. "That's what the issue is."

Lance swung round in his chair with a petulant wince.

"I thought you were gone."

"Only my appearance left," said O'Beefe. "I can still interact with the world, like invisible Koopas in terrible *Super Mario World* rom hacks."

"This represents an exemplary example of a literary device christened 'allusion,' wherein the author references other works," said Violet.

Lance put his fists to his sides. "I must say, I am quite impressed by such in-depth knowledge o' such an obscure subject you have, Sir O'Beefe. It's truly consistent with your characterization. By chance, do you spend your free time scurrying round the forums, downloading your precious Kaizos & discussing the merits o' glitch-exploitation requirements for level victory, or do you merely watch videos o' others playing these games? I'm truly curious."

O'Beefe smiled. "You seem footsomenely knowledgeable 'bout the subject, Sir Chamsby. It's truly consistent with your characterization."

Lance's eyes narrowed. "Smile wider & I fear your face will rip open."

"How can you tell I'm smiling if I'm invisible?"

Lance turned back to the table & slammed both fists against it.

"Stiglitz! What's taking that idiotic looter so long to get here? My time's too precious to waste B-balling with you plebs."

"I failed to recognize that Professor Joseph Stiglitz was attendant on this peregrination," Violet said as she turned her head left & right, searching 'mong the other passengers.

Lance rammed a hand into his right eye socket & ripped out its eyeball. He then handed it to Violet while saying hoarsely, "Here. Take this."

Violet winced as she stared @ it in her hand, blood, pus, & oil dripping o'er the sides.

"It must be elucidated that this oculus is inordinately malodorous."

O'Beefe twirled a finger round his ear.

Lance swung round & thrust a finger forward.

"I saw that!"

"How can you see when you just ripped your eyes out o' your sockets? Having portable eyes is truly consistent with your characterization, by the way."

"I only ripped 1 eye out, asschasm. Pay mo' attention to the text."

Violet beamed. "Sir Chamsby! I must elucidate my gratification at your radical development of literary comprehension."

Lance glared @ her. "I'm no smelly radical; I'm a smelly *individualist*, & don't you forget."

"Give her the flash cards, Chamsby," said O'Beefe.

"Take these flash cards," Lance demanded as he slapped a pile o' cards on the table.

Violet gazed @ the stack with the wonder o' a scientist who has

just discovered a new gene. She hesitantly grabbed the top card & flipper it facing her.

“Splain the miracle that was Chile under the ’70s? Was not Chile subjugated to a mass-murdering totalitarian dictator during that interval?”

Lance crossed his arms. “You can’t cook a utopia without cracking a few troublemakers.”

Violet put the card down.

“I fret that I am obligated to be discordant. I can perceive the desirability of a restrained market system and perchance eliminating & torturing a judicious number of dissenters—or conceivably, solely vigorously suppressing the aggregate—however, in my unostentatious inclination, recrementitious liberty and plethoric oppression is excessively radical. Where is the balance?”

The concept o’ balance so illed Lance that he leaned his face o’er the side o’ the table & puked streams o’ blood, pus, & oil.

“Look, 1 side says that murder is necessary, the other side says that it is merely sometimes useful,” said O’Beefe: “That’s what the issue is.”

Lance glared in O’Beefe’s direction, only to remember that O’Beefe didn’t *have* a direction, since he was still invisible.

“Do you have any authentic opinion o’ your own?”

“Look, 1 side says that I have no authentic opinion o’ my own, the other side says that I do: that’s what the issue is.”

The room was finally filled with silence. Violet twirled her hair in her finger, Lance tapped his fingers gainst the table, & O’Beefe rearranged his internal organs out o’ absentminded boredom.

After a few empty minutes had passed, Agent Purple Mountain’s Majesty asked, “Sir Chamsby, would you mind if we sat down. My feet are getting awfully tired.”

Lance swung round toward his agents, who were still standing in

the middle o' the aisle.

"Gee, well I'm so sorry you actually have to put some effort into your work for once. It's not as if you get paid or any—Agent Granny Smith Apple! What did I tell you already?"

Agent Granny Smith Apple stopped in the middle o' his scooping kibble out o' the red pet bowl & into his mouth, his eyes akin to a dog that's been caught shitting on the carpet.

"Put that 'way this instant!" shouted Lance. "Now you don't get to eat for the next 200 years. I hope you're happy."

Agent Granny Smith Apple stared down @ his feet in shame.

Meanwhile, Agent Purple Mountain's Majesty's feet suddenly reached up into his coat & extracted a handgun each, 1 after the other. They then pointed the guns @ themselves & fired, causing Agent Purple Mountain's Majesty to fall o'er with a groan.

"Are you e'er quiet?" said Lance.

"Sir, I believe my feet had become so exhausted that they just committed suicide, making it impossible for me to stand, Sir."

Lance sighed. "If it isn't sneaking into the kibble, it's having suicidal feet. Do you 2 e'er cease failing me?"

"I once won a soccer trophy when I was li'l," said Agent Granny Smith Apple.

"Did everyone win a trophy just for trying?" asked Lance, disgust deep in his eyes.

"O yeah, 'course. Do you know how embarrassing it'd be to win a trophy when everyone else didn't? They'd all make fun o' me & my trophy-winning freakishness."

"Being the only trophy winner's a *good* thing," said Lance. "It's the only thing that makes you special."

"That's not true," said Agent Granny Smith Apple. "My mother said I was special *'fore* I won the trophy."

Lance was 'bout to begrudgingly agree, but was interrupted by

Agent Purple Mountain's Majesty, his voice still weak from pain:

"Yeah, I once won a trophy once & 'twas a bad thing. In this competition the person who won the trophy gets shot."

"If that's true, then why are you still here?" asked Lance.

"O, getting shot only takes a second, & it happened such a long time ago."

Lance's eyebrows lowered & his voice deepened. "No, why are you still 'live?"

"O, they only shot me in the foot."

"Then why were your feet so capable o' shooting themselves?"

"Well, obviously I didn't stand round with a dead foot for years. I bought a new foot @ the foot store."

"This represents an exemplary example of a literary device christened 'exaggeration,' wherein the author expounds an event that exceeds verisimilitude," said Violet.

"That's it," Lance said as he reached into his pockets & pulled out his phone.

He then punched in a #. Unluckily, his fist was too big & he accidentally pressed all o' the buttons @ once, so he next made due with simply dialing the #.

He tapped his fingers on the table & glared @ blank space before him while he held the phone to his face & waited for the other side to pick up.

After a few beeps, he heard a click, & then the muffled version o' a familiar voice say, "Who is this?"

"Why aren't you heisting the S.S. Bottleneck?" asked Lance.

After a short pause, the other side asked, "Lance, is that you? How the hell d'you get my #?"

"You should keep your attention to your own business. I've been waiting here for *hours* so I could hinder your revolting crimes & finally bring spicy justice gainst you. So why aren't you here?"

“Who told you I was ‘heisting’ the S.S. Bottleneck?”

“That’s none o’ your concern,” said Lance.

The voice on the other side became gruffer. “& what I do is none o’ your concern, so don’t waste my time.”

Then Lance heard a call-ending click.

“A thief & a social aberrant—why am I not surprised?” Lance grumbled as he glared down @ his phone.

He tried ’gain, only to be led to a message machine. He left a quick demand for her to call & ’splain when she’d arrive & then put the phone ’way.

“Great. Now I don’t know if I should stay or leave. Why am *I* the one who is always inflicted with such misfortune?” Lance said as he dug his chin into his upraised fists.

After a short pause, Violet said, “We may peruse the residual one thousand pages of *Atlas Shrugged*, if that is your inclination.”

Suddenly, the ship rocked & rolled on the waves, throwing Violet & Felix round in their booths & throwing Lance completely out his chair.

As Violet regained her composure, she noticed with surprise that Felix’s violent movement had had no effect on her slumber.

“What in Venezuela was that?” Lance asked as he stumbled back into his chair.

They all turned their heads toward the door when they heard a cork pop & saw a woman in a white uniform burst in.

“No need to panic, everybody: we just hit a giant soda can & will soon sink to our seaworthy sepulcher. Everyone use their last minutes ’live as best as they can.”

“What?” 1 o’ the passengers called out. “I can’t hear anything ’cause I seemed to have lost my ears.”

But by that time, the attendant had already left. However, they didn’t need to hear to know what was happening: they could witness

it by the rapid increase o' water in the bottle ship.

Lance slammed his fists against the table. "What? The ship can't sink yet. Captain Springer hasn't arrived to try plundering it & I haven't been able to stop her yet."

"Look, 1 side says that the bottle can't sink, the other side says that it will: that's what the issue is."

"If I am permitted to bequeath my unostentatious inclination," said Violet, "I am obligated to elucidate that this locomotive phial sinking is excessively radical. Where is the balance? A bisection of this vessel submerging, asphyxiating a bisection of its population or the entirety of this vessel submerging in way that we all merely sense the affliction of evanescent asphyxiation sans the mortiferous repercussions would represent a superiorly moderate solution."

By the time Violet had finished her wide-winded dialogue, the bottle had already tipped o'er from the weight o' the entered water & summarily sunk deep into the sea, leaving only a few burbling bubbles as a last remnant o' the S.S. Bottleneck.

But then, a few minutes later, a figure grasping the flat plastic board o' a ripped-off table top jumped to the surface. Said figure began to cough the water from her lungs & her eyes slowly opened till they understood their surroundings & then widened in 1 large stretch.

"How did I end up here?" Felix asked as she stared round her. "Violet? Sir Monopoly? Sir Snowman Mayor? Anyone here?"

"I am."

"Who's that?" asked Felix, swiftly swinging her head in the other direction.

"Don't bother looking for me; you can't see me. See, 'cause I'm technically not physically present anymo', I didn't sink with the ship," said O'Beefe. "It appears that what is mo' consistent with my characterization than Chamsby's is having the final guffaw."

Unluckily, 'cause so many characters had disappeared from the scene, the sprite limitations that had kept O'Beefe invisible had been eased, causing O'Beefe to reappear—& thus fall into the sea.

O'Beefe splashed wildly, desperately trying to keep 'bove the surface.

“Help! I can't swim! I'm too sexy to die.”

He did, ne'ertheless. Though Felix tried to reach out & grab him, he was a few meters 'way—much longer than Felix's arms, believe it or not. By the time Felix was able to splash her flotsam ship o'er to O'Beefe, O'Beefe had already sunk under the surface, ne'er to return 'bove.

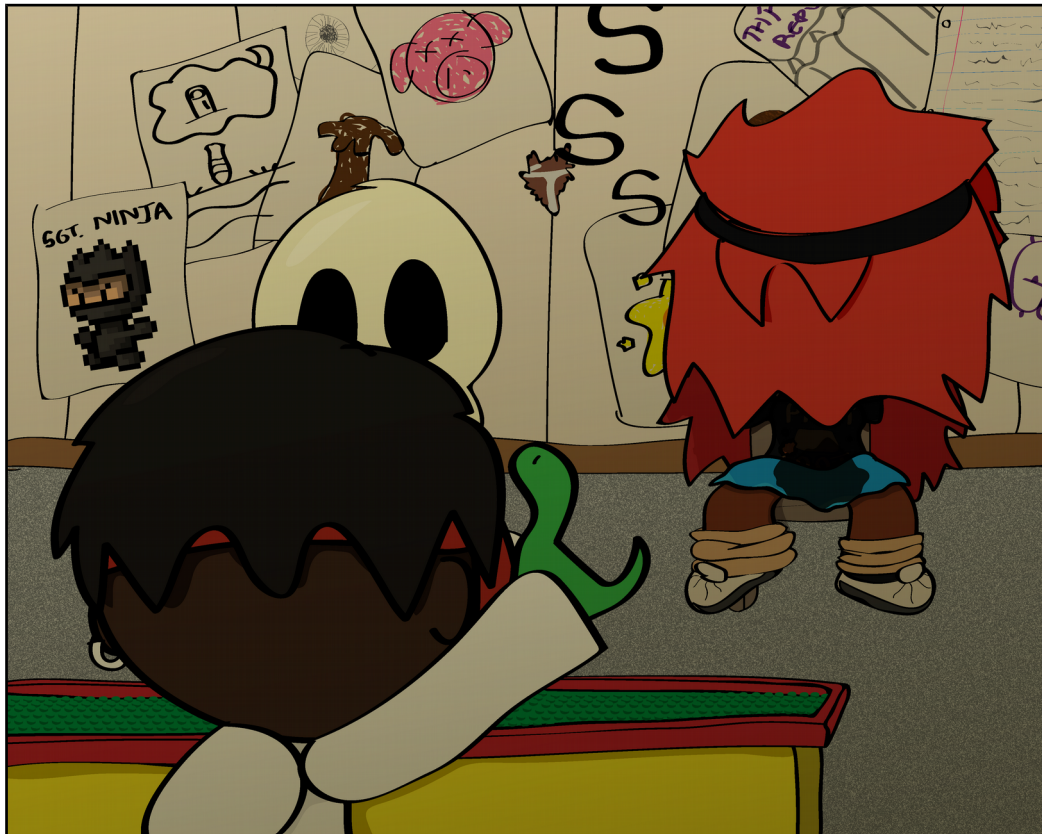
Felix lowered her face to the table & sighed, her eyes cringing under the heavy heat o' the sun, which was also sinking into the sea, though @ a distance e'en farther than O'Beefe was.

Though Felix knew she'd have no hope o' rescuing it, just to be safe, she paddled toward it.

#BOSK-BL1317-RIVAL

**DEAD ON A RIVAL MAKES NO
SENSE SO PRETEND THIS STORY
IS CALLED SOMETHING ELSE
PLEASE**

J. J. W. Mezun | 2015 June 1



I.

Autumn's eyes were lost in the carpet as she & Edgar walked down the hallway to their room with a black suitcase in Autumn's hand. Every few steps Autumn glanced up for just 'nough time to see the # on the door she was passing.

She still couldn't get her mind off the peculiarity o' their situation: some short man in a giant mustache claiming to be "Sir Al Arbor" knocks on their apartment door & tells them that they have to evacuate for the next few days so it can be debugged & tells her that a room has been booked for both o' them here @ the Maple Motel, no charge. Sure 'nough, when they came to ask 'bout it, the staff confirmed what the moustached man had said.

The # "407" caught Autumn's eyes. However, that # had no consequence to them, for their # was actually "415." Now, when they reached *that* door, that was when they stopped & Autumn used the key the staff gave her to open it.

She paused in the threshold, scanning o'er what she could see o' the room. So far, it appeared to be just an ordinary motel room: a yellow-white bed with a spring popping up from a torn spot in the middle; a short white cooler that Autumn knew not to touch, so as not to be charged an arm & a torso; a li'l TV covered in dust & ants, & with broken glass in the screen due to being shot @ with a rifle, which Autumn surmised probably didn't get mo' than basic cable.

However, Autumn knew looks could be deceiving. For instance, she knew that when the motel staff smiled @ her & asked her to have a nice day that they actually couldn't care less if she had a nice day or a crummy 1—not to mention that 'twas 9 PM. She also knew that

this room could be full o' traps hidden 'neath layers o' ugly but practical furniture.

'Course, standing still outside her room as if she'd lost motor skills wouldn't help her figure them out any mo' swiftly, so she finally entered, Edgar following.

"You want me to put the suitcase 'way?" asked Edgar.

"No, I'll do it," she said without looking @ him. "You ne'er know what traps they've hatched round here."

Edgar didn't reply; 'stead he sat quietly on the bed, staring out the window. 'Twas a beautiful, lazy night—as opposed to all those arrogant nights that race all o'er, showing off their magnificent calves—still in twilight, due to the longer days o' late summer.

"Hey, d'you think they have free internet?" asked Autumn.

Edgar felt the bed bump under him as the other side weighed down. He turned & saw Autumn sitting down with her laptop on 1 leg, the suitcase on the other, still in her clutch.

"Uh, I guess you'd have to check," he said.

"I want to check out this 'Al Arbor.' He seemed suspicious. Voice didn't sound like a moustached male @ all. I know how moustached men sound, & they don't sound like that. Not usually, a'least."

Edgar nodded. *Autumn does know a lot 'bout social signs & all that, it seems; so maybe she does have a reason to be suspicious.*

They heard a knock on the door, causing Autumn to look 'bove her monitor with a furtive wince.

"Just as I thought," she said as she closed her laptop & set it next to her. "They think they're going to trick us into answering the door just like that, as if only our ordinary friends came by to say hello." Autumn's wince became wincier. "Only, we don't have any friends."

She got up; but before she went to the door, she turned to Edgar & whispered, "Keep the suitcase safe, OK?"

Edgar nodded & scooted o'er to her spot o' the bed, feeling the

power o' her authority seeping into him through the warm spot she left. He then began worrying 'bout what disasters he might cause with these new responsibilities. He grasped the handle o' the suitcase tightly, feeling its tough scaly hide, as if 'twere his baby—'cept he wouldn't hold any baby that tightly by the handle, 'cause that'd be rude.

Autumn opened the door & saw a short man with a plain, hairless face in the same green uniform the rest o' the staff wore.

"We don't want any," Autumn said 'fore he could speak. "Whatever you have, we don't want it. E'en if you *don't* have it, we probably don't want it."

"Sorry to perturb you, Madame, but we just realized we neglected to clean your room. It'll only take a few minutes to do so."

"I still don't want it," said Autumn. "We've slept in the sewers for months; you think we care if our bed has a literal spring loose or is covered in jism from a wild, late-night tryst by some cubicle worker who stopped loving his wife, but is too timid to say anything, much as his wife, who is probably cheating on him with the repairman?"

"It'll only take a few minutes, Madame."

"Yeah, it'll only take a few minutes for you to abscond with our possessions," Autumn said as she crossed her arms & winced to her eyes' fullest wincing capabilities.

"Madame, we can assure you we would ne'er do such a thing. We are professionals, after all."

"I'll have you know that thieving is an immensely professional career. Not any bum can do it, y'know."

The attendant ignored her & said, "Sides, we grant all our customers an insurance that if any o' their possessions are lost, we will refund them."

"O, truly? & what if some possessions are nonrefundable? What if, say, that laptop o'er there"—she pointed @ it—"had important

work on it that I can't afford to lose?"

The man shook his head. "We're sorry, Madame, but we've gotta clean this room 'fore the bed bugs evolve into carpet critters & truly become a nightmare. By the way, we're also going to have to scrub your laptop to make sure it doesn't have any bed-bug cooties on it. Did you sit on that bed?"

"What if I did?"

He shook his head 'gain. "We'll have to give you a change o' clothes & wash yours. We simply can't have you going round spreading those bed-bug cooties."

Autumn closed the door without a word. She turned back for the bed & said with a limp wave o' her hand, "'Twas nobody. Just a religious nut trying to sell us eternal salvation & a condo by the Fountainhead."

But her solution was impertinently foiled when the man dared to knock on her door 'gain.

What a dick, she thought: knocking on our door all night as if that were its purpose—to be manhandled by his germy knuckles.

"Just ignore it," Autumn said as she sat down next to Edgar, leaning into her laptop & continuing her research.

To Autumn's relief, the knocking 'ventually ceased & they had peace once mo'.

"Well, I can't find anything on this 'Al Arbor.' I have a feeling he fabricated the name so he can scam us. We must be on high alert."

Edgar nodded, not knowing how else he should respond.

"So, what should we do now to pass the time?" Autumn asked as she closed her laptop.

"Dinner?" said Edgar.

"Hmm... To be honest, I don't know if I can trust the food round here," said Autumn. "You ne'er know what treachery that 'Al Arbor' guy or that guy who knocked on our door might be hatching. I don't

trust any o' them."

"We could always go to a restaurant."

"That's a good idea," said Autumn. "Just make sure you take everything with you."

"E'en the stuff that isn't ours?"

"*Specially.*"

So they went off, Edgar now carrying their suitcase while Autumn carried the bed o'er her back, with the television set in 1 arm & the lamp in the other.

"Um... You need help with some o' that?" Edgar asked as they went down the hall.

"No: I have it covered."

As they walked down the lobby, the receptionist—who Autumn noticed was someone completely different now—stared @ her, wide-eyed.

"Uh... Madame... You need help with that?"

Autumn aimed a chary eye @ her.

"So you can pocket them? Nice try, *Madame*, but I wasn't born a week & a half ago. I wouldn't be able to talk yet if I were."

"Uh, you know we offer a bed & a TV here. You don't need to bring your own," said the staff member, her expression growing mo' uneasy.

"It's a religious thing," Autumn said quickly 'fore going out the door.

They were surprised when they saw that the Rock Lobster was still round; but when they sat @ their usual spot in the corner, they saw that Dawn was gone, the waiter now being a short man in a tuxedo with short, middle-parted brown hair.

"Either she must've sold it or it automatically reverted to 1 o' the debt holders," Autumn said to Edgar as she watched the waiter walk o'er to their table. "Mo' likely the former."

The waiter stopped @ their table & said into his notepad, “What can I do for you today?” only to have his attention snatched by the bed still on Autumn’s back & the TV set sitting on the side o’ the table. “Madame, I’m ’fraid you can’t bring those in here.”

“What? What kind o’ shoddy business you running here?” said Autumn. “When that woman in the strange jacket owned this place, she would let us do this—hell, she’d let people do anything; she was a terrible owner. That was what made her so great.”

The waiter blinked @ her ’fore continuing, “I’m sorry, Madame, but rules are rules.”

Autumn grumbled. “Can we a’least get a meal to go 1st?”

The waiter nodded. “We can definitely do that. What would you like?”

“Just a bowl o’ Ramen noodles & a cup o’ water, please.”

The waiter twisted his eyebrows @ Autumn. She could read them as the “Mmm... Look @ your pedestrian clothes, with their smelliness or their holes that reveal other clothes that probably shouldn’t be seen in public.” She wanted to rip those eyebrows off.

“I’m ’fraid we don’t serve Ramen noodles here, Madame.”

Autumn crossed her arms. “Well, what’s the cheapest meal you do serve?”

“We have an exquisite garlic cake for only 400Pts¹.”

“400Pts? I could probably get a garlic cake for a quarter o’ that @ the Hundred Tree. Make it 200Pts.”

“I’m sorry, Madame, but we don’t haggle here.”

“Whatever. Just go get it.”

The waiter wrote this in his pad. “Got it. I’ll get it to you in a jiffy.”

“A whole jiffy, huh?” murmured Autumn. “The woman in the jacket would’ve done it in only half a jiffy, 2 moments, & an instant.”

Autumn turned to Edgar. “I don’t trust this waiter. Who would

1 Approximately \$5.07 American.

shampoo their hair down & wear such a nice suit @ a craphole like this?"

"You think the waiter's trying to steal your stuff, too?" asked Edgar.

"No... No, that'd be contrived," Autumn said as she stared down @ the red-stained table surface, ruminating o'er the idea. "I think he's probably just trying to o'ercharge us."

The waiter returned with a Styrofoam box & a paper cup & set it down in front o' Autumn with the bill. Autumn quickly paid the bill, though not without grumbling 'bout the steep price.

She turned to Edgar. "Could you carry my food for me, please. My hands are full."

So they left, Autumn dragging the bed, TV, & lamp all the way back to their motel room. This time the woman @ the counter didn't say anything, trying to keep her focus fully on the computer in front o' her & 'way from the crazy lady.

When Autumn entered their room, the 1st thing she did was examine everything for any sign o' tampering. This was how she confirmed that someone had searched their room, hoping to abscond with their possessions: she soon discovered a few dark gray hairs lying 'long the carpet, 1 near the closet, 'nother near the nightstand, & a 3rd near a tacky potted plant in the corner.

"Are you sure these weren't left 'hind by guests who were here before us?" asked Edgar.

"I examined this room when we 1st entered, remember," Autumn said as she picked a hair up with tweezers & dropped it in a plastic bag. "I know I ne'er saw any black hairs."

Autumn put the bed, TV, & lamp back in their proper places & sat on the bed. Edgar joined her & handed her her meal, which she ate while trying to think o' the best way to keep their property safe during the night.

They obviously have a key to this room, so the lock is virtually useless.

Then 'gain, she knew she was usually a light sleeper, able to wake @ the slightest disturbance. She'd just keep the briefcase with her in bed.

As she sucked on her drink, she noticed it didn't taste much like water; 'twas much thicker & milkier. *Is this some rich-person water?* she wondered. *Is this why they charged me so much? Cheap asses.*

She wasn't sure if 'twas due to her stomach being refilled or carrying that heavy bed round the city, but she soon found her nerves murmuring with exhaustion, causing her to slide down into a lying position. Her eyes repeatedly blinked, struggling to stay open.

Edgar saw this & asked, "You want me to turn out the light?"

"Yeah, I s'pose," Autumn said in a large yawn. Then she turned to her side—knocking the now-empty food box onto the floor—& closed her eyes. Consciousness fully slipped 'way only a few seconds later.

II.

Autumn woke to gentle nudging on her side & whispering. After a few seconds, she recognized the voice as Edgar's, saying, "Autumn! Wake up!"

She blinked her eyes open & sat up, rubbing the side o' her face. It took her a while to remember why she was sleeping in this foreign room.

But the next thing she noticed was much mo' pressing: the room appeared to be so bright, despite the lights being out, that she turned to the window & saw the sun blazing near the top o' the sky.

"What time is it?" she muttered as she wiggled the glasses on her nose in pain.

Augh. Forgot to take my glasses off 'fore sleeping 'gain.

Edgar answered, "It's almost noon, but that's not important—"

"Why did I sleep in so long?" mumbled Autumn.

"Autumn, our suitcase is gone!"

Autumn's eyes widened, sobered to full consciousness now. She scrambled round the bed, lifting pillows & sheets, searching for the suitcase.

Edgar only shook his head as Autumn peered under the bed.

"I already checked: it's gone."

Autumn put her hands on her frazzled head. "I don't understand. I should've woke if somebody broke in & stole it... Then 'gain, I shouldn't have o'erslept, either."

Autumn gasped. "Wait..."

Then she stuffed hands in her pockets & Edgar noticed, to his fear, that her pupils dilate.

Next she checked the secret pockets in her skirt, her shoes, & her socks. They were all empty.

"This is impossible!" said Autumn, clutching the head o' the bed as if she were 'bout to faint. "How could I sleep through someone digging round my clothes, considering all the time it must've taken them to e'en *discover* some o' my hiding places?"

"You did really conk out last night," Edgar said timidly, wringing his hands round.

"Yeah, but that's no different from the many other times I..."

Autumn's eyes gazed round the room, searching for clues, only for them to latch onto the cup o' water still on her nightstand. She picked it up, opened its lid, & sniffed it. It had a milky smell that fit its taste.

"No..." she said as she continued to stare @ the cup. "They couldn't have. Why would the Rock Lobster be in on this... 'Less this motel & the Rock Lobster are both owned by the same people? How high up is this conspiracy?"

“What’s wrong?” asked Edgar.

Autumn sat on the bed ’gain, holding her aching head in her hands.

“OK, let’s consider this carefully, so we don’t allow our paranoia to tamper with the evidence,” Autumn muttered to herself. “How likely is it that they laced my water with sleep medicine?”

“What? Is that why you fell into such a deep sleep?” Edgar asked as he crawled o’er to her side o’ the bed.

Autumn paused, staring @ the cup & rubbing her chin.

“There’s only 1 way to find out...”

She reached for the cup & put it to her mouth, only for Edgar to stop her.

“Wait. You should have me drink it,” he said as he reached for the cup. “If you fall asleep ’gain we’ll be mo’ vulnerable than if I do.”

“Yeah, but what if it doesn’t work on skeletons?” asked Autumn.

“Then you can try it to be extra sure,” said Edgar.

Autumn couldn’t argue with that logic, so she handed the cup to Edgar.

“Don’t drink too much o’ it, though. I only took a few slurps, & look @ how it affected me.”

“I’ll try only a few & if it doesn’t work I’ll try mo’.”

“Good idea,” Autumn said with a nod.

But this was unnecessary, for only a few seconds after Edgar took a few slurps, his body slumped in tiredness & his head buzzed with drowsiness, & he soon couldn’t keep himself from lying down & sleeping.

Autumn nudged Edgar’s arm. “Edgar? You asleep?”

There was no answer.

She throttled his arm harder. “Edgar?” Then she leaned forward with her hands funneling her mouth & shouted, “Hello!”

Edgar still did not stir.

“Well, that answers that,” Autumn muttered to herself.

III.

When Edgar 'woke 'gain, he saw 2 things: 1, the sun hanging high outside the window showed that 'twas late afternoon, & 2, Autumn was gone.

In the beginning he began to panic a li'l, till he noticed the note left on the nightstand telling him that she was having Dawn examine something & that he should stay—she'd be back soon.

Since Edgar had nothing better to do—well, other than watch talk shows wherein guests hit each other with metal folding chairs—he decided to do a bit o' investigating himself in the motel.

He started downstairs, telling the clerk—the same clerk as last night—that someone had stolen their stuff last night.

“I told you you shouldn't have brought it,” said she. “What was wrong with the bed, TV, & lamp we offered?” Edgar could hear the bitterness in her voice.

“No, uh, not that—our briefcase is missing. & Autumn's money. Someone picked her pockets.”

“Did you lock your door?”

“Well, yeah, but Autumn said it didn't matter 'cause they have a key.”

“Who's 'they'?”

“Uh... I don't know. I guess the people who robbed us.”

“How does she know they have a key?”

Edgar shrugged. “Well, I mean, they got in, didn't they?”

The receptionist scratched her head.

“Gee, this sure is a bothersome itch.”

She dropped her hand & continued, “Anyway, I'm 'fraid there's nothing we can do to help you. You should be mo' careful with your

possessions.”

“But, uh... 1 o’ your staff, when he asked to clean our room, said that you guys offered some insurance policy to make up for the loss, right?”

The receptionist squinted @ Edgar. She’d left her glasses @ home today, & thus had trouble seeing.

“I’m ’fraid we do not offer such a policy, nor do we clean guests’ rooms while they still use them. I can offer you a # you can call if you need further assistance.”

“Uh... no, that’s OK. Sorry to bug you.” Edgar waved as tepidly as a leaf & left.

Well, that went nowhere, he thought as he headed back to his room. I guess I could look for some other staff member, but they’d probably be e’en less likely to help; & I doubt I could e’er get through to the # the receptionist offered.

Edgar sighed. *No, I should’ve known this’d fail. After all, wouldn’t Autumn have thought o’ it already? She probably did & already guessed the reasons why it wouldn’t work.*

Still blue in the mood, & still without else to do, Edgar sat on the bed & watched a show wherein a bunch o’ radio personnel laughed @ celebrities for criminally weighing too much or having sex a lot. It only took a few minutes for Edgar to develop the urge to hang himself, so he leaned forward to turn the TV off, only to be interrupted by the door opening.

“I figured out the culprit,” Autumn said as she burst in.

Laughter emitted from the television, followed by a voice saying, “Pretty soon she’ll have adopted all o’ Ethiopia.”

Autumn turned to the TV with a sour stare.

“What kind o’ garbage are you watching?”

“Ne’er mind that,” Edgar said as he hastily turned the TV off. “Who took it? Was it the guy pretending to be a room cleaner?”

With the TV's racket gone, Autumn turned back to Edgar & answered, "No... Wait, that guy was a fake?"

"That's what the receptionist said," said Edgar, breathless with excitement. "She also said they don't offer any insurance for lost items."

"Cheap asses," murmured Autumn. "Anyway, I had the hairs tested & they matched someone named 'Heloise Solstice,' whoever that is."

"That's that witch we worked for, remember?"

"No."

"Remember? We were supposed to capture some golden egg for her, but you tried to stiff her, so she locked us in a jar... Hey, how did we e'er get out o' there, anyway?"

"I don't remember anything like that happening e'er. You must've just dreamt that," Autumn said with a wave o' her hand. "Anyway, we need to track her down so I can get my loot back & show that finch why stealing from me is a bad idea."

IV.

'Course, Autumn couldn't teach her thief till she determined where the cackling asschasm was. This thief was smarter than Autumn expected, since she seemed to leave no records on the internet regarding her location—a'least, Autumn couldn't find any.

"Maybe we should just let it go," Edgar said slowly & unevenly as if his words tread bumps.

"I'm 'fraid that's impossible," Autumn said without turning her head 'way from her laptop. "My reputation's on the grill here. Nobody steals from me; it should be the other way round."

"Well, then what're you gonna do?"

"I have an idea, but it might be a byte extreme..."

“Which means you’ll ’specially want to do it,” said Edgar.

“If you want, I can leave you here to watch more o’ that riveting show you were watching.”

“No, I want to go. What is it?”

“Well, I know for sure that the government has this kind o’ record —”

“Surely you’re not thinking—”

“So, my plan was to sneak into a nearby police station to steal them,” said Autumn. “Since these police are, let’s be blunt, not the brightest bolts, it shouldn’t be too hard. I mean, there’s a reason they’ve yet to catch me, despite my other crimes.”

They aimed straight for the police station, dodging treacherous shoe salesmen, stumbling drunks, & some evangelist peddling a cult called the “Heavenly Republic” & warning ’bout some heretic in a green jacket.

They premiered with the perfect stealth plot: Autumn stood in front o’ the front door & knocked.

The door opened, ’hind which was a woman with curly hair & thick black shades. On her jacket was a nametag that said “Captain Margaret Napoleon.”

“Hello there, kids. Here to turn yourselves in for vandalism?”

Autumn extracted a notepad & pencil from her pockets. “Scuse me, Madame, but I’m an up-&-coming journalist, & I just wanted to ask if I could see a tour o’ the area for a practice paper.”

“Ah, I understand,” Captain Napoleon said with a nod.

Then she shut the door. Autumn could hear the click o’ a lock from the other side.

Autumn started biting her fist. “Hmm... Not 1 o’ my better plans.”

V.

“Don’t you think this is a li’l extreme?” asked Edgar.

“Don’t be goofy,” said Autumn. “What’d be extreme’d be me letting that thief get the best o’ me. Now come.”

She squeezed glue onto a pipe & plugged the pipe into the rest o’ the mechanism. ’Twas the last o’ the glue in the bottle, so she tossed the bottle ’hind her into a mountain o’ the others. While she did this, Edgar stood back & goggled @ the complex contraption.

Autumn rose & rubbed the grease from her hands to her skirt.

“OK, I think we’re ready.”

As they walked back to the front o’ the police station, Edgar asked, “What does that thing do?”

“You’ll see.”

She knocked & saw the curly-haired police officer from before.

“Say, didn’t I slam the door on you 2 before?” asked Captain Napoleon.

“Nope, that was our 2nd cousins.”

Napoleon nodded. “O, OK.”

Autumn poked a thumb o’ershoulder. “We want to show you something.”

“Well, I do like looking @ things...” Napoleon scratched her chin, which for some reason kept itching. “Well, OK.”

She followed Autumn & Edgar round the building to the back. There Autumn stopped & pointed @ the mad mechanism she’d crafted earlier: a tightly-wound mound o’ rusty gray pipes, dry red & brown bricks, carefully crushed pop cans, & objects the officer couldn’t e’en identify.

Captain Napoleon tipped her shades up & stepped closer.

“Wow, that is amazing. How did you make that thing?”

She waited for a response. When she didn't get 1, she looked round & saw that the other 2 were gone.

"Hey, where did you 2 go?" She scratched her head—not out o' itchiness this time; she just figured that's what you did in situations like these.

She turned her head when she heard a crash to her right & saw a maroon sedan's front embedded in a mountain o' white plastic glue bottles.

The driver hung his head out his window & raised a rumbling fist. "Bastard teens! Now they're leaving their crap in my way when I drive, too? Why're they all gainst me?"

The officer stared @ the mess with eyes wrinkled in consternation when she was suddenly spooked by a light tapping on her shoulder. She 360'd, expecting to see the ghostly manifestation o' all her regrets. 'Stead, she saw Officer Murphy.

"Scuse me if I'm interrupting something, Captain, but I just wanted to confirm this young woman's claim that she had permission to have all our files." Murphy's bushy brown mustache twiddled as he talked.

Captain Napoleon paused for a second, scrutinizing Murphy as her fuzzy head tried to understand what the hell he was talking 'bout, only for the pieces to all crash together in her head.

She threw her hands up to her head. "You fumbler! You fumbled it all!"

She rushed back to the station. Murphy hung back, scratching his head—he'd seen the other officers doing it, so he thought he'd do it to look cool—as he watched the space Captain Napoleon had ran 'way from.

Captain Napoleon reached the front o' the station just in time to see a red-ponytailed woman crossing the street with a cardboard box full o' papers in her arms. Napoleon stopped, facing the ponytailed

woman with a hand on her forehead, only to see the li'l robed skeleton scamper after her.

She funnelled her mouth with her hands & shouted, "Stop, scoundrel! You are flouting 1 o' the deepest o' civil laws!"

But she knew it'd do no good—telling criminals to stop criminalizing ne'er worked, for some reason. Usually she just bugged them by chewing saliva loudly or holding her finger near them & saying, "I'm not touching you..." repeatedly till they collapsed in cries & gave up; but this didn't seem like a scenario compatible with such tactics.

Captain Napoleon returned to her desk with her head hanging in her arms, ruing all her life's problems, such as the need to keep up her father's honor or just how this chapter's perspective somehow switched from the ponytailed woman's to hers so sneakily.

VI.

The mountain looked like an ice cream mix o' chocolate & mint, with dry rock on 1 side suddenly melting into a grassy hill. Science had no explanation for said phenomenon—a common occurrence, the postmodernists say, for we do live in merely an illusionary world. She specifically built her home here decades ago for this very scenery; a humble but comfortable home hand-made from wood o' various colors so that her house was erratically splotched with reds, browns, & grays.

Inside she sat @ her red plastic LEGO table, drinking her steaming cup o' Boskeopoleon brunch tea, as she did every late afternoon. She animated a plastic Velociraptor in 1 hand & a Togepi doll in the other, reenacting "The Great Battle on the Rainbow Road" as she wrote in *Discussions o' the Matters Involving Greater Public Participation in Heavenly Affairs*, the book o' her made-up religion.

Said reenactment was interrupted by a door knock—a 1st in many years. She couldn't e'en remember the last time someone had come by.

Ne'ertheless, she had expected this 1.

She slowly got up with her mug still in-hand & padded o'er to the door in her fuzzy pink slippers, hearing the knocks become heavier & heavier the longer she took.

Ventually, she opened the door. As she'd expected, the frowning young woman in the "PHAT LOOT" T-shirt was standing on the other side, 'long with her timid skeleton friend. A second after, she saw the young woman's sour glare twist into an expression somewhat less sour & much mo' muddled. Heloise smiled, e'en though she knew they wouldn't be able to see it from 'hind her orange avian mask.

Autumn's frown deepened 'gain. "So I caught you already preparing for 'nother scheme, eh?" She pushed her way forward into Heloise's house.

"Be my guest, please," Heloise said 'fore taking 'nother sip o' tea under her mask. She watched Edgar politely slide past her.

"Are you prepared to return my property you pilfered or will I have to repossess some o' your possessions to e'en the score?" Autumn asked as she swung her attention round the living room.

"You sure don't waste time with your lines, Madame," said Heloise. "You didn't e'en 'splain my crimes yet."

"We can flip the checkerboard already, *Madame*. Though you may have mistakenly thought I was such a sucker that you could simply slip in with your cute masks & slip 'way without me e'er finding you, I'm sad to say I'm not such a sucker. I didn't get where I am now by being robbed whenever I turn my back."

Heloise nodded. "I'm sure you didn't."

"So, will you show me where you're keeping my property & convenience us both?"

“What property?”

Autumn held her arms akimbo. “OK, so I s’pose you *will* play stupid then. Tell me, then: why did I find a strand o’ your hair in my motel room this morn?”

“O, Madame, surely you’re not so naïve that you didn’t know ’twas I who was all o’ those people—the man who tried to clean your room, the man @ the counter, the man who sent you to the motel itself. It’s rather obvious.”

Edgar’s fearful face vacillated ’tween Autumn & Heloise. Though Autumn’s expression was still calm, Heloise could see the dormant fury it contained.

“OK... Sure. I didn’t know that already,” said Autumn. “Then tell me, what you were doing in my room? Have a bullshit alibi for that?”

Heloise took a long sip o’ her tea, savoring it in her mouth as she watched Autumn’s patience drain from her face.

“Less you count ‘stealing your suitcase’ as an alibi, no.”

Autumn nodded. “So you admit it, then? Thank you for wasting all our time.”

Heloise smiled @ Autumn. “You’re welcome.”

“OK, so where is it?”

“O, why it’s o’er on that table right there,” Heloise said as she pointed to Autumn’s side.

“I’ve already looked round this whole—bullshit.” Autumn had turned just to humor Heloise, only to now see her suitcase, indeed, on a desk gainst the wall, right where Heloise was pointing.

“That wasn’t there before, but whatever,” Autumn said as she strode o’er to it. “Some subtle illusionist trick, I surmise.”

“I have quite a few other tricks, too, if you’re interested.”

“I’m not,” Autumn said as she started searching the briefcase.

She went o’er it a few mo’ times ’fore saying, “My cash is missing.”

“That’s ’cause I took it out.”

“Well, return it,” Autumn said as she waved the top half o’ her hand back & forward @ Heloise.

“I don’t have it.”

“Where is it then,” Autumn asked as she turned her head to Heloise with irritation.

That was when she noticed Heloise slowly backing up toward the wall ’hind her.

& *that* was when she felt the floor below her disappear. She looked down to see an airy black square below her.

“Ah, crap,” Autumn murmured to her feet ’fore gravity inevitable punched in, plummeting her into the abyss.

VII.

Autumn discovered herself tied in a chair, her wrists handcuffed ’hind her, her ankles tied to the front legs o’ her chair, & bizarrely, a small baby blue blanket o’er her lap. She couldn’t remember this happening; everything after falling down the trapdoor was a fog.

Nor did she recognize the strange room she was in, with walls covered in watercolors, pencil drawings that appeared to her to be just a bunch o’ incomprehensible blobs o’ color, & shelves stuffed with mysterious cans & boxes without labels.

As she examined her environs, she saw Edgar in the same predicament she was in, minus the strange blanket.

“Edgar, do you know where we are?” she whispered.

Edgar looked down in shame. “I didn’t want to cause any... conflict or anything, so I just let her tie me up... I’m sorry.”

“Did she e’er say what this blanket here’s for?” Autumn asked as she raised a knee to tip it up.

“She said ’twas for, um... modesty.”

Autumn nodded. “Yes, it’s important not to peek @ one’s knickers

'fore butchering them. We must be civil, after all."

They both turned their heads to the staircase when they heard a voice emerge from just 'bove it:

"O, good, she's awakened," Heloise said as she stepped in with a tray holding 2 bowls o' soup. "I hope you 2 aren't too uncomfortable."

Autumn stared sourly @ Heloise.

"& what do you think you're doing with us, you screwjob?"

"Bringing you your dinner," Heloise said as she set the tray on Autumn's lap. "See, the blanket also makes a superful soup-bowl pad." She picked up the spoon, full o' orange tomato broth. "Course, since your arms are... unusable for now, I should have to deliver the spoonfuls for you. Say 'ahhh."

Autumn bumped her knees up, knocking the tray o'er. Unfortunately, she failed to knock it forward as she'd intended, tipping it o'er toward her & spilling the bowl on her. She winced in pain as she felt the boiling liquid spread o'er her legs & stomach.

Heloise stepped back & shook her head with her hands on her sides.

"That's not how you eat soup."

Autumn opened her eyes & stared @ Heloise with a calm look, as if they had just had a mere business transaction.

"The second I break out o' here—& I will—I... You'll wish I didn't."

"Here, I'll help you clean that up," Heloise said as she began rubbing the blanket gainst Autumn's lap.

"Yeah, that's—"

Heloise looked up @ Autumn. "See, it also makes a good towel."

"Yeah, that's OK. You can stop now," said Autumn, looking 'way awkwardly. She wasn't sure if the fact that she couldn't see Heloise's face made it mo' or less awkward.

"You sure?" Heloise asked as she stepped back.

Autumn nodded solemnly.

Heloise raised a finger. "I know you'll probably sigh @ me, but you know, if you had mo' covering, it wouldn't have burned so much."

Autumn glanced @ Edgar. If she could control her hands, she'd spin a finger round her ear.

Heloise continued, "Anyway, who wants to watch the epic 'Battle o' the Bridge under Tear Clouds'?"

Autumn squinted, scrutinizing Heloise.

"What the hell you talking 'bout?"

Heloise clasped her hands together.

"Perfect! I'll go set it up."

& with that Heloise scampered back out the door, leaving Autumn to gape @ the empty space wherein Heloise used to be.

Autumn sat back with an uneasy frown. "We are clearly @ mercy o' someone dwelling in the apex o' insanity."

VIII.

"You shall ne'er pass, you heathen! The lord's superior wisdom will crush you all!" Heloise said in a deepened voice as she shook a big blue gorilla toy @ a Ninja Turtle action figure.

"Your tyrannical god shall fall to the superior justice o' the republic!" she said in a nasally voice as she wobbled the Ninja Turtle toy.

Autumn lay back as much as she could while still locked in her seat, her head tilted & her eyes glazed. Meanwhile, Edgar's face grew wrinkles as he watched the feverish scene play out in front o' him.

@ 1st Autumn saw only the gains in Madame Solstice's inane display: it distracted Heloise so much that she didn't pay any attention to what Autumn & Edgar were doing, allowing Autumn to

sneak into her back pocket & get out her cell so she could text the police.

Hopefully they won't be too bitter 'bout that whole pilfering all their files peccadillo...

& @ 1st, Autumn had attempted to spend her time thinking o' ways to 'scape or moneymaking schemes she could try when she 'ventually *did* 'scape, but found she couldn't think with the loud distraction in front o' her; so 'stead, she sufficed with staring round her surroundings, feeding her mind with insipid activities, such as counting ceiling tiles.

She tried this for almost a half hour 'fore she came to a depressing realization: the ceiling didn't e'en *have* tiles!

She groaned. "Is this nonsense almost finished?"

Heloise continued her play as if she hadn't heard Autumn.

Autumn leaned forward. "Hey, crazy masked lady. You have ears?"

Heloise had the Ninja Turtle toy tipped back in her hand while the tiger figure in her other hand leaned o'er it.

"No, this can't be it! You can't die! Not yet!" she said in a high-pitched croon.

She tepidly shook the Ninja Turtle toy.

"I... I'm not important... The revolution... Always think o' the revolution... It is through that that we will live eternally..." she said in a deep, scratchy tone.

"Augh. Ne'er mind," grunted Autumn.

She attempted to sleep, but couldn't get in a comfortable position in her infernal chair. The best she could do was hang her head forward o'er her chest like a vulture, which caused the back o' her neck to ache after a while.

As the hours piled, she became increasingly restless, with the same thought pounding in her head, *Where are those idiot cops*

already? I texted them hours ago!

4 hours later—after 5 false endings & a musical scene Autumn thought had far o'erstayed its welcome, all o' which were interspersed with insipid commercials for sugar-saturated cereal & exploitive for-profit colleges—Heloise finally ended her story with the victorious republicans hopping up & down in cheer. Then she buried all o' the toys under the table & brought out a pile o' cards, flipping through them 1-by-1, aiming them @ Autumn & Edgar. The cards listed off a litany o' obscure cinematic jobs, such as "Best Grip" or "Catering," all o' which were attributed to Heloise Solstice. Autumn was speechless—Edgar was, too; but then, he *always* was, anyway—as she gazed with unbelieving ire @ each card with heavy sighs.

Finally, Heloise dropped all o' the cards, looked directly @ Autumn & Edgar for the 1st time since she started her play, & asked, "So, what do you guys think? Do you think it could win a Meyer?"

Edgar looked timidly @ Autumn, expecting mo' uncomfortable conflict.

Autumn closed her eyes & took a deep breath 'fore saying, "Why did you waste our time with that moronic tripe?"

"Uh, Autumn..." said Edgar.

"No, no, no," said Autumn, shaking her head 'long with each word. "That story was objectively terrible—so much that it would take hours just to explain all o' its flaws. Let me start by pointing out that 4 hours was far too long for the content & that you relied heavily on filler, when cutting your play down to only 2 hours would've improved it immensely. Your casting is absolutely ridiculous: I hadn't realized God was a hand, Satan was the Noid, or that dinosaurs, anthropomorphic eggs, & 1 o' the Ninja Turtles were angels. Would it've killed you to go out & buy a few authentic angel toys? Are they truly that rare? & don't think I was so stupid as to not notice you

doing every voice, making them all sound the same. I actually closed my eyes during most o' the story—hoping to ignore it, 'cause 'twas dreadful—& I literally couldn't tell 1 character from 'nother, they sounded that similar. You could've a'least given each character her own speech patterns. & speaking o' stupidity, the viewer would have to be lobotomized not to notice the millions o' plot holes. For god's sake, 1 o' the prorepublican angels was in 2 different battles that were later revealed to have taken place @ *the same time*! Do angels have special warping skills or abilities to bend time? & this is for a story that was nothing but battle after battle after battle, with only a basic info dump explaining why this war was e'en happening. Apparently Satan was the 1st one to consider that letting 1 guy rule everyone arbitrarily might be a bad idea, & only after an immediate epiphany out o' nowhere that immediately leads him to work tirelessly to o'erthrow God, without e'en a question as to the risks. Anyone with e'en an elementary-school level o' political or historical education would know that this is not how political movements work @ all.

“& that's only a few errors I found in that dreck; but I'll stop here, or else we'll be here all day.”

She'd expected Heloise's eyes to bulge & for her to charge @ them, tearing them apart.

'Stead, Heloise merely bowed her head slightly & said, “Thank you for your honest words. 'Scuse me,” & then turned & went out the door.

Autumn turned to Edgar & said, “OK, so it looks like we'd better devise a way to scape quickly 'fore she does something truly danger—shit.”

She stopped when she heard the door open 'gain. Heloise walked in with a suitcase that looked just like Autumn's & sat it in front o' her. Then she walked 'hind her.

Autumn tilted her head o'er her shoulder as much as she could.

To her shock, she felt the handcuffs on her wrists loosen. She moved her hands & discovered that they were free. She pulled them in front o' her & gazed @ them in marvel, only for her attention to be snatched 'way by the loosening o' the ropes on her ankles.

Throughout all o' this the same thought hung on her mind: *What is she doing?*

When Heloise finished, she stood & stepped back, clapping her hands together dramatically, as if the ordeal had caused dust to cover them. Autumn also stood, amazed by her ability to do so after so long.

Before Autumn could do anything mo', Heloise picked up the suitcase & handed it to her. This only fed her confusion.

This did not seem to bother Heloise a byte. She simply said, "All the money I confiscated from your various pockets is in there. You can count if you want." She pointed a thumb @ Edgar. "Do you want me to release your skeletal friend, too, or do you want to do that?"

"What are you doing?" asked Autumn.

Heloise shook her head & tsk-tsked.

"1st she complains 'bout being robbed & locked up, now she complains 'bout being freed. Critics, you can ne'er please them."

"You truly expect me to be fooled by this obvious trap?" asked Autumn.

"Fraid there's no trap anymo', Madame," said Heloise. "I only needed you here to critique my play. I'm such a solitary person, you know, have no friends who will do it, so I had to find 'nother way to carry it out. I'm sorry if I was rude in doing so; I'm not very good in social situations, which is why I stay solitary. I hope you understand."

Autumn shook her head. "No. No, I don't understand. This makes no sense @ all."

Heloise picked up 1 o' Autumn's hands & gently patted it.

"Well, thank you, anyway, Madame. 'Twas a pleasure meeting you. I actually wouldn't mind having tea with you some morn—though I'm sure you would, I can imagine." She chuckled & turned to Edgar. "Anyway, your friend must be freed."

Autumn stood back & watched Heloise closely, waiting any minute for a trap to emerge. But none e'er did. There was no trap when Heloise released Edgar from his chair, there was no trap when Heloise offered them dinner & Autumn declined, there was no trap when she led them back out to her front door, & there was no trap when they walked 'way from the house in the warm summer night. Autumn had e'en made a quick scan o' the briefcase, expecting 1 last screw-you to be found inside; but when she rifled through it, she saw that all o' her stuff was indeed inside, including the sum o' all o' the money Autumn had held in her pockets.

It bothered Autumn so much that she expected a trap to come up throughout the entire long walk back to their apartment. But if there was 1, 'twas the stealthiest trap e'er devised, for Autumn had noticed nothing wrong happening throughout their whole peaceful walk—& that was what was wrong!

"She couldn't have done all that just so we could critique her idiotic play—only my doing so, & doing so immensely *negatively*, @ that," muttered Autumn.

"Well, you did say she was crazy..." said Edgar.

"It's just not right," Autumn murmured as she shook her head. "I ought to go back & demand she tie us back up & do it *right*."

"Must we?" asked Edgar. "It's getting awfully late."

He looked up @ the bright moon & was startled to see that it all o' a sudden had a sour face, aimed down @ some unlucky people. It must've noticed Edgar looking @ it, for it suddenly turned its glare @ Edgar.

& that was when they both learned that they'd both be inflicted with the most horrible o' curses for eons.

