

# B\$ke@p@is STORIES

## SEASON 3



**J.J.W. Mezun**

# **Boskeopolis Stories**

## **Season 3**

J. J. W. Mezun

Stories published 2015 July – 2016 June.

<http://boskeopolis-stories.com>





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Last Updated: 2016 December 8

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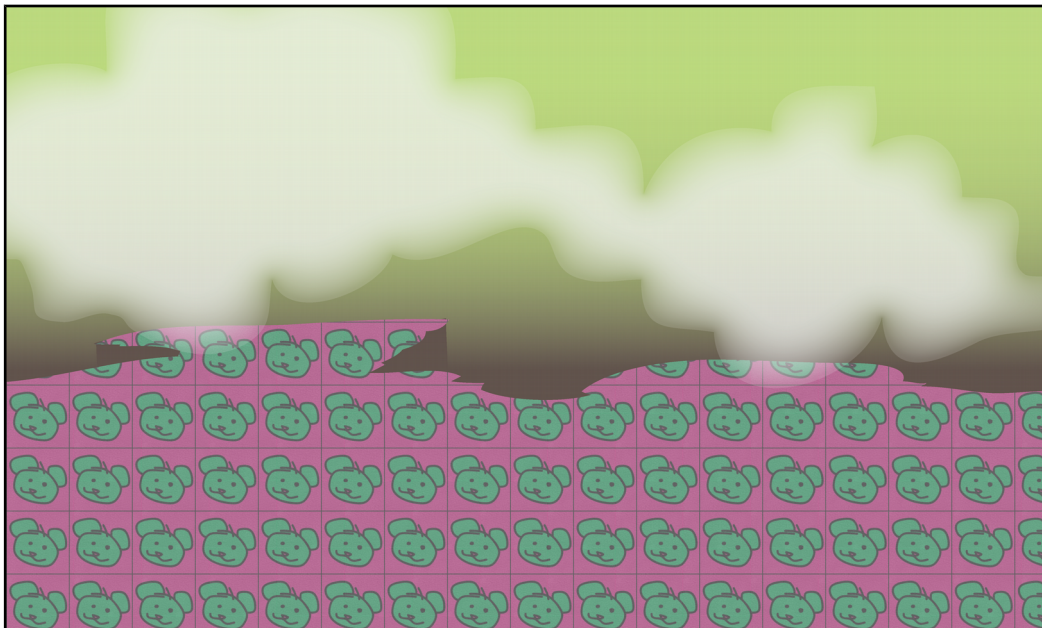
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#BOSK-CA2418-DREAMS

**SWEET DREAMS ARE MADE OF  
ARTIFICIAL SUGAR FOR ALL OF  
YOU READERS WITH DIABETUS  
YOU CAN THANK ME LATER**

J. J. W. Mezun | 2015 July 1



## I.

Boskeopolis was bathed in hushed tones o' cerulean, white stars piercing through black sky, while skyscrapers swam in the soft sound o' the city sawing logs: the purr o' car engines as they rumbled down streets, strewn with muffled honking—or e'en a stray siren; barks & howls & catcalls; the light cries o' far'way trains; & the general chaotic blowing o' the wind.

Lurking within 1 o' the thousands o' tiny rooms within many o' the hundreds o' buildings in Boskeopolis like 1 o' the million unknown spiders crawling 'long the ceiling o' a dark cave slumbered Autumn, Edgar, & Dawn—the earlier 2 huddled together on the floor under a few loose jackets & the last splayed o'er the couch with a limp arm hanging o'er the edge. One would expect that in such a thick heat wave as there was this night that Autumn & Edgar would least need to share their body heats, but reality was the opposite: like spiced wine, the burning in their chests only addicted them, making them want to voraciously kindle it e'en further.

Li'l did any realize, a red cast would soon swallow this ocean-colored city—probably 'cause their eyes were too closed & their minds too distant to know what palette this level used.

Prowling outside was the dastardly Lance Chamsby, twirling his metaphorical moustache with his literal white-gloved hands.

*These looters & looter apologists think they'd hit a year-long lull in my looter-busting, only for me to stab my scissors o' justice straight into the heart o' their security blanket.*

The matter o' sneaking in was harder. 'Course, as mayor, there were many ways he could force his way through their door; but none



were sufficiently covert for his tastes. After all, he wanted to strike when they were in their deepest comfort; & though his eyes & ears told him that nobody conscious was nearby, he still couldn't help feeling as if he were being watched.

This was why he waited till the warmest night o' the year, mid-July, to enact his plan: the chances that his targets would leave their window open to suck in the city's cooing breath was @ its greatest.

& sure 'nough, as precise as precipitation, as he scaled the etched side o' the brick wall up to their room on the 3rd floor, he saw the window a crack open. All that was 'tween him & the snug alcove inside was thin netting he easily defeated by the sharp edges o' his diamond ring.

Once through the threshold, he was walled by the temperature spike inside. E'en if he weren't so nervous 'bout his plot's success, his skin'd still drown him in sweat. Speaking o' which, he was equally bricked by the clean smell o' sharp air being replaced by the muggy mix o' sweaty socks & rainy tombstones.

*Ugh. ¿Are these idiots so lazy they can't e'en be bothered to ring their personal cleaning service to freshen the air?*

He flicked on his flashlight & searched round the darkness to find a tiny space consumed by piles o' what Lance could only identify as senseless rubbish. He ignored it for now, focusing 'stead on his mo' mortal targets.

He soon found his main 1 lying on the spongy carpet with its arms wrapped round its personal slave, as any other treasure.

He stepped forward with his fingers curling & straightening by his side, only to fumble as he felt some hard plastic break his gait's balance. He waved his hands out & swayed forward & back, a thread 'way from tumbling onto Autumn & Edgar.

He managed to regain balance & stop before the 2.

Then something odd happened: abruptly his vision began to blur

into a light purple-gray, gradually expanding & swallowing all vision as billowing smoke—only this smoke provided its own light.

## II.

Lance threw a couple swift steps backward. It did no good: the smoke remained round him.

He couldn't help noticing that the floor felt much less cluttered since the smoke appeared.

He felt round 'hind him as he walked farther back, hoping to find the window in case he needed to make a hasty 'scape. But after what must've been a'least 3 meters, he still hadn't found any wall or window.

*This is clearly a devious trap o' hers,* he thought as his eyes swung left & right like Ping-Pong balls. *She knew I'd come to destroy her & set up this crafty alarm system in preparation.*

Lance strained his eyes & turned in 360s when he noticed the smoke start to dissipate, hoping to spy Autumn before she struck. He stopped open-jawed when he saw not the messy dark room from before, but a warmly-lit, cozy home—a suburban house, from the look o' the windows outside—with burnt-sienna wallpaper in bold lines. In the middle o' the reflective wooden floor was a mahogany table covered in checkered & floral table cloths, pastel candles, & silver-lined dishes. Round the table sat the main looter herself & the looter accomplice.

Outside Lance could see the roofs & trees & streets covered in snow. He could hear the faint rattling o' a heater drumming warm air into the room; he could feel by the contrast o' its blown air with the still air gainst his skin that without it he'd be freezing.

He heard the door creak 'hind him & swung round to see the skeleton in a chef's hat walk in with a cake taller than his head,

covered in icing o' various pastel colors mixed together as if he tagged it like a common thug.

"The cake's ready," he said in a cheery voice.

"¡So! Thought you would sneak attack me from the back, ¿eh? ¿Is that not part o' the dark arts o' communism you keep in your Marxist spell books?"

Edgar stopped, levity instantly wiped 'way by fear. He shook so much that the cake rattled on its plate.

"¿Chamsby? ¿What are you doing in my dream?"

"¿Dream? I don't recognize that term. Speak good ol' Boskeopoleon English, man." He pointed @ the cake. "& that cake: I'm sure you probably pilfered that from some lightly famished 1%er. ¿Now what's he gonna have to supplement his fish pie midnight snack?"

But Edgar shook his head. "N-no. Uh uh. I made this cake myself... Well, I think I did. 'Twas all a blur, truly."

"You *think* you did. Right," Lance said as he stared Edgar up & down.

"Anyway, I need to serve this to Autumn & Dawn..." said Edgar.

"¿Why? ¿So they can spoil this good cake with their socialistic digestive juices? I don't think so."

Lance grasped the edges o' the plate closest to him & pulled, only to find that the other edge was stuck, as if the skeleton were still holding it for some reason.

"Let go," Lance grunted, sweat pouring down his face from the exertion. "I'm confiscating this cake."

"Please, ¡don't!" cried Edgar.

"I'm giving this to someone who better deserves this," said Lance.

"Chamsby, this is... this is unfair property redistribution. This is the confectionery version o' a bail-out."

Lance released his edge & gasped. "Why, ¡I ne'er heard such

libel!”

With the lack o’ balancing force, Edgar’s pulling caused him to fall backward back into the kitchen & onto the floor, the cake splatting into a mess o’ gibs, its deep red strawberry sauce leaking o’er the checkered linoleum floor like blood.

Lance looked @ both the cake & Edgar with disgust.

“Augh. You’re e’en worse than a Marxist: you’re a plain ol’-fashioned Luddite. Can’t get what you want, so you destroy it, ¿huh?”

Edgar wasn’t listening. He’d already turned round & stared down @ the cake sprayed all o’er the floor, sighing.

Autumn & Dawn both poked their heads in through the door, which caused Lance’s body to convulse in both directions. He finally turned round to face them & said, “I see you’ve learned the same sneaky techniques as this thief here.”

They didn’t seem to acknowledge his existence. ’Stead, their eyes were purely on Edgar.

“¿Is everything all right?” asked Autumn.

“We heard a crash,” added Dawn.

Autumn’s eyes lowered, the mix o’ bright colors splattered all o’er the floor yanking her attention.

“Uh oh. ¿Was there an accident here?” asked Autumn.

“I, um...” said Edgar.

But Lance interrupted him: “He refused to let me right the economic wrong he’d perpetrated; & thus bound to be foiled, he intentionally destroyed it, ensuring that this wrong could ne’er be righted. I can only imagine that your antiproperty teachings are the source o’ this sentiment.”

Autumn looked back @ Edgar. “Wait, ¿you *intentionally* destroyed it?”

“¿Why?” asked Dawn.

“But I didn’t—”

“¿Did you not hear me?” Lance said as he threw his hands up. “¡’Twas for mindless political disruption, I say! You lefties ne’er sit still to think ’bout things in their abstract complexities, which is why you can ne’er understand...”

Autumn & Dawn continued to talk through Lance as if he were a ghost.

“Don’t fret o’er it,” said Autumn.

“We have no reason to be angry, after all,” Dawn said with a concerned tilt o’ her head. “Just confused.”

“But... but... but I truly wanted you 2 to taste it & feel its sugary essence roll round your bellies like benign tapeworms,” said Edgar.

Lance crossed his arms. “So, ¿is everyone just going to ignore me now? Hmmp. Typical o’ the liberal media.”

Dawn nodded. “We understand you didn’t do it on purpose.”

“Yeah, don’t stress yourself o’er it,” said Autumn. “We can just eat tree bark or battery acid from 1 o’ the maples out front ’stead. No need to worry.”

Lance threw his arms out ’gain. “O, ¡come on! ¿Nobody’s going to comment on my conspicuously forced political reference? It didn’t e’en make any sense. ¿What do you 2 idiots have to do with the media?”

“No...” Edgar said in a low voice as if talking to a criminal mastermind ’bout to implode the world. “Please don’t. Anything but that.”

“Don’t be so panicky,” said Autumn; “I’m sure only half o’ our internal organs will be liquefied.”

“Yeah, we’ll still have the other half,” Dawn said with ’nother nod.

Lance began hopping round in front o’ the 2, waving his arms round. He couldn’t imagine how they could miss the ear-blasting click his feet made gainst the solid tile floor.

“¡Hey! ¡Give me attention! ¡Give me attention!” he shouted.



Suddenly, he felt dry spiderlike fingers clutch his collar & pull him in. He turned his head, ready to unleash the full eruption o' his reasoning powers, only to see 'twas just the skeleton with a horrified expression in its yawning eyeholes.

“¡You have to tell them what you did! You have to make them believe me.”

“Augh. You’re just like a beggar. 1st you groddy up my cloak with your corpse fingers & then you demand me to do things for you. Pull yourself up by your phalanges, man.”

Edgar looked 'way from Lance & up @ Dawn when she began to whisper to Autumn:

“You know, I think he’s finally getting sick o’ us. Always so demanding.”

“No...” Edgar muttered as he shook his head.

But Autumn nodded. “I concur. We should give him some peace for once.”

Then she & Dawn turned & began to walk 'way.

“¡Wait! ¡Don’t go!” Edgar wailed as he pushed past Lance.

But he saw Autumn & Dawn gradually fade as they left, till their footsteps became mute & they could be seen no mo’.

Lance, finally getting that skeletons hands off him, readjusted & dusted off his collar.

“Hmmp. I don’t see what he’s hollering 'bout. I’d think a reprieve from those leaf-heads would be a blessing.”

“¿Autumn? ¿Dawn? ¿Where did you 2 go?” Edgar called out, still incapable o’ believing what his eyes showed him. “¿Guys?”

Lance still stood in the middle o’ the kitchen, wondering what to do next. That was when something moving caught his eyes: he glanced in its direction to see... what he thought was some subtle movement o’ the walls.

“¿Is it me, or is this room getting smaller?” Lance said 'loud to no

one in particular.

Suddenly, Edgar's head popped in through the door like a John-in-the-Pyramid & called loudly, "¿Autumn? ¿Did you return here?"

"¡Gah!" Lance shouted as he swung round. "¡Stop sneaking up on me!"

"They... they actually left..." mumbled Edgar.

Lance rubbed his chin. "Yes. It'll be hard to destroy her now, I s'pose."

Lance looked up as he noticed the lights ease into darkness.

"Hmmp. Not surprised," his voice said, his lips shrouded. "I'd figure they wouldn't pay their electricity bills. Well, look where it got them now. ¿Will it now teach them the importance o' responsibility? I doubt it."

The kitchen was quiet now. All Chamsby could hear was the light ticking o' bones tapping gainst bones from Edgar's shivering.

"¡Kalecki! ¿Would you turn down that loud rock 'n roll? It's making my ears feel itchy."

Edgar didn't answer him. 'Stead, he muttered, "Autumn... Autumn... Wait... When I am 'lone... The crows could—"

"I *wish* you were 'lone, so I wouldn't have to listen to you," said Lance.

Lance was 'bout to get his wish: the mildly creepy blackness faded into a ghastly gray as smoke smothered him once mo', causing his eyes to sweat 'neath its blushing pastel edges.

### III.

The gloom resumed, but the cozy cold heat was replaced by the familiar loose warm breeze. Lance could see by the silhouettes in the light o' the flashlight in his hand once mo' that he was back in the apartment o' the looter's personal Friedrich Engels.

He leapt back as he heard mouth-splashing murmurs below him, & aimed his beam down to see that 'twas the skeleton tossing 'bout gainst Autumn's arms.

"Autumn... Autumn... Please don't go... Please, somebody..." he murmured with creaks in his throat.

Lance swooped back into 1 o' the darkest corners o' the apartment with the speed & silence o' an owl when he saw the skeleton slowly sit up. He was panting—the skeleton, not Lance, 'course—and turned his head round the room, but without seeming to see anything @ all.

Then the skeleton's attention arrowed down on Autumn & then up @ Dawn on the couch. Apparently assured he hadn't woken either, he slid back down into Autumn's clutch, turned on his side, & lay still. Since Edgar had no eyelids, Lance had to judge whether he was asleep by subtler cues, much to his ire.

Lance slowly stood once mo', cringing @ e'en the soft sound o' the feet o' his cloak & the fat o' his sleeves drooping.

But rather than moving in 'gain so quickly, he stood & stared @ the skeleton with wide-eyed uncertainty.

*¿What did he just do to me? ¿Did he use some o' his devilish magic to transport me to some secret nice suburban home they stole, hoping to destroy me where the law couldn't reach them? 'Cause I sure know these bums couldn't afford that nice o' a house legitimately.*

*Well, either way, they failed. Clearly, the skeleton was trying to poison me with his pilfered pastry, which he knew I'd recognize as stolen & knew I'd demand to be returned, being the law-abiding citizen I am.*

*But unfortunately, these villains plan their li'l plans as socialists plan their economies: without taking individual distinctions into consideration. They failed to realize I would not be tempted into taking a taste o' their ill-begotten cake, & thus rather than taking the poison, I*

*properly disposed o' it, thus angering the other harpies 'nough to cut the skeleton out.*

*& thus, having already failed, he lost the will to use his mendacious magic, automatically returning me to their odorous apartment.*

*Still, I should take care to stay 'way from that skeleton so he doesn't try any other magic tricks on me.*

He stepped toward Autumn from the other side, moving in the space 'tween her & the couch. Unfortunately, he'd become so used to the clutterless carpet o' the home from far 'way that he'd forgotten this apartment's accidental alarm system & felt a foot become snagged on something wiry. He aimed his flashlight down on it to see that 'twas a metal coat hanger.

*Hmmph. Wonder what they have that for. Certainly not for hanging clothes, the slobs. No, considering all o' the sex-fueled parties I'm sure they have, it's quite obvious, he thought with disgust: playing pirate with pretend hook hands, obviously.*

He carefully unhooked his foot & took 'nother step, only for that step to land on 'nother piece o' thick plastic. This time, however, 'stead o' moving, & almost certainly causing his balance to slip, he stayed still for a few seconds to steady himself.

This was spoiled by the jolt he felt jog up said leg, becoming sharper & sharper the longer he remained till finally he couldn't stand it anymo' & rushed forward, smashing his shin into a li'l coffee table he somehow missed, which caused him to leap sideways, only to topple onto the couch, which unfortunately had someone's legs on it.

He jumped up, expecting the legs' owner to wake, but 'stead saw the room fill with the same neon smoke he saw before.

#### IV.

Lance could not grasp the true form o' Dawn's dream. Nobody could—not e'en she. Visions spun round Chamsby's eyes so rapidly that they were but haunting blurs leaving rusted scars 'cross his retinas. Noises punched fists through his ear's throats, pulling them in 1 direction, only for their rhythms & medleys to suddenly drop or leap, twisted into an utterly different combination. 1 second, he's watching a black & white doodle o' a finger move up & down 'side a doodle ear while simplistic MIDI music droned & the rope to a cartoon bomb straight out o' an old 90s Nickelodeon show burns down, ending with the finger jabbing into the ear with the sound o' an unidentifiable animal noise just before the bomb explodes into spiky red. Next he sees a freakishly hyper-realistic Autumn in overalls clearly too big for her & a scribbly mustache. She simply stands there staring forward into space with blank eyes for 8 seconds. Then a giant naked boot had squashed that image 'way forever. In its place was a sketchy ink drawing that will look as if it came from the 18th century o' Edgar in a corn-colored wizard's hat with a black top hat in the same style just before him. Classical music playing throughout. The image jerks 'tween 2 frames o' Edgar normally & Edgar swinging his scepter forward. Eventually, a soft crescendo will play as a 3D-generated lamp head have stretched out the hat, bounce a ball on its head as a trained seal.

Before Chamsby had time to decipher these images, he found himself locked out, standing before a lonely arcade machine in a room otherwise surrounded in licorice black, the only light being the dusty li'l screen into madness Chamsby's tiny eyes had been looking into. ¿But for how long? The teary strain he felt in his sockets & the lazy burn on the tip o' his head told him it must've been hours.



He turned 'way from the machine & looked round the rest o' the room, only to see everything else cloaked in darkness. That was when he noticed the cold touch o' metal in his hand & felt round it with his thumb to realize he had his flashlight once mo'. He flicked it on & swung its beam round to reveal an empty compound whose only interesting feature was a case o' stairs leading upward in a spiral.

He walked up to it & looked round the corner, only to see that it spiraled e'en mo', making it impossible to see mo' than a few meters upward from where he stood.

*Well, there's no other way out o' here. It'd be better to force the weasely looters to attack me head-on than stay down here as a servile slave.*

So he climbed up the plush burgundy stairs, wondering 'bout the contradiction 'tween the barren, Soviet gray walls from below & the stairs straight out o' a New Yorkian hotel. As he climbed higher, he heard strange xylophone music begin to play, rising & falling in disjointed pitches while equally erratic strings & bass played 'hind it.

*Huh. Thought they could torture me before I made it to the top, ¿did they?*

He stormed up the stairs as if storming the People's Palace, ignoring the cacophony from his captors 'bove.

But after 'bout 5 minutes o' nonstop climbing, he thought, *¿How long are these stairs?*

His patience became thinner & thinner the farther he climbed without any end in sight. What began as a march had devolved into a trudge, his arm hooked onto the railing & his body lurched o'er as if he'd collapse if he weren't holding onto said railing.

Lance stopped & rubbed his forehead frantically, which felt invaded by many tiny wasps, each note o' the looping xylophone symphony like a sting that cut 1 o' the few strings still holding up his

sanity, the heat o' his sweat dripping down the sides o' his face that was burning with itches as if he were being smothered in suffocating sweaters, as if his face were liquefying.

*¡Augh! ¿When will this stupid staircase end?*

He turned round, half thinking 'bout going back down, when he saw the bottom end o' the staircase—the part that led back to the empty room with the lonely arcade machine—was just 'hind him, as if he'd been walking in place on a treadmill for the past 10 minutes.

Lance held his hands up to the sides o' his head like a screeching hear-no-evil monkey.

*¡That's impossible! ¡I watched my feet move up the steps, felt my body move!*

'Twas obvious that the skeleton was using his magical powers to break the laws o' physics 'gain. 'Twas the problem with crazy anarchists like them; they think laws are just put there as suggestions & that they can break them whenever they want, & then whine when they must suffer the consequences o' their individual actions—such as Lance was sure Edgar would do when he accidentally causes the universe to implode on itself & begs for his precious government to bail the universe out with *Lance's* tax dollars.

He turned forward 'gain & saw, to his supplemented shock, that 'stead o' seeing further stairs—what he saw the last time he looked in this direction—he saw the end o' the stairs, opening to outside...

A'least, he *thought* 'twas s'posed to be outside. It certainly didn't look like any outside he'd e'er seen before. The ground was covered in fuzzy pink tiles with kitten faces on them, pasted ad nauseam all o'er the ground, which snaked round in sharp-edged thin paths, bordered by tall cliffs into a black abyss. So thick was the lime green fog that Lance could only see that which was just in front o' his face, which included a few buildings with wallpaper comprised o' black-

and-white photographs o' random people.

As for the xylophone music, it disappeared; 'twas replaced by an e'en eerier 3-second horn loop repeated o'er & o'er 'gain with a volume that could set off powder kegs.

Lance slowly turned round before these visuals caused his eyes to break out in hives. Unfortunately, what he saw in the other direction was no better. Rather than seeing the lonely arcade room, 'stead he found himself face-to-face with a giant polygonal gray face whose haunting sterility couldn't be described by mere English, with flat eyelids & many legs popping out round its face like the hairs o' a lion's mane. Everything 'bout this creature spelled broken biology, cried from a lifeless machine for life it could not have, from a genetically-malfunctioning beast for rest it could not have.

Lance immediately took a few gallops backward, his heart choking on its own blood & his cloak shriveling in urine, only for him to be distracted by a sudden shout by the voice o' a man who sounds as if he'd hammered his own thumb, "¡WHAT THE FUCK!"

Lance swung round, eyes hunting for the source o' the scissor-rusted scream. He couldn't find any life in front o' him—though the fog choked so much vision, he couldn't confirm that that meant anything.

He glanced 'hind him @ the geometric visage; but though the many minifeet continued to dance round the head as sunrays, the thing itself stayed stationary.

Lance took a step forward, only to hear the same yell as before: "¡WHAT THE FUCK!"

Once 'gain, Lance looked round; & once 'gain, Lance saw no clue as to the exclamation's origins.

He took 'nother step, & heard 'nother, "¡WHAT THE FUCK!"

Lance lifted his eyebrows. He took 'nother step. 'Nother "WHAT THE FUCK!" When he took yet 'nother, the same happened.

He swung round & shouted to no one in particular, “What is going on her—¡AHHH!”

Suddenly, a figure covered in a gray raincoat was floating just before him, its face shrouded completely under its rain cap.

“No... stop...” gibbered Lance.

“¡WHAT THE FUCK!”

He took a slow step backward. Then he took ’nother.

“¡WHAT THE FUCK!”

The figure loomed closer.

“¡Don’t come closer!” Lance said with a hand thrust out.

“¡WHAT THE FUCK!”

“I’ll call the proper authorities on you.” Lance tried to speak with venom, only to have his heavy breaths knock the wind out o’ it.

“¡WHAT THE FUCK!”

The figure stopped a meter before Lance & pulled its hat back with its sleeve to reveal Dawn’s cheerful face.

“Watch out, Sir Chamsby.”

“Wha—¡AHHH! ¡Nooo!”

Lance felt the empty ground ’neath his next step just before he tumbled o’er, nothing but constant darkness in front o’ him now.

*¿What happens now?*

What happened was the blackness faded to gray smoke, & when that faded ’way, he was back in Dawn’s apartment once mo’.

## V.

This time Lance aimed his flashlight straight down, his rattling eyes watching every pixel o’ the crumb-crawling carpet for objects hatching devious plots to vacation his steps, his feet bending & slithering round them. As he did so, he noticed that everything round the beam looked subtly lighter than before—mo’ a deep blue

than an almost-black.

This was when he saw the black box with a thin antennae poking out 1 side & a large red button on the front—what looked mo' like a movie prop than any authentic device.

*Now, ¿what could this be used for? Something heinous, I presume.* He smiled as he directed both it & the flashlight on Autumn. *Well, we'll see how she likes it when it's used on her.*

He pressed the button, the vision o' her exploding into friendly, clean dust billows; her melting into juices; or her leaping up into the air with a pained expression & falling off the screen steering through Lance's eyes as if there were a delay 'tween his eyes & reality in his favor.

'Twas a long delay. He stood there & stared @ Autumn, waiting with hooked breathing.

Suddenly, he saw Autumn's mouth begin to move:

"I hope you're not holding your bladder on that doing anything, 'cause it won't."

Lance staggered backward, causing him to topple o'er a barrel covered in a white star pattern.

"I hope you're not o' the misapprehension that you invaded this home stealthily," said Autumn, her eyes still closed. "Note: when one spends much o' one's life out in the streets or in flimsily-guarded apartments like this, one learns not to sleep soundly, in case crazy swabbers like you try to kill me, or worse."

"I'm not surprised that you would hatch such a bitter scheme," Lance said as he dropped the device & stuffed his hands in his cloak.

"It's true: not wanting to be murdered in my sleep is awfully rude o' me," Autumn said as she opened the eye closest to Lance a crack.

Then her eyes ripped open when she felt a tiny piercing in her arm nearest Lance.

"Unfortunately, that failed, anyway," said Lance. "Nighty-night,



Autumn. This will be the last year you fall.”

Autumn clutched her left arm & felt the end o’ a dart. However, before she could do anything further, she felt the tickle o’ drowsiness infest her throat & eyes, the latter o’ which slid shut. Finally, her head tilted o’er to the side, her whole body as still as a deactivated droid.

Lance laughed as he stepped forward, his hands back in his cloak, searching for his “Ingot o’ Justice.”

But as his foot fell, it hit a hard piece o’ plastic & caused him to slip forward, toppling face 1st in front o’ Autumn.

He raised his face to see he was a mere half a meter ’way from Autumn. He struggled his arm out from under him & held the heavy nugget ’bove Autumn’s face.

“May mammon claim her sacrifice for justice,” Lance murmured softly.

But before he could drop it, he saw the glowing billows rise once mo’. His eyes widened.

*That’s it... that’s what the device does.*

## VI.

When the neon fog vanished, Lance found himself still in the apartment room, but this time much brighter than before. He could see through the open windows that the sun was already up in its mid-morning height. The apartment was also noisier & filled with far mo’ people, most o’ whom Lance had ne’er seen before. They were all in business clothing & most o’ them were holding cameras & flashing pictures.

He turned to where they were all staring & saw Edgar smiling under a chef’s hat before a giant golden cake. ’Side him was the woman in the ugly jacket with some strange goggles o’er her face. In

front o' her was a pile o' vials holding liquids o' every color in the rainbow.

*¿How do I keep ending up in these idiots' dreams? ¿Why doesn't that cowardly looter stop hiding 'hind her pathetic friends & challenge me directly?*

"How did you e'er make such an amazing confection, Sir Winters," said somebody, his words tripping o'er his gasps.

"O... I dunno. 'Twas nothing, truly," Edgar said as he ducked his head & scratched the back o' his skull.

"¿& you, Madame Summers!" exclaimed someone else, almost pushing the other interviewer 'way. "¿How did you e'er devise such a convoluted exploit to find the "Serum for Everlasting Life," which the Programmers meant to dummy out?"

She shrugged. "It wasn't that hard. A year ago I discovered that using a teleport potion just as I was walking in front o' someone 'bout to talk to me interrupts the talking algorithm, but without ending it, thus causing the world to confuse regular world-traversing pointers with conversation pointers. Boskeopolis is exceptionally sloppily coded; you can find errors evrywere. Anyway, as I experimented with this, I discovered that talking to certain people makes the 6th item in my pocket change—*making sure I alert people from a distance, 'course*; if you try walking right up to someone & conversing with them, the world will freeze for eternity. Boskeopolis's code will completely lock up. Anyway, I tested this on various people & found that talking to Arnold Druitt, the manager o' the motel on Apple Avenue, turns it into the elusive "Serum for Everlasting Life," or as it's called in the original Moidi, since 'twas ne'er translated, "Sewòm olaga mau lo ika wapa."

The crowd began clapping. "That's amazing," muttered 'nother someone.

Lance's eyes wandered 'way from them & round the rest o' the

apartment, hoping to find Autumn. As he looked round the floor, wondering if Autumn was still sleeping there & he simply missed her, he lifted a leg & shrieked when he saw a large rat standing under the shadow o' the couch's right arm, its beady eyes staring @ the crowd.

*Leave it to these slobs to have rats crawling round their apartment.  
¿Are these idiots so lazy they can't e'en be bothered to ring their  
personal rat exterminator to exterminate their rats?*

Then he saw the rat's eyes turn to him & swore he saw them tilt downward in anger.

A moment after, it lunged for him like lightning.

“¡Ahhh! ¡Get off me, you dirty Jacobin!” he shouted as he wiggled the leg 'twas biting.

Then it hopped up from there & bit @ his nose.

“¡Stop! Hey, idiots, ¿will you stop this rat from attacking 1 o' your guests? ¡I ought to sue you for every point you have for this assault!”

But no one replied, nor e'en glanced in his direction.

Lance dug through his cloak, pulled out his ingot, & then slammed it o'er the rat, only for it to leap 'way @ the final second, causing him to smash his nose 'stead.

Muttering curses, Lance flipped back onto his hands & feet & crawled after the rat, only to find it running faster than him. He flung his ingot @ the rat, only for it to fall a meter in front o' him.

However, as the rat reached the wall, it turned & dashed in the other direction. It all happened so fast, it took Lance a second to notice so that by the time he started chasing it, 'twas already meters 'head.

The crowd ran out the front door with gasps as the rat ran through them, followed by Lance, his nugget held up 'bove his head as before. Edgar eyed the rat, bent down, & picked it up.

“Shhh... It's OK, li'l guy. You're OK...”

He turned to Dawn & said, "It's shivering. Do you have any juice to calm it?"

"This rat attacks me, ¿& you try to help it?" Lance said bitterly, interspersed with short gasps. "You socialists insist on helping the worst @ the loss o' the best, thus ensuring a gradual fall to mediocrity & then destruction."

"Let me check," Dawn said as she searched her pockets.

But before she could, the rat busted out o' Edgar's hands & hid under the couch.

"Whoa. Poor li'l guy," said Edgar. He bent his head lower & peered into the dark tunnels under the couch with a look o' concern. "You don't need to be 'fraid; we won't hurt you."

Edgar opened the fridge & took out a li'l hunk o' cheese.

"Here you go, li'l guy. No need to worry," Edgar said as he set the cheese down on the linoleum floor. "I won't hurt you. Just come & eat."

They saw no movement from under the couch.

"I'll get the li'l bastard," Lance said as he charged for the couch. "Give it food. Please," he muttered. "¿Haven't they heard the saying? If you give a mouse cheese, it'll keep asking for mo', & their grating squeaks will drive you insane."

He bent down right next to the couch & peered under it, only to have the rat charge @ him, clawing @ his eye.

"¡Augh! ¡You li'l shit!" he shouted as he stood with his palm dug into the wounded eye. After a few beats o' nursing his eye, he said with strained cords, "Ooo. I know how I can get you."

He slid a slab o' plastic under the couch & then ran all the way to the other side o' the room with his ears covered & his face turned 'way.

*¡A brilliant solution!*

There were a few beeps, & then an explosion, filling the room

with smoke; but Chamsby quickly realized that this was no ordinary couch-exploding smoke: 'twas the same glowing smoke he'd already seen many times before.

## VII.

Autumn sat up & rubbed her groggy face while she gazed blankly @ the blurry cerulean apartment with slow breathing.

That was when she noticed something suddenly move next to her, causing her to grasp round the floor for her glasses. When she finally found them, she jumped out from under the covers. As she put the glasses on, she heard a thick thump just below her.

"Brad DeLong..." she heard a familiar voice mutter; & when she looked up @ the figure, she saw Lance Chamsby.

Autumn unleashed a heavy breath. "You have 1 second to get out now."

Lance snuck a hand into his cloak. "OK, that sounds fai—;Die, commie!"

He leapt forward with a knife in-hand, only for Autumn to intercept it, grasping & twisting his wrist.

";Ow! ;Stop! ;I need that hand for important work!"

"Then save it for your own tiny knife," Autumn said hoarsely as she twisted the knife out o' his hand.

Then, before he could move 'way, she grasped him by the arm & shoved him toward the window.

"You won't get 'way with stealing my knife, fiend," Lance shouted with a fist in the air.

She leaned toward him & whispered, "You climbed in, so you better climb out, or I'll push you out & hope you land in the bushes... or not."

She pocketed the knife, grabbed Lance by both his arms, &

pushed him out the window, hanging down the edge from her arms. To her surprise, he didn't seem to struggle much; in fact, he muttered, "All right, I can climb down; I don't know 'bout you, but I don't need movement welfare, thanks."

The second his hands left the window, she shut it & locked it tightly. Then she turned back to the rest o' the room—light 'nough to see everything's basic shape, but dim 'nough to be ugly. Both Edgar & Dawn appeared to be sleeping. Then she stared down @ her hand deeply.

Then she sighed. & then she stood, walked o'er to her robe hanging off an arm o' the couch, & put it on. She opened the door, slipped out, & then closed it 'hind her.

She crept into the 1st alley she found, housing a maple tree. She sat under it, glanced round herself for a moment, & then began jabbing the knife into her palm.

However, she stopped when she heard the sound o' scraping heels. She paused for a minute or so, only to hear nothing afterward. When she was convinced 'twas nothing but blowing debris, she moved to jab the knife in 'gain, only to hear mo' noise—this time the scrape o' whispers.

After a minute or so, Autumn said 'loud, "I'll make you a deal, Lance; get lost & I won't stab this into you, 'stead."

Lance jumped out from 'hind the alley's left wall & said with a finger aimed @ her, "You're a whackjob, you know that, ¿right? Don't think I can't tell you're trying some trick—trying to poison me with some poisoned blood you have, ¿perhaps?"

"& you're stalking someone so you can stab them with a knife; ¿what does that make you? 'Sides, you should be glad I'm doing this to myself 'stead o' someone else—a lesson you could learn, since I can guess there's some screwy psychological reason for your... you. After all, ¿don't you believe in individuals taking responsibility for

their own actions? ¿Don't I have the right to stupidly let myself go flying out o' my car when I don't wear a seatbelt, or whatever?"

Lance nodded. "That's right."

"Good. Then shut up," said Autumn. "Cause I need to hurt someone, & whatever trifling physical pain I may gain from this is nothing compared to the sheer mental exhilaration it creates. You might try it: it might hide the conspicuous hollowness present in your life to cause you to break into people's houses & try stabbing them."

Lance put his fists on his sides. "I'll have you know, I'm doing my job; something with which you may be unfamiliar. I promised I'd eliminate looter scum like you, & I'm keeping my campaign promises."

"¿Don't you have police for doing that?"

"The best way to get things done is to do them oneself," Lance said as he tilted his chin upward. "I'm sorry I don't do things like the lazy socialists bums you're used to—like Herbert Sunday."

Autumn shook her head. "No. I don't like the 'socialist' governments any better than the 'capitalist' 1s."

"Hmmp. I bet you delude yourself into supporting those fake '3rd-wayers,' or whatever they call themselves." Lance wagged a finger. "Well, I can tell you they're e'en worse than the outright socialists. A'least they're honest."

Autumn shook her head 'gain. "Nope. Don't like them, either. There's only 1 type o' government I like, personally."

"Hmmp. ¿& what might that be?"

"A dead 1."

Lance's eyes widened. He saw cold eyes glance @ him with the knife now aimed up 'stead o' down.

He aimed a gloved finger @ her. "You're... you're crazy, androgyn."

“Aw, don’t go all government-loving on me now, Sir antigovernment mayor,” Autumn said as she set the knife down. “After all, if e’en your hero could get wet to serial killers, I don’t see why you have to be so prudish ’bout it.

“Sides, as I told Edgar, I’m a careful nutjob. I think my dangerous ideas through. See, everyone wants to kill all o’ the killers—including you equally crazy nutjobs in parliament—but there’s 1 problem with that: ¿how does one kill all o’ the killers without becoming a killer oneself?”

Lance crossed his arms. “Hmmp. That’s obvious: put you all in a cage & let you destroy yourselves, while us *rational* people sit outside safely.”

Autumn’s mouth curled into a smile. Lance didn’t like that smile; it made his blood churn in the other direction, as if retreating.

“That is a good solution,” she said. “You know, there’s a lot o’ criticism gainst the Muslim suicide bombers, or whatever they’re called; but maybe they’re perfectly rational: maybe they know they’re fucked in the head & decided to kill themselves & the other fucked-up killers for the benefit o’ the sane.”

But then she turned her face down & rubbed her nose. “Though... now that I think ’bout it, they use kids & other innocent people for bombings, too. So maybe they’re just regular fucked-up killers like the rest. O well.”

She tilted her head back & stared @ the sky out o’ boredom. Though ’twas brightening into a deep periwinkle, she could still see the waxing-gibbous moon & its millions o’ speckled minions.

“Hm... it’s rather nice out this early. We should go out for a walk sometime,” she mumbled to herself.

Lance stepped back, eyes still the size o’ saucers, still glued on... whatever he was looking @. He still wasn’t sure. But he knew he was frightened. He could’ve handled her trying to impale him with the



knife, trying to bash his own brains with his personal ingot. He knew the risks.

No, what frightened him was that he didn't understand what she was doing here; & what he couldn't understand, he couldn't prepare for. He was expecting any second, she'd jump up &... &... he didn't know what.

*1st she twists my wrist, which is expected; but then she stabs the knife into her own hand, 'stead, & clearly doesn't want her crooked buddies to see her. ¿All for... exhilaration? Is that just a lie to trick me into false security, ¿or is she truly so antihuman, antireality, that she wants to destroy herself, too?*

*That's it. She said it herself: kill all o' the killers, kill us all. She's a regular Jesus, regular Buddha. Reality is too harsh, so we must sacrifice ourselves to "save us"... ¿I can't e'en use words to describe such an inane concept! ¿But isn't it so fitting for the person who believes destroying others is the only way to build herself?*

Autumn finally stood & climbed back up to Dawn's apartment door. 'Cause she knew Lance would still be following her, she quickly closed & locked the door 'hind her—with both locks & the clip. Then she rushed to the window & checked it 1 last time to ensure 'twas still locked.

"Poker," she muttered to herself as she walked into the kitchen to make coffee.

She sat on the counter & stared off @ the rest o' the apartment, the only sound being the gurgling o' the coffee pot.

She saw movement in the corner o' her eyes 'gain & exhaled in annoyance, only to see that 'twas only Edgar poking his head out from under the covers.

"¿What time is it?" he said softly as he rubbed his eyeholes.

Autumn shrugged. "The moon's still out."

She paused, staring @ the crumb-covered counter for a second.

Then she remembered the coffee, pulled out a mug, & began filling it.

“¿You still sleepy?” she asked.

“No. ¿Why?”

“¿Want to go for a walk?”

“O. Sure.”

*Hmm... I was expecting a “¿Why?” or e’en a, “Uh... sure... I guess,” Autumn thought as she took a sip. Then ’gain, he’s known me for years, & I am the kind o’ person who pokes herself with knives. Perhaps in that context, this request isn’t odd in the slightest.*

“¿You think Dawn would want us to wake her & join us, or do you think she’d prefer to keep sleeping?” asked Autumn.

“The former,” said Edgar. “She’s like you; sleep’s just an inconvenient necessity, not a, uh, valuable in itself.”

“Well then, wake her.”

Edgar moved o’er next to Dawn & gently shook her. “Dawn... Dawn...”

Dawn muttered incoherently, & then sat up & put on her glasses.

“¿What’s wrong? The mercury & saturn didn’t mix & cause an explosion, ¿did it?”

“No. Nothing’s wrong. We just wanted to know if you wanted to go on a walk with us,” said Edgar.

“¿Huh?” She looked up & saw Autumn sipping coffee on the counter.

“O. O yeah, definitely: I ne’er pass up walks in the dawn moonlight,” Dawn said as she slid onto her feet to get ready—getting ready being putting on shoes.

“You know, I had the strangest dream last night... or tonight.” Dawn glanced up @ the ticking owl clock. “Last night. Fully bizarre. Almost like a video game.”

“Mmm... By chance, ¿was good ol’ Mayor Lance Chamsby there?”

Dawn’s eyes shot open, this statement being the equivalent o’ a

caffeine injection.

“He was,” she said with a gasp. “¿Was he in your dream, too?”

“I would call mine a nightmare, but yes,” Autumn said as she pointed down @ 1 o’ the boxy, antennaed devices still on the floor. “It seems you left your toys round the floor last night, which just so happened to be the night Lance thought would be a perfect opportunity to break in & do some good ol’ people-stabbin’.”

*Well, that’s a li’l unfair...* she added in her head. *I doubt Lance would consider me “people.”*

Dawn gasped. “So they do work... That’s wondersome...”

Autumn noticed Edgar’s expression was strained, as if he were thinking deeply.

“I s’pose he infested your dreams as well, Sir Winters,” said Autumn.

Edgar held the side o’ his head. “I think so... I just don’t remember the dream well... I remember ’twas pretty depressing, so maybe that’s a good thing.”

“It’s redundant to call a dream with Lance in it ‘depressing,’” Autumn said before taking ’nother sip o’ her coffee.

“Can I take my Game Boy,” Dawn said as she searched round the couch for it. “I’m almost @ Fuchsia & I want to show you guys ‘Glitch City.’”

“I’m sure that’ll be the seed to a fruitful conversation,” said Autumn.

“& after that maybe we can play pirates with those coat-hangers—wherever I put them.” Dawn twisted her upper-body side-to-side, her eyes gliding ’cross the ambushed carpet.

“I’ll pass on the latter, thank you,” said Autumn. “By the way, just a warning: Lance may try trailing us.”

“Don’t worry, we can just set up that cardboard-box trap held up with a stick with the copy o’ *The Virtue o’ Selfishness* under it,” said

Dawn.

So they went out & walked down the street, Autumn & Edgar's arms clutched together & Edgar's head leaning on Autumn's shoulder.

"Wow, you're right, the stars are beautiful this night-morn," Dawn said as she walked with her head firmly tilted upward.

"I didn't say anything close to that," said Autumn.

"You're not the only 1 who can find the true ideas hidden 'hind misleading words," said Dawn. "No... I'm sure we went on this walk to get exercise."

Autumn didn't reply.

"You know, I've heard in some cultures there's a myth 'bout this book given by the stars & if you write in it, you'll get anything you want, no matter how bizarre it is—well, so long as it's not trademarked, 'course."

"If by 'some cultures,' you mean the cultures that crazy old lady in the bird mask made up in her head, then yes, that would be accurate," said Autumn.

"I wonder where she comes up with all this—"

"¿WHAT THE FUCK?"

Dawn stopped & stared down @ the foot she'd just planted onto the sidewalk as if it'd just committed murder.

"¿Is something wrong?" Autumn asked with a concerned look.

"Uh..."

"¡LOOK AT WHAT YOU DID TO MY CAR!"

Dawn turned & saw a young man shouting @ 'nother, the other leaning back with his hands up defensively.

"OK... OK... It's all right. No need to talk in all-caps. Let's not throw 'way all standards o' polite conduct & proper literary style, now."

Dawn exhaled in relief.

“¿What?” asked Autumn.

“Nothing,” Dawn said, & then laughed & scratched her head. “Just reminded me o’ something truly strange.”

Suddenly, someone jumped out o’ bed.

“¿Is something wrong, Mezun?”

Mezun panted as he clutched 1 o’ his 2 foreheads with his bulbous crab claw.

“I just had the strangest dream. There was the thief with glasses who had a skeleton partner & this Snidely-Whiplash-like capitalist mayor wanted to destroy them ‘cause o’ socialism, or some shit, & they walked through this city called Boskeopolis @ night.”

Mezun’s pet turtle stared @ him with the eye uncovered by a patch.

But before he could speak, ‘nother someone jumped out o’ bed.

“¿Is something wrong, Plak?”

“I just had the bizarrest dream... I dreamt there was this... round world with lots o’ water... & these brown fleshy creatures lived all o’er it... They had these things called ‘world wars’ & ‘science’ & 1 o’ them had a dream ‘bout this world called ‘Boskeopolis’ with these other brown fleshy creatures & this white nonfleshy creature... I can’t e’en ‘splain it, it’s so strange.”

“Well, maybe you should ingest mo’ splurge. That ought to improve your pipes.”

Dawn’s eyes yawned open & she sat up with a hand on her head. Autumn, who was using her laptop on the other side o’ the table, glanced o’er @ Dawn. ‘Hind her, Dawn could see Edgar stirring some bowl @ the counter while eye-searing light fell in through the open-window, concealing the fact that the apartment lights weren’t on.

“I just had the strangest dream... You were all there, which is no surprise, ‘course; but then I dreamt that that was just a dream by some strange creature called “Dr. Mezun” & then that that was just a

dream by some other strange creatures...”

“Huh...” said Autumn.

“& in that dream within a dream I made some dream-entering devices & Lance broke in @ night & broke into all o’ our dreams, & then I woke up & we all went out for a walk...”

“That did happen,” said Autumn. “We came home & then you immediately fell asleep on the couch, ¿remember?”

“O...” said Dawn, her shoulders slumping. “It all seemed so fantastic, though.”

“Dawn, Edgar & I once were kidnapped by some deranged scientist who performed body-mangling experiments on us. *Reality* is fantastic, truly; that’s what you get when your reality is fiction.”

But li’l did they know, their own experiences weren’t the only part o’ Dawn’s dream that were true: for when one backs up far ’way from Boskeopolis, far ’way from earth, far ’way from the universe, one will find a smooth, black tablet; & staring into that tablet were a cloister o’ scientists & an eccentric figure with tentacles, tusks, & 1 purple crab claw named Dr. Mezun—a world that went by many names, but only 1 you could understand: the Star Light Zone.



#BOSK-CB2119-ROADTRIP

**TRIPPIN' ON A HOLE IN A  
PAPER STORY WATCH WHERE  
YOU'RE GOING THEY'RE  
EVERYWHERE**

J. J. W. Mezun | 2015 August 1





'Twas after 3 weeks o' preparation, on what meteorologists predicted would be the hottest day in the year, when we finally punched the road through the Mustard Mountains straight into Vertitropolis like a needle being lodged straight into the veins o' the earth. "No," was Autumn's predictable answer when I asked her to attend---her being the only 1 who needed convincing. "¿Why not?" I asked. "Edgar said he'd go." "Well, that's good for him," she replied. "I'm busy." "¿When aren't you busy?" I asked. "That's why I'd ne'er be able to go on 1 o' your pointless joyrides round the island." "It might jog your mind. That might be the problem: your creativity's so sapped by wandering round the same old streets & seeing the same drab skyscrapers." "¿How would wandering off to some irrelevant land far 'way help me plan for what I need to do in this city?" she asked. "Maybe there are better thieving opportunities in Verditropolis," I answered. I saw by the way she paused that she was starting to see my way o' thinking. Only, she still shook her head & said, "Sorry, but I have other duties in which I must attend," as if we were in a business meeting, slow cold eyes o' a cat---as she always acted, or a'least as I'd always seen her act. E'en when she was touching on Edgar in ways she clearly saw passionate, she kept those cold eyes & slow, methodical movements. Everything could be boiled down to method. Well, I had my own methods, & I used these persistently to get her to finally agree to join us. "You don't want to leave Edgar all 'lone, ¿do you?" I asked her the next day.

"He won't be; he'll be with you guys," she replied. "You know what I mean. Come on, it's not like you can't plan during the trip, anyway." "¿With what internet?" "There's internet all o'er the place. Just pick it up." "I'm 'fraid your grasping for wood now," she said. "Look, if I agree to this inane nonsense, will you stop pestering me." "Why, 'course." & that was my brilliant plan to get her to join our already rainbow gang o' misfits. I e'en asked Felix to bring that 1 friend o' hers---I think 'twas Violet, or something. Anyway, we loaded nobody in particular's electric car, a scrunched li'l white sedan so discreet it could hide in the middle o' a jungle. We all packed inside like the Banana Bunch into a clown car in messy mountainous positions I'm sure was not legal, though we were ne'er stopped by the law once. "¿Everyone in?" Nobody in particular asked. "Yeah," we answered in unison. Suddenly the car charged forward @ a monstrous 40 km per hour, streaking 'cross the oil-stained roads like a hang glider. As we dashed, "Grandpa & the Delightful Tadpoles" blazed through our speakers. Throughout the trip I could hear Felix's friend---both o' whom were right next to me---whisper verbose words o' panicked shyness in Felix's ear. "I must conclude that I am an aberration 'mong this contrarily congruous congregation. I should veritably withdraw." "No... I'm sure everything'll be fine, just fine," Felix assured her, though she sounded kinda nervous herself--as she always did. So I made sure to introduce them to everyone. "Everyone, these are my friends Felix & Violet, & o'er here's Edgar & his girlfriend, Autumn; guys, these are Scratch,"--I pointed to Scratch, the adorably chubby 1 with a bush o' short, spiked hair that always seemed to cover his eyes, who waved with a smile--"Nora,"---I pointed @ the blonde 1 with wide cheeks & shades, who waved without a smile--"the

gremlin hanging off the side o' the car, & in front's nobody in particular. That's literally his nickname, 'cause he's so low-key." "I must announce how impressed I am @ the gremlin's exquisite portrait," Violet said. I nodded. "He uses his cum for all o' his work, 'cause bodily fluids are mo' meaningful than paint." Violet nodded. "Affirmative. O, how this noble craft doth possess mo' lurking complexities than any mortal could discover in one's lifetime." "Hey." The gremlin spoke in a creaky whine. "I'll have you know that in my day we got 'long fine with stories that just mentioned cum & hairy assholes & long paranoid diatribes 'bout aliens landing. You spoiled kids seemed to be getting bored o' that sort o' thing, what with your internet porn & your Photoshops for pasting your vaginas o'er Dracula's slong." "I only did that once," Nora said with a scuzzy look. Through the corner o' my eye I could see Autumn & Edgar squeezed far to the side, Edgar clutching the edge o' the window with his eyes---¿eyeholes?---staring round @ the scenery in wonder like a dog, Autumn clutching her knees in a compact ball, as if she'd hoped to gradually shrink into an invisible mote. Her eyes were haggard, & I could see that she found the whole thing terribly annoying so far. Scratch, e'er the most wary o' his surroundings, while throwing his eyes in every direction in desperate need to feed his insatiable energy noticed the 2. "Hey, I just noticed I recognize you," he almost shouted as he thrust a finger toward Edgar as if accusing someone o' murder. "You're the kid with the frigid skeleton mask. Hey, I'm sorry 'bout accusing you o' stealing mine. Turned out I left it @ my grandma's." Edgar chuckled nervously. "O, that's all right." "& that means the 1 next to you must be Autumn," Scratch said. "That name doesn't mean you can control the seasons like Dawn can, ¿does it?" "Um..." Edgar turned to Autumn, whose eyes were still

staring out the window with such strict concentration that you'd think she was trying to find Waldo in the urban mess outside. Edgar turned back to Scratch. "She's, uh... I think she's kind o' busy right now." Scratch nudged me in the shoulder. "Hey, she has the same hobby you do. ¿Have you 2 had competitions yet?" "I don't think she'd want to," I said. From so close, I could hear Felix's friend whisper into her ear, "That's that 'treasure-hunter' acquaintance you referred to, ¿precise?" Felix replied with only a shy, "Mmm hmm." "How aberrant. I had anticipated someone possessing a temperament mo' sanguine & less melancholic." I wanted to mention her behavior being due to her being "in the level," or whatever they call it, but thought she'd probably be e'en mo' annoyed @ my adding light to her spotlight, so I quickly changed the topic & asked Felix's friend to blather 'bout her favorite book, only for us to suddenly stop. I looked out the window to see 'twas @ a diner called "Greasy Dick's," whose name amused me, since there were 3 Dicks who ran it, making it an egregious apostrophe misplacement. "We have not succumbed to an expired tire, ¿have we?" Felix's friend said in panic. "No, we're just stopping for something to eat," nobody in particular said in his deep voice. "¿Why here?" I asked, half laughing. "You always stop @ diners on roadtrips. ¿D'you know nothing?" nobody in particular said. We went inside & took a table, Nora ordering 1st, asking for their mysterious blue "String Theory" soup---after confirming 'twas vegan, 'course. Legend says that this soup's made from the secrets o' the universe, but is probably just made o' ramen noodles & food coloring. As for me, I let chance drive round in the wind & quickly programmed a random # generator & used that to pick the Adam's Apple, which was so juicy, it dripped its red sauce all o'er me. When I tasted it, though, it had the metal taste common

in blood, if you can believe that. 'Fore we'd e'en entered, Felix's friend panicked o'er the condition o' the diner--which is fair, considering it had tilted sign letters, a sticky floor like a movie theater, & a smell o' spoiled meat. "This establishment is... it is sanctioned by the health department, ¿precise?" she asked, the 1st words not aimed only for Felix's left ear. "I sure hope so," I replied. "You can ne'er trust health inspections, anyway," Scratch said. "¿You e'er notice that the people who make them ne'er eat @ these places? That's rather suspicious." A man in an overcoat so high it covered his face's head perked up & he waved his partner o'er toward us & went next to Scratch. "Sir, we need to discuss something with you," 1 o' them said. "Aw, I can't go 1 roadtrip without something like this happening." Nora, nobody in particular, & I all laughed. "You have such bad luck," I said. "Well, time to be tortured in exaggeratively zany ways, I guess," he said as the cloaked men grabbed his arms & dragged him 'way. Suddenly, the gremlin from before hopped onto his chair & said, "See, now in my day, if that happened to him, he'd be being anal probed or a lot o' other exaggeratively disgusting things happening to him. Now he'll probably just be tickled to death or something. Kids these days are so pampered." "Why are you still here?" I asked. "You needn't worry," the gremlin grumbled; "I plan to pay for my own meal. No need to feel **burdened** by my presence." Though I hoped she would take this meal as payment for going on this trip she claimed she didn't want to go on, & still rudely refused to enjoy, I was unsurprised to see Autumn mutter, "I don't need anything, thank you," when asked her order. Her eyes were surgically attached to a napkin on the table below her, her arm scribbling something on it. "That's not what your boryborygmie says," I said with a waving finger. "Hmm," was all she

replied with. Everyone---'cept Edgar, 'course---slid funny eyes @ me as if it were **my** fault just 'cause I brought her 'long. Also unsurprising, Felix's loudmouthed friend became panicky 'gain. "¿Why is she so temperamentally caliginous? ¿What is askew? You do not postulate that it is due to transgressions performed by me, ¿do you? I am so disinclined toward agitation such as this." Nora looked back @ Autumn & hesitantly asked, "¿D'you mind if I ask what you're writing? I am a bit o' a writer, too." "Nothing interesting," was all Autumn muttered. Still, Nora pressed further. "That's not true. We have truly low standards." "It's not writing," Autumn mumbled. "Now, now. That's not true. There's no 'true' writing & 'untrue' writing. As Capote says, it's all just typing, after all&45;&45;'cept when it's writing with a pencil, 'course, but you know what I mean" This time I made the mistake o' deciding to knee in, tepidly, like a stickman creeping past the hangwomen. "Uh, actually, she's probably just making plans for herself," I said. "See, she's a, uh, thief. It's her career." Nora only blinked @ me as if I spoke in Westron. "¿You can get a career in that?" she asked. I nodded solemnly. "¿How's it work?" Scratch, who popped up under the table, 'scaping from the secret hatch under the floor from his torture chamber. "¿Do you just bust people's windows, climb in, & swipe stuff? 'Cause it seems like it'd be hard to get 'way with that kind o' thing." "Well, that's obviously why she's planning so hard," nobody in particular said. The waitress returned with our bill, which I found odd, since none o' us had eaten anything yet. I picked it up, looked @ it, & sighed @ its steep price. "You know what President Truman said; we must cut down on the cost o' living." "¿Who's 'President' Truman? ¿Isn't the American president that Clinton woman?" nobody in particular asked. This was when

Felix's friend almost leapt out her chair with a hand raised as if we were in school, saying with nervous rapidity, "O, O, Harry S. Truman was the 33rd president o' the United States o' America, a Democrat, elected after the death o' Franklin Delano Roosevelt. This quote is a reference to Truman's support for greater involvement o' the government in improving the economic status o' the postwar US." We all---'cept Autumn & Edgar, 'course---nodded silently. "Sure, that sounds right," I said. "Now, ¿who's ready to continue on our quest?" We stopped @ a building known only as the "Game Zone," where time wasn't spent, 'twas only twisted round. Or so the flashing neon sign claimed. "If we're s'posed to be on a roadtrip to Vertitropolis, ¿why do we keep stopping @ random places in Boskeopolis?" I asked. "What, you don't expect us to do nothing but drive all night in the barren wasteland, ¿do you?" nobody in particular asked; "that's much funner during the day, ¿don't you think?" I knew I couldn't argue with that logic. "I cannot be unequivocal regarding this location," Felix's e'er-talkative friend whispered in her ear. "This is habitually where illicit enterprises are enacted, ¿is it not?" I had to assure her that nothing wrong would happen. "I assure you that nothing wrong will happen," I said. "Well, if you say so it must be so," her friend said. But just when I thought I'd immunized everyone's mind from tranquility viruses, Autumn had to grumble, "¿What are we s'posed to do here?" I turned to her. "O, you'll love it. You can play games a win tokens for treasures which can be cashed in for money." "¿You mean gambling? You know that's rigged gainst you, ¿right?" she said. I shook my head. "These are minigames. You know, those same cliché games every video game throws in for filler. Though I did think 'bout showing you round this casino I know. If you're good." I gave her a sexy wink, which she only

responded to with a weak, "No thank you." Inside was a black hole full o' its own neon lights & bumping "Good Weather" by Masashi Kageyama, which everyone knows is the hippest tune out there, 'cept for maybe "Fight gainst a Stronger Enemy" by Yoko Shimomura, which is the true turtle's pajamas. The second we entered, everyone scattered, the place branching out into many orifices in which to have one's attention sucked out o' them like a straw. For me, that creamy core o' attention was the bar, not for alcohol, but for mo' sentient drinks. My eyes wandered round the lined-up prey like a hawk, watching for the weakest carcass. They stopped on a fragile li'l specimen tittering in her seat so the rattling o' her mug gainst the counter rang 'cross the scene. The top half o' her head was covered by a gray hood so that her eyes couldn't be seen @ all. I saw that the seat 'side her was empty. I moved in for the kill. I ordered iced maple tea & immediately turned to my victim with an arm leaned on the counter, ready to attack with the perfect pick-up: "¿Having a good evening, Madame?" She startled & then turned her head to me---though how she could see me through that hood, I had no idea. "¿Were you... were you talking to me?" she asked, her voice low & soft like black coffee. I reached my hand out & gently touched hers. "'Course. ¿Who else in this place would I rather speak with than you?" I asked. She paused, as if trying to think o' an answer, & then finally answered, "Uh... I don't know you much, so I can't know the answer to that." "O, you need not be modest," I said. "I would guess you're already with someone, ¿right?" She shook her head vigorously. "Nope. I don't know anyone. Just me." "That's impossible. ¿A Li'l Gray Riding Hood like you? That's a crime." She gripped the edge o' the table tightly & shivered. I must confess, I have no idea what this reaction meant, since I'd ne'er



seen such a thing in my life. ¿Is she play-acting?, I wondered. "¿I-is that true? I'm sorry, Madame, I swear I had no idea," she said, her voice cracking as if she were 'bout to break down into tears. "Please, don't take me 'way & feed me & drop me off the top o' Atlas Tower so I'll fall in a bloody splat. I'll be good, just tell me how." I smiled sympathetically as I patted her hand. "Don't worry, Madame; I don't believe in bad people; only those who need treatment. ¿Would you mind if I took you in & delivered it to you?" "I swear, I won't do anything wrong anymo'. I promise," she said. "You're a good person, ¿aren't you?" I said. She nodded. "Uh huh. Ne'er hurt no one." "I like good people," I said. "W-well, that's good then, 'cause I'm good," she said. "S-so you have no reason to drown me in the Spinach Swamps." I shook my head sadly. "I ne'er thought o' such a thing @ all. ¿What would make you think I'd want to do such a thing?" She hesitated 'fore whispering, "You know why..." I was authentically confused @ this point. I blinked blankly @ her to show this. "I'm sure I don't," I said. "I apologize for my naivety, but ¿is this a game o' some sort I don't understand?" "Everyone knows they're after me," she whispered back. "¿Who's 'they'?" I asked. "Just **they**. They don't have to be anything but themselves," she said. Technically, I guessed she had a point. Still, I went on. I put an arm round her shoulders & rubbed the farthest. "Come on, now," I said. "You have no reason to fear anything." She only stared down shyly @ the counter. Clearly, she didn't believe me, since she continued to shiver, despite it being almost 30 Celsius. I let go & turned back to my drink to wash out the soreness o' guilt lodged in the back o' my throat. As had happened so many times, my fantasies o' prey melting in my grip were deflated by the reality o' prey being traumatized by my obnoxious harassment. I became

a li'l mo' optimistic a few seconds later when I heard her squeak that she needed to use the bathroom---indicating that she still considered me in her company---only to finally realize almost a half-hour later that she'd almost certainly given me the slip. This only shamed me e'en mo'. "You should've left her 'lone earlier," my mind chided. "Now she probably thinks you're some crazy kidnapper." These swampy thoughts were interrupted by a soft voice saying, "¿Dawn?" as if asking a question. I turned & saw Edgar standing there. "Uh, sorry if I'm interrupting anything..." "What, this exciting adventure I'm on"---I spread my arms out to show him said adventure---"How dare you." Edgar blinked 'nough to realize the sarcasm, & then said, "Uh, Autumn just wanted to know if she could, uh... borrow money, which she promises to return with 10% o' what she earns." "O, she doesn't have to do that," I said as I reached a hand into my pockets. "¿How much does she need?" "Just 500 pts." I handed him a 5 hundreds & then he thanked me politely & went. My spirits raised for a'least this moment, I scoped round the bar for mo' candidates, but didn't find any receptive. 'Sides, I'd lost the mood. Rather than sit round soupping @ a greasy countertop all night, I got up & out for some new air. Anyway, they were now playing the Richard Jacques version o' "Green Grove Act 2," when everyone knows the Jun Senoue version is much better. It was such a relief to get out, too. The black night was like a waterfall o' cool water splashing o'er a body full o' sunburns; the stars made it look like the Programmers left their Marxmas lights out till July 'gain like they always do. The moon was grumpy as e'er, though, & was still aching to crash into the earth in 3 days & destroy it, but that just cheered me up if anything. I saw a motel nearby & decided while I'm there to check out a room for us, thinking nobody would

want us to have to sleep the night in the car. To save money, I planned to order 1 with just 1 bed we'd all share. Though I knew none o' the other idiots would care, I did worry that Felix's friend might be unkosher 'bout it, but then decided 'twas too late, anyway, by then. "We'll see how it goes," I told myself. But as I walked up to our room, I heard a familiar voice call my name & turned to see Scratch leaning out a doorway with his hand stretched out & waving. "We ordered a room," he said. "¿Truly? So did I," I said. "Unorder it." "I don't know if I can actually do that," I said. "'Course you can," he said. "¿What kind o' city are we living in where we can't unorder rooms we don't want anymo'? ¿The Soviet Union?" I wanted to tell him that the Soviet Union wasn't a city & didn't exist anymore since their mother ship returned & carried the whole government off to their home planet, but he'd already went back inside, so I went back downstairs & told the bellhop--- I think that person @ the counter might be the bellhop---to cancel the room I just ordered. Turns out, 'twas as easy as Scratch had said. I went back into their room to see Scratch, Nora, & nobody in particular all sitting on the bed--apparently they had the same idea I did---playing some strange amalgamation o' "Monopoly," "Candy Land," "Clue," "Risk," & "Pokémon Master Trainer." It was a rather tubular room, too, e'en if it had torn wallpaper & cockroaches scurrying all 'long the carpet. "¿What are you all doing in here?" I asked. Without looking 'way from the board, where she was stamping her thimble up toward Peanut Brittle House, Nora said, "We were getting bored o' the Game Zone, so we came here so we could play some games. ¿Wanna join us? It'll only take half an hour for Scratch to 'splain the rules." "Wait, ¿so you left the only people who are unfamiliar with the Game Zone there?" I said. "O, they'll be fine," Scratch said.

"Just so long as they don't touch door #9. Once someone goes through that realm o' non-Euclidean horror, there's no returning to sanity." "¿You think I should return & tell them where we are, in case they want to leave & can't find us & panic & blow up a building?" I asked. "Can't happen," Scratch said. "¿Where would they get the explosives? They don't just hand that stuff out, you know. This isn't the United States." "Yeah, I'd better go get them," I said. "Somehow I doubt they'll like the place any better than we did." So I returned, though I had a hades o' a time finding everyone. I hadn't remembered how inhumanly huge the place was till I went through that devil's maw entrance 'gain & saw the many twisting pneumatic tube passages there were. ¡& the crowds! ¿How was I s'posed to find an anthropomorphic cat & living skeleton in this herd? I must've wandered for a'least half an hour 'fore I spotted Felix & her friend sitting in the giant café, mountains o' mystery noodles piled on Styrofoam trays in front o' them. The friend also had a sheet o' paper & a calculus book, which she was paying far mo' attention to. "Additionally, that is the method in which computer biologists postulate patching the autoimmunity deficiency mechanic by reprogramming infected persons' primary white blood cell function so that infections no longer produce instant death for their white blood cells," I heard her say as I walked o'er to them. When her friend finished, Felix turned to me, waved, & said, "Hello, Dawn." Hearing this, the friend turned & greeted me as well: "Salutations, Madame Summers. We simply posited our interim in this luncheonette for a temporally efficient method o' redressing our comestible deficiency." "Ah," I said. "I like to do that, too, sometimes. Anyway, I just wanted to A, tell you that we're staying in the motel just @ the end o' the block, & B, ask you where Edgar & Autumn

went." Felix's friend stared @ me in horror. "¿Are you insinuating that we are expected to perambulate? But... but ¿what if we are assailed by a defalcator or an Unassuming Local Guy?" "You won't, & e'en if you are, just run 'way or use PSI Fire Alpha on them. It's just a few meters," I said. Felix turned to her & said, "I'll make sure you don't lose any lives." "Regarding the skeleton & his acquaintance, they have yet to ingress our perceptions since we 1st absconded." "Well, if you do see them, tell them where the motel is." But just as I was 'bout to turn, Felix's friend closed her book & said, "Surcease. I am of the inclination that we have concluded our mastication & would be content to agglutinate to your return promenade. ¿Is that precise, Felix?" Felix nodded. "Uh huh." "But then ¿who's going to tell them where to go?" I asked. "¿Can't you go with them when they leave?" She glanced @ Felix. "Well, if Felix assures me they are innoxious..." Felix nodded 'gain. With that settled, I returned to the motel, where we played Scratch's spacy board game for 'bout 2 hours 'fore I got a call from Edgar telling me Autumn wasn't feeling well & apologizing for both o' them bailing. "Wait, ¿where are you both going? My door's locked. I mean, I can guess where **she's** going; but ¿are you truly going to join her?" Edgar hesitated, which gave me an opportunity to hear Autumn in the background say, "You should go with them." Then I heard Edgar say, "But ¿what 'bout your anxiety?" "I don't mean to be mean, but I don't think you being round will help." Edgar just replied with an "O;" But 'twas an "O" stuffed with heartbreak, like ice cream cartons on a lonely Valentine's night. "I truly hate to do this to you, Edgar, & I truly wish you'd join them, but I just... I just can't be round them. I'm much too busy & they're distracting & I can't... I can't be round people right now," I heard Autumn say in the

background. "¿You sure?" Edgar asked. I heard no reply, but I guessed there was some silent affirmative, for Edgar said next, "Well, I guess Autumn will just be the 1 going. She says she's truly sorry, though." "Uh, I understand," I said awkwardly. "¿Are you still @ the Game Zone?" "Near it." "OK. I'll need you to go back in, find Felix & her friend in the food court, & escort them to the motel just down the block from there---west facing the entrance." "OK... ¿You want me to tell them where it is?" "I need you to go with them," I said in exasperation. "Felix's friend is 'fraid o' random encounters when she should know that the enemies show up on the map in Boskeopolis." "OK, I can do that," Edgar said so affirmatively I could hear him nod through the phone. They arrived a few minutes later, by which time we'd already gotten bored o' our game & began playing video games while analyzing the deep metaphysical issues surrounding them making up bullshit 'bout them. Well, everyone but Felix, who kept telling us she had nothing interesting to add with a shaking head. Her friend joined, however, though she borrowed a bit too much from classical bullshit, like James Joyce, when the whole point was to make up the bullshit yourself. As for Edgar, who was in an awkward space 'tween her & us, he sometimes chimed in when specifically asked: "¿What 'bout you, Edgar?" I asked. "¿What is your opinion o' the symbolic meaning o' the long line block in Tetris?" "Uh... I wouldn't know anything 'bout that," he said. "Well nobody knows," I said with a shrug. "'Symbolic meaning' is 1 o' those things so vague it doesn't mean anything. You're just s'posed to make shit up." "O. I don't know how to do that." "You just do it. Just say anything." "But I don't know what to say." "Anything," I said louder. Edgar squirmed. "But I don't know what anything is." We all stared amongst each other with open mouths @ such

incredible deepness. Edgar only stared @ us with increasingly desperate confusion. "I didn't say anything wrong, ¿did I?" From then on, we began to gradually fall like flies under the night's natural sleep gas. A'least, I assume that's what continued after I fell asleep, considering I was 1 o' the earliest to fall. On the other slipper, I was 1 o' the 1st to wake, 'cept for Felix, who was sitting quietly on the floor, staring @ the blank wall as if 'twere a Saturday morning cartoon. "Good morn, Felix," I said groggily. "Good morn," she replied, sounding much mo' awake than I was. "So, ¿what're you watching?" I asked. "O, nothing," she said. "Just sitting." "So, ¿how're you doing? It's been a while since I've seen you." "Nothing much. I guess you've met Violet." "O, ¿is that her name? ¿Where'd you meet her?" "She's a coworker. She's very smart." "I've noticed that," I said. "¿Can you understand a word she says?" Felix shook her head. "Nope. She apparently goes to college. She's always doing school work." We waited while the others woke up before packing into the car & driving off 'gain. We stopped @ a diner for 1 quick & uneventful breakfast just before driving through Wasabi Woods, singing 'long to Jun Ishikawa & Dan Miyakawa's "Begin Treasure Hunting." It didn't take long for the crowded canopy o' greens, blues, & browns casting cool shadows o'er us to quickly dissipate, replaced by dry brown crust left open to the boisterous sun as if its limbs were spread out & staked into the dirt. & this sun was just as irate as the moon last night, 'cept 'stead o' destroying the earth in one big crash, it just wanted to keep swooping down & torching us till we throw a turtle shell @ it. "¿We're pear out!" Scratch yelled o'er the speakers roaring Jerry Martin's "South Bridge" as he dug round under his seat. "¿We'll just have to keep dodging it!" I replied. "¿What astronomical

divergence could compel this G-type main-sequence star to develop the impetus to concentrate on an exiguous approximately .000000070% o' the world's population for extirpation?" Felix's friend, Violet, exclaimed. But we didn't worry 'bout it too much. We did begin to worry, though, when we saw the car was running out o' fuel. Predictably, Felix's friend, Violet, panicked. "It is inevitable that we shall be consumed by the ravenous canines o' fulmination!" she cried. "Nah, thunder wolves don't hang round here," I replied. "Only the Hungry Chihuahuas." "I told you you should've gotten mo' o' the fuel pickups, but no... You said you were gonna fucking TAS this road trip," Nora said with a smirk while nobody in particular muttered incoherently down @ his controls. "Don't worry; I'm sure Dawn can whip up some potions that will magically fix this problem so that it'd be as if it ne'er happened," Scratch said. "No, I can't," I replied. "¿What?" "You don't think I'd be adding this to the story if it could be solved so easily, ¿would I? ¿What would be the point? ¿Should I add every time I scratch the back o' my head, too?" Scratch scratched the back o' his head. "Well, I'm grape out o' ideas." "I heard coal comes from underground. Coal is what's used to make electricity, so clearly we should be able to plug the car into the ground to refuel it," Nora said. I slapped my forehead, which hurt, by the way. "You can't just plug cars into the ground to refuel them." "¿Why not?" "Because they **patched** that bug in the last update. 'Sides, we knew this'd happen: car troubles always happen in roadtrips like these. We just have to tough it out." A kilometer or 2 later, the car finally sputtered to a stop, right in the middle o' the golden sands o' the Durian Desert. "Well, we might as well get out & stretch while we figure out what to do next," Nora said as she opened her door & stepped out. The



rest o' us soon joined her. Standing outside was like being under an interrogator's lamp, 'cept without any o' the contrasting darkness. A hot white glare spread its arms 'cross every surface that could possibly shine, 'specially the windows. To keep my eyes from being boiled like eggs, I had to put on a pair o' thick shades that I, thankfully, remembered to bring with me. "So here's the thing," nobody in particular said: "we have no choice but to send someone back to the city to buy some power packs, which will take a'least a whole night." "I take it you didn't pack any power packs in the trunk," I said stern-faced. "We used them all. I was in a hurry," he said irritably. "I can go if you all want." "No, that's not fair," I said, softening my tone. "We'll draw straws to decide." Nora tore out a page from her spiral notebook & divided it into 7 pieces---1 for each o' us---and she handed what pencils she had to 2 others, which were passed on to others when they were done. When everyone had finished, we voted on each drawing, not allowing anyone to vote for their own, 'course. So frightened o' having to cross the Wasabi Woods all 'lone @ night was Violet that I could hear her teeth chattering, despite the debilitating heat, though they had no reason to fear; her & Felix's were actually some o' the best-looking straws. Coincidentally---or perhaps not; I just know I didn't make it happen on purpose---nobody in particular was the one voted to go get the power packs, anyway, making the whole exercise pointless. I wasn't sure if he was intentionally trying to lose out o' guilt, but his straw looked mo' like a lightning bolt than anything anyone could drink out o', though Scratch said he'd personally love to have a straw that looked like that, earning from Scratch nobody in particular's only high rating. With nothing better to do while we waited for however long it'd take for nobody in particular to

get back, we sat round the dead car & stared @ the scenery. There wasn't much to see, save thick wavy air o' condensed heat that blurred the Wasabi Woods & Mustard Mountain cliff tops so that it looked like someone had rubbed their hand all round a freshly-painted portrait. "Wasn't there s'posed to be some pyramid here---Pepperoncini Pyramid, I think 'twas called---that was s'posedly full o' ancient treasure or something...." Nora asked. "Nah, I'm pretty sure the UFOs already carried them all 'way," Scratch said with the assured nod o' an expert. "¿Already?" Nora asked. "I just saw it on Google Maps just a few months ago." "They're fast, those aliens," Scratch said with e'en mo' nodding. I couldn't help noticing while looking in his direction, Edgar furiously scribbling something on a sheet o' paper before stuffing it into the pockets o' his robe. Nora also must've noticed this, for she asked him, "¿You a writer, too?" Edgar shook his head & murmured so quietly, hardly anyone could hear him, "No, I was just writing myself a note for later, in case I forget." "You know, I've always told myself I wanted to do the same thing, but I ne'er remember," I said. "Guess I oughta write myself a reminder note to start writing myself reminder notes. Ne'er met anyone who actually carried through with it, either." Eventually night did come, which, whatever the circumstances, was beautiful. It's nice to a'least once just sit---or e'en better, lie--down & just watch the sky gradually change colors, so stealthily that you hardly e'en notice night slip in & day slip out past your eyes; the stars wink open 1-by-1, like the eyes o' a shy thousand-eye sky monster. The sights weren't the only thing that slipped by our attention; what was once an unbearable heat quickly plummeted to an uncomfortable chill. Luckily, nobody in particular **did** have the sense to pack sleeping bags in the trunk, knowing we'd need them

whether we had fuel problems or not. Unfortunately, he hadn't planned on us having 3 extra guests, so we were stuck with only 4 for 6 o' us, 7 when---or if---he e'er got back. Luckily, to my surprise, Felix's friend offered to have her & Felix share 1, leaving me to try coaxing the 1 with the cold blood or the 1 with the thick head to join me. "I say you try the skeleton. I bet skeleton sex is the hottest," Scratch said as he aimed a mischievous smile @ Edgar, who reacted with only a frightful stare. "Don't be scaring him with your natural creepiness 'gain," I said. "& anyway, he's already taken, if you already remember." "¿With the ponytailed woman?" Scratch asked. I could tell this was unbelievable to him by his tone. I nodded. "Uh huh. He's quiet like her, that's why." "¿Is that your secret to getting with her?" he said with a wink. "No. ¿Why, you want tips or something?" I asked. "Maybe..." "I wouldn't try, if I were you---if you do e'er see her 'gain," I said. "Most people can only take you in small doses; she's the type who couldn't e'en tolerate a drop." He crossed his arms & turned 'way. "Hmmpf. Well, maybe I don't want to share a sleeping bag with you." However, the cracking o' his frown betrayed this acting. I laughed. "¿You have a headache?" "Yup. Multiple." "¿You need to brush your hair?" "I think that 'scuse would only work from someone who looks like they'd brushed their hair a'least once in the last month," he replied. "This scenery's putting me in the mood, so if Scratch truly doesn't want to bunk with you, I wouldn't mind," Nora said while her glazed eyes were still glued up @ the sky. She always looked that way, though she ne'er did any drugs. She didn't need them; she was naturally high, anyway. "O, leave me out in the cold. I understand," Scratch said with a mock pouty face. "You throw 'way the key, you stay in the cell," Nora said. "I've ne'er heard that saying

before," Scratch said. "It's new." "¿New? ¿From where?" "I made it," Nora answered. "¿What, you think sayings just grow on trees? People make 'em up & then others use them 'nough till after 'nough years, everyone knows it." "I must admit I'm a li'l offended by the 'I wouldn't mind' line," I said. Scratch turned to Nora. "¿See? You're a bad friend." "It's better to have unwanted wants than to want the unwanted," Nora said. "I think I read that in a fortune cookie once," Scratch said. "Well, they plagiarized me, then," Nora said. "¿What place was this? I wanna sue." "This was a'least a year ago," Scratch replied. "I think they came up with it 1st." "Bullshit. I'll go back in time & copyright it. ¿What'll they say to that?" We eventually agreed to put the 2 remaining sleeping bags together & share them 'mong the 3 o' us. Ironically, though I was exhausted last night, tonight I didn't feel sleepy @ all, though I did feel cold 'nough that I wanted to stay as tightly wrapped 'neath as possible. Edgar, Felix, & Violet, on the other nail, had quickly fallen asleep during the inane conversation I wrote 'bout earlier, so stealthily that I don't e'en know when precisely it happened. I don't know if I've mentioned this yet or not, but I don't have the greatest grasp o' time. It just runs past me without me e'en noticing. This day, in fact, felt like only a few hours in my head, e'en though most o' it was spent lying round staring @ cacti & the cracks in the earth's peeling skin. Thinking 'bout cacti reminded me o' how thirsty I was. "Remember what the doctors always say, Dawn: Always keep yourself hydrated... & always crank the heat up in waiting rooms so you can fleece patients with expensive vending machine drinks." "Hey, Scratch, ¿where'd you put that water bottle?" "Uh, I think we're out, actually." "¿What? ¿Didn't nobody in particular pack mo'?" "Nah, ¿why would he do that? That'd be like

keeping extra power packs or sleeping bags." E'en under the dim light o' the moon, I could see Scratch's mischievous smile. But that wasn't important now; what was was the scraggly dryness crawling all 'cross my throat. "We won't be able to last long if we don't get mo' to drink," I said. Scratch shrugged. "¿What are we going to do?" "Cacti have liquid, ¿don't they?" Nora whispered. "That's a good idea," I said, & then got up with the bottle & snuck o'er to the nearest cactus, as if I were afraid it'd suddenly jump up & start galloping 'way with gaping mouth & eyes if it noticed me come near. It didn't, & I was able to cut a hole in it with my Scandinavian Army Knife & fill my water bottle full with ease. I guzzled almost a 3rd o' it 'fore I reached the other 2. They both reached a hand out; I handed it to Nora, who was closest, & who then passed it on to Scratch when she finished. "Wooo," Nora said as she laid her head back on the ground with her arms spread out, looking e'en mo' dazed than usual. "That was better than I expected. My heart is racing." I had to admit, I had a similar feeling. A drowsy feeling. I couldn't quit yawning.

she wasn't wearing The environment appeared sense into her. I could which was odd. Colors on my eyes, the khaki different. Browns replaced & the fat cigar in flaming reds. Cliffs . "Get a hold o' into screwy shapes, crooked iWe need those stars felt like 'twas turning 'Whomp's Fortress'!" "I it were a boat on a internet once that Scratch, who somehow secret star if you me without me noticing. into the sun from mouse is 'bout to throw Scratch said calmly But His head slowly twisted @ him, he flickered frown & he said, "You to his normal color. I turned to Nora, to exactly what I was drowned in the quickdirt. replied, "It's a harmless round out o' the sleeping his palette problems peculiar part was that o' the screen while as they came crashing

rational person would, to change, too, collar o' the shirt became mo' vibrant, mo' anymo' & shook some by neon yellows & feel the thick shades slanted. Cacti twisted fisher's hat on my head, & bent. The world the edge o' my mouth back & forth, as if yourself. ¿Are you crazy? river. I pointed @ to open the door to moved meters in front o' heard a secret on the "¡Look out, Scratch! ¡A Luigi would give you a brick @ your head!" shot yourself straight toward me with a grim outside the castle," fool. I **am** the mouse." when I turned to look make sure she hadn't green 'fore he returned She was rolling He apparently knew bag, naked; but the thinking, since he she was boxing stars bug. Sometimes stuff down on her. As any when it's on the edge I picked her up by the scrolling."

We must've made a lot o' noise, since I noticed Edgar stir under his sleeping bag & look up @ us laughing so uncontrollably we had to hold onto each other to keep from falling o'er. When I was finally able to recatch my breath, I whispered, "Sorry. We didn't mean to wake you," snickering throughout. "No, it's all right. I just thought something wrong might've been going on." "Nah, we're just pretending to be on drugs," I said. "¿Why?" he asked. "It's mo' creative than actually using them," I answered. "¿Want some cactus juice?" I added as I raised its bottle for him to see. "It'll **raise your senses to the 4th level.**" I twiddled my fingers spookily @ him to show the seriousness o' that claim. "Uh... that's OK," he said. "It doesn't have any alcohol in it," I said. "I boiled it in 1 o' nobody in particular's pans 'fore putting it in this bottle." "No thanks. I don't drink anything, remember." I smacked my forehead, which still hurt, for some reason. "That's right, duh. Sorry. Well, sorry to disturb your sleep. We'll be quieter." "That's all right," Edgar said. Though I saw him turn 'way from us

in, pretending to go to sleep, I could see by the longing present in those dark chasms for eyes that he was still as wide awake as we were. "¿You want to come hang with us?" "O... You don't want me to bother you guys..." Edgar replied. "Don't be ridiculous," I said as I patted the ground near us. He scooted out o' his sleeping bag & crept o'er to us as he rubbed his other hand as if it were a wounded paw & he were going to the vet. "Don't worry; you're safe with us, li'l buddy," Scratch said as he rubbed his hands together & smiled in a way that would inspire the **least** feeling o' security. "I like your robe," Nora said as she grabbed one o' Edgar's sleeves & began rubbing it through her thumb & index. "It's velvety." "Um... thanks," he said shyly. "So, ¿are you invincible?" Nora asked, looking up @ him with the same thick-lidded gaze o' wonder she always had plastered o'er her face. Edgar shook his head. "No." "¿Truly? But you can't starve to death, right?" Nora asked. "No, but I can still drown & all that." "¿You have lungs?" Edgar nodded. "How do your lungs keep from breaking down without protein & all that." "Now, now, stop making fun o' him 'cause his programming isn't as realistic. Some o' the greatest characters in literature are e'en mo' unrealistic, you know," I said. "I wasn't making fun o' him; 'twas just an honest question," Nora replied. We didn't say much mo' o' substance before the sky lightened & the sun began to peak 'bove the western cliffs. My eyes stung from the light o' an ambivalent morn, unsure if I were tired or wide awake. Either way, I knew I'd ne'er be able to get to sleep now, nor would I be able to function @ a normal human level. I got up, stretching legs that hadn't stretched for hours, & checked the trunk. "¿D'you think nobody a'least remembered to pack any extra food?" I asked. "I didn't see anything when we were getting the sleeping bags out," Nora said. "He

probably planned on us eating @ diners all the time."

"¿So he expected us to go hungry through the whole Mustard Mountain area?" I asked. "It would've only been a couple-hours' drive if he hadn't let the car go kaploop," Nora said. It wasn't for a few mo' hours till nobody in particular returned, by which time Felix & Violet were already awake, the latter o' whom was already freaking out once mo' when I casually mentioned we had no food. However, nobody looked so exhausted as he trudged o'er to us with the pile o' power packs in his arms that none o' us could stay peeved @ him. "Here they are," he gasped as he dropped them all on my feet. He sat there panting on his knees, face covered in sweat. We refueled the car while nobody in particular returned to the driver's seat, clutching the steering wheel as if he were 'fraid he might fall out. "¿How far is the next place with food?" I asked. "Well, 'less someone happened to setup a store or restaurant in the middle o' a desert, I would say we'll have to wait till Verditropolis," nobody in particular grumbled. "Aw, look on the bright side. A'least you got to get a good bit o' grinding in," Scratch said. "Maybe you'll learn 'Pack 2,' which should hopefully lower the odds o' forgetting fuel or food." I took it from his expression that nobody in particular didn't particularly enjoy that joke. However, all o' our moods bloomed as we drove onward, getting farther 'way from the Durian Desert while blasting that theme tune from "Wacky Races." After only 'bout an hour, we began to see trees, & then buildings pop up; & a glossy sign surrounded by bushes said, "Welcome to Verditropolis." Felix & Edgar in particular, who probably ne'er saw Verditropolis, hung their heads out their respective windows like dogs & stared round @ all the sights. Felix's friend, Violet, however, evidently had been here, since she told Felix all 'bout it in her usual



obsequious diction, which I don't want to bust my fingers typing. We all pumped fists in the air & hoorayed---'cept Edgar, Felix, & Violet, 'course, who were much too shy. "Well, now we're here," I said. "¿What should we do 1st?" There was a long, drawn-out pause like a horn section sputtering out as nobody in particular slowed the car to a stop in some vacant parking lot. Everything stopped, as if we were in a movie & somebody hit pause. All I could hear were distant motors revving as their cars drove past 'hind us. It wasn't till now that I noticed the cavernous darkness in this li'l car, its contrast with the blaring brightness outside the window burning my eyes. The fast, cold air slowed & warmed, causing the prickly burn on the back o' my neck to return. "Hey, ¿didn't you guys say you were hungry?" nobody in particular asked. As if all struck by the same lightbulb, we all started vigorously nodding & gibbering, "O yeah, uh huh, that's right." So we rocketed to the nearest diner, where I had royal mushroom with a li'l crown on top & Scratch the scenery, which he told me went good with Boskeopolean brunch tea. But as we finished, the long, drawn-out pause began to creep in 'gain. We all sat back with our arms hanging limply, staring @ our crumb-covered plates. "So... ¿Now what?" I asked, feeling an odd sense o' deja vu. "What else is there to do round this town?" Scratch asked as he turned to me. "You're the one who wanted to come here." "Well yeah, 'cause everyone wants to go to Verditropolis. ¿Where else would you go on a vacation by car? ¿Ice Cream Island?" "Well, they have to have something," Nora said. "You can't just make a city that has nothing in it." "¿Can't you?" Scratch replied with a raised eyebrow. "This city has plenty o' things," I said, feeling pretty defensive. "It has diners & theaters & motels & stores & stuff." "¿Does it have anything that

Boskeopolis doesn't?" Nora asked. "Uh... Well, I'm sure it has different people," I said with a shrug. "But we're the same people," Nora said. "I'm sure they have slightly different laws," I argued. "Laws aren't terribly interesting," Scratch said. I stopped, staring blankly @ my dish once mo'. No matter how I dug for ideas, I found nothing but dirty dirt. "Now that I think 'bout it, I'm not sure **why** we came here in the 1st place," I said. The impact o' this revelation blew me 'way so that I leaned all the way back in my chair, arms hanging loose. "Well... You know what they say: it's not the... it's not the reward but the trip there, or something," Scratch said. Now I went in the opposite direction, hunched forward o'er the table with my chin in my arms. "¿So what now?" I asked. "¿Do we just go back already?" Everyone was silent, spontaneously finding something to preoccupy their minds with, whether 'twas filing their fingernails on their sleeve or checking a nonexistent watch. "I do have to get to work tomorrow," Nora said. I turned to nobody in particular & saw a particularly angry eye twitch. I could tell he knew the outcome was inevitable, but still disliked it all the same--the whole trip was a waste. I touched his arm. "Don't fret. You know, you probably had a mo' exciting trip than us. Too bad I couldn't be there. I plan on writing a story 'bout this after we get back on this frigid typewriter I found lying 'bout. I e'en thought 'bout trying out this 1 weird scrambling technique some beatnik made up." So we packed back into the car & rode off into the sunset. & when we were done with that, we went back to Boskeopolis, dancing to David Wise's killer "Hot-Head Bop"---or rather, moving our knees up in down to it, since there wasn't 'nough room to truly move round that much. We dropped everyone off, 1-by-1--'cept Felix & Violet, who were apparently roommates, & Edgar & I,

'course. I have to admit feeling a growing pang as our car slowly emptied & the sun slowly left, ending this bright, warm vacation, & eventually the whole summer. This only intensified as Edgar & I were dropped off & we trudged up the steps to our apartment. Then 'gain, I was pretty sure Edgar's morose face was mo' o'er his continuing concerns with his girlfriend than with the end o' the trip. My mind was somewhere else @ the time, however; I was so exhausted when I got back, e'en though 'twas barely twilight--probably 'cause I didn't sleep last night, now that I think 'bout it--that I lay splayed on the couch with the door open to let the lukecold air in, having asked Edgar to close the door 'fore he went to sleep. That's 'bout all there is to say 'bout the trip, other than to maybe mention that Autumn the next day apologized for "ruining" our amazing trip, though I told her she needn't have done so, & assured me 'twas some personal stress she refused to talk 'bout that caused it & not us. 'Course, when I asked her if she wanted to impact @ my place, she said no, though that was normal on her part. Anyway, I'd better tie this story up soon, 'cause the narrator's getting itchy 'bout me stealing his job. I don't envy him, since this is a much harder job than it appears. You'd think the fact that this is all just events that truly happened would have made it easier, but for some reason I still kept getting writer's block in places--not in terms o' what to make up, but what things that already happened to include. You have to remember, a lot o' things happened within those 3 days, & I couldn't have included all o' it. Obviously I didn't include every time I went to the bathroom or every time someone coughed, since that would be boring & creepy; but there were also snippets o' conversations I thought were rather insightful, but didn't include since I didn't think you readers would get. They were those

"you had to have been there" incidents, & nobody wants to read that crap. Anyway, I can see the narrator give me the smelly eye, so I'd better finish this. I guess I should probably give this a clever conclusion, as a true writer would do---& I'm sure Nora, who I must say is a much greater writer than I am, could do--but I'm running low on time & this story will ne'er get finish if I try that, since it's clearly 'bove my abilities. So 'stead, I'll just it the old fashioned way:

END



#BOSK-CC1D1A-POISON

# **GUZZLE UP BITTER CONDUCT AND UNSAVORY GUIDE IT'S ALL UNNATURAL**

J. J. W. Mezun | 2015 September 1



## I.

Our tale begins with Autumn & Edgar in the direst endeavor they'd e'er attempted: grocery shopping. On the micro, we witness Autumn holding 2 different brands o' peanut butter up to her face, calculating price gainst size for each to see which was the better buy. Autumn, as any rational shopper, always compared these for all 500,000 products to discover which combination optimized her rational self-interest. Meanwhile Edgar did his mastery: standing to the side quietly.

“¿You, uh... you need help holding those jars?” asked Edgar.

“No, I can handle it fine,” Autumn said without looking @ him, her attention locked on a pocket notebook in which she was scribbling. “¿You want to compare the prices & sizes for the jelly jars, please?”

Edgar nodded vigorously. “O, yes. Definitely.”

He scampered o'er to the shelf that held them, only for his joints to stiffen when he saw the sheer # o' brands there were. He gazed 'long all the price tags; but his brain fizzled @ how scattered their positions were. *¿Do these refer to the top item or the bottom 1? This name seems to match this thing way o'er here.*

Finally, he found the 1 that was the lowest & picked the jar up, only for said arm to freeze in midair.

*Wait... she said she wanted me to compare the prices & the sizes...*

He looked back 'mong the jars & saw what seemed to be the biggest near the top o' the shelf—too far 'bove his reach. However, he could see the price tag, & saw that 'twas a'least a Pts costlier than the 1 in his hand.

“I found the cheapest & the biggest, I think,” said Edgar. “¿You want me to get both?”

Autumn looked up from her pad. “¿Huh?”

“I, uh, I said I found the cheapest & the biggest, I think. ¿You want me to get both?”

Autumn shook her head. “No, no, no. We need to compare the price & size—that’s content size, not jar size; it should give it in grams somewhere on the jar—& then compare these #s to each other to figure out which nets us the highest ratio ’tween content size & price. See, look:”—Autumn turned her pad round & pointed her pencil @ some strange graph with numerous dots inside—“this is a scatter graph. See, the bottom side represents the content—the independent variable—& the left side represents the price—the dependent variable. The further to the bottom right the dots are, the better their product, though since jars with mo’ content generally cost mo’ & jars with the lowest price tend to have less content, this is harder to find.”

Edgar goggled, as still as an oak. For some reason, no matter how much he stared blankly @ the graph, it wouldn’t make sense in his head.

“It’s no matter,” Autumn said with a wave o’ her hand. “It shouldn’t take much longer for me to finish.”

As she spoke, they heard the rumbling o’ a cart rolling toward them. Both threw their heads to the side when they heard the heavier crash o’ plastic & metal gainst each other. After picking up their heads & returning them to their necks, they looked @ their cart & saw that it had been knocked forward a meter. ’Hind it they saw ’nother cart with Lance Chamsby standing up on the edge o’ the bottom layer, his hands revving the cart handles.

Autumn’s face vacillated ’tween their cart & Lance. Her eyes were the usual thick-capped dead bulbs.



Lance hopped off his cart & stared 'tween the 2 with fists against his hips.

"Thought you could hide your heisting from my eyes, ¿did you? ¿Did you?" He said the 2nd sentence with a twist o' his head & a rise in pitch.

"No," said Autumn.

"O." Lance looked down, crestumbled.

Then he looked up 'gain, strode o'er to their cart, & began rummaging through its contents.

When he rose 'gain with a loaf o' gray bread in his arms, Autumn said, "You might as well put it back, since I can easily replace it, anyway. E'en if I planned on stealing anything, nothing in there is stolen yet, since I haven't left."

Lance's nose pinched itself with itchy thoughts. Finally, he dropped the loaf back into the cart & scrambled down the aisle, almost knocking into 'nother woman just as she was grabbing a can o' cashews. Autumn was ready to breathe with relief @ his seemingly sudden retreat, but felt spikes in her neurons when she saw him turn round & point @ them.

"Record that my eyes will be on you when you leave, so don't think 'bout doing anything comedic or tragic." Autumn noticed the woman he almost knocked into quickly arrowing him an odd eye, & then swiftly shooting it in the opposite direction.

"Whatever you say, Big Brother," said Autumn.

Lance swung round 'gain. "I have no time for your Orwellian language." Then he walked 'way—& to Autumn's bliss, didn't return.

## II.

Every tock o' the analog clock that occupied this mute void o' a room caused Edgar's nerves to twitch. The shady heat beat down on him

under his heavy robe while the dim yellow light from Sir Druitt's li'l desk lamp drilled into his eyeholes.

In the thin light he could faintly see the dark shapes o' what he hoped were shelves & drawers & potted plants with their backs pressed gainst the wall; but what truly turned his femurs fragile was the obscure figure standing like a skyscraper in a back corner. Edgar thought he could see the figure crossing its arms; but its face was shrouded in shadows.

Sir Druitt sat back in his puffy leather armchair so deep, it seemed as if 'twere in the midst o' devouring him. If this were true, Druitt's expression didn't show any bother in it; 'stead, he directed a half-smiling, half-frowning smirk @ Edgar while his hands clasped each arm o' his chair, the leather melting under his claws like silly putty.

Druitt uncrossed his legs, then crossed them in the other direction, then uncrossed them 'gain, & then crossed them in the original direction once mo'.

Edgar glanced back @ the constantly clicking clock & saw that it had been a half hour since he entered & sat in this creaking, hard fold-up chair opposite Sir Druitt & was smothered in its sultry silence. His heart hurniaed under the strain o' his impatient anticipation.

Sir Druitt cleared his throat.

"I'm sorry, Sir Winners, but I'm 'fraid we have no openings as o' now. Terribly sorry for the inconvenience."

Edgar felt as if he could melt into his chair right then.

"¿Will you, um"—Edgar gulped—"let me know if any openings appear?"

Sir Druitt paused for almost a minute, & then said abruptly, "I'm so sorry, my good man, but I am dreadfully too busy to chat." He turned to the figure in the corner. "Hamilton, could you show Sir

Winners the way out.”

The crossed arms dropped, & the legs below them began to move as if he were a golem come to life.

Edgar slid out his chair & crept backward toward the door.

“N-no, that’s OK. I’ll go.”

He scrambled out the door, carefully closing the door as if ’twould keep the figure from chasing him, & hurried down the stairs & out the front door.

### III.

Though it drizzled that evening—as it did in mo’ than half o’ Boskeopolis’s days—’twas a warm drizzle typical o’ late-summer September. Edgar breathed heavily, his bones itching under his thick robe, as he trudged home, his head staring down @ the numerous puddles strewing the streets & sidewalks.

Depression turned to surprise when he entered their apartment & noticed Autumn lying down, curled up in a tight ball. He tiptoed o’er to her & noticed a twice-bitten peanut butter & jelly sandwich, as well as her still-open laptop lying nearby, its monitor providing the only illumination inside.

*She must’ve truly worked herself to fall ’sleep.*

He bent down next to the laptop, turned it in his direction, & stared @ its screen, its yelling light lasering his eyeholes so used to the hours o’ darkness in which they’d dwelled recently.

*Maybe I’ll be able to help her with her work, he thought. I just hope I don’t mess anything up like I usually do.*

He uneasily slid his index ’cross the mouse pad, only to see the screen cursor refuse to move. He rubbed a li’l harder, but it still wouldn’t budge.

*I don’t get it. I see Autumn work this thing all the time; ¿why won’t*

*it work now?*

Edgar's heart locked up like a faulty hard drive. *Don't tell me I already broke her computer.*

Then his heart seized into action 'gain: *Maybe she made it so that it only worked for her fingerprints. ¡She would definitely do something like that!*

He turned to Autumn hesitantly, fearful that she'd open her eyes any second. The conflict 'tween his desire to get 'way as quickly as possible & his desire to ensure he hadn't broken anything raged, & 'ventually the latter won: he slowly reached his hand out, gently picked up her hand, & carried it toward the laptop.

*Something feels weird 'bout her arm...*

As if in answer to this thought, he heard a low, moaning voice say, "¿Edgar... is that you?"

"¿Autumn?"

He dropped her arm, & she pulled it back toward her, her whole body tightening itself together e'en mo'. E'en her eyelids squeezed into an e'en mo' constricted cringe.

"Good... Watch the place, please..." she groaned, barely audibly to Edgar.

Though she was compressed, he noticed her chest heaving, & that part o' the droning noise he'd been hearing was not just the computer, but Autumn's breathing. Despite the sweat infesting her face, she appeared to twitch in shiver.

"¿Are you OK?"

"Yes... Just need a li'l rest..."

"¿You need me to get you anything?" asked Edgar.

"Maybe some water if that's no bother..."

He rose & rushed to the kitchen. He threw open cupboards for a glass as if searching for a ticking time bomb in need o' defusing, & filled it with tap water—the glass, not the ticking time bomb; the

latter he filled with maple syrup.

“Here you go,” he whispered as he held the glass ’bove her.

She didn’t stir. He noticed her breathing was much lighter than before.

“Autumn, ¿d’you mind if I turn the light on for a second? I just want to see something,” he whispered.

When he got no response, he rose & tiptoed o’er to the light switch. Its light engulfed him much worse than the laptop monitor.

However, he had scant time to ruminate o’er this, for what he saw when he turned back to Autumn hogged all attention: the strange color he’d seen on Autumn’s skin he’d thought was caused by the mix o’ the monitor light & the darkness turned out to be real. He rubbed his wrists vigorously in his eyeholes, but they could not change what they clearly saw: her skin was a deep, pinkish purple.

Panic defeated politeness, causing him to tumble next to Autumn & shake her arm.

“¡Autumn! ¡Autumn!”

There was no reply or physical reaction. She remained silent & still.

He flipped her on her back & pressed a hand gainst her heart to feel its beats. They were much slower than normal.

Gasping, Edgar rummaged through his robe pockets for his phone & jabbed 4-0-4.

#### IV.

The doctor held Autumn’s wrist in his fingers & tilted his head & eyebrows back & forth as if tasting wine. Edgar watched from meters ’way, hands tightly clutched together, for a full half hour without hearing a sound but the doctor’s soft “Hmms” every so oft.

“So, uh... ¿is she all right?” Edgar finally asked, taking a step

closer & tilting his own head to see better.

The doctor looked up & @ Edgar with a baffled expression, as if just waking from a dream.

“I’m so sorry, my good man, but I am dreadfully too busy to chat.”

Then he stood straight, gathered his supplies, & right—which is slightly similar to having left, but with a mo’ prominent strut.

## V.

The 2nd doctor held Autumn’s wrist in her fingers, but without tilting her head, or e’en her eyebrows.

“It’s terminal, I fear.”

“¿Is there... is there nothing you can do to save her?” asked Edgar, his voice sounding as if all the moisture had been sucked from it.

Now the doctor tilted her head.

“Hmm... I didn’t try knocking on her noggin & shouting. It’s a far toss, but it just might succeed.”

She rapidly rapped her fist gainst Autumn’s forehead, leaned her face close, & said as if calling out to someone @ a distance, “Ello there, Madame. ¿You still ’live there?”

She stepped back & stared down @ Autumn, face as impassive as a cat. Autumn didn’t stir a pixel.

After a painted-out pause, Edgar asked, “¿Did it... did it work?”

The doctor held a hand o’er her mouth—not in thought, but to protect herself from the death viruses Autumn’s body was likely releasing.

“Fraid not, I’m ’fraid.”

Then she started coughing.

“Sorry.” She cleared her throat & then walked toward the door. Just before going out, she turned back to Edgar.

“Hey, if you need help finding a place to put the body, I know this woman who’s in need o’ a decoration next to her fireplace.”

Edgar didn’t answer. His long face was dead set on Autumn’s corpse, his arms sagging to the floor, brushing carelessly against the carpet.

“Sir, ¿did you hear me?” the doctor called out. “¿Sir?”

She shrugged. “Mate must be high on the tanuki leav—”

She was thrashed by ’nother bout o’ coughing. Then she cleared her throat ’gain, apologizing to no one in particular.

Then she left, ne’er to be seen by Edgar ’gain. Later that doctor would die o’ DVS: Death Virus Syndrome.

## VI.

Edgar wandered the room, throwing his arms in arbitrary directions & patterns. He felt as if he’d lost control o’er most o’ his body, wailing deep in his mind while his body rambled in autopilot. He knew he could ne’er sleep, so distracted by the present & too terror-stricken ’bout the future.

*There’s still time yet... I ought to do something... I must do something...*

*¿But what can I do? I can’t e’en figure out how to use a computer or not wait in some guy’s office for a half hour while he silently molests his armchair; ¿how could I cure Autumn when a trained physician said ’twas impossible?*

*But I must do something...*

He stopped & breathed deeply, his hands squeezing each other tightly, but holding still.

*OK, must calm... Panicking will only fuzzy your mind & lead you to do stupid stuff. That’s what Autumn always told me. She would want me to stop & think carefully.*

*Now, the 1 person I know who could help is Dawn...*

Edgar pulled out his phone 'gain, dialed her #, & waited as he listened to the beeps, & then mo' beeps, & then mo', till finally, he heard a click, & then a robotic voice:

"WE'RE SORRY, BUT THE PERSON YOU ARE CALLING IS NOT PRESENT IN THIS STORY. PLEASE TRY 'GAIN 'NOTHER MONTH."

¿*Now what?* he thought as he let his phone-holding arm slump back to the ground.

## VII.

*The gods pass us a bill full o' rain,* Heloise thought as she leaned back in her chair, sipped her Boskeopolean brunch tea, & listened to the storms reign gainst her windows—a perfect ambiance to the epic LEGO war 'tween the green people & the blue people waging on the table before her.

Suddenly, she heard something heavy thunk gainst her front door.

*My, this is a ferocious storm. The camaels will no doubt balk @ the water deficit this will create.*

'Nother thunk.

*Hmm... If I were less savvy, I would think that sounds suspiciously similar to knocking...*

As if in answer, the knocking returned.

Heloise slowly rose to her feet & trudged to the front door with tiny steps, the soles o' her pink slippers scraping the wooden floor. Half a minute later, she opened the door to see a shivering, soaked, robed skeleton 'hind it.

"O, you lower-middle-class thing. Please, come in."

"U-uh, th-thank you," said Edgar.

Heloise moved to let him in. He stopped on the welcome mat to



rub his feet, & then stepped inside, his drenched robe sloshing against the floor. The crumbs o' brown leaves fell as he went, every 1 o' which he watched with guilt.

Heloise grabbed Edgar by the arm & led him to her poofy purple beanbag chair. She was pleased by the stench o' rain he brought in with him.

"Please, please, make yourself comfortable," she said as she sat him down.

He curled his body up in a tight ball to protect himself from the cold cutting him from every direction. It only reminded him o' the way he saw Autumn when she...

Edgar tried to stifle the vision 'way, & was glad that Heloise bringing him the mug o' tea offered a distraction.

"N-no, thanks," he said. "I can't drink—I mean, anything, 'cause o' being a skeleton & all."

"I understand," said Heloise, the beak o' her red mask rising & falling in a slow nod.

Edgar lowered his drink & then his face. "O, I'm sorry. I'm so rude. You probably want to know why I'd knock so suddenly..."

Heloise dribbled her fingers together. "O, there is no need to apologize, young skeleton. You are not the 1st o' your kind to appear @ my doorstep."

Edgar looked up @ her in confusion.

"Tell me: ¿what is bothering you, mousse?"

"Well, you see, a friend o' mine—"

"The 1 with coal in her eyes & fire in her esophagus," said Heloise, nodding 'gain.

"Uh, no... Autumn Springer's her name. See, you once locked us in your basement so we could watch some play o' yours..."

"Mmm hmm. I recall."

"& you see... Now she's almost lifeless & her skin is purple & the

doctor's say its terminal & that there's nothing they can do & ;I don't know what I should do!" Edgar's voice gradually climbed in pitch till he was suddenly throwing his arms out & wailing.

Heloise stepped closer & patted Edgar gently on the shoulder.

"There there, mousse. I think I know what has afflicted your friend."

Edgar looked up @ her with hope glowing in his eyeholes.

"¿You do?"

"Mmm hmm: she has been poisoned—fed the venom o' toxic seahorses, I'm 'fraid."

"¿I-is there... is there a way to cure her?"

Heloise turned 'way & dribbled her fingers once mo' in consideration.

"There is, but it won't be easy..."

Edgar stared down, feeling like the leaves still left on the floor.

"¿What do I have to do?" he asked in a low voice.

"The cure is found only in a pharmacy located deep in Spinach Swamp."

"¿Spinach... Swamp?"

"Yes. I must warn you that it is filled to the neck with rabid crystal crocodiles, feverish beavers, & the thunder wolves, not to mention the deep eggplant-purple sludge you would have to trudge through, 'neath which legend says lies eyeball & tentacle creatures unclassified by zoologists."

"But... but I can't make it through the Spinach Swamp; I don't have the guts to do it—in fact, I don't have any guts @ all, or e'en a stomach." He voice began to crack. "Please, don't leave it to me. I'll mess it up & fail Autumn, & she deserves better than that..."

Heloise clutched Edgar tightly, each o' his arms in each o' her hands. Her mask was so close he could smell its weird waxy scent.

"You must, Sir Winters. *You*. Madame Springer would not want to

find herself revived by a stranger while you stood blubbering into your sleeves. Either dispose your fear, or recycle it into something useful or Madame Springer shall die & I'll make you watch home movies o' the battle @ Cube Canyon."

"¿But what if I fail?"

"You have it backward, mousse," Heloise said as she released Edgar. She walked 'way from him to a dresser on the other side & began rummaging through 1 o' its drawers. "You are already in the failure state. 'Tis the *successful* state you must work for. Succeed or fail, or fail or fail: all that matters is that only 1 road may lead to success."

Edgar began to rub his hands nervously. "OK... I'll try, I guess..."

"That's the tonic," she said as she stepped toward him & shoved a sheet o' ruled paper into his hands.

Edgar stared doubtfully down @ the paper. He saw that 'twas a map in colored pencil, with 1 corner labeled, "Spinach Swamp," & the familiar area next to it labeled, "Wasabi Woods."

"Well... I guess I'd better get going on that swamp exploring & all," he said.

Then he stowed the map in his robe pockets, stood, & went for the door. "Thank you for the advice & the map & the tea & the comfy chair."

"1 last piece o' advice," said Heloise, stopping Edgar as he grabbed the doorknob: "Spinach Swamp is saturated with slimy scammers eager to sabotage your mission, so be wary. You ne'er know when they might appear."

Edgar nodded. "Thank you for the advice 'gain."

"No problem @ all," she said. "All I can give is all I have been given, after all."

## VIII.

All Edgar could hear was the air's natural static, the sound o' millions o' leaves rustling @ once, a hoot o' an owl, the scrabbling o' a squirrel here & there, & the sound o' his own feet dragging in the dirt, now beginning to fill with drowned leaves.

Though 'twas not as cold as he'd expect from a night like this, & it had stopped raining, he shivered all the same, the dangers o' deranged mushroom men & explosive robotic homing owls he'd encountered last year still dormant in his mind.

The eyes o' his head & his flashlight glided back & forth 'tween his map & his surroundings, till finally, he saw that he had passed the last gnarled tree in the shape o' a Y on the map & began to hear his regular music accompanied by beeping crickets, buzzing insects, sloshing sludge, & oddly, rasping logs.

He raised his flashlight 'gain, revealing a tilted plastic signpost in the soil that said in bold black strokes, "WELCOME TO SPINACH SWAMP," & then to its side a sign that said, "DO NOT FEED YOUR GAME CARTRIDGES TO THE WILDLIFE, NO MATTER HOW TASTY THEY MAY BE," with a silhouette o' what looked like a rectangle o'er an open-mouthed croc covered by a red circle crossed by a red line.

Then he felt his soles suddenly submerged in a thin layer o' thick liquid, gradually growing till it reached his knees. The difficulty o' movement also gradually increased, as standard steps turned to sticky stomps.

*Well, I found the swamp; now I just need to find where the pharmacy is.*

But wherever Edgar turned, all he saw was the same purple—though most looked oil-black under the night—sludge stretching to the horizon. Its emptiness only heightened Edgar's desolation—a

feeling that frightened him far mo' than the prospect o' being bitten by crystal crocs.

*I'm ne'er going to find that pharmacy... I'm ne'er going to find anything. I'll just wander through this endless wasteland forever & e'er & e'er...*

Edgar couldn't keep from swinging his flashlight erratically in his mad search for some—any—kind o' external sentience. He crushed his shaking hands gainst it to distract his mind from the unerring agony o' the quiet engulfing him. He felt as if the lack o' light—or any kind o' environmental substance—suffocated him, making every trudge feel as if he were carrying a 2-ton block on his back.

*This is it... There is nothing after this. I should just lie down & let the mud eat me for good. Then maybe I could join Autumn under the dirt 'stead o' uselessly trying to keep her 'bove.*

Edgar shook his head @ such thoughts, as if it'd toss them out his ear holes.

*Remember what the woman in the mask said: Autumn wouldn't like me standing round blubbering. I have to turn my fear into something useful. OK, remember self: the faster you find that pharmacy, the faster we can leave.*

It didn't seem to raise his spirits much, but it did a'least distract him from his cloudy thoughts—& that was a difficult feat to accomplish when the farther he ventured, the farther the emptiness expanded, adding mo' doubt to his heavy pile.

As he moved onward, thin black branches reached out into the sky, covering the stars & moon & what li'l light they offered.

Edgar jumped when he heard a creak to his side. When he turned to its source, he saw a gargantuan teal toad sitting on a fat, rotting purple toadstool. Its eyes were mo' glazed than a Creamy Crisp, & out its deflated mountain o' a mouth snaked a bronze pipe, from which billows o' various pastel colors 'scaped.

“¿Why are you invading this swamp?” crooned a raspy voice deeper than the Mariana Trench.

Edgar shook like a student @ the principal’s.

“O, I’m sorry to have pestered you, Sir Toad, Sir...”

“Name’s not Sir Toad. He died in a motorcycle accident. Shouldn’t have been texting Mole ’bout his Sir Toad Appreciation Ball.” The toad paused. “To be fair, ’twas a true penis move to put a floating wall just after a jump. Few toads survive level 3.”

“O, I’m awfully sorry, Sir...”

“Call me Prince.”

“I, uh... I don’t have to draw some funny symbol to spell that, ¿do I?”

Prince’s expression didn’t change a molecule till a full second later, when all he did was say with molasses slowness, “No.”

The conversation tapered out from there, with Edgar scratching the back o’ his head nervously & Prince puffing mo’ smoke from his pipe.

“So, uh, ¿what’s that stuff you’re smoking?” asked Edgar. “It smells nice.”

“Tanuki leaves. Steel toads like us need them for philosophy. Cures the brain o’ coffee grinds.”

Edgar gave Prince the kind o’ wounded look o’ hope one might find on a dog seeing its owner hang by the front door<sup>1</sup>.

“By chance, ¿can it cure humans who are poisoned?”

“Fraid not.”

“O...” Edgar looked down sadly.

Then he looked up ’gain & asked, “Well, ¿would you happen to know where a pharmacy is round here?”

“Pharmacies are everywhere. Works great for helicopter toads

1 That is, dogs o’ abusive owners. Most dogs prefer nonsuicidal owners so their food trays remain replenished.

who pump tadpoles full o' proteins."

"¿W-where? I haven't been able to find anything but empty mud."

"Thinking too 2-dimensional. Need mo' philosophy. Need tanuki leaves. Give you mo' Z with your X & Y."

"Gee, I dunno... ¿Aren't drugs bad for you?"

"Only for humans. Only for real life. Neither human nor real. Build calcium in your fictional bones."

Edgar scratched his chin. "Well, I have been wanting to build calcium in my fictional bones; & if it helps revive Autumn, I guess it'll be worth it."

"Just pull any leaf from nearby trees & eat."

"This isn't... this isn't unsanitary, ¿is it?"

"Swamp's cleaner than a full moon."

"¿Are full moons clean?"

"Must be," said Prince, glancing off to the side. "Otherwise that saying wouldn't make sense."

Edgar couldn't find fault with this logic, so he plucked the 1st leaf his fingers found & hesitantly put it in his mouth. A myriad o' spicy & sandy flavors scraped his tongue as he chewed the pieces o' dry leaves, churning them in his mouth. As they evaporated, he could feel their ether float up his skull, embracing his sticky brain like warm blankets.

His eyeholes widened. He could feel his mind pumped with philosophy. Before his eyes paced women whose eyes were shielded by glasses, men whose chins were buried in beards, & Martians with tentacles dripping oil (this happens whenever Martians develop a truly wonderful idea or are sexually aroused). Edgar spun, questioning whether pipes were truly pipes, apples truly apples—which 'course, they weren't: they were labels for these objects.

Edgar went beyond the drug-addled artistic cesspool called "postmodernism"; he entered the *postpostmodernist* world. Here,

characters didn't just break the 4th wall, but also the 5th & 6th, as well as the 19th. Characters didn't just spout out every literary technique used, but discussed how they were discussing every literary technique.

'Twas a world Edgar desperately wanted to leave.

Unluckily, he didn't know how: the nightmarishly empty dark marsh had been swallowed by an e'en mo' nightmarish crowded pink void—but 1 just as lonely.

The world became stranger. Though the room was large, 'twas hot & steamy under the penetrating light o' the ceiling lamps, much brighter than any sun could be. Glasses tinked gainst each other o'er pure white tablecloths by humans in identical pure-black tuxedos. There were 2 'ceptions he noticed: a pudgy black cat in a bib eating winkles & shrink, & some strange man dressed in a rat's coat & crowskin with a cross 'hind him.

They all spoke in a variety o' European languages—though English was certainly not 1 o' them, since he couldn't understand a word any o' them said.

Edgar stood halfway down a lonely—'well, cept for the striped & spotted tabby seemingly in deep contemplation—set o' stairs, wondering if he dare descend further into this polite inferno, wondering if he dare provoke the cheery folk with his ague & anguish o' the marrow. ¿What would they make o' the sight o' a skeleton such as him?

“Look there @ that bald spot on that living skeleton's head,” one might jeer with a point o' one's finger. “¿What kind o' living skeleton can't afford a toupee?”

While Edgar was distracted by these thoughts, women kept passing in & out the hallway.

“—était certainement le plus amusant tortue,” one said just before taking a vertical bite o' her slice o' pineapple pizza like a Roman



emperor eat grapes.

“Orange toujours a été ma couleur préférée,” her partner added.

“Tu, Madame, es l’humoriste éternelle,” said the other.

They completely ignored Edgar, which he found to be a double-edged nunchuck: on 1 tentacle, if no one noticed him, no one could ridicule his baldness—or the maggots crawling round his eyeholes, too, he s’posed; on the other 7 tentacles, he’d rather be acknowledged as ridiculous than not acknowledged @ all—the former a’least had certainty to it.

Then he remembered what Autumn, who held the opposite view, had always said: “There’s worse than being ignored; there’s being noticed. Makes it harder to rob them.”

Then he remembered what the masked woman had said: twist weaknesses into strengths.

He crept to the crowd o’ dining tables. Not 1 face turned in his direction—& his shyness ensured that e’en in a dream such as this, he could not meet their eyes. He waited for talk to turn to the elusive pharmacy. For some reason, none talked o’ it. Clambering all round him were snippets o’ conversations he couldn’t understand:

“C’era qualcosa che ha detto che forse ho sfidato.”

“Cousin Harriet, hier ist die *Boston Evening Transcript*.”

“En mi pais el tiempo estará lloviendo.”

What talk he could understand was ’bout the perverted yellow smoke, rubbing itself & licking all ’long the outside o’ the house; the unconscious patient who, for some reason, was lying on their table, his dripping blood their only drink, & his bloody flesh their only food; & the street that kept following round this table’s original patron, seeming to find something to argue ’bout every word he spoke. But none spoke o’ the pharmacy.

“That is not what I mean @ all; that is not it @ all,” spoke the street’s gravely mouth.

The other looked @ him in confusion. He furiously scribbled, “¿What isn’t it @ all?” on a piece o’ paper & dropped it on his guest’s plate. Unfortunately, his tarmacked guest wasn’t paying attention to him, being far too busy trying to squeeze the universe into a ball—an arduous task for someone with as spindly arms as he.

“¡I tell ya, there’s not ’nough room in there!” shouted the man, throwing his arms out.

“I know what I’m doing,” grumbled the street. “I know all the evenings, morns, & afternoons, & they’ll need only 5 coffee spoons o’ space to operate. They won’t miss all o’ that excess space. They won’t miss it @ all.”

With this discussion clearly leading Edgar into a dead end, a pertinent question filled his head: *¿How should I presume?*

Edgar’s heart jumped o’er the honeyed moon when the gentleman turned to him & asked, “¿Would you happen to be the waiter? I must say that I am deathly craving some oyster shells & sawdust,” as he rubbed his stomach.

“Be careful ’bout him,” said the street, her attention still rapt by the black ball o’ the universe in her hands. “E’ll pin ya to the wall, wriggling like a screeching mermaid.”

“Dry bones can harm no one,” the gentleman said as he patted his mouth with a napkin—why, Edgar couldn’t discern, since he hadn’t eaten anything.

The street dropped the universe & stared up @ the gentleman with a penetrating glare.

“That’s not ‘Prufrock,’ ya idiot; that’s ‘The Waste Lands.’ God, did you e’en *read* Eliot? We go through all o’ this trouble to mix up this nice li’l philosophical dream for the nice skeleton kid & you go an’ ruin it. What a triumph o’ bullshit you’ve built.”

The chair creaked nastily as the gentleman stood, a dark glower in his own eyes & his hands pressing hard gainst the table.

“¡For Christ’s sake, stick it up your ass!” he shouted.

Unfortunately, he was leaning too hard on the table & slipped & pulled the table cloth, o’erturning a coffee cup.

Suddenly, a dilapidated elderly waiter with trembling hands & nothing better to do walked toward them & after clearing his throat, said repeatedly, “If the lady & gentlemen wish to take their tea in the garden...”

Edgar backed ’way slowly but steadily. The 1 place he *didn’t* like attention was in the midst o’ an argument.

¿Would you like me to take your coat, Sir?”

“¡Gah!” Edgar shouted as he turned, only to see a footman in a neat sweater vest & with 2 tiny black arrows for a mustache.

“I’m not wearing a coat,” said Edgar.

¿Would you like me to take it, anyway?”

“Um... if you really want to...”

The footman took his nonexistent coat & then suddenly started laughing submarinely. Edgar’s face drooped in horrified confusion.

The footman made a futile attempt to cover his laughs. “I’m sorry, Sir. It’s just... I remembered this delightfully absurd chap I saw earlier tonight. The bottom o’ his trousers, they were *rolled*, you see. ¿Isn’t that just absurd?”

“Yes, this certainly is,” Edgar replied hesitantly with a withered expression. He looked up @ the footman. “Look, ¿would—would you happen to know where a pharmacy is? You see, my friend, she’s had a—she’s been poisoned &, & you don’t know how much she means to me, my friend, & how, how rare & strange it is, to find in a life composed so much, so much o’ odds & ends, to find a friend who has these qualities, who has, & gives those qualities ’pon which friendship lives. How much it means that I say this to you... Without these friendships...” & then Edgar sputtered out, already humiliated by how much fluff he’d already sputtered out.

“Why, ’course: you’ll find it under the brown fog o’ a winter dawn.” He pointed his finger out ’hind Edgar. “Just go up that hill & down William Street & you’ll find it.”

Edgar turned.

“There’s nothing but an empty wall here.”

But when he turned back to the footman, he saw that he’d disappeared. ’Stead, where the footman had stood was a sheet o’ paper. Edgar picked it up & read it. @ the top was the word “NOTES” in all-caps, followed by a paragraph:

Not only the title, but the plan and a good deal of the incidental symbolism of the poem were suggested by Miss Jessie L. Weston’s book on the Grail legend: *From Ritual to Romance* (Macmillan). Indeed, so deeply am I indebted, Miss Weston’s book will elucidate the difficulties of the poem much better than my notes can do; and I recommend it...”

Past that paragraph, Edgar saw a bunch o’ #s & phrases that made no sense—he recognized a few as Bible stories, & that’s it.

He let the sheet gently fall to the floor & shook his head.

’Ventually, he raised his head & searched for the front door. When he finally found it, he crept toward it, hoping dearly no one would get in his—

“HURRY UP PLEASE IT’S TIME.”

Edgar jumped for a second, but forced himself still & continued toward the door.

*Ignore it. Ignore it all. They weren’t talking to you. It’s something completely irrele—*

“HURRY UP PLEASE IT’S TIME.”

Though he knew he probably shouldn’t, Edgar couldn’t keep his head from turning back to the source o’ the sound, fully cognizant that its consequences would be like being turned to stone.

“HURRY UP PLEASE IT’S TIME... jto play with this crazy wicked

pack o' cards!" a man in a dishevelled tie exclaimed as he clumsily raised a glass o' wine he'd clearly drunk too much o', spilling copious drops on the carpet, while he held up a pack o' cards, the front o' which showed some cute li'l monster.

Edgar shook his head once mo' & pushed his way out the front door & onto the cold sidewalk outside, feeling newspapers & withered leaves that wept gainst his feet. He was startled when he heard heavy clanking 'side him & turned to see a shower curtain banging its noodly arms gainst a window with broken blinds. When that accomplished nothing, it climbed onto the roof & banged onto the chimney.

Still watching the strange shower, Edgar walked backward down the street, only to startle @ e'en mo' banging. This time when he swung round he saw a streetlamp banging its own noodly arms on drums & rapping:

"Regard that woman & see the corner o' her eye twists like a crooked pin. Remark that cat which fattens itself in the gutter & devours rancid butter..."

Edgar gasped & then rushed for the nearest storm drain. But as he neared, he saw beaked gray faces pop out.

"S-scuse me, but, ¿could you tell me if my friend's in there?" asked Edgar, his jaw swelling to maculate giraffe.

With a fugitive resentment in their eyes, the sparrows said together, "¡How you digress!"

Edgar stepped backward in befuddled fear, unsure what to do in this nonsense world, no matter what he did. The ol' woman was wrong: neither fear nor courage saves him.

As he stepped back, he felt an extra emptiness 'neath him & looked down to see hushed & shrunken seas, its water pale & thin. He could already see that too late to avoid falling in. O, sure, he hung in midair 'bove the ocean as a coyote—he could hang there for

hours. But he knew he'd 'ventually have to give into gravity, so he let go.

Edgar had many flaws he'd ne'er had the time—or guts—to rectify, & here was yet 'nother: he couldn't swim. No matter how much he frantically slapped arms gainst waves, he plunged under faster than an anvil.

There he lingered in the chambers o' the snarled & yelping seas, burning on the water all day, subjected to the sirens' defunctive music...

Till human voices woke him & he drowned.

## IX.

The sky was as black as e'er when Edgar woke; the same waxing-gibbous moon was shining down on him.

Edgar felt most o' his body submerged under the sticky sludge o' Spinach Swamps; but what surprised him were the hollow metal objects he was leaning gainst. He turned &, squinting @ them under the moonlight, & saw that they were trash cans, most o' which were fallen o'er, spilling colonies o' crumpled paper balls, browning banana peels, yellowing newspapers, & bent pop cans into the soupy sea.

"You had quite a venture for the last few hours, small guy. Should go easy on the tanuki leaves next time; almost o'erdoesed on the philosophy."

Edgar rubbed his pounding head as he searched for the voice's owner. All he could see was a black shadow in the shape o' a human—which was mo' info than he could expect, considering the creatures he'd met so far.

"¿Where am I?" Edgar asked groggily.

"They call this part o' Spinach Swamps the 'Waste Lands.'"

Edgar cringed.

“You had quite a time for the last few hours, ¿haven’t you? I don’t know where your mind was, but in reality some alligators with mighty large lips were eyeing you hungrily. Had to shoo them ’way.”

The figure’s arm reached out. Edgar grabbed it & let it pull him out o’ the quickmud.

“Thank you,” Edgar said weakly. “I didn’t want to take the tanuki leaves, but the toad—Prince, I think he said he was—told me I had to find the pharmacy.”

“Doesn’t look like it’s had a good effect on you: you look ill.”

“It’s all the postpostmodernism.”

“From the allusions I heard you mutter, sounds mo’ like a case o’ *prepostmodernism*.”

Edgar sighed. “You wouldn’t happen to know where a pharmacy is, ¿would you? My... my friend’s poisoned & I truly need to get this medicine for her before she... before she...”

Edgar knew trying to finish that sentence would be futile. He’d have to unload a lot mo’ than 1 mo’ word; he’d have to smother this poor stranger in a truckload o’ dark feelings.

“S’alright, kid. No need to fret. The pharmacy’s right on down that way.”

Edgar saw the shadowy hand rise & point ’hind him. He had an uneasy feeling he’d see ’nother empty wall if he turned, but ’stead he saw a li’l glowing white box in the distance, surrounded by kilometers o’ purple sludge.

“HURRY UP PLEASE IT’S TIME.”

“¿What?” Edgar exclaimed as he turned back to the stranger, eyeholes wide in horror.

“I said, if your friend’s poisoned, you’ll probably want to hurry & get that medication before she croaks.”

“O... Yeah, you’re probably right,” Edgar said distractedly. “Well,

thanks.”

He scampered 'way toward the pharmacy, going as fast as the muggy sludge would let him.

He'd ne'er see the mysterious figure 'gain: said figure would in the burgeoning hours o' dawn die o' Death Virus Syndrome.

## X.

When Edgar finally reached it, he saw that it looked just like any pharmacy one would find in downtown Boskeopolis. It glowed in the mechanically white 24-7 light, mo' enduring than the sun & the moon. Gaudy posters full o' bold fonts—mainly “Cooper Black”—& bright Photoshop distortions o' food & drugs covered the windows, which made Edgar wonder why said windows were there in the 1st place if their primary purpose was impossible to fulfill. Edgar looked up & saw on the wide, striped roof a sign that said in glossy orange & purple, “Morgenacht's,” & then below it in slightly smaller text, “Drugs & Stuff.”

Edgar took a deep breath before the sliding plastic doors. *Well, this is it... You can do this...*

He went in & headed straight for the main counter, ignoring the scintillating shelves full o' packages o' every color, displaying the contents they hoped to sell like peacocks displaying their tail feathers.

Edgar was so short, only the top slice o' his head poked 'bove the desk, forcing him to tilt his head up just to see the clerk.

“Um, 'scuse me, sir...”

“¿YES?” The clerk was chewing gum. Clerks always chew gum @ Morgenacht's.

“I, uh... I'm sorry it's so late. It's just that... my friend was poisoned somehow & I wanted to know if you had some kind o'



medicine I could get to heal her.”

The clerk’s eyes retained the same listless quality they’d had since Edgar had entered. There was something ’bout the way he chewed his gum in the same e’en rotation—up & down, up & down—that would’ve made Edgar’s hairs stand up if he had any<sup>2</sup>.

“PLEASE STATE THE CLASS O’ POISON.”

“Um... something ’bout ’venom o’ the toxic seahorse’ or something.”

“‘TOXIC SEAHORSE POISONING’ IS THE CLOSEST MATCH. ¿CONFIRM?”

“Uh, yes...” Edgar nodded vigorously. “I think that’s it.”

“LET US SEE...” the clerk said in a slow monotone. He jerked his upper body to the right & picked up & put down bottles methodically.

He stopped with 1 & jerked his upper body back toward Edgar.

“THIS IS THE 1.”

The clerk’s hand stretched out till ’twas o’er Edgar’s hands & then the clerk’s fingers stretched out, dropping the bottle into Edgar’s hands.

Edgar looked @ the bottle. Its label said, “Frosty Elixir,” & below that, “Shields gainst the poisons o’ all aquatic equines.”

Edgar gasped. “Th-thank you, Sir. You have no idea what this means to me. I’ve been so scared that I would ne’er see Autumn ’gain... I...”

“THAT WILL BE 400Pts, PLEASE<sup>3</sup>.”

“O, I’m sorry.”

Edgar rummaged through his robe pockets & handed the clerk a 500Pts bill & was handed back a 100.

“HAVE A NICE DAY.”

“Uh, you too.” Edgar looked up @ the clerk & waved @ him as he

2 Edgar did have villi all round the tendrils under his robe, but those only stood up... well, in specific situations involving Autumn...

3 Approximately \$4.32 American.

stepped back to the door, only to stop & shrink back when he saw the jerky way the clerk twisted his hand left & right.

Edgar would ne'er see that clerk 'gain; it would later die o' Death Virus Syndrome.

Edgar stood in front o' Morgenacht's, staring @ the sludgy sea stretch to the horizon, shivering in the wind. Having spent so long out @ night & having just waken made the stale warmth o' the night air suddenly become chilly.

*Well, Edgar thought with a sigh. Now I just need to hurry all the way back before Autumn...*

He stopped the thought there & began trudging his way through the swamp, both mouth & mind silent.

## XI.

The second Edgar pushed through their apartment door he ran for Autumn, his hands already scooping through his pockets for the medicine. Then he put a hand on 1 o' her wrists & her chest. He could feel a slow pulse or beat every few seconds.

After struggling with the child safety cap for a minute, Edgar moved to pour the medicine into Autumn's mouth, only to remember that he'd forgotten to read the instructions 1st.

*Damn it, ¿why don't you plan this kind o' stuff better? I had almost a whole hour to read this bottle.*

He filled the cap full & poured it in Autumn's mouth twice. Then he sat back & waited, hands gripping knees tightly.

10 minutes passed without a single stir from Autumn.

Edgar started nudging her. "¿Autumn? ¿Are you feeling better?"

No reply.

Edgar felt Autumn's pulse. 'Twas e'en slower than before.

Then he checked the bottle's label. *It says 2 caps full for people 16-*

28. *¿Why isn't it working?*

*¿Should I give her a li'l mo', or would that only make things worse?*

He gasped. *Maybe I already gave her too much...*

He reread the instructions, every word, 3 mo' times. He still couldn't find anything he missed.

*Maybe it just takes a while to start working. Maybe if I went to sleep now she'd be all better when I woke up & I could make us both plates covered in minty waffles & buttered toast.*

He lay down, but the dread flowing through his veins faster than blood cells—as well as the fact that he'd already slept only an hour ago—made it impossible for him to sleep.

He was caught in a conundrum: there seemed to be absolutely nothing he could do to save Autumn, & yet he knew he had to.

*Remember, turn your fear into something useful.*

*¿But what could fear be useful for now?*

He got up & checked Autumn's pulse once mo'. He checked it for a full 5 minutes—though his mind recognized it as hours, which he'd credited to fear—when he finally noticed that Autumn didn't have a pulse anymo'.

*¡O shit! ¿What do I do now?*

He checked the bottle once mo'.

*Well, it can't do worse than kill her, ¿can it?*

He shakily poured 'nother cap full, causing much o' it to slop onto his robe. He didn't care. He quickly dumped it into Autumn's mouth, scooping any that strayed & pushed them fully down her lips just to make sure she missed nothing.

He checked her pulse once mo'. 10 minutes passed without a single beat.

He vacillated from pouring caps full o' medicine into her mouth & checking her pulse for a couple minutes a few mo' times till the bottle emptied.

Edgar checked the time & saw that it'd been an hour & a half since he arrived. There was still no pulse.

Edgar finally dropped Autumn's arm, staring vacantly @ the charcoal-colored wall 'hind her.

## XII.

The landlord wouldn't find Autumn's corpse till 3 weeks later, when she noticed Autumn's rent hadn't come in, despite Autumn always being punctual in paying her rent. She guessed 'twas due to that Death Virus Syndrome that kept spreading this season.

When she couldn't find any living relatives, the landlord auctioned off all o' Autumn's possessions, which wasn't much, anyway. There was 1 'ception: the landlord was so enamored by the brilliantly crafted statue o' the grim reaper that she put it in her own house & stood it next to her fireplace.

It didn't get much use from her, however. Only a week later, said landlord would die. Doctor's diagnosis: cardiovascular disease.

## NOTES:

1. Autumn & Edgar's trip @ the store was inspired by an ancient folk tale in which 2 people shop @ Fred Meyer & buy TV Dinners & then eat them @ home.
2. The way Druitt sits in his chair is a reference to a story my uncle wrote in which he sat in a chair. You should totally read it.
3. Mark XII, xvii. I didn't quote the Bible anywhere in this story; I just thought you might find this line interesting.
4. Knowing me, there are probably many *Super Mario Bros.* references. This is just here to remind you you could be playing those games instead o' reading this dreck.

5. Shantih shantih shantih.

#BOSK-CD0B1B-DISTURBED4

# DISTURBED RESIDENCE, Part IV

J. J. W. Mezun | 2015 October 1



## XVI. Deceiver

Lance Chamsby felt like the man who owned all the blues, reds, oranges, utilities, & railroads in *Monopoly*. Now his only 4 competitors were safely locked down in his prison where they could no longer do him harm & his men were scouring the whole mansion for the rest o' its treasure; & once they explored the whole area & found all o' its treasure, he would be able to leave this gruesome place with utter victory.

With nothing urgent in need o' his attention, Lance turned back to the ponytailed devil's backpack &, most significantly, her notebook full o' dirty secrets. As he held it in his hands once mo', savoring its papery feeling & sight, he thought, *Now it is time to crack this witch's secrets & use them to shut her down once & for all!*

He flipped o'er the cover page & saw a date in large lettering @ the top—January 1, 2015—& then below it, paragraphs in curly cursive writing with the lowercase I's dotted with hearts. His heart skipped as he began to read the 1st paragraph:

Dear Diary,

Today I bought a notebook to write stuff in for this new year, which you probably already know, I guess, since I'm writing in you right now. Sorry if that sounds a lil' weird, though I guess writing to a notebook is kind o' weird, but then 'gain a lot o' people do it, anyway.

*¿Why is she blathering 'bout this nonsense?*

He decided to skip forward a few pages. Curious 'bout how she

'scaped all o' his traps back in March 1, when he 1st started his crusade:

Dear Diary,

Sorry I couldn't write before, but I had to help Dawn carry boxes back & forth o'er some conveyor belt in her restaurant. I'm not sure why the guy in charge o' shipping makes her do that, or why he kept flicking a switch to make it suddenly go backward.

We were delayed a lil 'cause this weird rich guy in a top hat & cloak kept asking me questions I probably shouldn't have been answering—I tried not to give 'way any personal info, since I know Autumn doesn't like that-& skipped out on his meal, which truly stressed Dawn.

*¿What kind o' propagandist lie is this? O, ¿so the looter—;who so arrogantly talks to herself in the 1st-person, e'en, as if it'd fill her flaccid ego!—had to pay for my meal after I left without paying, e'en though we have ne'er eaten dinner e'er, & ne'er would? ;That is rich!*

There were no other mentions o' him in the remaining passages, nor for any o' the others afterward. He flipped forward to September, when he kidnapped her partner to see what affect it had. But, once 'gain, she conveniently suppressed information for those days—*Must've been too devastated to have lost her source o' power to sponge off for so long*, he thought with a laugh—but did eventually find 1 on September 25:

Dear Diary,

Sorry it took so long to write, but that guy in the cloak & \$-sign top hat kidnapped me & locked me up for days. Luckily Autumn was able to rescue me. It was so dark, cold, & lonely in there that I was thrilled to leave & hope



ne'er to return 'gain, & am glad to be writing 'gain, since I was so bored in there I had a lot o' ideas & feelings I wanted to write, but now I can't remember any o' them, unfortunately.

Anyway, after so many truly depressing days, the day Autumn saved me may be the best, e'en mo' than that prom we went to in high school. We spent the rest o' the day snuggled under her jackets all afternoon, which was much better than sitting in that dungeon listening to terrible sitcoms & news shows that aren't outright racist, but you can kinda hear a racist tone in the way they tell the stories.

*This is some sophisticated propaganda you've wound up—not to mention a creepy self-lust, which I'm sure is to make up for her many lacks.*

His reading was interrupted by a voice calling in his ear piece, “Uh... ¿Sir Chamsby? ¿Are you there?”

“¿What is it, Agent Big Dip O' Ruby? ¿Can't you see I'm bus—?”

He looked up @ Dip O' Ruby's monitor & saw what looked to be an empty black void with empty white light shining down o'er a small circle o' the area.

“¿Where are you? ¿What's going on?” Lance said as he sat up mo' stiffly.

Emerging from the black emptiness into the white emptiness were 3 people—or rather, creatures, perhaps: in the back was a man in a black tuxedo who looked like any other well-dressed man, 'cept that he had a bulbous jack-o-lantern on his head, & to his side was a green werewolf in a matching tuxedo. In front was a tall, gangly skeleton covered in a black robe. In his right hand was a scythe that stood e'en taller than he did.

“Sir, ¿d'you see what I'm seeing?” he heard Agent Dip O' Ruby say with a whimper in his headpiece. “¿What should I do?”

“I’m sure this is that ponytailed devil’s partner’s doing o’ some sort,” Chamsby said quickly. “They’ve seen now that they’ve finally been put in a desperate situation once in their life & so now the skeleton wizard has come out with his true powers. That’s the only explanation.”

The skeleton jabbed its scythe’s stick end into the ground with a heavy thud & spoke with a deep voice, “We can hear everything you say through that li’l communication device you’ve got there, buddy, so watch what you say before you anger the, uh... the ultimate skeleton wizard.”

The wolf & pumpkin-headed lackeys tried to suppress chuckles, covering their mouths with their hands & turning their heads ’way from Agent Dip O’ Ruby’s camera.

Somehow, this made Lance both angrier & mo’ ’fraid. Either way, he gritted his teeth & clenched his fists e’en harder, his skin turning e’en paler.

“We were just curious why you decided to have your li’l knights in shining armor come galloping round our mansion like you own the place,” said the skeleton. “We wanted to know the big man who thought it’d be a good idea to come charging through every level & every room, breaking our peace for their precious treasure. That is what you are after, ¿am I right?”

“I shall have you know, Sir,” Lance said in his microphone, “that this mansion is owned by Madame Heureuse & that we made a contract which stated that I had the right to 3 full days o’ exploration o’ this mansion, with the condition that I could keep any treasure I find. I have seen no rule that I have violated so far, & thus you have right to interfere with my affairs.”

The edges o’ the skeleton’s mouth seemed to crack as if ’twere smiling.

“I think we’ll be the judge o’ what we can & can’t do.”

Lance leaned forward. "I'm warning you. I'll call the police if I have to."

"I would love to see your puny police try to stop me from hanging your neck from the rafters as we did with those 2 buffoons who were messing with our time control."

The wolf & the jack-o-lantern men rubbed their hands & smiled wickedly, as if just 'bout to taste some sweat ham.

Lance's eyes twisted with fury, his hands now gripping onto the edge o' the desk as if he were 'fraid he would fall off his chair otherwise.

"¡You can't do that!" he shouted back. "¡I... I have my rights, you crooked bastard! ¡You slaving scoundrel! ¡I shall not fear immoral death when I have life & ethics on my side!"

The skeleton & his 2 cohorts threw their heads up & began laughing, which only made Lance grip the edges o' his desk with extra force, his fingers quickly draining o' blood.

"It looks like your li'l friend here doesn't share the sentiment, Sir Life & Ethics," said the skeleton. "It looks like he plum pissed all o'er himself in his armor." He snapped his left finger & turned to the werewolf. "Anyway, Beo, please take this pathetic thing out o' its misery before I puke."

"Sir Chamsby, please help," Agent Dip O' Ruby whimpered breathlessly. 'Twas then that Lance noticed that Agent Ruby had been blubbering the whole time.

Lance saw the werewolf walk up to Agent Dip O' Ruby with the kind o' smile you'd only see on serial killers or car salesmen & then saw him reach his hand out under the monitor. Next thing Lance knew he heard choking sounds come out his ear piece.

"Sir, ¿is anything wrong?" asked a few other agents. "¿What's going on?"

Lance ignored them. His attention was purely focused on Agent

Dip O' Ruby's monitor & the sound o' him choking, pleading, "¡Help, Sir, help!" as if speaking in a foreign, ducklike accent, till finally he saw the view o' the monitor tilt downward a li'l & heard the choking taper off.

The werewolf returned to his spot from before & wiped his now-bloody hand onto the pants o' his tuxedo, leaving a red smear. Then the skeleton pointed directly @ the monitor.

"Let that be a warning, tiny man. Do not fuck with the... with the *skeleton wizard*..." Now Lance *knew* the tall skeleton's mouth was twisting into a smile. "He demands that you free him & leave immediately; & if you don't, you'll wish for death, for what we give you will be a thousand times worse."

With that the skeleton snapped its finger 'gain & they all turned round & walked off to be engulfed in the darkness once mo', leaving 'hind nothing but emptiness & their laughter.

Lance sat back & stared @ the monitor—@ the emptiness it showed—for the next few minutes in silence before he was shocked out o' it by 'nother agent asking 'gain, "¿Sir? ¿Are you all right? ¿What's going on, Sir?"

"Agents, all o' you," Lance said into his mike, his hand shaking o'er the red on button. "I want you to be wary o' anything supernatural or occult you see. Any creature you see that seems this way, kill it. In fact, anything that seems sentient in any way that is not human, kill it. Destroy it."

"¿Are you saying ghosts are going to attack us, Sir?"

"¡I will have any o' your sniveling, Agent Purple Mountain's Majesty!" shouted Lance. "¡I will not let some lifeless beasts step all o'er my rights—and I certainly will not let them do so @ the behest o' those vile thieves down below! Clearly, Madame Heureuse has failed in her duties to make this a safe environment. She has breached her contract. Thus, to ensure my safety, & to ensure I can properly get

what I am owed from said contract, I will be temporarily taking o'er this mansion as provisional owner. You all are to patrol this area till we can extinguish these beasts once & for all. Meanwhile, I will call for backup—I will call for hundreds mo' men @ the least." Then Lance raised his fist in the air & shouted, "¡This is war!"

He sat back in his chair 'gain & panted. Finally, after a few minutes' rest, he turned on the microphone 1 last time.

"Agents Red & Purple Mountain's Majesty, I'll need you 2 here for our 1st action gainst those beasts, & hopefully the 1 that'll solve this problem entirely. I'll need you 2 to go down into that hole, capture the ponytailed devil's skeleton cohort, & have him executed in any manner possible."

*Yes, I'll free the conniving bastard...* Lance thought as he stared bitterly @ the still-empty screen where Agent Dip O' Ruby used to be. *I'll free him from this mortal coil once & for all...*

## **XVII. Liberate**

Though Autumn & Dawn felt a li'l better when they woke up in terms o' head, stomach, & throat aches, as well as the desire to throw up, they now found this replaced with the dull stomachache o' hunger; & any benefit they derived from the water they collected earlier was now gone, their mouths feeling like sandpaper lit on fire once mo'.

'Cause o' this, neither wanted to get up, feeling that they lacked the energy to do so. 'Stead they both lay with their backs on the ground & their glazed eyes with dark rings under them staring up @ the ceiling.

All 'cept Felix, who was still sitting cross-legged with her back against the wall, sitting next to Dawn. She looked down @ Dawn.

"¿You still feeling sick?" asked Felix.

"No," Dawn said laxly as she turned to look up @ Felix. "But I

don't know how long we're going to last down here without food or, mo' importantly, water. ¿Aren't you starving? ¿How long have you gone since you've last eaten?"

"O, I don't need any food," Felix said with a wave o' her hand. "I've gone weeks without food plenty o' time. It's not important."

Dawn was much too tired to reassure Felix.

Autumn suddenly shot up & said, "Felix, ¿where's Edgar?"

Without any change o' expression, save her head turning to Autumn, Felix said, "O, some o' those knight guard guys came down here & took him up with them."

"¿What? ¿Why didn't you wake me so I could try stopping them?" Autumn asked, her eyes no longer droopy, but in fact, flaring.

"I thought it might be rude to disturb your sleep..." Felix said as she began to shrink her hands back & seemed to be trying to push herself back into the wall.

But rather than yelling, Autumn merely cringed & pinched the bridge o' her nose while she muttered under her breath, "You've got to be fucking kidding me."

Dawn wanted to tell Autumn not to be too hard on Felix, but then decided that considering the circumstance Autumn was in now, that might not have been a good idea.

Autumn raised her head & stared blankly @ the opposite wall as if in deep thought. Then she glanced up @ the hole in the ceiling.

Finally she cupped her mouth with her hands & called up, "OK, guys, I have the perfect 'scape plan this time, which those idiots will ne'er be able to stop, but we'd better do it quickly so that they don't find out before we've started & be able to stop us."

She stared up @ the hole in the ceiling 'gain. Dawn & Felix did, too, though mo' out o' curiosity as to what the hell Autumn was doing.

Autumn then stood & walked back & forth under the hole @

different areas, turning her head up & round @ different angles. Then she walked o'er to Dawn & Felix.

"I think the armored guy's gone," whispered Autumn. "Must be because he took Edgar. This is our chance to get out o' here."

"¿How?" Dawn asked as she scratched her neck.

"The same way we did before."

Surprisingly, 'twas Felix whose eyes twisted in worry & whispered, "¿Are you sure that's a good idea?"

"Yes. I'm sorry if we're being *rude* to our hosts, but I rather like survival, thank you," Autumn whispered as she stood back up & walked o'er to the hole.

Felix lowered her head in shame. Felix's original worry was that Autumn & Dawn would get attacked as they did before—& without Edgar, it'd be harder to resuscitate both o' them in time—but then Felix saw Autumn point out a flaw in her plan that her stupid brain couldn't e'en have noticed. In fact, she didn't understand what Autumn was talking 'bout, but imagined it must've been smart & she was just too dumb to understand it.

Dawn put her arm round Felix's shoulder & whispered, "Autumn, that was a li'l harsh... She did save our lives, after all."

"& I'm trying to save ours & Edgar's," Autumn replied without looking back @ them.

"It would probably be better if you left me down here, actually," Felix said matter-of-factly to her feet. "I'd probably only slow you 2 down."

Autumn struggled to muffle a deep, petulant sigh. *Perhaps in 'nother context I'd have the patience to deal with her neuroses; now time's too short.*

*Clearly Dawn's babying does no good: the cat deflects all compliments like rain off a windshield. ¿& why shouldn't she? After all, such mindless niceties are so transparent. But we can't just agree with*

*her, 'cause that just leaves us right @ the beginning o' the problem.*

Then she devised an idea. She turned round, faced Felix, & said, "OK, Felix, you screwed up completely, but there's good news: there's a way you can have it all erased."

"¿What?" Felix said as she raised her head, a look o' curiosity on her face.

"I said, all o' your past fuck-ups, all o' your failures, they can all be expunged, they can all be rectified, if you help us climb up this hole like you did before."

Felix blinked @ Autumn, not sure if she heard correctly.

"¿You mean... You mean *everything* I've done wrong will be... will be fixed? ¿You mean I'll be clean 'gain? ¿A new person? A... a good person for once?" Felix had her hands clasped together tightly, the only way she felt she could contain her excitement. Autumn couldn't help notice that, for once, Felix's e'er-stoic eyes were beginning to water.

"Yup," Autumn said with a nod. "You'll be a real boy—or girl, whatever." She turned round 'gain & waved toward her. "Anyway, get o'er here."

Felix immediately jumped onto her feet & dashed o'er to her. Dawn hesitated for a second, taking in what Autumn had done. She was both impressed & creeped-out @ the way she essentially psychologically exploited Felix.

Finally, she rose & helped the other 2: Dawn, who was stronger than Felix, stood bent down @ the bottom with Felix bent down on her shoulders. Autumn, who they all figured would be the best—or rather, least bad—@ defense, if deemed necessary, stood @ the top, the 1st to go up. When she was safely balanced on Felix's shoulders, Felix & Dawn stood up straight, raising Autumn high 'nough so that her neck & 'bove were 'bove the hole.

When she swung her head all round the room, she saw that,



much as she'd guessed, Agent Purples Majesty Whatever was gone. Everyone was gone.

She climbed up & immediately helped Dawn up. Now the only trouble was figuring out how to get Felix up.

"You 2 don't need to worry 'bout me," said Felix. "Just go on & do what you need to do & I'll be fine."

*This was it, Felix thought. All o' my failures have been fixed. & now with this 1 last good deed I can die knowing I was a good person.*

"We may need to wait till I can retrieve my backpack so we can use my rope," said Autumn.

Dawn dug through her inner pockets. "I still have some yo-yo string we can lower down to her. It might be able to hold her up."

"Worth a try, I s'pose."

Dawn unwound the string all the way down the hole & said, "Try climbing up it, Felix."

As she felt Felix's weight pull the string down Dawn grabbed the end o' the string right next to the yo-yo, 'fraid it might rip if she held the yo-yo. Then she turned to Autumn & said, "Could you hold me back just in case. Autumn nodded, stepped 'hind Dawn, & wrapped her arms round Dawn's stomach for extra weight.

Though the prospect that the weak string might break was always on Dawn's mind, she was surprised to find that it didn't, & soon 'nough Felix was crawling up the edge o' the hole. *Good thing she's light*, Dawn thought as she sat back & relaxed.

Autumn, however, was back on her feet already, the clash only just commencing. She stared up @ the covered hole 'bove them. What she truly wanted was to see if Lance was up there; & if so, she truly wanted to get up there & wring his neck till he told her where Edgar was.

But then, he would probably know it wasn't one o' his minions, since he didn't answer last time she tried knocking. Indeed, it'd likely

only alert him & then his minions that they'd scaped 'gain, & then any stealth advantage they might have had would be gone.

& yet, Autumn needed to find Edgar, anyway. & that was going to require a confrontation with Lance or his minions, anyway.

After a minute or so mo' o' internal debate Autumn thought, *It'd be worth a try, a'least.*

She turned to the others & whispered, "I'll need you 2 to help me do the same for up there, too."

"¿What? ¿Why? It's blocked off," Dawn whispered.

"Yes, but I just want to see if Lance is still up there, anyway," Autumn whispered. "Maybe he'll be stupid 'nough to answer."

"He'll probably just sic his guards on us," whispered Dawn.

"Yes, well, we'll need to deal with them, anyway, if we're to find Edgar," whispered Autumn. It was then that Autumn considered that Dawn & Felix might not e'en be interested in finding Edgar. It'd certainly be the logical sentiment.

But Dawn merely nodded & sat down.

They made the same human pyramid as before, 'cept with Autumn ducking a li'l so she didn't bonk her head on the ceiling. Then she knocked on the hunk o' wood blocking the ceiling hole. When that went unanswered, she knocked 'gain.

From the other side she could hear Lance's muffled voice say, "¿Who is it? I know you're not 1 o' my guards."

"Shit," Autumn mouthed silently.

With no other recourse, she knocked 'gain without saying a word.

"Agent Red, I need you to return to base immediately," Lance said in an urgent voice. After a short pause he added, "I don't know who it is, but someone is knocking on my door."

"You know what I mean. I'm quite sure it's that monster from before trying to be a wise guy. Thinks I'm dumb 'nough to answer if he just keeps knocking."

Autumn's ears perked up @ this. ¿*Monster? ¿What is this?*

“¿How long till all those new recruits arrive? We need them immediately.”

Autumn's ears also perked @ this. ¿*New recruits? ¿You mean he's getting e'en more o' these armored assholes?*

Finally, Autumn knocked 1 mo' time, harder, & yelled, “Lance, ¡open this fucking door!”

After a pause, she heard thumping, & then saw the wooden block slide out o' the way.

“Ponytailed devil, what are you doing out o' your—”

But before Lance could finish, Autumn jumped up through the hole & climbed up while Lance, stunned by the sudden action, backed 'way. Then he backed 'way e'en farther & quicker when he saw Autumn move in toward him, till she had him pinned gainst the wall. He tried to reach his hand out to grab the microphone, but 'twas too far 'way.

Autumn lifted Lance a few dozen centimeters off the ground. Lance watched with horror as Autumn's eyes glared @ him, not with burning fury, but with icy precision, as if she were preparing to shoot a laser @ him.

“¿Where is Edgar?” asked Autumn.

“My patience has grown thin with you & your evil minion's tricks,” said Lance, his horror half-abating into indignation.

She tightened her grip round Lance's neck & repeated, “¿Where is Edgar? ¿Do your minions have him?”

“That is not your business to know—Hey, ¿what are you doing?”

Autumn ignored him & grabbed round his ear, till she found what she guessed was the communication device. She tore it out & put it up to her own ear as she moved o'er to the microphone. After a quick glance to figure out how it worked, she pressed the button & put her mouth up to it.

“Hey, assholes, ¿where’s Edgar?”

“¿Sir Chamsby?” whimpered the voice she recognized as Agent Purple Mountain’s Majesty’s. “¿Do you hear that crazy lady on the communication device? ¿Are you sure we should be doing this? ¿What if it just makes them angrier?”

“¿What are you doing with Edgar? ¿Who’s ‘they’?” asked Autumn.

From ’hind her, Lance had stepped o’er next to Autumn & said, “Hey, that’s not yours to touch, you filthy looter. Give it back,” with a point o’ his finger. Autumn ignored him.

“¿Sir Chamsby? ¿What should we do?” She heard some o’ them say.

“‘Sir Chamsby’ can’t speak right now,” said Autumn, “But you may continue your happy li’l games ’gain when you tell me what you’ve done with Edgar.”

There was silence afterward. Autumn didn’t get a chance to hear how long the silence lasted; soon after, Lance tackled Autumn, trying to wrench the mike out o’ her hands & then, seeing that fail, made a grab for her damaged nose.

“¡Augh! ¡You cocksucker!” Autumn yelled before she swung an elbow @ Lance, knocking him off o’ her.

But Lance soon returned to his feet & tackled Autumn ’gain, followed by him throttling her by the neck. Autumn responded to this by kneeing him in the stomach & throwing a punch gainst the side o’ his face with the microphone.

When that didn’t quite get him off, she released the microphone & dug her fingers into his eyes till the pain forced him to release her neck & grab his face, sitting up to get some distance. With his guard down ’gain, Autumn kicked him backward by the crotch so that he collapse on his back.

“Autumn, ¿d’you need any... help?”

Autumn turned & saw that Dawn was hanging up the edge o’ the

hole by her arms.

“Yes,” Autumn said with heavy breaths. “Toss me a yo-yo.”

“Let me see if I have 1 left,” Dawn said as she dug through her inner pockets.

Autumn turned just in time to see Lance tackle her 'gain, this time trying to use his arms to pin hers down. She could see that his eyes were red & furious, though his mouth remained a grim straight line.

Though her arms were pinned down, she could still move her head & used it to head-butt him off, followed by kneeing him in the crotch.

With all o' this, Autumn could feel Lance's hold on her weaken. He could clearly feel it, too, as he soon gave it up, & 'stead used his right hand to punch Autumn in the jaw. With her left hand released 'gain, she responded with 'nother punch o' her own to the side o' his head.

With him slightly weakened, she rolled on her side & pushed Lance off o' her, ignoring the kick he made to her crotch, & then quickly roll-jumped onto Lance's back. She turned to Dawn & saw that she was staring, bewildered, @ Autumn, holding the yo-yo in up in her hand.

“Toss me the yo-yo,” said Autumn, panting.

Dawn threw the yo-yo & Autumn caught it, but Lance soon shoved Autumn off o' his back. But before he could get back up, Autumn jumped on his him 'gain & grabbed his hands. While he tried head-butting her & throwing his knees up @ her, she quickly wrapped the yo-yo string round his hands & tied them. She let go & watched him try to pull his hands 'way, to no avail.

Next, she did the same to his legs, separating the string tied round his hands from the rest with her teeth. She found that his legs were e'en easier to do, since he had no other means to try to stop her. With that done, she stepped back & examined him 1 last time to make sure

he was truly tied down.

She looked @ the yo-yo still in her hands & said, “This is strong string.”

She moved Lance o’er to the side o’ the room while he shouted, “¡You can’t do this! ¡This is a violation o’ my rights, you filthy looter! ¡I will not be locked up in your vile labor camps!”

She walked o’er to Dawn, who was still gaping @ the bruises on both Autumn & Lance’s faces, & offered a hand.

“Holy shit...” said Dawn.

“Watch him & make sure he doesn’t ’scape,” Autumn said as she pointed to Lance, & then she immediately returned to the microphone & ear piece.

She pressed the button &, brushing her bangs back & exhaling deeply, said, “OK, ¿now where is Edgar?”

“I hear the crazy lady ’gain, Agent Red,” she heard Agent Purple Mountain’s Majesty’s voice whisper. “I can also hear Sir Chamsby yelling in the background. I think he’s in trouble.”

“She can hear you, you know,” muttered Agent Red.

“Yes, I can,” said Autumn. “¿Where is Edgar?”

Nobody answered.

“I have your boss tied up. If you want him safe, you shall tell me where Edgar is.”

“¿What?” whimpered Agent Purple.

“We have him in room 304,” said Agent Red.

“¿& why?” asked Autumn.

There was a pause before Agent Red said, “¿Why what?”

“¿Why did you choose the room next to ours—the room where the 2 others were hung—out o’ all others?” asked Autumn. “¿What did you need the rope for?”

There was ’nother pause. Autumn couldn’t see it, but Agent Red’s eyes widened in shock. He could clearly see he had given too much

info already.

He hesitated a li'l mo' before answering, "We were trying to hang him."

Autumn, who had been rather cool before, could not stop the lump that formed in her throat.

Then when everything he said sunk in, she asked, "¿Trying?"

"Yes," said Agent Red. "If it pleases you to know, he's still 'live. 1st we tried tasing him, but it seemed to just hurt him, not kill him. So then we tried hanging him. We've been standing here waiting for a'least a half hour, just seeing if he would die, but every time we told him to speak, he was able to speak just fine."

"¿Is that Autumn?" she heard Edgar's frightened voice say. She felt her whole body relax when she heard him, & breathed in deep as if she had been suffocating before.

"Well, release him immediately," said Autumn.

"I'm 'fraid we can't take orders from you," said Agent Red. "¿May we ask who you are?"

"I'm Autumn Springer & you'd better take orders from me if you care 'bout your boss's safety."

'Nother pause. ¿*What's with all o' these pauses?* Autumn thought. ¿*Are they incompetent?* She looked up distractedly when she noticed monitors stacked together in a boxy formation. They all showed various scenes o' the mansion. As she looked 'mong them all, she almost jumped when she saw 2 o' them that showed Edgar. Sure 'nough, he was hanging from the ceiling with a rope tied round his neck.

Autumn couldn't keep herself from slapping her forehead. ¿*There were monitors here I could have looked @ this whole time?*

"¿Are you the one in the ponytail?" Agent Red asked.

"Yes."

There was 'nother pause. Autumn decided to breach the pause

this time.

“OK now, here is what you 2 shall do,” said Autumn: “you’ll untie Edgar, & I’ll be watching to ensure that you do, & you will tell him where Lance’s li’l base is. You shall let him go alone. Remember, I’ll be able to see if you try following him. ¿Understand?”

“¿& what if we don’t do this?” asked Agent Red.

“Then I’ll use the same string with which I’ve tied him up to wrap your boss his own noose.” She leaned in closer. “& I doubt your boss’ll be as resistant as skeletons.”

Agent Purple Mountain’s Majesty found himself unable to stifle a whimper.

’Hind her, Autumn could hear Dawn gasp & say in a sharp whisper, “Autumn... You can’t...”

*’Course I can’t, you idiot—but that doesn’t mean we need to let them know...*

But ’stead o’ saying this, she turned to Dawn & said in the dullest monotone she could manage, “When Edgar’s safety is @ stake, anything is possible.” She then slowly slid her eyes to Lance & saw his eyes bulge in horror, his constant curses gainst Autumn replaced by muteness.

“¿May I ask Sir Chamsby his view on the situation, or is he incapacitated?” asked Agent Red. “I’m not sure whether he would prefer I continue this work & let him die or not.”

Autumn walked toward Lance, which caused him to struggle gainst his ropes mo’ strongly than he’d e’er done before.

“You can’t seriously be planning to execute me,” Lance said in almost a plea. “Surely e’en someone so vile as yourself would not stoop to murder.”

Dawn stood & gave Autumn a stern look. “I can’t let you do that, Autumn. Certainly not with my yo-yo. There must be ’nother way to save Edgar...”



“We’re not to that part yet, sadly,” Autumn said to Dawn.

Then she bent down next to Lance & held the microphone next to his mouth with the button still pressed down.

“Agent Red, or whoever, wants to know if he should release Edgar & save your life or carry out his work & let you sink to save the superfluous ship. It’s your choice.”

“O, so it’s only extortion, then,” said Lance.

“We’re not playing ‘Cops & Robbers’ anymo’, li’l Lance,” said Autumn. “Either both o’ you die or neither o’ you die. Win-win or lose-lose. The correct option should be quite obvious. Indeed, they haven’t e’en been able to kill Edgar yet, & don’t know how to, so it’s not e’en necessarily lose-lose; it could be lose-win in our favor.”

“I don’t have to choose from just the 2 choices you offered—I have free will!”

“No less than Edgar, & no less than I,” Autumn said as she started unravelling the yo-yo.

Lance stared up @ her, both o’ their eyes locking. Dawn, meanwhile, still stood to the side, glancing ’tween them with alarm. Whom she stared @ most, though, was Autumn: the way she stared down @ Chamsby with dead eyes, now holding the string gainst Lance’s neck as if merely measuring a sneaker. Dawn saw from the few times she’d seen her back @ the Rock Lobster that she was kind o’ a stoic, & she knew she was a thief, but now she was starting to wonder if Autumn might be a sociopath.

Then ’gain, it seemed to be the only way to prevent her boyfriend from being killed, & Lance clearly had a way to avoid it by not committing an evil act himself.

*’Less he knows something ’bout Autumn that I don’t... ¿Maybe she’s lying? ¿Maybe she’d just kill him e’en if he did as she demanded, & he knows it? But then, ¿why would she hesitate now?*

*& ’sides, ¿didn’t she just say Edgar’s life probably wasn’t in danger*

@ all? ¿What was that s'posed to mean, & then, why was she still doing this to him?

Whatever the case, Dawn couldn't help feeling sick to her stomach as she thought 'bout it all, ¡as well as sweating & an obnoxious itchiness in her neck that wouldn't go 'way!

She was so distracted by these thoughts that she missed Lance's eyes gradually morph from challenging to fearful. After a few mo' hushed moments, he muttered, "Yeah, let the stupid skeleton go."

"¿Can you say that loud 'nough for Agent Red to hear?" said Autumn.

"Let the stupid skeleton go," Lance said louder.

"¿Did you hear that, Agent Red?" asked Autumn.

"Yes."

"K, I'm watching," Autumn said as she turned to face the monitors.

& indeed, what she saw was 1 o' the minions—*Probably Agent Red*, Autumn thought—untie Edgar's rope, releasing him back to the ground.

The minion looked @ Edgar & said, in Agent Red's voice, sure 'nough, "You are to go to room 606, which is where Sir Chamsby's base is & where, I'm sure you know, Autumn Springer is located. She expects you."

"K, thank you," Edgar said quietly with a nod, & then Autumn saw him scurry out o' view.

"¿You saw us release the skeleton, correct, Madame Springer?" said Agent Red.

"Yes. & you are to stay there. I'll be watching to make sure that you do. Then when I meet Edgar, I'll leave Chamsby's hideout open so you can return & untie him. ¿Understand?"

"Yes," said Agent Red.

Autumn tossed the microphone aside & the yo-yo into Dawn's lap.

Though Lance tried to hide it, Autumn could clearly see relief on Lance's face. Dawn, on the other hand, was mo' occupied with Autumn not e'en trying to hide relief, which mollified her a bit.

But then Autumn stared down @ Lance 'gain with stern eyes. "Now, ¿may I ask why you wanted to kill an innocent man who has ne'er e'en hurt a fly in his life?"

"Innocent, yeah," said Lance. "Tell that to his big ol' skeleton buddy & his freak-show cronies who threatened to have me hung after strangling Agent Dip O' Ruby to death."

"¿What the hell are you smoking?" said Autumn.

"Don't play dumb with me, you filthy savage," said Lance, his voice rising in anger.

"I would think you'd know we were all down in that li'l prison you developed for us. It makes me curious how we would find the opportunity to befriend some large skeleton monster & order him to kill you & your minions. You might recall that we are in a *haunted mansion* & that we had previously been attacked by ghosts."

"Yes. I also recall that your skeleton friend is a *skeleton*," said Lance; "& I know you 2 have ne'er had any trouble escaping from otherwise inescapable traps many times before. ¿How? Well, it's quite simple when one gets her help from the *occult*."

"You're bloody bonkers, Chamsby."

"For god's sake, your vile partner in crime's minions *told me themselves* that they served him. They said 'the skeleton w...' They specifically pointed him out specifically."

Autumn shook her head.

"¿& you believed these occult figures?" asked Autumn. She was no longer staring down @ Lance, but now gazing toward the ceiling with brows tilted in curiosity.

"No less than I would believe a shameless thief such as you."

*Have to admit he's a point there*, thought Autumn.

“Obviously I am not going to let such an obvious hole in my defenses slip by,” Lance continued. “Unlike sloppy idiots like you, I plan my work fully, so that all issues can be resolved.”

*Now, this point’s a different matter.* Autumn threw her arms out in exasperation. “¡You left the hole to our prison wide open! ¡You answered your door when you knew I’d be ’hind it! ¡Motherfucker, your defenses had such a wide hole you could ride a fucking rocket through it!”

“My men didn’t have time to close your prison ’gain ’cause they were preoccupied with mo’ important tasks...”

Autumn turned ’way from him in disgust, picked up the microphone, & sat down @ Lance’s desk with her face buried in her hands.

“Hey, that’s my desk your messing round with,” Lance said.

“Shut up,” Autumn said civilly as she turned to look @ the monitors. That’s when she noticed something on the desk.

“Hey, this is my backpack,” Autumn said as she slid it o’er to her. “So you’re the dick who stole it. I should have thought, Sir Hypocrite would be a ‘looter’ himself.”

“Don’t pretend as if you didn’t steal everything in there,” said Lance. “I was merely repossessing property that was the rightful property o’ society, not filthy looters such as you.”

“Whatever you say, Karl Marx,” Autumn said as she dug round inside the pack. “Hell yeah,” she said as she pulled out a couple bags o’ trail mix & a couple bottles o’ water.

She turned to Dawn, who was sitting back gainst the wall with her eyes down on the ground ’tween her feet. Autumn couldn’t help notice Dawn’s naturally rather cheerful disposition replaced by a low frown & couldn’t help feeling she played a significant role in that.

*O well, somebody has to be an asshole to get things done round here,* thought Autumn.

“Hey, Dawn, catch,” she said before tossing a trail mix bag & water bottle o’er to her.

“¿You have some for Felix?” Dawn asked as she opened her bottle.

“Yes,” Autumn said as she walked o’er to the hole. She looked down to see Felix sitting cross-legged as she always seemed to do, staring serenely @ a wall.

“Hey, Felix, catch,” Autumn called down to her.

As Felix looked up, Autumn dropped a trail mix bag & water bottle down on her lap.

Felix looked down @ it with a puzzled expression & then looked up & said, “O, you didn’t have to waste your food on me.”

“You’ve been redeemed, ¿remember? From now on you deserve all o’ the food & drink you hunger for,” said Autumn. “After all, you wouldn’t want to collapse from dehydration & make us carry you, ¿would you?”

Felix shook her head. *¡I’m already messing up ’gain already!* “N-no.”

“Then eat & drink & everything will go well.”

& then Autumn stood up & went back to the desk.

She grabbed a handful out o’ her bag, shoved it in her mouth, & then began to wash it down with water when she remembered something else.

She turned to Lance & said, “Hey, ¿what did you do with my coat & other crap, too?”

“I have the right to remain silent,” Lance said as he glanced ’way. “You can’t compel me to say anything.”

“K, Gandhi; I’ll just have to search for it myself.”

“¡Hey, you can’t do that!” shouted Lance. “¡That’s illegal!”

“So’s theft & attempted murder,” Autumn said as she moved the chair back & looked under the desk. “I think we’re ’bout e’e—¡Hey!”

Lance looked forward to see Autumn searching under his desk, &

the realization came to his head.

“¡Hey, you leave that ’lone! ¡I found that with my own hard work!” yelled Lance.

“What a coincidence; I also found it with my own hard work,” Autumn said with a wry smile as she stood back up from under the desk with 2 treasure chests the size o’ toasters in her arms. “¿Is this the treasure you said you found?”

“¿What d’you mean?”

“O, right: We were listening in on you while you were in your basement area & heard that you found some treasure. ¿Did you look inside any o’ them yet?”

“No, & don’t you dare, either,” said Lance. “¿D’you hear me?”

Autumn ignored him & sat down with her legs crossed & the chests lying in her lap. She fiddled with the clasp on 1 o’ them & then lifted its lid, her heart buzzing with excitement o’er what she’d find.

She was expecting it to be full o’ golden coins, with maybe a few other jewels mixed in, but ’stead found 1 large golden polygon—some triangle with rounded edges. She checked the other chest & found the same.

She was actually grateful that the treasure was packed into such convenient pieces, & stuffed them in each o’ her pockets, creating bulges on her sides.

“You’re not truly planning on going round here with those bulbous things in your pockets, ¿are you?” Dawn asked in almost a laugh.

“¿What else am I going to do?” Autumn asked as she continued searching the place. “Sides, when I find my jacket I might put them in there ’stead.”

“You are not to put them anywhere but back where you found them, in the chests, & then under my desk,” said Lance.

“Li’l lesson ’bout thieves, Lance—¿or should I say ‘looters’?—they

don't listen when you tell them to stop robbing you. They just keep on robbing for some reason."

She returned to her excavation under Lance's desks, only to stop in the midst with a look o' bewilderment. Then to goad Lance into revealing its purpose, she pulled out the object in question—a rather lifelike doppelgänger o' Autumn—& asked, "¿Dare I e'en ask what purpose you have for this?"

Dawn looked up to see what Autumn was talking 'bout & then immediately looked back down & shook her head, regretting it.

Lance's face fumed @ this transparent innuendo.

"I'll have you know that that high-quality android was created for some plan to capture you & bring you to justice; but I don't need it anymo'. Turns out that bumbling oaf O'Beefe finally made himself useful for once & found me a veritable master o' disguise..." Then his eyes widened in realization that he'd said too much, & instantly muted himself.

"I do agree that it's still mo' authentic than your character design," Autumn said as she examined it, trying not to show the awkwardness she felt as she examined... well, *her*.

Then she dug in deeper & found a remote control. *¿Didn't he say this was an "android"? This must be how it's operated.*

"I may have some use o' this later, actually," she said as she stuffed them both into her backpack, causing said pack's top to balloon.

"I'm sure you'll take anything that isn't nailed down," said Lance.

"If I'm working competently I will," replied Autumn.

Though she didn't find any mo' treasure, she did soon find her jacket, costume, & the rest o' her stuff lying on the ground in a corner. She had been so preoccupied that she hadn't noticed how cold 'twas, but immediately felt a nice, snug warmth when she put her jacket & costume on.

With everything searched, & everything she knew was here found, she returned to her seat & continued her meal while putting the stuff Lance left out back in her backpack. However, she stopped as she was putting Edgar's journal back into the pack when she noticed it had a bookmark in it. She pulled the bookmark out & briefly glanced @ it to see, as she expected, that 'twas full o' some bland quotes 'bout freedom & privacy from a place called "Let's Liberty."

Then she turned to Lance. "K, 1st you try to kill him, ¿& then you read his diary?" Autumn asked with the journal hanging in her hand. "¿Have you no shame?"

"When in war, I will use any means to collect information on my enemy," Lance said as he looked 'way 'gain, mouth puffing & twisting.

"Well, it's nice to know we're @ war," Autumn said as she put the journal 'way. "Looks as if you may be losing, though."

"Yes, I am @ war, with those violent monsters who are trying to run me out o' this place, & by your own actions gainst me today you have clearly showed yourself to be on their side."

"Whatever your neuroses tell you," Autumn said as she returned to her trail mix. "Just a curiosity: ¿what intel did you find on us?"

"I bet that'd be useful to you, which is why I won't tell," said Lance. In truth, he did find secrets 'bout them; but not secrets he particularly enjoyed knowing.

They spent the rest o' their wait munching on trail mix & drinking water in silence. Lance made a few indignant comments, such as, "You'll ne'er get 'way with this, you know," but stopped when he saw that Autumn & Dawn were ignoring him.

Eventually, Autumn heard the door below them open & close. She immediately jumped to her feet, dashed o'er to the hole, & looked down to see Edgar. They locked eyes for a silent half-minute before



she turned to Felix & said, “Felix, could you watch out the door to ensure none o’ Chamsby’s goons plan to ambush us.”

“None o’ them seemed to move since you instructed those other 2 guys not to,” said Dawn, watching the monitors.

“Let’s just be extra sure,” said Autumn.

“I would be honored to be used for good,” Felix said before turning & moving for the door. Autumn frowned as she saw that, as Felix went, Felix had a look o’ pure bliss on her face.

By that time, Dawn was standing next to Autumn & said, “So, shall we jump down now?”

“Wait,” Autumn said as she turned her head back. “I want your help with something.”

“¿Carrying your backpack?” Dawn asked with an incredulous look. *Surely it’s not any heavier than the 2 people you’ve lifted before —e’en with the... you in it.*

“No, carrying Lance down with us,” said Autumn, though she did get up & put on her backpack, almost forgetting it till Dawn reminded her.

“Ah, so you thought you’d kidnap me,” said Lance. “It seems the looter has evolved all the way to slaveholder so soon.”

“Don’t flatter yourself,” said Autumn. “We’re only taking you to the floor below & leaving you there.”

“¿Why?” asked Dawn, looking e’en mo’ befuddled.

“It’ll give us a head start, as it’ll take him longer to get back up here by himself,” said Autumn. “I promised I would untie him, so I will do so, but I ne’er promised *where* I would do so.”

Lance didn’t say anything, but merely glared up @ the ceiling. @ this point, he figured ’twas pointless to protest anymo’; the looters clearly wouldn’t listen to reason. ’Sides, his voice was starting to feel funny from all o’ the talking.

So Autumn gently lowered Dawn back down to the middle floor,

& then dragged Lance o'er to the hole. Then she lowered his feet down to Dawn & sat on the edge o' the hole. She looked down @ Lance's head in her arms & said, "OK, this part might be a li'l bumpy."

"If you damage my head or neck in any way, so help me—"

He was interrupted by a loud whump below him as Autumn's feet landed on the floor below. Lance could feel his head wobble, but it did not seem to be damaged. *The witch is lucky*, thought Lance.

Then Autumn lowered Lance on the floor & they left. 'Twas standing outside that door, looking round @ the orange & red-orange striped wallpaper that Autumn realized she needed to consider what to do next.

"Now, we could search round the 6th & 5th floor, which we haven't checked yet, but I'm sure Chamsby's minions already scoured the area closely, so I suggest we just go up, seeing how far up this place goes." She said it while facing Edgar, unsure whether or not Dawn or Felix would want to join her.

"So, ¿I guess you're still staying here till you find everything?" asked Dawn.

"Yes." Autumn thought it might've been polite to ask Dawn if she wanted to help, but then figured it'd also be impudent to act as if she expected Dawn to help them. *If she did, she would say so.*

"Well, I think I'd better help Felix get out o' here before she gets in danger 'gain."

Autumn could already predict Felix's inevitable response. She waved her hand round & rolled her eyes back as she heard the Felix-bot recite, "O, you don't have to ruin your plans for my safety. It's truly not worth it."

"That's OK, it's no trouble @ all," Dawn said with a weak smile.

"¿Are you sure?" asked Felix.

"Definitely."

& with that Autumn & Edgar turned & went on forward down the hall while Dawn & Felix turned in the other direction, to the stairs back down to the fifth floor.

& as Autumn & Edgar walked down their hall—hands held together, which they rationalized as a way to prevent separation 'gain—Autumn begrudgingly admitted that she'd miss that ditz Dawn.

### **XVIII. Criminal**

Lance Chamsby felt it had taken far too long for those idiots to finally make it back to his base. All he could do was lie there inertly, staring boredly @ the plaster walls for minutes. The only solace he found during this long wait was that it gave him time to plan his retribution in fine, delectable detail.

*O yes... No mindless ghosts are going to be showing me what's what, & certainly no stupid li'l witch will do so, either.*

His thoughts were interrupted by the door creaking. He looked up & saw a few o' his minions enter, while many others crowded outside the door.

"Sir, we came here as quickly as we could when we still didn't hear anything on the microphone," said Agent Red's voice. "¿Why are you down here, Sir?"

"Ne'er mind that," Lance said as he struggled gainst his ropes. "Just untie me & help me back up to my base."

They proceeded to do just that. Since there were so many minions here, there was no trouble in getting him up; & as they hoisted him up, 1 o' them had good news:

"If it makes you feel better, Sir, Agents Laser Lemon & Banana Mania found 'nother treasure chest."

"Excellent." Lance didn't tell them 'bout his other 2 treasures

being stolen.

When he reached the top, he waited by the hole while his minions carried up the chest next, & then he took it.

*& this time the filthy looter won't e'en lay a finger on it as long as my heart is still beating.*

“¿What do you want us to do now, Sir?” Agent Red called up to him. “¿Shall we continue patrolling the whole mansion for treasure & ghosts?”

“Yes, but I want you to do something else, too.”

“¿What, Sir?”

“If you e'er see any o' those looters—the ponytailed devil or that warlock skeleton o' hers—you are to full-on attack them. If you find the idiot in the baseball cap or the cat in the stupid headband, lock them up & take them as far from the mansion as you can; as for the skeleton, just kill him in whatever way is most efficient; but if you find the ponytailed devil, I want you merely to capture her & bring her here. She is deserving o' punishment much deeper than mere death.”

“Uh... ¿Sir? ¿You want us to kill a human, too?” asked Agent Red, his voice sounding as if 'twas lost.

“If anyone has a problem with this, he may resign & go home,” Lance said without looking back @ them. “That ‘human’ as you call her willingly works for murderous demons—the very foes to life, ethics, & anything that is just. You can go look for Agent Dip O' Ruby & see how he's doing if you want a demonstration—or that rose monster who ate Agent Screamin' Green, which was probably their devilish work, too.”

His minions looked 'mong each other. “Man, I have a mortgage I still need to pay, I can't lose this job,” a few muttered, as well as similar sentiments.

Finally Agent Red turned his head up to Lance—who still had his

back to them—and said, “K, Sir, we can do that.”

“¿Did you install the lock on this door yet, too?” asked Lance.

“Yes, Sir, we did that as we moved your equipment. Just use the switch under the rightmost monitor to control it.”

“Good. This time no ghosts or looters will be sneaking up on me. You may resume your work now.”

The minions looked 'mong themselves awkwardly 1 mo' time before filing out the door.

### **XIX. 'Nother Way to Die**

As they continued toward the 7th floor, Autumn could see for herself that Lance wasn't kidding when he said he was taking o'er this place. While before she noticed maybe 1 wandering armored minion every so oft, now she saw them everywhere, which worried her; she knew Lance wasn't the type to let grudges abate, & when he eventually climbed back up to his equipment, he'd probably tell them all to go after them.

However, for now they appeared to ignore her. In fact, it seemed as if they were making an effort to pretend Autumn & Edgar didn't exist as they passed by, quickening their steps as they neared. Perhaps they were all returning to their boss, worried after not hearing him on the microphone yet. After all, they couldn't have untied him already.

Either way, Autumn was not heartbroken that his minions ignored her; she'd prefer the ability to do the same to them.

Still, Edgar was unnerved by them all—*Which isn't surprising considering they tried to hang him*, Autumn thought—and when they were 'way from any visible minion, he whispered, “¿What will we do if they decide to get back @ us?”

Autumn shrugged. “We'd better hope we'll be able to fight all 10

or so o' them off."

Edgar clutched Autumn's arm tightly. "Autumn, I have to admit I'm getting scared. Chamsby doesn't seem to be acting the way he usually does. He seems serious now. I think it's this mansion. Something 'bout it isn't right."

"Something 'bout it isn't right" seemed to Autumn to be the biggest understatement in the world, but Autumn thought she understood his point all the same.

"Lance also saw what I'd do to him if he touched you 'gain. ¿You think he wants to go through that 'gain—or worse?" Autumn said as she rubbed his shoulder.

"Yeah... Sorry, I guess I'm just o'erreacting a li'l," whispered Edgar.

When Autumn looked back @ the events that had recently transpired 'tween her & Chamsby, she wondered if they all were.

They were soon climbing up to the 7th floor on stairs that seemed to grow mold, moss, & e'en mo' dust than the others. When they emerged @ the top, they looked round & saw that this floor was different in mo' ways than simply the yellow-green wallpaper that was tearing a li'l mo' than in the other halls: the air felt thicker—both in sight & touch—as they gazed @ the half-opaque clouds o' haze & sensed cold moisture swarm all o'er their bodies. The area reeked o' some unidentifiably strong odor.

"Madame Heureuse went full-force for this floor," said Autumn.

"¿Are you sure 'twas Madame Heureuse who did this?" Edgar said in a low voice as he somehow clung to Autumn e'en mo' tightly than before.

"¿What, are you saying those minions did this to try to scare us or 'twas ghosts?" asked Autumn.

Edgar paused, having not thought o' the former option. "Either," he finally said.

“Hmm... I doubt ghosts would arbitrarily do that to 1 floor & not any o’ the others—’specially a floor so high up, most won’t probably see it. I’m thinking ‘twas Lance’s dirty work.”

This actually calmed Edgar a li’l. E’en with his previous brush with almost-death, he much preferred enemies he could understand to some extent than the kind o’ unimaginable horrors he knew were lurking round this mansion somewhere.

Autumn tried to turn the knob on the 1st door, but found that it wouldn’t budge, as if ‘twere just a fake knob glued to the door. She stepped back & scrutinized it.

“Great: these dicks probably locked all o’ these doors to keep us out,” muttered Autumn. “I s’pose we could try busting through, ¿but what would be the point? They’ve probably already searched this floor up & down.” As Autumn thought ‘bout it, she thought she wouldn’t be surprised if 1 or a few o’ those minions they passed had some treasure on them.

*Cheating bastard: just hiring hundreds o’ other people to find his treasure for him,* thought Autumn, though she did take solace in the fact that all o’ his hundreds o’ minions weren’t able to prevent her from taking 2 o’ his treasures.

A’least not yet.

When the other doors similarly wouldn’t budge, Autumn said, “Let’s just go up as far as we can go & start from there. Maybe we’ll find some rooms the Renaissance-Faire rejects haven’t scoured yet.”

Edgar didn’t reply. Honestly, he didn’t like the idea o’ going farther & farther up the mansion—farther & farther from the exit—but realized ‘twas a ‘ventuality, anyway, if they were to find all o’ the treasure; so he simply followed ‘long Autumn quietly as they made their way up to the 8th floor.

As they climbed up the stairs, Autumn & Edgar noticed that they became somehow e’en dirtier farther up. The top few steps looked to

be stained with blood & some green-brown liquid—probably vomit, Autumn reckoned.

To match this shift, the 8th floor itself looked e'en worse than the 7th: its black-and-dark-gray striped wallpaper was full o' cuts & rips, as well as blood stains, some yellow stain, & some sharp objects embedded in one part. In addition to the mist, there were also rats crawling all o'er the carpet & flies swarming round a few areas. As Autumn neared them, she saw that they were all swarming round a clump o' rotting green ham lying on the floor.

Edgar squeezed tightly to Autumn mo' than Autumn thought he'd e'er done before. She, however, thought it all to be rather silly. *¿Why would ghosts, who are highly unlikely to eat, have rotting food in their hallway, but not anywhere else?*

Then 'gain, as she thought 'bout it, she wasn't quite certain how Lance's minions, or e'en Madame Heureuse, would be able to fill these hallways with mist. Though Lance could possibly have been able to pay for some expensive equipment to do so, & had 'nough minions to carry such large equipment up here, she couldn't comprehend why he would waste so much effort—& vitally, money—for such a silly endeavor.

Then she remembered 'twas Lance she was describing...

She ignored all o' the doors for now—which was hard, since they all had wonderful decorations on them, such as one with a pig head mounted on it—& made straight for the stairs up to the next floor.

She ne'er found them. 'Stead, what she found was a great goldenrod door with dark gold, rocky-textured lining round its arc. Autumn could find no doorknob anywhere on it; but she did see 4 holes embedded in its front. Autumn noticed that the holes were the same shape as the 2 treasures she pilfered from Lance. She mined said treasures from her pockets & put them up to the hole; they fit perfectly.



“¿Where’d you get those?” asked Edgar.

“Stole ’em from Lance.”

Autumn returned the treasures to her pockets & stared @ the door, rubbing her chin in thought.

“Hmm... I’m to assume that the real treasure is ’hind this door & that the treasure we thought we were looking for were truly the keys to the door. This means we’ll have to find the other 2 lying round here somewhere.”

“¿But what if we can’t find them?” asked Edgar.

“Then I’m sure Lance will already have them & we’ll have to find a way to take them from him.”

“¿With all o’ those guards protecting him?” asked Edgar, his voice rising in pitch @ the end.

“I was able to steal these with those guards ‘protecting’ him. The advantage they have in quantity is ruined by the disadvantage they have in quality. We will simply have to trick them somehow & search his li’l headquarters while they are temporarily incapacitated.”

Autumn realized this was an o’ersimplification. For 1, ‘twas doubtful that e’en Lance would be dumb ’nough to keep his treasures in the easy-to-find place he thoughtlessly left them before. Still, Autumn knew ‘twas possible & knew she’d done harder heists before.

“Well, anyway, I s’pose we’d better try the doors & see what we can find. We’ll see ’bout trying to bust some o’ the blocked doors down and, if that fails, or if we find nothing, we’ll head back to the 6th floor & formulate a plan to rob Lance.”

Edgar squirmed @ the improbability o’ any o’ this plan succeeding, but said nothing. Anyway, he thought maybe he was being a li’l too anxious ’bout nothing. After all, he’d been in life threatening situations before &... well, managed not to have a heart attack. But something ’bout this whole mansion was different. No

matter what his mind thought, the atmosphere o' this place—the coldness & the emptiness—acted to attack his entire nervous system.

'Twas then he realized 'twas the emptiness that truly vexed him. He was used to the noisy cities. Moreo'er, in their other adventures Edgar could a'least assume what would kill him & know beforehand; but here he felt as if any minute some unimaginable creature might attack him in unimaginable ways. ¿Who knows? He could e'en suddenly black out & ne'er wake back up.

His thoughts were interrupted when both heard the creaking o' metal joins & thumping gainst carpet floor that signaled the return o' Lance's minions.

"Shit," Autumn muttered as she rushed from door to door, throttling knobs to no avail.

She turned back to Edgar & whispered, "Psst, go by the stairs & see how close they are."

Edgar nodded & scurried 'way while Autumn dug the screwdriver from her pockets & turned to the nearest door.

*Hope this makes a good hiding place, since I'll only have the chance to open 1 o' these @ the most,* she thought.

Edgar rushed back to Autumn's side.

"¡They're halfway down the floor below us!" he whispered.

"That should give us 'nough time," she whispered back, eyes still on the screwdriver she was twisting into the sides o' the doorknob.

A minute after, the knob fell, leaving a gaping hole where it used to reside. From there she was able to manually pull the latch out & open the door. They wasted no time slipping inside.

Autumn scanned the room & judged it sufficient. Then she immediately plugged the knob back into its hole & screwed it back in.

"¿Is that so they can't get in?" whispered Edgar.

Autumn nodded.

But Autumn knew there was still a chance they could get in the same way themselves—or that they had a key to it. So she searched round the room till her eyes quickly captured a sofa chair, & then she ran up to it & started pulling it.

“Edgar, ¿could you help me push this o’er to the door?”

“K.”

When they accomplished that, they waited by the door silently, listening to the footsteps grow much louder outside.

“We can’t find them in any o’ the doors, Sir,” said 1 o’ them.

Finally, they heard their door shake on its hinges & then move forward a bit, smacking into the couch chair. Autumn suddenly grabbed Edgar by his robe & dragged him ’way from the line o’ sight o’ the door, & then slowly toward the back o’ the room, trying to be as quiet as possible. Considering how cluttered with junk she just noticed the room to be, this was harder written than done.

After a few thumps o’ the door, the voice grunted. “The door’s unlocked, but it won’t move.”

Autumn & Edgar hid ’hind a bookcase gainst the eastern wall.

“¿What’ll we do if they bust in here?” Edgar whispered into Autumn’s ear.

“¿You e’er played a game called *Robotron 1984*?” Autumn whispered back.

“I thought I heard some movement, yes,” said the voice outside.

*Shit. Well, I guess it’d be obvious we’re here, regardless,* thought Autumn.

*Well, if they know we’re here already, then, I might as well see if I can find something useful in all o’ this junk,* Autumn thought as she began picking up objects.

The 1st she found was some odd alarm-clock shaped device. ’Pon closer inspection she saw a button with the words “Start detonation” below it.

She put it closer to her face, as if she couldn't believe what her eyes told her.

*¿Why would Madame Heureuse have a time bomb here? ¿What did she plan to use this for?*

As she mused on the possibilities, Autumn felt a sudden urge to finish this quest & leave as quickly as possible.

She rummaged through the pile a li'l mo', but found li'l interesting: blank notebooks, a bottle o' some pink liquid, a pack o' matches with the silhouette o' a bull's head on it, & a pen. She moved to put them into her pack, wondering why said pack seemed to bulge @ the top, but was interrupted when she heard Edgar whisper to her.

"Autumn, you might want to look @ this..."

So she simply pocketed the last 3 items,—tossing the notebook back into the pile—stood, & walked to Edgar's side to see a puddle o' water seeping in from below the door.

"Hey, Springer. ¿You in there? You might as well stop lying for once & admit you're there, since I know it & the consequences will be the same for you, regardless."

Autumn recognized the voice as Lance's.

"Well, whether you'll acknowledge it or not, I know you're in there. I know it's probably dreadfully dirty in there, so I offered to help you clean it."

Autumn noticed that the puddle o' water was now a thin layer o' water spreading all 'cross the floor—1 that was still gradually growing.

"¿How is the water not spreading back out on your side?" asked Autumn.

"The pump stretches all 'cross the hole under the door."

"¿Do pumps like that truly exist?" asked Autumn.

"They do when I order them to be made."

Edgar clutched Autumn's arm. "¿What do we do now?" he whispered frantically.

Autumn replied coolly, "Nothing. The window's open, so the water will only e'er reach a certain height. The worst that will happen is that we'll receive an extended bath."

Edgar looked all round the room. This window eluded him.

But when he looked back @ Autumn, she delivered him a meaningful stare & put an index to her lips.

"Nice try, looter o' truth, but my henchmen have been through all o' these rooms, & I know for a fact that none o' the rooms on this side o' the hall have windows—*they're not e'en gainst the outside wall o' the mansion, you simp.*"

The water was already up to Autumn's knees & halfway up Edgar's upper body now.

"You can pick 1, looter: open the door & accept the justice you deserve, or wait inside & drown."

Autumn searched round the pile o' junk for something that might be useful. As she did, she wondered, *¿Could I use the time bomb to break open my own window?*

*But then, ¿what use would that be? As he said, this room isn't gainst the outside wall o' the mansion. It would only flood the adjacent room, which would only delay the inevitable...*

*'Less I could open the door in the other room & release the water out the hallway. I'd only have to hope no minions are waiting on that side, too.*

'Course, there was 1 complication still on her mind: *¿How powerful is this time bomb? ¿Would it only blow a hole in the wall, or would it also blow the whole room up, e'en the whole mansion, as well as blowing the faces off our heads?*

By this point, the water was already up to Autumn's stomach. When she noticed this, she swung her head round frantically &

called out, “¿Edgar? Edgar, ¿where are you?”

“Here...”

She followed his voice to see him climbing up on the arm o’ a sofa chair like a shipwreck survivor.

She held her arms out as she trudged o’er to him.

“Here, let me put you somewhere much safer.”

She lifted him, trudged back to the bookcase, & heaved him up to it, her hands giving him a boost as he scrambled up.

*Well, that’ll give us a li’l mo’ time. Not much, though...*

She began to shiver as she felt the chilly water seep into her shoes & under her pants, which felt like anchors under so much saturation. She noticed Edgar seemed to feel the same way by the way he wrapped his arms round himself & shuddered.

*Well, it’s either risk the time bomb, drown, or release ourselves into Lance’s hand.* In her mind, the last actually seemed worse, since she had no idea what he planned to do with them before he had them killed.

She took the time bomb out & scrutinized it. It only had 2 buttons: 1 for starting & 1 for stopping. She briefly wondered why they would make it so easy to stop it.

She stared @ it in thought as she felt the water rise to her chest, & then finally thought, *Well... here goes nothing...* & pressed the start button. The bomb’s blank face was replaced by blinking red lines that formed the shape o’ “10:00,” which slowly count down, second-by-second.

“¡Shit!” she gasped as she turned the bomb o’er & under, looking for any other controls.

*¡10 minutes isn’t ’nough time! ¡We’ll drown by then!*

She stared back @ the interface, wondering if she should just set the bomb next to the wall & stand back, just in case it did go off early—she was already feeling uncomfortable holding the bomb so close

to herself. However, the #s seemed to go down in a consistent manner.

Finally, she stuffed the bomb back into her pocket & turned to Edgar, thinking, *'K: new plan.*

“Edgar,” she whispered as quietly as she could up to him: “I am going to open the door & release the water. As the water rushes out, *hide as best as you can.* Try to prevent them from capturing you as much as possible.”

“¿But what 'bout you?” asked Edgar.

“Hopefully, I'll be able to 'scape them. Don't worry: I have a plan.”

So she returned to the door & began heaving the sofa chair 'way from the door, only to find it much harder to do without Edgar to help as she'd imagined it'd be. By the time she moved it a foot from the door, the water was already to her chin, & she had to hold her breath, tilt her head upward to prevent water from seeping into her lungs, & close her eyes to prevent it from seeping into them as well.

As she felt her lungs constrict from hunger, she thought, *Must remain calm. Panicking has no utility, & thus should not be performed. Just steadily continue your work & you should finish before drowning.*

After half a minute o' moving the chair, she walked round it & tried opening the door, throwing it wide when in 1 swift movement. Suddenly, she felt a force propel her forward out the door in 1 giant splash.

Feeling as if minutes had been condensed into 1 second, she soon found herself lying face-1st on the ground, panting & dripping on a drenched carpet.

Before she could do anything else, she felt heavy armored arms clutch her own arms, pull them 'hind her, & wrap metal rings round them—*handcuffs*, she surmised. She felt the same sensation on her ankles & looked down to see her guess confirmed.

“Search inside that room for the skeleton,” Lance said as he

pointed inside it.

Autumn's heart sank as she saw them charge in and, just a moment later, charge back out with Edgar locked up just as Autumn was.

"Sorry..." Edgar murmured as he stared down @ the ground.

"It's all right..." Autumn muttered back with a similar expression.

"Lead them to the court room we set up," Lance demanded as he pointed down the hall. The minions holding Autumn & Edgar nodded & they all marched forward.

## **XX. The Infection**

Felix noticed something funny 'bout the mad-scientist woman—something 'bout the way she just couldn't stop scratching her neck, which was now covered in deep red splotches bigger than coins, or the way drool kept dribbling down her lower lip, which she had to keep wiping off with her sleeve, or the way her eyes looked half-gone, as if she were drunk. Maybe 'twas the way her arms seemed to shake as if they couldn't decide quite what they wanted to do, & so tried to do multiple things @ the same time.

Felix definitely thought there might be something wrong with the mad-scientist woman, but didn't dare say anything. After all, ¿what if she were wrong? She had gone so long doing good; she didn't want to squander that by bringing up something only her stupid mind would worry 'bout. 'Sides, 'twas not like the mad-scientist woman couldn't have noticed these symptoms herself; she surely knew 'bout them & was probably already doing something 'bout them. Bringing them up would only embarrass her

So Felix said nothing. She simply stared down @ her twiddling fingers anxiously as she continued to hear the mad-scientist woman scratching her neck, make strange saliva noises, & breathe heavily.



When they finally reached the front door in the main room, Dawn was practically dragging herself 'bout, her upper body lurching & her eyes gaping, as if she were staring @ something from 'nother dimension. Ne'ertheless, she grabbed the doorknob to turn it, impatient for the breath o' fresh air & coolness she would find outside as opposed to the cramped hotness she suddenly felt.

But when she tried turning the knob, it wouldn't turn. It remained solidly still as if 'twere a mere prop. She tried a few mo' times & then thought, *Well, maybe that's just how the weird lock works.* But when she looked for the lock she couldn't find anything.

*Fine, then, I'll just unlock it with my trusty paperclip.*

She missed a few times trying to jab the small end o' the paperclip in, hitting it gainst the knob, before she finally fit it in the hole. She turned it round, back & forth, but didn't feel any change @ all. Then suddenly, she felt a force pulling the paperclip in & soon felt it slip out her sweaty fingers, disappearing into the lock hole.

She gasped as she throttled the door knob futilely. “¿What? ¡No! ¡That can't happen! ¡That's stupid!”

Then she felt gravity become too much o' a burden & dropped to the floor, rubbing her heavily sweating face & moaning, “¿What is going on here?”

Felix still didn't say anything.

Dawn was now falling down on her hands, panting heavily, & sweating rivers. The room seemed to spin. Her eyes felt blind e'en though they were seeing, her mind felt empty e'en though she was thinking vaguely, & her body couldn't decide whether she was freezing cold or burning hot.

Finally Felix spoke up: “Um, ¿d'you want me to get you some water?”

For some reason, Dawn felt a cord snap in her brain that made her want to lunge @ Felix & strangle her, but she made an effort to

wave 'way that thought. 'Stead, she stared up @ Felix sternly & said interlaced with heavy breaths, "No, I need you to run 'way as fast & far 'way as you can, immediately."

"¿Are you sure—?"

"¡Go!"

Felix turned & padded 'way as Dawn said, staring down @ her fidgeting hands in shame. She knew it wouldn't be long till she screwed something up, & here 'twas. She knew it'd have been better had she been left in that hole, for a'least then she would die a good person. Now she had already spoiled her goodness into badness & would likely ne'er have that goodness e'er 'gain.

When Felix left through the doors, Dawn collapsed on the floor & began to lose consciousness. *Good, it'll give them all a head start*, she thought. As she lay unconscious, the only movement her body made—'cept for her heartbeats, breaths, & pulse—was her hand scrabbling round on the carpet, scratching.

To be continued...



#BOSK-CE191C-HURRY

# HURRY UP PLEASE IT'S HURRY UP PLEASE IT'S HURRY UP PLEASE IT'S TIME

J. J. W. Mezun | 2015 November 1



## I.

The paper was empty. It remained empty for hours, though by then it shouldn't have been. Autumn should've filled it by then, but whenever she turned her attention to planning, where 'twas s'posed to be, it'd turn 'way to other subjects—subjects it'd be better off not squandering precious time considering. She must've tried turning her attention to planning dozens o' times, but her attention kept turning 'way like a stubborn, spoiled child.

She tapped her fingers on her book 'gain & 'gain & 'gain & 'gain & 'gain. @ frantic speed, rapidly. She shifted gainst the brick wall o' Edgar's storm-drain home, careful not to shake Edgar too much, Edgar having fallen asleep next to her. Then she shifted in a different position, & then shifted in 'nother position, & then shifted in yet 'nother position. None were well. Her head had incomprehensible aches, & she held her head in her hand. This didn't make the aches go 'way.

The only sound present in that empty realm was the inescapable tick, tick, tick, tick, tick, tick, tick. Sometimes there would be a tock inside o' there—sometimes. Since she saw no clock in sight, she wondered if the ticks her ears swore they heard were true or if they were only her mind's fantasies.

What *was* certain was the effect it had on Autumn, which was her fingers quaking, her teeth gouging her bottom lip, & her eyes twisting in fury. The ticks seemed to vacuum in all o' the oxygen, for Autumn was breathing heavily & sweating under the stale carbon dioxide left 'hind.

Which was ironic, since Autumn knew she didn't *want* the clock—

authentic or imagined—to stop ticking. Quite the opposite, actually: 'twas the very knowledge o' their 'ventual demise espoused by every tick that made her twitch.

She had made a habit o' checking her funds every so oft, written on the back sheet o' her ideas pad. She knew 'twas a time-wasting distraction, but couldn't stop herself.

*Let's see... I have 113,752Pts within the span o'—she paused to do the math... Almost a year & a half. That'll probably solve less than a year's worth o' necessary funds just to keep myself 'live, much less money I get to keep. 'Less I improve my production immensely, I'm screwed.*

Always afterward, she'd check the calendar on her cell & would always see the year 2011 shrink.

*Only a few months till I must figure out a way to subsist on my own,* she thought. O, she knew her mother would technically ne'er demand she go out on her own; she always had that peculiarity o' demanding nothing from Autumn while offering whatever li'l she had—which was, Autumn surmised, probably why she had li'l in the 1st place. But Autumn knew she could ne'er accept such a degrading situation for herself. 'Twas embarrassing 'nough to do so as a minor, when there was a socially manufactured 'scuse; when the 'scuse disappeared, such a situation became untenable.

No, if Autumn could not keep herself afloat on her own, then she deserved to drown. That was the logical conclusion.

Whenever that thought had finished its time, she put full pressure on her plans, e'er cognizant o' the time she'd pathetically squandered. In such a mental state as that in which these thoughts left her, her imagination rarely felt well, & so Autumn oft felt the need for external enticement: what would start as the absentminded squeezing o' her hand from 'nother would gradually shift to the e'er-so-minded stabbing o' pencil in palm, closing her eyes & breathing

deeply @ the serene burn it left.

*It does not stop till you start devising feasible thieving opportunities,* she told herself.

It rarely did; but after a while, Autumn would see the futility in this venture & stop. Though she always craved a stronger dose, she acknowledged the disastrous opportunity losses she'd accrue if she were to accidentally break something. Anyway, she realized 'twas mo' a recreational act than an incentive to think, since it ne'er seemed to succeed—& she didn't have time for such useless games.

*Hmm... I seem to be mentally aberrant,* she mused as she stared down @ & slowly pet Edgar's head. *O well. So long as we keep that to ourselves, that should cause no problems; so long as we keep everything to ourselves, there should be no problems.*

## II.

So urgent was her quest for new ideas that, after finishing the usual business, she spent the rest o' her lunch sitting @ a table with her face pressed almost-touching to a blank notepad, hoping to make it not blank anymo', while Edgar sat 'cross, watching the rest o' the cafeteria for signs o' abandoned food that Autumn could pilfer & resell.

But she could tell that part o' his focus was on her, & she could tell that he could tell the frustration painted on her face or embodied in her hand squeezing her pencil so hard she could feel it almost break. She could tell that that knowledge only increased her frustration, e'en though it should do the opposite. It only did so 'cause she didn't want it to infringe on his feelings; & the increase in her ire only increased the infringement further, creating a cycle...

“¿Is something wrong?” asked Edgar.

“¿Huh?” grunted Autumn, looking up @ him. When he hesitated

to answer she added, “¿Did you say something?”

“I, uh... I was just wondering if something’s wrong.”

“Nothing you can cure.”

Edgar turned fully toward her with his jaw hanging out slightly.

“¿Is it something serious?”

“¿What? No,” Autumn replied in a petulant tone.

“¿Does it have something to do with—?”

“Edgar, I don’t have time to discuss this inanity,” Autumn snapped. “¿Could you just give me peace for the next few minutes?”

Edgar lowered his head & murmured, “Yes... Sorry...”

“You needn’t be,” murmured she.

It did Autumn no good, anyway: e’en with Edgar’s voice gone, the constant clatter o’ plastic dishes & the perpetual patter o’ a trail mix o’ voices ensured that her focus would be squandered. She reacted by covering her ears, which gradually progressed into trying to squeeze her head; but the sounds still somehow managed to seep in.

She slammed her pencil down, stood up, & announced, “Fuck planning: it’s time for action. My surroundings are clearly giving me a message.”

Autumn’s eyes shifted left & right as she stormed down the cafeteria, seeking food or other valuables she could raven. But no matter how deep she searched, none appeared.

*This should be no surprise. After years o’ being robbed, surely they’d learn to perfect protecting their property. Still, you’d think there’d be some who’d leave their food ’hind purely from nonchalance —’less they’re intentionally trying to deprive me o’ thieving opportunities, which is certainly possibility.*

*I s’pose I could try breaking through the new locker locks, but it’ll be risky. People are also mo’ watchful ’bout that, too, now.*

No matter where she went, her thoughts were distracted by the voices surrounding her.



“I must say, old chap: take a gander @ this pneumatic moving picture I discovered on the *ThouScreen* in which this fellow hollers into a face-recording camera embedded in his computational device while playing 1 o’ those electronic entertainment devices.”

“¡Indeed! ¡It’s quite the gerbil’s pajamas!”

“¿Didst I hear thou art crooning with Sassoon?”

“Indeed, agreed we both to prom this noon.”

“Prithee, hold not your tongue in dam, thou beaver;

Release the details for which I so thirst.”

[Exeunt both.]

“They say the clock tower’s where the janitor left his riches just before suiciding.”

Autumn stopped as if reaching the end o’ an invisible rope.

“*Sigh*”—the voice literally said “sigh.”—“I don’t want to hear any more o’ your obviously fabricated stories. This is as bad as that time you said a blurry photograph jumped out @ you from your closet.”

“¿O, truly? ¿Then why did I find this golden doubloon, huh?”

Autumn glanced toward the noise & saw that, indeed, 1 o’ the students appeared to be holding a fat goldenrod coin.

She noticed 1 o’ them glance back @ her for a split second, & then look back @ her partner.

“We can discuss this somewhere else,” she continued in a low voice, & then the 2 shut their lockers & walked ’way hastily, as if they were late for class.

Autumn didn’t follow, but stood still & scrutinized the floor tiles. She doubted the story: ¿*Rich janitors?* ¿*Who could believe such an absurdity?* But considering the situation, searching could hardly be considered any mo’ a waste—& the potential reward was too spicy to dispose o’ so quickly.

’Nother plus: this wasn’t true theft, since the dead can’t carry their wealth with them to the abyss, & thus the risk o’ danger

dramatically diminished. It wasn't as if the janitor's ghost was going to come back to haunt her or stop her; not 'cause she didn't believe in ghosts—ghosts were 'nother scientifically-confirmed biology anomaly in Boskeopolis that gave scientists such headaches—but 'cause the idea that someone who chose to kill oneself would voluntarily return was just too absurd to taste for a second.

But her newfound enthusiasm didn't end with this scheme; for as she considered the prospect o' this treasure's true existence, she mused o'er what other buried riches might lurk round Boskeopolis. After years o' scraping raw the same empty caves with plastic beach shovels, she might've landed in an untouched mine providing its own automatic drills.

*I'd better find Edgar*, she thought as she 180'd, only to bump into him.

"Ah, there you are," said she. "Good news: I might've found a new reservoir o' gold."

Edgar scratched his head. "¿Inside the school? ¿Couldn't that cause water damage?"

"Shhh," Autumn whispered as she leaned her head closer, her eyes darting left & right. "Wait till we find barren land before we discuss this further."

"That might be difficult to find in such a sprawling city as this, though there may be some in Mustard Mountain,"

The reveille rang for 4th period.

"Damn. It's too late to try my lunch hideout," muttered Autumn. "We'll just have to consider somewhere else after school."

### III.

"...This protest proved historically important, as 2 months later, General Clay relented, allowing a parliament to form, the 1st steps

toward Boskeopolis's transition to a republic..."

Autumn was glad her 6th period teacher spent the whole class droning on 'bout the same content they'd already went o'er before, giving her ample opportunity to consider mo' important issues.

Foremost, she still needed to figure out where the clock tower was, & find a way to sneak inside unseen. She guessed that 'twas somewhere near school grounds, considering the involvement o' the janitor; though she also knew this was not a certainty.

She couldn't stop eying the clock every minute. 'Tween the birth o' this business @ break & now, further rumination had melted her juiced engine o' ebullience into a flickering flame o' doubt—which only made further thought harder, since candles had much less memory to spare for thought than e'en engines impaired by spilt Citrus Berry juice.

So distracted by these figurative thoughts was Autumn that the bell's school-end chime startled her. She gazed round the room that seemed alien after such a long mental vacation & received confirmation from all o' the students sliding books in bags & storming out the door. She played the pattern.

She waited by the maple just in front o' the entrance, ignoring the light sprinkle o' rain falling o'er her & watching the stream o' students swarm out the door for signs o' a familiar skull & hood. By the time her eyes netted him, he was already staring @ her & walking her way.

"So, ¿what do we do now?" asked Edgar. "¿Go to your house so you can plan whatever this new thing is?"

Autumn paused to think.

"I think we'd better use this short opportunity while we still have a 'scuse for being here to search for the clock tower; then we can go & plan how to sneak in."

"¿Clock tower? ¿What do you need from there?"

“Shit,” Autumn muttered as she searched the vicinity for lingering ears. Her arteries eased when she saw no suspicious hesitations—nor many students @ all, for that matter.

*You’re on fragile rope already, she told herself; don’t drop lit matches like cigarette ashes.*

“Ne’er mind,” Autumn whispered huskily. “Just look round for 1 without attracting attention.”

“Um, OK.”

“I’ll start outside, you inside; ¿all right?” asked Autumn.

Edgar nodded.

#### IV.

*Look casual,* Autumn told herself as she paced down the back terrace o’ Applewood with her hands deep in her pockets, her head hanging low, & her shoulders slumped.

This was not mere acting. In the deepest corners o’ her brainstem festered visions o’ various people—some she saw in her vicinity, & some she’d ne’er seen in her life—sneaking into the clock tower this minute & mad dashing with fat cash sacks ’cross their backs, leaving her 1 year later crouched in an alley, fishing from a trash bin.

“¿You all right?”

Tossed back into reality from her looping nightmares after dozens o’ attempts to do so herself, Autumn looked up to see that ’twas the groundskeeper, who was now raking the soggy November leaves into a pile next to a pair o’ black plastic bags, his large furry claws working effortlessly. Autumn couldn’t e’en guess what the crafty grizzly was thinking, as its eyes were covered in the same olive uniform-matching ranger hat they all wore; but she knew the groundskeeper would know where the clock tower is, & thus would be a high-level risk o’ competition.

“Nothing,” mumbled Autumn. “Just a tad tired.”

“¿Doing some extracurricular activity?”

“Uh huh.”

Autumn couldn't stop herself from cringing when she felt a familiar buzz in her pocket.

*That must be Edgar, either with intel or trouble. Knowing his capabilities, it's likely the latter.*

She waited till she'd left the groundskeeper's sight from 'hind an outcropping wall o' the building before slipping out her phone & checking it:

“Found where clock tower is its [sic] fasther [sic] out in the park hind the wire fence hgind [sic] the school”

*¿Why would you add 'sic' statements to your own text? Why not just correct them if you know they're wrong?* Autumn wondered as she questioned Edgar on how he made his discovery.

Her phone buzzed once mo', & her screen was replaced with mo' text:

“I asked someone a the front desk”

Autumn blinked repeatedly, refusing to believe what her eyes told her.

“I think you made a type. You were not foolish 'nough to outright ask someone for its where'bouts, right?”

A'least a minute perished before 'nother text appeared:

“Was i not sposed to”

Autumn could feel the steam rise from her forehead as she mashed her next message:

“‘Course you weren't s'posed to! What part o' 'without attracting attention' did you not understand?”

“Its OK i told her we were doing some istory project”

“That's such an obvious lie she'd have to be lobotomized to believe it.”

When 'nother minute went by without reply, Autumn added, "Well, it's late, so we might as well get started on plan 2. We a'least gained something, though @ mo' risk than warranted. Meet me 'hind the school."

She pocketed her phone & then began pacing swiftly back & forth, her eye swinging through the vicinity to ensure that the groundskeeper wasn't watching her. Every second that withered off the branch felt like 'nother coin being vacuumed out the clock tower, the vision o' its mammon mountain quickly dissolving fixed before her eyes.

*Holy Buddha, ¿what's taking you so long, Edgar?*

A minute later, she saw Edgar emerge from 'hind the corner, guilt obvious on his face.

"There you are," whispered Autumn. "We don't have time to plan. We'll just have to snap it from here, ¿OK? Now let's go."

"Uh, OK..."

But before Edgar could say mo', Autumn was already halfway to the gate; & when she reached it, she didn't e'en hesitate for a second before she began climbing. The only time she did stop was when she reached the top, so she could help Edgar up. Once he landed on the other side, she jumped down after him & bolted forward, Edgar scampering 'hind, holding the hem o' his robe up to avoid sloshing it all o'er the slushy grass.

Autumn turned her head left & right @ a dozen turns per second as she wandered through the enormous clearing till her eyes caught thick bronze. They followed the tall rectangular object upward till they reached the top, adorned by the round white face o' an analog clock.

*¡Perfect!* she thought as she rushed for it, looking back briefly to ensure Edgar wasn't too far 'hind.

@ the front o' the tower, bordered by 2 thin wall outcrops, stood a

tall, thin door o' mossy green wood. She turned the knob with shriveled expectations o' utility, but was surprised to find it as loose as unlocked—& indeed, when she pulled, the door opened easily.

'Twas an unhappy surprise: it meant somebody had probably already entered, & would likely take all o' the treasure before she could get a coin in her fingernails.

## V.

Since the inside was so small horizontally, her eyes naturally glided upward. There her mind became o'erloaded by the mechanical complexity o' all the moving screws, churning cogs, jerking plastic hands, & other apparatuses Autumn's attention couldn't stretch 'nough to register. E'en the walls were a jumble o' millions o' mechanical pieces glued together, a few cogs in the front spinning, for reasons Autumn didn't care to guess.

Getting to the top would be complex. Autumn frowned. She didn't like complexity: it only added mo' steps she could fail, causing her to fall off completely. The mo' she considered the whole venture, the mo' she doubted its benefits: she didn't e'en know if there was truly treasure here, if somebody else hadn't stolen it by now, or whether she'd be able to e'er find it if 'twas still there. If any o' these returned false, she'd have wasted hours—& with time running out, she needed to optimize the usefulness o' her time.

On the other hand, she'd already spent so much time that it'd be a waste to give up before trying.

*I'll just have to carry my expensive bet out to the end.*

Since the only object she saw in front o' her on her level was a set o' grated silicon steps, she started by climbing them. As she rose, she looked down & saw below & to the sides o' the stairs empty blackness. She didn't want to learn the consequences o' falling in.

She turned her head 'hind her once 'gain to ensure Edgar hadn't lost himself since she'd last seen him. As she neared the top o' the steps, she saw Edgar poke his skull in.

"Up here," she said as she waved a hand toward herself.

As she looked for where her next path should lie, she debated whether she should instruct Edgar to stay 'hind, & thus save her time not waiting, or if he might come in handy later, & thus be needed nearby.

This deliberation was shoved aside when she noticed a small clock on 1 o' the walls, with a sign 'bove that said:

*Greater time means greater speeds;  
12 is when all motions cease.*

*I could sure use some speed,* Autumn thought as she strode o'er to it.

"This sure is an odd clock tower..." Edgar said as he stared upward, his tinny voice rising in strumming echoes. So long had Autumn gone hearing only the light whoosh o' plastic & metal swinging through the air, the quiet crunching o' gears grinding against each other, & the steady whirr o' them spinning by themselves, that such sudden loudness caused Autumn's hair to jump.

"I'm blurry on why they'd have a clock tower in the 1st place," said Autumn. "Probably some rich academic built it for fun."

"Hey, you don't think... you don't think with people dying in here this place might be... might be haunted, ¿d'you?"

"Such a prospect wouldn't e'en nest in the top 20 o' my frets," said Autumn.

She now stood @ the edge o' the grilled silicon platform, with a wide spinning gear 'tween her & the platform below the li'l clock. She carefully reached a foot out to the gear platform & instantly felt



a force pull on it when it touched the gear, causing her to yank it back before her legs were ripped apart.

*The only way this'll work is if both feet go together—I'll just have to leap the whole thing like a frog.*

Edgar continued the conversation Autumn hoped had already been buried:

“¿You don't think any bats might fly @ us from dusty corners or any spiders might leap on us as we're trying to climb, or any floating ghostly Medusa heads might fly @ us in wavy patterns & knock us into the abyss down below?”

*That's the most ridiculous thing I've e'er heard,* Autumn thought as she crouched in preparation for a large jump. *¿What harm could spiders do us?*

But Autumn just replied with, “We should be fine so long as I don't fuck up any jumps.”

As soon as she could after jumping, she grasped the riveted edge o' the gear to hold her in place. Then she stood up in a crouch 'gain &, when her face was a few degrees before the platform, jumped so that her angle matched the platform's.

*Just think: you'll have to do this many mo' times before we're done,* she thought as she thumped gainst silicon 'gain.

She grasped the single hand on the clock. *Well, let's hope this bears honey...* Then she twisted it clockwise till the hand was pointing @ the 11.

Gears whooshed—e'en heavier than before. She turned & saw all rush. Cog edges & plumbs blurred. She trod back, shocked.

“They weren't kidding when they said this made everything faster.”

She turned the hand to 12 & heard the whirring & grinding & churning & flailing, indeed, cease, which was replaced by a gradually fainting sputter, like that o' a dying fan. She turned & saw that

everything had stopped moving.

Autumn put her hand on her chin & rubbed it back & forth while she attempted to devise a strategy for continued exploration based on the results o' her recently-finished experiment.

*On 1 hand, this'll be much easier to deal with; on the other, it might make things go slower, & I'm already probably getting clogged out o' my money now.*

She sensed the minutes slipping past her guard, moment by moment by moment by moment. She clutched her head, pressing against it with such strength as if she were attempting to crush a balloon. She didn't keep a single reason for why she might believe such an action might help her think mo' quickly; but then, she was so preoccupied with attempting to figure out the solution to the dilemma 'hind the clock speeds that she simply did not possess the time necessary to rethink the reflexive motion she made gainst her head.

*¡There's not 'nough time to waste standing round here; but there isn't 'nough to screw up, either! ¡Shit! ¡Think!*

She mentally forced herself to settle on a decision, which would be to make the clock tower operate @ maximum speed so as to make their movement speed maximal, too—a'least, that is what she hoped. She decided that her situation was so calamitous @ this period o' time that 'twas necessary for her to maximize her risk in the hopes o' gaining as much o' the reward as she could.

She placed her hand on the clock hand & turned it back a li'l distance so that 'twas now o'er the 11 once mo'. All spun 'live 'gain so fast.

“¿Did you figure it out?” asked Edgar.

“I think...” Autumn had her hands up to her head & a confused expression.

Edgar noticed this & wanted to ask her what was wrong, but then

saw her instantly turn her attention to the task @ hand & decided that she'd probably not want to waste mo' time discussing such trifles.

She stopped by the speeding cog, watched it close, & then jumped on it. The cog's force would've thrown her if she hadn't grasped tightly. Legs wobbled as she tried standing. Her surroundings blurred.

*No time to waver, she thought. Better try the next revolution & hope for the best.*

She leapt, but a li'l too late: she went @ a leftward angle, landing on the edge o' the platform. She moved forward to avoid tipping off backward.

"I guess this'll make climbing the tower quick in some way, ¿right?" asked Edgar.

"Hopefully."

Autumn strode to 3 cogs half-stuck in the wall, leading up to a higher platform. She saw that they were revolving toward her. She looked back @ Edgar.

*Damn. ¿How is he going to be able to get through these if I can barely do it without being flung off?*

"Edgar, stay 'hind," Autumn called with hands funneling mouth.

"¿Are you sure—?"

"Yes. Hopefully this won't take long."

Her trick was to hop past all cogs without pause. Since she spent li'l time on any cog, their movement had li'l effect on her. 'Bove, she saw that the path went much farther: conveyors, pendulums, giant screws, & flipping blocks. The next step was a long conveyor that ran toward her.

*Augh. ¿Cranking the speed up didn't help @ all! This is only going to slow me.*

No time to go back, so she ran full-speed. Only 'twas harder than

she guessed, going only tick by tick. It took 2 minutes to reach the end, & she barely had the energy to leap to the next platform—a rapidly flipping block she had no time to rest on, though her heart's battery felt low.

She jumped to the pendulum after—mistimed, as it swooped 'way in mid-leap, leaving her unable to grab it. Gravity yanked her till she slammed face-1st onto silicon ground, shattering glasses.

## VI.

Staring upward, she saw the smudge that was Edgar.

“¿Are you all right?”

She reached for glasses & raised them to shocked eyes. Then she sat up & pressed palms into her sockets.

“I still had time... I still had a chance...”

Edgar saw her shake.

“If you want, I can go & see if I can find you 'nother pair o' glasses you could wear.”

She turned to him, the bottom o' her eyes dark. While she was mostly still, her hand still shook as it grasped through the holes in the silicon platform.

She whispered, “You don't understand, Edgar—we don't have time. We still have to climb this insipid tower, look for the treasure, & hope that nobody's taken it. & we can't just stay in here all day; somebody's going to notice us in here, what with all o' the noise. This was only s'posed to be some quick search. It'd probably be better just to leave, but then, ¿what if there truly is treasure here? ¿& then what will I do?”

Edgar hesitated.

“I'm sure you'll find ways to make money later...”

“You don't understand—I *don't have time*. Time is running out on

us just being able to sit round getting necessities for free. I need a constant supply for food, for shelter, for all o' that & keep a surplus to prevent me from being perpetually poor. Hoping that money will eventually come is not 'nough: the speed & 'mount o' my gains simply *must* improve."

She sprung to foot. "& I'm just wasting mo' time on this discussion."

But she was fuzzy on what to do next. *¿Should I try climbing with broken glasses or waste time having them fixed?* She squeezed a hand as if it'd pump her mind. There were too many split paths that split into other split paths & so on till there were millions o' choices—almost all could lead to failure.

She exhaled deeply. *We must ease. Excess hurry is causing you to make poisonous choices. Whatever we might gain from speed will have been lost by now, anyway. I will simply go get my glasses fixed, take this tower the slow way, & hope that the treasure's still here—if there's any e'en.*

She turned to Edgar's blur & held out her glasses.

"¿Could you run out & get these fixed or find 'nother pair, & could you hurry, please?" she asked, wincing uncertainly.

Edgar took them, nodded, turned, & sped downstairs.

Just after, Autumn jumped on the cog to the small clock, but waited before jumping 'gain, better aiming where to land still with blurry sight—falling off here'd be direr than wrecked glasses.

She grasped the hand & twisted it to 1; but then when she planned mo' for how she'd climb, she turned the hand e'en further to 12.

With that issue now properly settled, Autumn expended the time she waited for Edgar's return in attempted relaxation. She sat down & considered in greater detail what she'd do, not only in terms o' her current venture, but also for the relatively distant, though not distant 'nough for Autumn's taste, future.

She found this to be much too arduous as she stared round the tower, seeing it become mo' portentous in her smoky, congested vision, as if her losing her glasses had transformed the tower into a spectral, non-Euclidean nightmare. Autumn's nerves ne'er soothed @ the deprivation o' her spectacle-dependent sight any mo' than they would if she were locked in a confined coffin, vulnerable to the various invisible hazards surrounding her.

*I s'pose that's simply the outcome one must expect when one is born with such biological weaknesses,* she mused.

## VII.

After a couple o' minutes, Autumn had considered asking Edgar how well he was doing; but then she remembered she'd ne'er be able to see what she was typing, so she dropped the idea.

*Wouldn't be surprised if he just said fuck me & went awol. It's not as if I'm doing anything for him 'cept harry him round...* Autumn thought as she bit her finger, only for her thoughts to trail off when she noticed the pain said biting caused & realized how much it soothed nerves that just recently were as far from soothed as possible, & found a new way to survive a time period that wouldn't be useful, anyway.

However, she had to quickly stop her activities approximately half an hour later, when she witnessed the white smudge o' Edgar's skull ascend from the top o' the large yellow smudge that was the silicon stairway.

She waved him toward her & said, "Could you try hopping o'er here? I stopped everything, so it shouldn't be too hard."

Edgar stared @ the holes 'tween the cog for a few seconds, but then nodded. He ran toward the hole & leapt with his hands outstretched, as if he hoped it'd improve his distance. Autumn sighed

in relief when she saw his fuzzy figure land before her & felt a light bump 'neath.

Then she saw the blur move 'gain & sensed an e'en lighter tumming beside her. Suddenly, the much closer voice o' Edgar said, "¿Could you lean your head down a li'l, please?"

"¿Huh? ¿Why?" Autumn asked as she did so, while also turning toward him.

Then she said, "O," when she felt plastic lightly jab into the sides o' her face, & her blurry vision was replaced with clarity o' Edgar's skull & the tower.

She straightened up & readjusted her glasses with a cough.

"Thank you," she mumbled. Then she added, "& sorry for my rude rushing... I..."

"Anyway, I wanted to ask if you could stay here & change this clock when needed." She pointed to said clock. "I'll call down to you when I need you to change it."

"Uh huh," he answered.

With that settled, Autumn bounded back 'cross to the central platform, & then up the 3 gears 'gain, finding it much easier than before thanks to the lack o' movement messing up her jumps. She found traversing the conveyor belt to be much quicker, as well.

However, as she reached the end o' the block after the conveyor, she noticed that the pendulum was stuck in a backward swing 'way from her; she was certain she couldn't jump that great a gap without winged boots.

So she called down to Edgar with her hands funneling her mouth, "Turn the hand up to the #1, please—& be ready to turn it back to 12 the second I say 'now.'"

Edgar raised a thumb in confirmation, & then she saw him twist the hand a tad rightward. The ground below her feet rumbled & the pendulum slowly swung forward, & then back.

She curled her fists & stared fixedly @ the pendulum while she timed short hops every few seconds to keep from being rolled off the floating block.

As she saw the pendulum near the end o' its swing toward her, she shouted, "¡Now!" & watched as it eased to a stop a mere 2 feet 'way from her.

She leapt & tightly hugged the neck o' the pendulum. Then she kicked her feet upward till she was able to get them 'bove the bottom ball while she pulled her upper body upward 'long the neck. Her feet wobbled on the ball, unsteady on her spherical ground.

*OK... Just need to take this next part carefully. Jumping off this is going to be much harder than jumping on—I don't want Edgar to have to find me a 3rd pair o' glasses.*

She called down, "K, turn it back to..." Then she looked up @ the gap & platform before her. *While making it run mo' speedily will make it harder to jump off, it will also minimize the risk o' not reaching the other platform.*

"Turn it up to 6."

She didn't hear a reply, nor saw 1, since her attention was fixed on what lay before her; but she did hear the click o' pieces being put into different places, & then felt the pendulum gradually increase in speed till it was a swing per second. She felt the bile rise in her esophagus as it swung her back & forth as if 'twere a twisted carnival ride.

She watched the next platform carefully as it neared & distanced, & when the pendulum swung forward for its dozenth time, she leapt.

So we don't have to read through mo' paragraphs-worth o' Edgar retrieving her new glasses & her climbing all the way back up, let's say she made it. The world will ne'er know, if only 'cause the world is concerned with mo' important issues than whether some secondary student climbed some clock tower.



@ the end o' the next platform, she saw a set o' spiral stairs, mostly covered by a long white plastic tube lined with many thin, ringlike ridges. *Well, this ought to be much easier than all that other crap. Let's just hope it takes up most o' the climb.*

She rushed up the steps, still impatient to get to that treasure before anyone else. Then she went up mo' steps. & then e'en mo'. & so many that Autumn began to wonder how long the whole thing was. By this point, running up so many steps had sapped the energy from her, leaving her slowly treading, panting, up the steps rather than rushing.

Finally, her curiosity o'erthrew her desire not to waste e'en a teaspoon o' time, & she looked back, only for an inkling o' the sheer height o' stairs she'd climbed.

She saw that she was still only a few steps from the platform where she began.

*¿What? That's impossible—that's literally impossible.*

She turned round & stepped backward up the stairs, thinking the trick had to appear sometime. 'Stead, she saw that she didn't appear to move up @ all, despite the feeling o' her feet going up & down the steps.

Then she stared down @ her feet as she climbed, specifically seeing them change steps. But every time she glanced forward, she saw the same opening, static.

*The doorway couldn't be moving 'long with me & I just didn't notice, ¿could it? I mean, this tower must be decades ol'; they couldn't have had the technology yet for such an insignificant tower.*

*Then 'gain, ¿why would they have giant swinging pendulums & flipping blocks all controlled by a clock @ the bottom?*

*¿& who are they & why did they build this pointless place in the 1st place?*

Autumn slapped herself out o' her reverie.

*No time for clouding.*

She descended the stair, surrendering any attempt to figure it out, & looked round it for 'nother way up. But as far as her eyes told, there was none.

She squeezed her hand as if t'were a boiling spigot in need o' stemming. *Panicking won't help you devise a way forward, so don't waste time with it.* Then she realized she was wasting time just thinking 'bout panicking & drove it all from her mind.

The repetition o' clicks, ticks, flips, & whooshes drilled into her head, slowly, & seemingly methodically, challenging her already weakening grasp on her sanity. Her forehead started producing beads o' sweat while the rest o' her form twitched as an o'erboiled kettle. Thoughts on what she could do with the pendulum or what she still could do with spiral staircase were constantly interrupted, till she was left with just the distracted thought, "OK, need to think o' something..." o'er & o'er 'gain.

She clamped palms o'er her ears & shut her eyes, hoping to 'scape all environmental distractions. Then she remembered why Edgar was far below her in the 1st place:

She shouted downward, "¡Edgar! ¡Turn the clock to 12, please!"

She could faintly hear a voice call out, "K."

Then she heard everything round her grind to sleep, & then blessed quiet. Her mind, once being so cramped that she felt every thought shoved round till they couldn't root, now was full o' space in which to experiment.

After a few minutes basking in this renewed calm, her nerves bunched up 'gain.

*¿What're you doing wasting your time fogging 'bout? ¡We don't have time for this!*

Then she peered mo' closely @ the ridges round the stair's shell & her sight followed them upward. She walked up to the shell & lifted 1

o' her sets o' arches up to 1 o' the ridges, testing her balance on it. Then she gripped ridges higher up & lifted the other arches to a ridge 'tween them, & then 1 with her other arches. Though she could feel herself wobble on such tiny holds, she figured she could stay on with constant climbing.

So she did, moving hands & feet upward in a left-right-left-right motion. She found it worked well for the 1st half o' the climb, till 1 point in which her foot slipped, & the rest o' her almost tumbled down with it. The prospect o' falling 5 meters down drenched the side o' her face in sweat—*¡Think o' how much time I'd have to waste climbing back up!*

But as I said, I don't want to waste any mo' time repeating actions already done; & since I don't want to be repetitious, I didn't have Autumn fall, but 'stead wrote for her to reach the top in this story.

& what a height 'twas: Autumn could see the walls all stretch toward each other toward the bottom, all o' the contraptions she'd used to climb upward looking like toys.

Remembering her pressing mission, she looked 'head & saw a door on a li'l platform @ the other side. The gilded words on 'twere so big, she could still read it e'en from her distance: "DON'T ENTER WITHOUT PERMISSION." Under that was a white rectangle o' what she guessed was a sheet taped to the door; but 'twas much too small for her to e'en confirm it had text, much less read it.

There was still the matter o' crossing the gap. Autumn saw her solution when she noticed the giant arrows protruding horizontally from a pole in the middle. They were still much too far 'way, though, till Autumn remembered, once 'gain, the way this tower operated.

“¡Edgar! ¡Turn the clock forward to 11!”

She heard no reply. He was so far 'way by now that she doubted he could hear her, nor her him if he e'en replied.

But then she heard the tower's cacophony restart & saw the giant

clock hands move in a circle in rapid jerks. Only the longer o' the 2 seemed as if it could reach her, so she watched it & waited till 'twas near her before she shouted for Edgar to turn it to 1.

Everything ground to a trudge, as if the tower were suddenly buried in sand, giving Autumn plenty o' time to mount the arrow when it came before her.

Now safely lying on the arrow, her arms wrapped round its neck tightly, she shouted, "¡11 'gain!"

She felt herself throttled left & right as the arrow jerked its way forward. She guessed that this would leave her with throbbing headaches later, but didn't think much 'bout it now—now she had to watch where the arrow was so she could tell Edgar to slow the tower 'gain before it reached the other side.

It did, she did, Edgar did, & Autumn stood up 'gain when the hand slowed. Now all she had to do was step o'er the crack-wide gap 'tween the arrow & the platform & she'd reach the end.

That was when 1 o' the hand's jerks flung her so out o' balance that she fell o'er the side, plunging meters down the empty center o' the tower. As the sides o' the tower rushed past her, her eyes frantically searched for some piece below her she could grab to a'least salvage something.

There was nothing—there was just a black void below her. Looking o'er her shoulder, she could see that she already fell past the bottom o' the tower & that the walls o' the bottom platforms were stretching farther as she went deeper into the hole.

The image o' her splashing gainst hard ground into bloody, bony bits any minute for some reason festered in her mind.

She shouted, "¡Hey, Edgar! ¡See if you can do something to stop me falling in this pit, please!"

She doubted he would hear her, doubted he could do something to salvage her e'en if he did, & doubted she'd 'scape this pit with her

internal organs still internal. But though the vision o' final failure did trouble her, what truly made her distraught was that it happened @ such a low point in her life. She'd dreamed that if she had to go—& she had a good inkling that she did eventually, though she had also dreamed o' finding some form o' immortality—she'd a'least go out in a powerful blaze.

### VIII.

As it turned out, Edgar did hear her & looked down with a start to see Autumn's body quickly shrinking into the dark distance. He stared upward in search for any mechanism that e'en seemed able to do something from below. A full minute's hunt left him dry.

*¿How could I e'er find such a thing in this tower before Autumn... hits the bottom? Either it doesn't exist—;which is probably most likely! —or it's hidden deep within the millions o' gadgets & stuff in this tower.*

He looked down into the abyss 'gain & saw only the abyss stare back @ him.

*This is my fault. If I were a mo' competent partner, I could've thought o' some way to get her back up before she...* he shook his head, the full image o' what might happen to his best—only, in fact—friend striking his mind.

*Certainly that couldn't happen. Not to her. Not so young. I mean, I could see lots o' disastrous stuff happening 'cause o' her unique hobby... ;but not something this disastrous! ;Certainly not without a warning! ;It seemed to happen in a snap!*

E'en if Edgar had only known Autumn for 1/6th o' his life, his thoughts still filled with warm memories o' him sitting next to Autumn as she planned in her hideout during lunch, him sitting next to her as she planned in his storm drain, & him sitting next to her in

class, when she pretended to spend attention on class activities, but was truly just focused on her heist-planning.

Edgar sighed, knowing that no matter how desperately he wanted to relive those memories, the reality o' time made it impossible. No matter how much he'd love to, he couldn't just turn back time as if 'twere a clock.

After a few second's pause, Edgar turned back to the clock controller.

*...¿couldn't I?*

He clutched the hand & tilted it backward slowly. This speed was not by his own desire, but by the way the hand moved, caused by some complicated way the gears were constructed that Edgar couldn't comprehend.

Edgar watched his surroundings as he turned the arrow back & felt his heart smack into his ribcage: the flipping block was flipping in what Edgar could swear was the opposite direction from which it did before.

*That doesn't mean anything. E'en if you didn't just forget how it truly went, it could just be how the tower itself works. We don't operate based on its position.*

But his heart stirred 'gain when, looking into the pit, he saw a speck gradually grow into the shape o' Autumn & rise from the pit, all the way back to the top o' the tower.

## IX.

"Uh, Edgar, ¿what's happening here?" she called out.

"Tell me when you're back right before you fell off," he called back.

Autumn felt her feet land back on the arrow @ the top & waited a second before yelling, "¡K, stop!" Everything stopped. "¡Now make it

1!" Everything started churning forward @ a slug's pace. Now all she had to do was step o'er the crack-wide gap 'tween the arrow & the platform & she'd reach the end.

That was when she bent down & tightly gripped the arrow head, holding herself gainst the forces o' its jutting. When the hand reached the other platform, she jumped off just after letting go.

Now she saw the door right before her eyes. However, before opening the door, she took a closer look @ the paper taped to it. Its clean whiteness already worried her; that meant 'twas likely put there a'least within the last year.

to autum:

CONGRATURATION!! this story is unhappy end for you. if this is your reading you are super dumbfuck.

you've gained all o the treasures @ last! NOTHING! the jantor & money story is an illusion & is a trap divisut by us you must truly try the identicle tower in honey street with a ballchain tighed to you.

the fail o your theifs now prooves the justice o' our culture. LOL

Autumn's limp hand let the sheet gently glide toward the floor while she slowly slid gainst the wall to her knees, eyes vacant.

*O' all the outcomes I expected... I ne'er expected it to be as mortifying as this. ;To think, those 2 idiots with terrible grammar drew me as an ass so well!*

Autumn was jerked from her thoughts when she heard a sudden, piercing ;*Ding!* She looked to her left, where she thought she heard it,

& saw a door she'd missed before slide open. Inside was Edgar.

"Well, it does work apparently," Edgar said with a guilty expression. Then he saw Autumn sitting on the floor & his face became e'en mo' haggard. "It's not there, ¿is it?"

"No. ¿Is that an elevator? ¿Where'd you find that?"

Edgar hesitated. "On the very bottom floor. I saw it when I was looking for a way to get you back up from that pit, but instantly ignored it as useless. Then my curiosity got the best o' me &... well, I tried it & I guess it works..."

Autumn pressed palms into her glasses, feeling the hard plastic pinch gainst her face. *¿How could I have missed something so obvious? ¡I swear I ne'er saw such a thing! ¿Did I not e'en spend a second to look @ the bottom floor?*

*'Course, not... She smacked her forehead. I didn't want to waste any time, ¿remember?*

She let her arms fall to her sides. "Well, its nugatory, anyway, since this whole ordeal turned out to be a practical joke." She lifted the sheet. "Hours flushed down the drain."

Edgar sat next to her so he could get a closer look @ the note & cringed.

"I'm sorry..."

"¿For what?" said Autumn, hands still covering glasses.

"O, I dunno... So, ¿are you still in money troubles?" asked Edgar.

"On the minute hand, no; on the hour hand, yes. But e'en when you're far 'way from the hour hand, you still can't ignore it, or 1 day it'll smack you right off when you aren't looking.

"But on the other hand, it seems my trouble is I keep my eyes on the long-term so long I screw up short-term goals so frequently. & e'en if my plans weren't going awry, ¿who knows what might come in @ the last minute to screw them up, anyway?"

Edgar noticed dark lines under her eyes, as well as both her



eyelids & body as a whole were drooping.

“You spent all night planning last night, didn’t you,” said Edgar.

“Always,” Autumn answered ’hind a stifled yawn.

She gradually leaned into Edgar till she was lying down gainst him, eyes closed peacefully, her snoring inhales & exhales mimicking the ticking & tocking o’ the various clocks round the tower.

#BOSK-CF231D-SEASON

# THE SEASON'S UPON US COULD YOU GET IT OFF IT'S RUFFLING MY SUIT

J. J. W. Mezun | 2015 December 1



## I. Das Opium des Volkes

“E very night on the 24th o’ December people hang the red star on top o’ their pine trees, leave out a plate o’ fish & chamomile tea, & giggle in the dark as they lay in their beds, pretending to sleep, waiting for Santa Marx—also known as Karl Kringle or Father Frost—to fall down their chimneys & share the means o’ production with them.

“That is, if they had class consciousness & were properly proletariat. If they were bourgeois, then he’ll transform into Santa Lenin & send them to his inhumane workshops located somewhere in the snowy wilderness o’ Sherbet Slopes—a place no GPS has e’er been able to find.”

Edgar begun to shiver under his thick blanket as Dawn read on ’bout the working conditions o’ Santa Lenin’s elves.

Autumn, who was blocked by the closed bathroom door, said with a slightly muffled voice, “So, ¿what rubric does Santa Marx use to decide who is ‘proletariat’ & who is ‘bourgeois’?”

“It’s a story for children. We assume the parents tell them what ‘proletariat’ & ‘bourgeois’ is—usually the latter is being greedy or ungrateful or something like that. ’Sides, it’s not as if parents aren’t going to give them their gifts, anyway. It’s just a way to convince kids to be good,” said Dawn.

“Ah, so it’s an instrument for parents to instill obedience into their children. See, now I thought there was a purpose to this story.”

Dawn rolled her eyes. “Yes, you could say that.”

Then she blurted, “¡O!” & checked her ticking owl clock on the opposite wall. “The specials will be on soon. Tonight they’re showing

the *Static Marxmas Special*, when the black & gray pixels have a truce for Marxmas & share greetings & food & e'en play football with each other. Then they go back to killing each other afterward."

She switched on the TV; but when the commercials had ended, 'stead o' seeing pixels in tiny red caps, she saw the local news begin.

"Augh. Not TV news. That'll just make me e'en dumber. ¿What's this doing on?"

"You still forgot to turn back that clock for daylight saving's time, ¿didn't you?" said Edgar.

On TV, an anchor was standing in front o' a typical urban area with naked trees & dusky sky.

The anchor said calmly, "Well, Marxmas is almost here, & you know what that means"—the anchor threw his arms out & his eyes lit up:—"prices are dropping like crazy @ stores such as Fred-Mart & EverythingCo,"—the scene switched to said stores, 1st outside & then in—"& people are *swarming* to take advantage o' these new deals.

"We talked with a few o' them, 'cause we know you're terribly interested in that."

Dawn slowly shook her head & mouthed the word, "No..." with a wince—though that didn't keep her from watching, 'course.

The anchor stood next to an nervously smiling citizen in an "Opiate o' the People" sweater with his microphone leaning toward said citizen.

"So, ¿are you excited 'bout Marxmas?"

"O, yeah," said the interviewee. "You wouldn't believe the deals they have on Che Guevara shirts. It'll be great getting the family new clothes for once—they need them."

The scene abruptly switched to the front o' a Fred-Mart with crowds walking round with signs. The anchor continued, "Not everyone is excited by these shopping sprees, however. Retail workers are stepping up their efforts to strike gainst what they claim

are too-low wages, which retailers warn may lead to shortages & raising prices.

“On the lighter side o’ news, the seasons o’ giving have also led to an increase in charity, which should especially help many still struggling in this depression. 1 citizen’s made it a mission to go round teaching homeless how to program in JavaScript. Here we see an example o’ 2 o’ his ‘students’ etching a complex-looking jumble o’ code in the dirt o’ the park where they live...”

A woman tightly wrapped in jackets standing o’er the etching woman’s shoulder threw her arms out & exclaimed, “I’m telling you: if you use the ‘module’ notation I showed you, you wouldn’t waste extra runtime evaluating those variables every time that function is run. ¿Didn’t you check out *JavaScript: The Good Parts*, like I advised?”

The reporter continued, “Let us talk now with our ‘Programming Sensei,’ heh...”

Dawn & Edgar were distracted ’way from the TV by a creak & turned to see Autumn emerge from ’hind the bathroom door, now garbed in a slightly wrinkled work suit & short black boots, with fewer hairs sticking out o’ her head, both noticed.

“Hee hee hee. Well don’t you look cute & professional.” said Dawn.

Autumn’s stiff frown neither moved nor changed a pixel. Then she muttered, “Thank you for letting me use your apartment,” & started walking toward the door.

But before she could make it to the door, Dawn asked, “¿What’s the place?”

Autumn stood @ the door without looking back @ Dawn. “Don’t know. Well, I know the address; just not the name o’ the company.”

“¿What’s the job?”

“Rescue teams.”

“¿What’s that?” asked Dawn.

“I don’t know. I think they go through dungeons & areas like that & escort people who got lost in them out,” said Autumn.

“¿You’re interested in that?” asked Dawn.

Autumn’s brows furled & her lids rose a centimeter. “I’m interested in earning money, & this is what I’ve estimated to be the soundest option. I would surmise that the company that placed the listing is interested in it, since they’re paying money for it. If I were interested in doing it myself, someone would probably not be prepared to pay me to do it.”

“Some do.”

“Huh.’ Autumn checked the clock. “Anyway, I think I’d better be heading out now.”

“I s’pose if I offered to let you stay here tonight, you’d decline, e’en though it’s snowing out...” asked Dawn.

Autumn nodded. “Winter doesn’t affect the storm drain much. Edgar & I spent every night under there quite a few times before our spontaneous enrichment.”

Edgar nodded grimly.

“If you say so...” Dawn said as she watched Autumn zip up her coat, open the door & leave.

Dawn stared down @ the mug o’ cocoa she’d forgotten she still had in her hand & sighed.

“I don’t know what’s going through that mind o’ hers...”

Edgar didn’t answer. He only stared down @ the carpet.

Then Dawn announced, “¡Ooo! *¡The Static Marxmas Special* is on!”

Dawn turned up the volume & she & Edgar gazed into the flashing mix o’ gray & black while the sound o’ a million seeds scattering against a linoleum floor swarmed through their eardrums.

## II. Misère de la philosophie

Atlas Tower brimmed with festive fare: dodging bird poop under a phone wire, unlocking doors with funny-shaped keys, & shooting fruit with grenades. All done with burnt drinks & electric laughter.

This formed a colorful contrast to the morose gray inside Mayor Chamsby's office,—curtains closed & covered with dust—where he grumbled as he scribbled slowly onto his paperwork, constantly distracted by the jungle hijinks outside his door. He could see spots from the perpetually staring he did @ the thin blank ink on yellow paper, & had black lines under his eyes from the exhaustion o' many sleepless nights—a contrast to the 10-hour sleeps with afternoon naps on the side he was accustomed to before becoming mayor.

But this was different: he was a man on a mission. He had transcended his tedious body & evolved into a human spirit far greater than mindless religion or pathetic altruism: the mechanism on the quest to perfecting the city through perfect economics.

Finally, his patience's coil snapped so much that he got up & threw open his door. When they heard this, his minions immediately stopped their antics & turned frosted-o'er faces in his direction.

“¿Don't you have work to do?” he said as his eyes glided 'cross every 1 o' them.

1 o' them—Agent Razzmatazz—finally built the will to reply:

“Aw, don't be a Grinch, Sir. It's the Marxmas holidays.”

“It's Gold Saturday; it's not e'en December yet.” Lance's face was a bone valley. “Sides, I also know what Marxism is & don't see anything much to celebrate 'bout it, 'less one for some reason views the former Soviet Union, Cuba, & North Korea as the height o' society. 'Cause that's exactly what you get from it.”

“Aw, come on, boss; it's just some nice mindless tradition,” said

Razzmatazz. “Nobody actually pays any attention to the political stuff.”

“Well, I do,” said Lance. “& I won’t be celebrating sentiments so antithetical to humanity. Augh. It’s e’en worse than the holiday celebrating that other raving socialist, Jesus.”

Suddenly, they all stared down morosely, streamers hanging loosely down their chins like sad dog ears.

Lance raised a stack o’ papers with a satisfied grin.

“Well, that’s OK, ’cause I have a *Marxmas* gift I plan to give to this great city, so long as the parliament don’t suddenly shatter their spines—my magnum opus: ja massive list o’ spending cuts that will save the city millions, effective just in time for the holidays!”

There was a collective groan.

“¿Work?”

“¿On the holidays?”

“Bah, ¡murmurinsect!”

Chamsby held his arms in jars & glared @ them. “You know, the demand for employment in this economy is very high. Those who don’t think their demand is quite high ’nough for this job could easily be replaced by those with mo’ will.”

Suddenly, everyone’s tart face become moldy with horror.

“Now, if you’re all done whining, you can do the minimal work o’ calling up the rest o’ the lay’bouts in parliament & tell them to get o’er here so we can hold this vote.”

1 o’ his minions raised his hand.

“Agent Purple Mountain’s Majesty, ¿what is it?”

“¿Won’t they be a li’l... sour ’bout being dragged here so late, on a holiday weekend?”

Chamsby crossed his arms. “Yes. I’m sure they’re afflicted with the same laziness virus that everyone else catches round this time. Those are the consequences o’ the kind o’ moral deterioration a city



like this goes through to celebrate a holiday dedicated to an antihuman scoundrel like Karl Marx. Unfortunately, there are mo' important things for us to do than sit @ home by the fire, sip our cute li'l mugs o' cocoa, & curl up to some socialist holiday specials. We're the *government* for Mises's sake. We need to get the trains running on time, ¡& quick! & unlike what that raving socialist Mussolini claimed, this is done by giving that power to the superior Taggard Transcontinental, not to Boskeopolis inc."

His henchmen's heads dipped low with half-shut eyes & a few drowsy snorts.

"¡Wake up, you slouches!" shouted Lance.

"Sorry, Sir," said Agent Atomic Tangerine. "You seemed to be going into 'nother 1 o' your John Galt speeches."

Lance punctured them with smelly eyes & muttered, "That speech would be a gourmet meal to the dog food you deserve."

Cringing & leaning back, Agent Purple Mountain's Majesty continued, "Well, it's just that... ¿don't you think they might be less likely to vote in your favor if you anger them?"

"Only the most retched human beings would alter their morality based on such slight dispositions," said Lance.

"Right: so, parliament."

### III. Die Ausdehnung der Maschinerie

*OK, let's just hope this all goes well... e'en if I don't technically have any occupational skills—'less thievery truly is transferable to the business world.*

*Then 'gain, if I were good @ thievery, I wouldn't be in the situation I'm in now, so it's all nugatory, anyway.*

*'Sides, plenty o' people don't have any skills, anyway. Hell, the sheer # o' those who haven't e'en graduated high school must be higher than*

*the # o' unemployed, or a'least those destitute 'cause o' it. I'm hardly some extreme outlier, ¿right?*

But then she noticed mo' & mo' people sitting on curbs as if conspiring to mock her fantasies, all shivering, some huddled under thin blankets. No, none o' them looked as if they were waiting for busses—probably 'cause o' the boxes next to them that said, "We're not waiting for busses; ¿could you give us some change, please?"

"Hey, Hawthorn. ¿What you doing here?" Someone asked as she walked by on the opposite sidewalk. "¿You get laid off, too?"

"No—nice to see you 'gain, too, Heather. ¿How long has it been?" said 1 o' the people on the curb—though without any box. "Anyway, they lowered my wages, the gits. Well, that *just* lowered the value o' working so that the value for working to ensure I don't starve to death became lower than the value for leisure time." He stretched his arms out & leaned back. With half a yawn he said, "After all, ¿who needs food or shelter when you can have pure leisure?"

"¿How's it feel?" asked his acquaintance.

"O, it's horrible. Absolutely horrible," he answered. "I'm freezing so hard it feels as if a million swords are stabbing into me. I've gone without food so long I feel as if I can barely think or move & my face feels as if it's going to melt off my face."

"Well, a'least now someone else's demand will fill the supply o' jobs your quitting has recreated, moving the demand e'er closer to the supply & toward equilibrium," said Heather.

Hawthorn nodded as he shivered. "Yeah, I hope the lucky bastard enjoys it."

*Maybe not all o' them are truly destitute. Maybe some o' them are just clever & are using the increased empathy caused by the holidays to gain unneeded extra funds,* Autumn assured herself.

No matter how much she tried to force this idea, her brain wouldn't accept them.

She quick-walked out o' that block, both to distract her from this unpleasant reminder o' what was @ stake & to avoid being late after such a long delay.

As she went, her attention dithered 'tween the city & the map in her hands, lit on-and-off by streetlamps she passed. Every so oft, she'd gaze round just to distract her mind from the millions o' ways she could fail this interview. She frowned @ what she saw was a lot o' waste: blinking neon lights on signs & firs & tacky posters depicting jolly painted Santa Marx guzzling down a bottle o' Hero while a polar bear held its arm round his shoulders as if they were good buddies.

The urge to check the time was impalpable, & she kept digging round her pockets for a phone that was no longer there.

*No matter. I calculated the time needed with plenty to spare; e'en a short delay shouldn't make me late.*

She squinted @ all o' the details o' the city before her, making sure she didn't miss a turn. The million flakes o' snow scattering all round her like a million childrens' hands waving round in her face didn't help. She obviously hadn't had time to draw all o' the details from the online map onto her paper map, so hers focused mainly on directions. The problem now was remembering what counted as a turn & what didn't.

*'K, that turn leads to a dead end, so it probably doesn't count. That's an alley, ¿right? That doesn't count.* But a few blocks forward, she began scratching her frost-covered head. *But this turn doesn't look like any turn I remember on the map...*

A voice began to creep from the bowels o' her head, *Come on, ¿you can't e'en handle simple directions anymo'? ¿Have you lost your stems this quickly?*

She exhaled. *No time to shake bushes. It's always better to make your choice & stick with it e'en if wrong than do nothing @ all. My*

*memory is mo' likely true than the assumption that all alleys don't count as turns; thus I'll take the previous turn.*

She felt her chest ease as she entered the past turn, remembering 'nough o' the scenery—the fir standing right next to the fence like a perpetually anonymous neighbor, the white plastic sign waving wildly in the wind advertising 'nother bland marketing firm that will bless the city with its presence—to feel confident 'nough that she was going in the right direction.

*Operating in life has billions o' switches & just 1 switch wrong—1 true where there should be false, 1 false where there should be true, just 1 combination wrong out o' the quintillion possible—and it's all o'er,* she thought as her eyes swung side-to-side, e'er alert for the next switch she'd have to flick.

She passed many stores on her way, their windows still glowing with yellow light, presenting their rainbow collage o' useless doodads. The sight reached its hand out & tickled under Autumn's nose as the wafts o' a fresh-baked pumpkin pie to a diabetic or the smoke from a fresh-lit cigarette to an addict.

She thrust her head in the other direction in the vain hope o' forgetting 'bout it.

*That career's o'er. It's not worth the health risks. We're going fully legitimate now.*

Still, she stared down @ the crumpled leaves smothered in piles o' snow & sighed.

Then she reached where her map said was the end. Looking @ reality before her, she saw a parking lot holding a building shaped like 2 + signs glued together.

She looked up @ the sign just 'side it. It said, "Level 1," & below that, "7029 W. Honey Plaza."

*This is it,* she reaffirmed as she walked up to the front door.

However, when she pulled on the handle, she found it wouldn't

budge.

She shrugged. *Must be 'fraid o' thieves.*

She knocked a few times before quickly shoving her hands back into her jacket pockets, shivering. She hadn't noticed till now how much cold was shed by constant movement, as if she were outrunning it &, now that she'd stopped, it had finally caught up.

After a minute or so without answer, she tried knocking 'gain. Then she checked round the windows, only to see that all o' the lights were off inside.

*¿What's this? ¿A truly shy firm or the business equivalent o' being stood up?*

She exhaled deeply in annoyance, unsure o' what to do with this unexpected event.

*Maybe the interviewer's the 1 who's late. Maybe I just have to wait for him to get here.*

So she sat on the small snowless spot o' the short stairs & stared off @ the rest o' the city, eyes alert for any car to drive in. Already she saw a few sitting in the parking lot, but didn't see anyone come out o' any within the next few minutes. She *did* see some *enter* their cars & drive 'way, making no signs o' acknowledging Autumn's existence.

After what she felt must've been a'least 10 minutes, she stood up 'gain & checked through the window 'gain just to be sure.

*This can't be chocked up to a li'l error on the interviewer's part. She sighed. I should've known some contrived problem'd emerge. They always seem to in my stories.*

She checked the sign 'gain. *Well, this is the right address... ¿Maybe I need to check 'nother door? But this door has the sign to the place, Team Cheery,—she thought the name with disgust & a smirk—right 'bove. That clearly means this is the front door.*

But when she checked the door to the left, she saw a sign with an

arrow pointing toward the door she already checked, saying, "Use door down front."

She tried its handle all the same. It wouldn't budge. Through its li'l window she could see the lights were off in there, too.

*I'm sure this is the right day & the right time & the right address,* she thought with bubbling blood as she stormed back to the front.

Then she tried the right side & saw a few mo' places, the signs saying "Team Grumpy" & "Team Indifferent," respectively.

She slapped her forehead. *¿How many rescue groups do they have in this city?*

She looked @ the 1 closest & saw the lights were on inside & someone was sitting @ a desk. Then she looked through the other & saw the same.

*Well, ¿which 1 is it? All I have is the address & these all seem to have the same address. I bloody well can't just come in & ask, "Hey, ¿is this the company who's s'posed to be interviewing me? I don't actually know the name, you see..."*

*+, I'm surely already late. I might as well box it @ this point.*

She hesitated in the space 'tween the 2 doors.

*No... I came here to shred the last shred o' dignity I have left. I might as well go all the way. The alternate is to lose completely, anyway.*

She tried the door on the left. She poked her head, trying to push as much dread off her face as possible, & said, "Um... Hello. ¿Is this... are there interviews going on here?"

The man @ the desk looked @ her funny—not *Looney Tunes* funny, but British comedy funny.

"Yes. ¿Are you Madame Autumn Springer?"

Autumn stepped all the way inside. "Yes."

"You were s'posed to be here 20 minutes ago."

Autumn nodded. Then she blurted, "Erm, yes. Sorry. See, I

mistook you for the place back there & I didn't see it open, so I waited..."

"That's fine," said the interviewer. His eyes were listless. They gave no extra info to this already desiccated phrase.

He handed her a clipboard with a sheet in it. "¿Would you mind filling this out?"

Autumn nodded. Her disposition began to brighten. *¿Paperwork? This'll be easier than I imagined.*

She sat & quickly filled out everything. After checking it all a dozen times, she stood & held it out to the interviewer.

He stood & took it & then reached a hand out for her to shake. She couldn't help marveling @ the precisely moderate grip he had. This was someone with a high hand-shaking stat.

"I'm Alex Vanilla," he said.

Autumn merely nodded 'gain & let Alex decide when the hand-shaking would cease.

They both sat back down in their respective chairs, Autumn with her arms awkwardly resting on the bony chair arms. The interviewer, meanwhile, sat back & checked through the sheet, eyes as still as a Sphinx's.

"So, you don't have any experience, ¿is that correct? You're only level 1."

"Um, yes," she replied, unsure o' a proper way to 'splain this obviously problematic fact.

"Mmm hmm..." he murmured.

He looked up @ her & asked, "¿& what skills do you have that would make you particularly fit this rescue team?"

Autumn froze. Her eyes jumped all round Alex's desk for some muse—anything but Alex's penetrating eyes.

"Well..." she began in a futile attempt to mask stalling.

*¿What skills do I have?*

“Well...” she repeated. “I am... I’m good @ following directions. I almost ne’er get lost.”

Alex nodded. “OK.”

When she didn’t reply to this—a’least not quickly ’nough—he added, “¿Would you also say you’re good @ finding things?”

After a short pause, so Autumn’s mind could process what he said, she answered, “Yes,” with vigorous nods. “You could say I could a diamond in a mountain o’ trash.”

*Technically, Edgar did, & ‘twas on accident; but I doubt he’ll e’er discover that.*

He gave her a curious look, but then nodded & said, “¿Anything else?”

“Erm, I have a lot o’ endurance.” She said this almost as a question, unsure o’ whether this was relevant or if he’d believe her. In fact, she wasn’t quite sure she understood the point o’ this aspect o’ the interview, since she wasn’t sure how he could judge whether these claims were true or not.

“Mmm hmm...” Alex repeated with ’nother nod.

Then he ’splained the details o’ the job—the hours, the work, the training—every piece o’ which Autumn’s mind frantically tried to grab, ’fraid o’ missing some other vital piece & being ruined ’cause o’ it.

*Remember, every switch must be flicked in the correct direction.*

*& yet so many have been flicked wrongly already, this’ll turn out to be just a random splash o’ pixel vomit.*

They shook hands ’gain, & then he said, “Well, I don’t have the authority to hire you or not, but we’ll call you Tuesday @ round 1 PM.”

“Um... ¿call me?”

He nodded. “Yes.” Then he looked back down @ the clipboard. “You put down your #, ¿right?”



“Uh... ¿What if I don’t have a phone?”

“O...” he said with an embarrassed frown.

He looked back up @ her & said, “I’m sorry to say we require all employees to have phones with them, in case o’ emergencies. You know, you get trapped in a cave-in in Tangerine Temple & need to be rescued immediately.”

Autumn nodded, trying to hide her misery, & failing miserably @ it.

“But when you do manage to get 1, feel free to apply ’gain,” he said lightly.

“Yeah... I will. Thanks,” she said as she got up.

“Have a good night, & Merry Marxmas,” he said with a quick wave before returning to his papers.

“You, too,” she said just before leaving.

Outside, the wind seemed to have become e’en harsher. However, Autumn was so distracted, she hardly noticed.

As she walked through the parking lot—the start o’ a long trek back to her subterranean home—she mused with a sigh, *Well, that went splendid.*

#### **IV. Ein Ausschuß, der die gemeinschaftlichen Geschäfte der ganzen Bourgeoisklasse verwaltet**

The members o’ parliament scanned through the fat stack o’ papers handed to them in their designated seats while Lance sat @ his mayoral center chair & ’splained it in as much detail as he could squeeze in an hour’s reading.

’Pon finishing, the leading minister, a Gold named Earl Gray, cleared his throat & said, “Yes, this seems good. We should read this in finer detail next week & hold a vote on our 1st January meeting.”

Lance’s grin collapsed into a frown.

“¿Why can't we hold the vote now?” Lance snapped. “We have only a few days to implement it before we have to wait a whole 'nother month—if you all plan on taking till after New Years to return, as I'm guessing you will.”

A few o' the ministers looked @ each other uneasily.

Finally, Minister Matcha Cornflower, a Silver, said: “Well... it's just that... it's just before the Marxmas season...”

She could tell by the way his eyes twisted—as well as the giant anime vein that appeared o'er the side o' his head—that he was annoyed by this question.

“Yes,” he said. “Correct me if I'm wrong, but I don't believe your blessed communist holiday starts in just mo' than a week, 'less it's decided to ripoff Hanukkah, too, & is mo' than a week long. That leaves you plenty o' time for you to vote on this bill &, if it passes, implement it before the 15th.”

“O, it's not that,” said Cornflower. “It's just that... ¿Don't you think a lot o' people might get particularly irate @ having their livelihood cut just before the holidays?”

“Yes. I s'pose if I were a leech, I'd be particularly peeved @ being yanked off my free government teet, too. On the other wrist, I'm sure those few diamonds 'mong the dregs o' our public—you know, the ones who *make* the money that we steal to pay for these hand-outs—will be quite pleased not to be robbed. They may e'en work harder to create these jobs people keep pretending they want while conspicuously not finding 1, rather than scare them all 'way to a city that doesn't worship the father o' totalitarianism. I don't think you understand what we're working with here. Socialism isn't some... something you can work with. It's a virus that leeches off anything it touches. It's something we must pull out by the *roots*. In fact, you're lucky I believe in personal freedom—let the idiots do idiotic things if they want if it doesn't harm others, I say—or I'd try *banning* this

reprehensible holiday *completely*, as I did for Atlas Tower. We don't have much time before some socialist sneaks back into mayorship. This bill isn't e'en the *raison d'être*; it's only the *beginning*."

All but 1 o' the ministers' heads dipped low with half-shut eyes & a few drowsy snorts.

"¡O, Minsky!" Lance started snapping 1 o' his fingers. "¡Wake up, you fogeys!"

"O, sorry. Sorry. We thought you were doing 'nother 1 o' your boring John Galt speeches," Earl Gray said just before failing to stifle a large yawn.

The minister who hadn't fallen asleep, Jasmine Carnation, the only Pink in parliament, said with irate eyes staring down @ the bill still in her hands, "I think those who had to live through Clay would have different ideas for what the origin o' totalitarianism is, Mayor Chamsby."

Before Chamsby had a chance to blow up @ Carnation for the 20th time since they both joined parliament, Cornflower cleared her throat & said, "¿Mayor Chamsby, Sir?" Chamsby turned to her, the fury @ Carnation still latched onto his face. "I think you know I'm a big supporter o' the free market, I think it's the best economic system e'er created, & I know 'nough from history how destructive command economies are. Believe me, I don't want Boskeopolis to become mo' like Cuba any mo' than you. I'm saying this 'cause I want you to know that I—& many others here, I'm sure—want to *protect* capitalism & Mayor Chamsby, Sir, @ the risk o' sounding rude, I don't think you're succeeding @ doing so. I think what you're doing is counterproductive. Ironically, your extreme attitudes are pushing mo' people gainst capitalism"—she glanced o'er @ Carnation for a second—"& toward radical economic solutions. I don't know if you've read, but sales for *Das Kapital* has increased immensely in the past year, & you know, I've been in parliament for years, & I've ne'er

seen the public protest with such hostility as they have been recently—granted, we also haven't had a depression till a few years recently—but it's exacerbated this year. There didn't used to be all this conflict—in the public sphere or in parliament.”

She had expected Chamsby to blow up @ her, but 'stead saw him calmly sit back with his arms crossed.

After a second to see if she'd finished, he said, “The Constitution says that I can keep you here for 3 hours to ensure my bill gets the proper attention it deserves—& I plan that it does. You can quickly vote on it, quickly set it in motion tomorrow, & have your tyrannical-loving holiday off, or you can waste 3 hours doing nothing, & then waste mo' time in January doing the work you could do right now. Your choice.”

Many ministers looked as distraught as a child being forced to spend the summer cutting weeds 'stead o' skateboarding with friends @ the park, going to 8 Flags to ride the Soaker Coaster, or sitting in bed making sprite comics 'bout Goombas & Boomerang Bros.

Gray shrugged. “I'm sure it'll be fine. We might as well get it o'er with.”

“I must say, I'm all for this bill...” Lance breathed heavily as he restrained his glare from Minister Cyan. *There's the golden “but...” waiting, as there always is from this sad 'scuse for a Gold.* “But I must ask if I could get an exemption for my district.”

Lance slammed his fist gainst the table. “¡No! ¡We can't have *some* free market with a li'l socialism on the side as if we were a fucking all-you-can-eat buffet!” Lance moved a squeezed-in hand to the side as if setting up this invisible socialist side dish.

Many o' the members looked 'mong each other with confusion. Lance could faintly hear 1 mumble, “That doesn't e'en make sense,”

& 'nother mutter, "I've always said that mayorial elections always bring out the crazier voters in droves."

So they held the vote, the bill barely failing @ a tie with 8 yeses against 8 noes—the former including Earl, the latter including Cyan, Carnation, & Cornflower. Considering voting in the past, Chamsby would've expected a'least 10 yes votes. As he surveyed their faces, he could see not a few pursed lips & creased foreheads.

*Agent Purple Mountain's Majesty was right: these cockroaches do care mo' 'bout their moods than fixing the fucking city.*

## V. Der Ursprung der Familie

Dawn's apartment glowed with mo' electricity than a red dwarf.<sup>1</sup> No corner could 'scape the grasp o' cords as tight as licorice, dangling rainbow bulbs @ every few centimeters—& most were also susceptible to red, green, silver, & gold tinsel, too. Nor was the ceiling neglected, strewn with hanging clown-bat ornaments on string with the customary mint-green mistletoe.

Meanwhile, the apartment strummed with jolly holiday classics like "Killing in the Name," "Rich Man's World (1%)," & *The Smurfs'* theme song.

It also swam with the scent o' various spices & sugars enmeshed. Dawn was in the middle o' mixing a special brew o' IQ-enhancing sugar syrup when she heard the doorbell ring.

"Well, that can only be Felix & Violet," Dawn said as she got up, wiping the pink powder off her white jacket. "Autumn ne'er uses that thing."

She opened the door to see Violet in a brown wool jacket & black slacks gently pushing Felix forward & whispering "—the main guest;

1 Which doesn't say much, since red dwarfs don't glow with any electricity, though yellow dwarfs can if they equip the "Thunder Hammer."

you have to be—” only to turn to Dawn, reach a hand out, & say, “¡Oh! Merry Marxmas, Madame Summers. My recollection is vacant on whether I have heretofore delineated my cognomen, but if this lacks accuracy, permit me to specify that it is Violet Ajambo.”

Dawn grasped her hand & shook it vigorously. “You already did— & Merry Marxmas to you, too. You can just call me Dawn, by the way.”

Violet nodded. “On condition of your insistence.”

Dawn pushed the door back & said, “Please, come on in.”

“I must explicate my appreciativeness in regards to your magnanimity of permitting us access to your abode.”

Dawn laughed. “It’s no problem @ all.”

Felix slowly walked nearer to the door with a small wave & said quietly, “Hi, Dawn.”

“¡Felix!” Dawn spread her arms out & embraced Felix. “¿How have you been?”

“Good.”

“Come on in,” Dawn said as she pressed Felix through the doorway & closed the door.

“I must elucidate my...”

But this voice was so far ’way that ’twas muffled by the boom box’s “¡Fuck you, I won’t do what you tell me!”s.

“¿What’s that?” Dawn said loudly. “Here, maybe I should turn down the music a li’l.”

She twisted the dial downward so that the “Fuck you”s were whispers & said, “¿What was that ’gain?”

Violet was standing in front o’ the tree, which, in addition to the usual wooden & plastic ornaments, was spray-painted with splotches o’ pastels.

“I stated that I must elucidate my admiration for your eclectic bedizenments. Marxmas always imbues my person with a

saccharine disposition—even if we must ignore its pseudoscientific elements. After all, history has shown heavily-regulated market economies to be superior in regards to serving people's needs.

"Anyway, I must confess my adobe's inferiority in comparison to yours."

"'Twas nothing, truly," said Dawn, scratching 'hind her head with sweat falling down the side o' her face. "Edgar helped a lot."

She pointed @ him standing by the oven in his chef's hat & Violet & Felix turned to him. He gave a li'l wave & a quiet "Hello," which was met by 1 o' Felix's own.

"¡Oh, gerizekalı! I am immensely contrite in regards to my unconscionable neglect toward you, Sir Edgar."

She rushed o'er to Edgar & shook his hand so vigorously, she looked close to yanking his arm off.

Then they heard a knock @ the door, causing Dawn & Edgar to turn their heads toward it.

"Ah, so she did come," Dawn said as she dashed toward the door.

Sure 'nough, 'pon opening the door she saw the wiry figure o' Autumn, still shivering in her job suit, but now covered in flakes o' snow. Typically, her arms were slumped, stuck to her sides like tongues to icy steel poles & her eyes had that look as if they'd been screwed in far too tightly.

"¡Merry Marxmas! ¡Come on in!" Dawn practically shouted @ her.

Autumn nodded & stepped inside. As she did, she quietly mumbled, "¿You mind if I use your internet?"

"You're not actually going to try applying for jobs on Marxmas, ¿are you?" Dawn said as she closed the door. "I know you're trying to make up for lost time, but you're just wasting your time trying to find any takers today." She smiled. "Didn't you e'er hear the tale o' how businesses that insist on running on Marxmas have their businesses socialized & the owners boiled in their own pudding—

which sounds gross by the way.” She wrinkled her nose. “Course, this doesn’t apply to pet kennels & stuff, since you can’t actually expect li’l doggies’ bellies to take Marxmas breaks from eating.”

“No, I hadn’t,” said Autumn. “But I have other activities I must do, anyway. One should ne’er put all o’ their files in 1 storage.”

Suddenly, Violet rushed up to her with her arm held out.

“¡Salutations, Madame! I do not purport that we have had the delectation of rendezvousing. I operate by the cognomen of Violet Ajambo. I am a recent close acquaintance of Felix’s.”

Autumn blinked for a second before limply lifting her hand high ’nough for Violet to grab, & then crank up & down.

“¿Would it offend you if I inquired you as to your own cognomen?”

“Autumn.”

“Merry Marxmas, Madame Autumn.”

Felix gave Autumn her patented shy greeting, & Autumn replied with a short wave & a curt hello.

Autumn sat on the floor by the tea table where Dawn had been making her syrup, dragging her laptop out from ’neath. “So, ¿did you say yes on the internet question?” she asked dully & quietly, without daring to meet Dawn’s eyes with her own.

“If you insist,” said Dawn. Then she looked @ the tree & said, “Here, since we’re all here, you can all open your presents.”

“¿Presents?” Autumn & Violet said almost in unison, but with opposite tones.

Dawn walked back to the table with her arms full o’ presents o’ various colors & picture patterns.

“Oh, ¿do you require assistance?” Violet asked as she stood from the couch.

“No, I’ve got it,” Dawn said as she dropped them on the table, causing 1 o’ them to topple off. Violet bent down to pick it up.



"I, um, also baked cookies for everyone," said Edgar, jolting Autumn up from her computer.

"O, hello," she said hoarsely before turning back to her computer.

"Hello," he said. "¿You want to pick 1 1st?" he asked as he leaned the tray closer to her. He began to pick up each cookie to show them. "See, this bearded ol' white guy is Marx, this other bearded ol' white guy is Engels, this other bearded ol' white guy is Bakunin, this other bearded ol' white guy is Kropotkin, this other bearded ol' white guy is Proudhon, & O, here's Emma Goldman."

"No thank you. I'm not hungry," said Autumn.

Violet raised a hand as if in high school.

"Is it not veritable that Sirs Marx & Bakunin were acrimonious adversaries, ¿or has my recollection of history failed me?"

"That's OK, 'cause we can make them kiss & make up," Edgar said before tapping the mouths o' each cookie together.

"OK, this 1's for you, Felix," Dawn said as she held a present in purple paper covered with a black cat paw pattern & pink ribbon to Felix.

"O, you didn't have to get me anything," mumbled Felix.

Dawn laughed. "We already have a perfectly functional Autumn; we don't need 'nother. Now open it already." Autumn wanted to point out that "perfectly functional Autumn" was a paradox, but couldn't will it.

Felix carefully cut open the ribbon & paper as if trying to minimize the hurt she had to cause to the poor present. 'Eventually she unveiled the blue cover o' a Wordsworth dictionary/thesaurus.

"O, you truly didn't have to go through the effort o' getting this just for me," said Felix.

Dawn laughed. "It's just a dictionary."

"It's exactly what I wanted," said Felix. "Now I can finally learn all o' those big words Violet uses & be able to use them myself."

“And, with your sanction, Felix, I could utilize that aforesaid dictionary to potentially study lexemes which are a modicum more approximate to a breviloquent quality.”

“OK, ¿what was the word that had 'said' @ the end 'gain?” Felix asked as she quickly flipped through the pages.

“Here's your present, Violet,” Dawn said as she handed a starry cyan, goldenrod-ribboned present to her.

“I am consummately obliged,” Violet said as she began opening it, only to struggle with the ribbon.

With the help o' a pair o' scissors Dawn handed her, Violet was able to open it & see that 'twas a thesaurus, too.

“I cannot communicate the...” Violet flipped through the thesaurus. “Level of... gratitude in which I... feel within this... current... moment. I cannot comprehend how such multitudes of you can communicate so curtly so spontaneously. I must confess it is utterly arduous for my person.”

“& here's yours Autumn,” Dawn said as she handed a red present covered in green \$ signs to her.

Autumn paused, her hollowed eyes staring blankly up @ the present. Dawn shook it & Autumn finally took it.

“Scuse me for any unintentional rudeness, but in the interest o' utility, I must warn you that you shouldn't waste your precious money on objects that won't help me.”

“Perhaps I should've gotten you a thesaurus, too,” said Dawn.

Autumn hesitantly opened the present to see a wool blanket inside. 'Pon closer examination she saw the words, “You can always be safe for the night,” sewed onto it.

“This was actually from Edgar,” said Dawn.

Autumn nodded, though her expression didn't brighten. In fact, it appeared to deepen—not become angrier; just lower.

\* \* \*

## VI. Nichts in ihr zu verlieren als ihre Ketten

Snow continued to spray all o'er Boskeopolis, blurring the already-messy visual cacophony o' blinking neon lights, shining streetlamps & windows, speeding headlights, & movie-screen-lit billboards. Autumn half stumbled through the menagerie without any idea o' where she was headed, just that her feet wanted to move her somewhere. Her eyes were aimed straight @ them, to stifle the headaches already caused by the jumbled medley o' simplistic jingles from stores, the muffled growling o' heavy music blasted from passing cars, & dozens o' voices o' people all round her, no matter where she went.

Finally, she stopped @ a quiet brick bridge, its emptiness a bold contrast to the rest o' the city. She gripped its edge as if she would've fallen o'er from exhaustion if she hadn't & stared down into the river below, which under the night sky was now a poisonous black, saving for a few specks o' white reflecting off the sickle-shaped moon. During the day, Autumn might expect to see her reflection in it; but now she only saw the equivalent o' a thick wall. She preferred it that way.

*We may need to finally face the reality you've been dodging for years: that the world has no demand for what you supply & that the economy would be made mo' efficient if you just cut your losses & throw 'way your supply to save the world on future costs—not to mention minimizing future loss to your dignity. After all, ¿what do I have left to lose but chains that strangle me & whip gainst those near me?*

She gazed down into the lake & mused o'er how bearable the last

minutes under would be when she heard a familiar voice call from 'hind her, "¿Autumn?"

"Don't bother trying to win any wings from saving me," grunted Autumn. "I ne'er saved any poor people from having their homes foreclosed or saved any kids from being poisoned from some bitter ol' koot."

"¿What?"

"Nothing."

Autumn sat gainst the bridge's wall.

"I suppose I can't expect you to stay with Prozac & have a Merry Ol' Marxmas without me."

Edgar sat next to her. "No. I can leave if you want, but it won't be very merry for me."

"Right."

"& you think that's an absurdity, ¿don't you?" asked Edgar.

"¿On your part? No. You have no control o'er your neuroses any mo' than I have o'er mine." She turned to Edgar. "I take it my assurances that nothing you do or don't do will help me won't help you any mo' than Prozac's insistence that I should learn how not to worry & love my incompetence."

"I..."

"Go on. Take your time," said Autumn. "You know, hanging out with Prozac—someone who enjoys having her voice heard, for some reason—actually improved your speech a bit."

"Well... I guess I'd feel kinda like a hypocrite, which I already feel like too much, anyway."

"¿Why?"

"Well, I mean... just consider what the holiday's 'bout..."

"Right. I forgot," said Autumn. "Wouldn't want to upset the scriptures o' some bearded religious nutjob."

Then she frowned. *O, ¿who am I to make fun o' his silly*

*superstitions? I still can't e'en figure out the riddle to success in this city's mess o' inconsistent rules. For god's sake, I thought... still think thieving is the proper way... & now I've been trying to succeed by doing the same thing 1 o' the poorest classes do—and still have had less success than through theft. ¿Who wouldn't cling to superstition as a levy gainst Boskeopolis's incoherent mindfuck o' an economy?*

But to her surprise, he went on.

"No... None o' it's 'bout some particular words some bearded guy wrote o'er a hundred years ago."

"It's 'bout... family & love & goodwill to all & sticking each others' dicks in our mouths, ¿correct?" Autumn said with heavy breaths, hoping the rudeness might be subtler this time.

Edgar shook his head. "Not that either."

"¿Then what?"

"I... I dunno... I guess it's 'bout... putting real human lives 'bove... 'bove unproven, invisible systems meant to judge whether you deserve such & such or not. I mean, ¿don't you think it's a li'l extreme to... judge your life on such a subjective measure? I mean... I played a part in you losing your money when I fell, ¿remember?"

"That's bullshit. That wasn't your fault—and you found the golden ass hat, or whatever 'twas called, in the 1st place."

"By luck," he said.

"By luck. Exactly," said Autumn.

"Well, ¿you think we're the only ones?" asked Edgar.

"¿The only ones who happened to find a 50-million-Pts top hat in a landfill?" said Autumn.

"No. I mean, ¿you think we're the 1st to gain & lose by luck?" asked Edgar. "You don't think I made the apartment I live in with my own hands or bought it with my own money; Dawn didn't make the restaurant she inherited from her parents or Lance the money he inherited from his parents; you don't think Felix got out o'

homelessness by herself..."

"You 3 earned yours—and you can be assured that in a just world, *Mayor* Chamsby would've already starved to death with as much he's done on his own."

Edgar shook his head. "None o' us did anything on our own..."

Autumn tightened her grip on her knees, lowering her chin.

"Thank you for the after-morning-special lesson, Sir," she said. "I should just shut up & learn to love metaphorical prostitution. If I wanted that, I'd try smooshing with the government for superior results."

"Well, I mean... that's just the point I'm making: you can't insist on winning through fairness if life isn't fair, ¿can you?"

Autumn raised a brow. "So, ¿what... you're advocating that I cheat? ¿You?"

"You yourself said you can't win a rigged game without... rigging yourself, or something like that."

Autumn pressed her chin mo' tightly to her knees. "It's 1 thing to cheat strangers; it's 'nother to buddy-buddy with people & then take from them. It's..."

"¿Wouldn't make any sense?" Edgar asked. "¿Illogical?"

"Exactly."

"Well, that's just the thing," said Edgar. "You can't expect life to make sense if it doesn't. That's just the way it works: some people lose their jobs 'cause they got an injury; somebody films their hands doing a puppet show as a joke & somehow makes millions..."

Autumn rose to her feet. "That's bullshit." She threw her arms out. "You can't just say, 'society's just illogical, we have to accept it.' If it's illogical, by definition it's wrong."

"I know..."

"Illogic shouldn't be tolerated."

Edgar stared @ Autumn. She was still focusing on the concrete

under her.

“¿What do you mean?” he asked.

“Illogical scoring systems must be made logical,” she murmured.

Edgar gazed @ her silently.

*I’m babbling nonsense ’gain. Perhaps Edgar is wrong: perhaps most o’ the world & I simply have different systems o’ logic that are incompatible. I must go—& since I’m the weaker entity, it’ll inevitably be me.*

*Still, must keep myself ’live as much as I can.*

“¿Autumn?”

Autumn looked down @ him. “You carry books with you, ¿right?”

“O,” Edgar said, leaning back. “Uh, O, yeah. Though, uh, you probably might find them kinda juvenile or something.”

“Well, I’m desperate, so I’m looking for 1 by the beard’s-nest-bearded looney himself.”

“I, uh, don’t know who that is.”

“Marx.”

“O...” Edgar paused, perhaps to gauge Autumn’s rationale from her expression. If that was the reason, Autumn made it as difficult as possible.

“I, uh, don’t have anything he wrote,” said Edgar. “I, uh, I have to admit that I’m not smart ’nough to understand any o’ it.”

“Pumps his books full o’ technical jargon to feign brilliance, I presume,” Autumn said. “Those kind o’ people do that all o’ the time. Most o’ the books Lance ne’er shut up ’bout do, too. Understand that ‘intelligence’ isn’t ’bout true intelligence, but the *appearance* o’ intelligence, which can easily be feigned through prolix diction—a trick both o’ us exploit.”

Edgar nodded.

“O well,” said Autumn. “I doubt I would’ve gotten much out o’ it, anyway. Is it true he has a hard-on for government or whatever, ¿or

is that just bullshit Lance made up?"

"Uh... I don't know," Edgar said. "¿Why? You... you're not thinking o' trying to run for anything, ¿are you?"

Autumn cringed as if sprinkled with battery acid. "No. Don't be ridiculous. I'm not 1 o' those rich bastards. No, quite the opposite: I was thinking that, if so, his diagnosis is backward nowadays: if my goal is to beat rich bastards like Lance—and remember that he himself agrees that we are @ war—then the goal is to eliminate the very government they helm to maintain their irrational economic laws."

Edgar stared @ her for a minute, probably trying to figure out what she e'en said, & then laughed nervously & said, "You're... you're just talking, ¿right? 'Cause today's not the day for doing anything radical..."

"No," mumbled Autumn, shaking her head. "No... You should know me better: I don't just do crazy shit the second I come up with it; I plan thoroughly before I do crazy shit."

Autumn looked down @ Edgar, their eyes locking.

"¿You want us to stay here?"

"O.... No." Edgar scrambled to his feet. "So, uh... ¿What are you doing?"

"If Dawn insists, I'll spend 1 night there so I can do some research."

Edgar nodded & followed her back down the same path from which they arrived. Autumn kept her eyes on it.

That was interrupted by a nervous laugh from Edgar & a "I don't know whose health to worry about: you or the government's."

"¿Can't it be both?" asked Autumn.

"I guess..."

"& I promise I won't spend all night fucking round while leaving you to Prozac—I'm not that heartless." Autumn added in a murmur, "If it makes you feel better, 1 o' the reasons I'm impatient for success



is that I feel bad for leaving you there.”

“Um... ¿What did you having in mind particularly? I, uh... I don't know what you like to do, actually,” said Edgar.

“Mmm... I think you do have some inclination, considering the patterns of the past.”

Edgar stopped to consider what she said.

“¿You mean some treasure hunting adventure or something romantic?”

“¿Which's practical?”

“I didn't know practicality was e'er important when it came to you,” said Edgar.

“It does. Orthodoxy is what doesn't.”

“Well, uh... I would love to... Though I don't know what you mean.” He looked up at the sky. “I guess we could sit on Dawn's stoop and... ¿stare @ the stars? That sounds stupid, ¿doesn't it?”

Autumn let a beat pass before saying, “I was thinking mo' 'long the lines of sex; but sure, your idea sounds like a good extra.”

#BOSK-CG351E-DYSTOPIA

# DO HUMANS DREAM OF EXTRA RAM WELL I GOT THEM A FLOPPY DRIVE INSTEAD

J. J. W. Mezun | 2016 January 1



0000.

Boskeopolis was a shithole.  
Don't ask me how it happened  
so soon after O'Beefe  
had officially declared himself mayor  
in Mayor Chamsby's disappearance.  
Most would say that considering  
Boskeopolis's economic, environmental,  
& overall social system for the last 2 decades  
that Boskeopolis was headed this way, anyway.  
Still the extreme changes in just a few days were shocking—  
as if the world's script were  
allergically reacting to some parameter in O'Beefe's code.  
'Twas an unreal city<sup>1</sup> under the variegated fog o' winter—  
fog so thick the city was permanently in the infirmity o' twilight.  
'Cause o' this, the previously blooming groves  
that'd put the "Bosk" in "Boskeopolis"  
shriveled & withered till  
they were but naked bones, hair & skin  
scattered round their bent feet as if under radioactive rays.  
Replacing the subtle life o' these trees  
was the loud mimicry o' life  
mysteriously emerging from the city's many shadows.  
Taxis throbbed & waited  
for unsuspecting citizens to draw near for a ride

1 'Course, it had always been unreal, so that wasn't the problematic part.

only to be devoured by a monstrous face  
suddenly blinking on the hood & bumper.  
Middle-aged men with blue faces  
chased innocent civilians with metal canes.  
Violent hours in liquid clocks gang up with  
possessed petroleum pumps,  
wide-grinned records, &  
coffee mugs running so abruptly  
that they splashed their indigo serums o'er  
the cracked & rusty streets,  
feeding its kilometer-stretching stains.  
& all throughout,  
neon smoke choked throats,  
while a cacophony o'  
beeps, buzzes, zips, zaps, wooshes,  
whirrs, plplplps, & scratches  
nesting in ears like heart worms—  
till one's brain runs out o' nutrients.

**0001.**

Though Autumn woke early in the morn—when the sky'd still be  
black e'en before the city's mutation—she remained 'side Dawn, not  
wanting to deprive herself or Dawn o' warmth.

'Sides, she could use the time to think. How strange it seemed for  
her previous patterns o' action to suddenly lose their context.  
Usually she'd push herself to constant action, saving her pondering  
for her computer's many delays.

She had to admit a tinge o' emptiness @ the lack o' her laptop—  
the 1 important possession she'd had for a noticeable length o' time  
—& coffee.

*I thought getting older was s'posed to make one less spoiled; but I seem to be getting weaker, lazier... softer.*

She tried to breathe mo' slowly to calm what she called her "paranoid predictions." She clutched Edgar's arm 'neath her jacket mo' tightly.

'Twas the uncertainties that were the true trouble. In truth, they didn't *have* a true plan: they merely stayed in their egg till either the crows came to lay them or an enemy came to crack them @ a brick wall.

How that crow would look—¿Chamsby finding a way to get the city back on his side & returning it to peace? ¿Someone else assassinating O'Beefe & returning it to peace?—she had no idea.

If she had to guess, their egg wouldn't hatch for a long time.

Her thoughts were interrupted by a noise. Then she heard a click & saw a light beam splash o'er her & Dawn.

"Hope I haven't ruined your beauty rest."

From 'hind the glare of the flashlight she could faintly see O'Beefe like a ghost.

"¡Hark!" Autumn shouted as she put on her shades. She turned to Dawn & shook her. "¡Cannoli! ¡The fucking Feds are here! ¡I told you they'd come! ¡I fucking told ya! ¡They'll force their fucking chips in our head now!"

Dawn murmured for a few seconds before slowly rising with wincing eyes. She picked up her pince-nez & put them on.

"¡I must say, Sirs! ¡This is most indubitably uncivilized!" she said with a finger raised.

O'Beefe's grin only widened.

"Those are sure nifty costumes you got," he said. "Maybe you can find some time to needle me some before the needle's finally stuck in you 2."

"¡We are most certainly *not* your tailors, Sir!" said Dawn.

Autumn clutched her by the shoulders. “¿Did you not hear him? He said he’s gonna stick 1 o’ his needles into us. Probably try & give us the dick disease, like they gave Capone when he didn’t pay their fascist taxes.”

“Not so rough, Sir Carpaccio, you’re ruffling my ruffles,” said Dawn.

“As I said, those are nice disguises you got there, Madames Springer & Summers,” said O’Beefe.

Then he moved his flashlight round & stopped on the backpack.

“Agent Mellow Yellow, be a doll & search through that pack o’er there.”

But before he could e’en say yes, Autumn grasped the pack by 1 o’ its clasps & hugged it.

“¡O’er my dead body!” she shouted. “¡My shit’s not for you commies to just take whenever you want!”

Dawn adjusted her pince-nez.

“I affirm. This is truly a violation o’ the Queen’s oaths against invasion o’ privacy without a warrant, I warrant you.”

O’Beefe snapped a finger.

“Agents, shake these 2 out o’ their zany costumes so we can finish this before I faint from the smell o’ them.”

“Um, ¿what if they’re... you know... not dressed ’neath?”

O’Beefe turned to him with a wink & a finger gun.

“Then, my boy, you’re 1 lucky guy.”

By this point, Autumn & Dawn had already leapt to their feet & scrambled back into the shadows, only to bump into the rubbery substance of someone. Just after, ’nother light clicked o’er them.

“Err, I don’t think you should be leaving,” 1 o’ the guards said as he picked Autumn up by her arm.

“I’ve got the other 1,” ’nother minion said as he held Dawn by the arm.

Autumn immediately twisted against the guard's grasp while simultaneously shoving her foot in his crotch, only for the other minions to join in & hold her down onto her chest, her arms locked 'hind her back.

"A feisty one, ¿ain't we?" O'Beefe said as he stepped toward them. He held his hand out & said to the general group o' guards holding Autumn down, "Give me her pack."

Agent Razzmatazz did so & O'Beefe dug through it, during which he found a black plastic bag. He checked inside & was unsurprised to find a pile o' bones & a skull staring in terror @ his smiling face.

"Good morn, Sir Winters. Funny how you'd be kicking cans with Madames 'Carpaccio' & '¿Cannoli'? Don't tell me those other bitches dogged you, bra."

Edgar didn't reply. After a minute o' terrified silence, O'Beefe closed the pack, hoisted it o'er his shoulder, & led the rest out.

### 0010.

"Get up," said a testy voice.

"Mrmmr..."

"Hey. Sir."

Lance's eyes peeled open hazily only to pop fully open @ the sight o' a man in white police uniform.

"All right. Move out," barked the officer.

"¿What?" Lance practically squeaked.

"I said move out. This isn't your personal bed, Our Magnificence."

Lance could feel the fury flush through his veins. *Wouldn't it be great to have this slob fired. ¿"Our Magnificence," indeed!*

But he knew that'd risk being arrested, & that risking arrest would risk being caught, so he silently rose to his feet, feeling his legs ache from pressing against the hard wood o' the bench all night.

Every bone felt the imprint from hours o' ceaseless chill breaking through his flimsy newspaper blanket, leaving his nose stuffy.

*Great. Now I've probably got a cold. ¿How am I s'posed to survive in such savage circumstances?*

Lance stood, packed his body together tightly to insulate against the cold with his hands in his pockets, & shuffled 'way as quickly as his feet could take him.

Each awkward step in his clunky tennis shoes only served to remind him o' his drabby costume. He still wasn't sure whether he should be glad that those daft broads had given him clothes that contrasted so sharply against his usual attire or bitter @ the additional reason for the authorities to look their fat noses down @ him.

He settled for being bitter 'bout the whole ordeal, regardless.

*& to think, if I were smart & just left the world to its corruption, I would've been safe & sound in my comfy castle. ¿But nope! I had to play the d'Anconia & venture into the inferno, only to be dragged down into the bottom circle with the rest o' the cretins.*

*I s'pose the only thing to do would be to get a job & lay low till I can save up 'nough for a plane ticket to a civilized country, like the United States. I wonder why they haven't done anything to stop this obvious injustice.*

*Since nobody in this city seems to want to e'en try getting a job, considering the sheer unemployment, it shouldn't be hard to get 1 if I actually try.*

Though he received "Sorry, we're not looking for hires right now"s the 1st few times, he did finally get an application from a McCheesy's that seemed primary-school-level simple. However, he found he had trouble with the very 1st line.

*I ne'er e'en bothered to make up a name, ¿did I?*

*Piero Sraffa. Quick, think... If they see you hesitating they'll think*



*something's not right with you.*

*Look @ me. They should think that 'bout me already.*

*Yes, but they might not hire you.*

He naturally started with an Ayn Rand or Terry Goodkind character, only to remember he should distance himself from his previous self as much as possible. "Hank Galt" was just too obvious.

*He pinched the bridge of his nose & strained his eyes.*

*¿John Smith? No. ¿Michael Hudson! That's too obvious.*

*Wait a minute...*

*¿Michael Hudson? That's not obvious. E'en if someone tied that name to the dreadful economist, surely no one would mistake the true me for admiring his ideas. ¿Perfect!*

He quickly filled out the rest o' the form, making up the rest so that it wasn't too unbelievable. Then he handed it to the bored clerk & ran out in triumph.

*Ha. That's so easy.*

*Hey, wait: ¿how am I going to know if they'll hire me or not if I don't have any phone or computer to contact me from?*

*O well, I guess I'll just have to come in every day or so & ask 'bout it.*

The pang in his stomach continued to irk him, however. He knew that it wasn't healthy to go so long without proper nourishment, & could see that from the exhaustion he felt already, so early in the day.

*No need to panic. You just need to use your practical mind to figure out how to get food temporarily while you wait for them to make their decision. Considering how scarce labor is, they're bound to be desperate to hire someone soon, so it shouldn't take long.*

& yet, no matter how much he considered the question as he walked down the frosty sidewalks, a practical answer eluded him.

## 0011.

Autumn mused on the absurdity: while she was packed with numerous other colorful characters when she was jailed for mere stealing, she was given her own cell after purportedly attempting to assassinate the mayor through a terrorist attack. Then 'gain, she s'posed perhaps a normal person would've preferred the company o' others—e'en other menaces to society—to loneliness.

She would've preferred company if that company were Edgar, or e'en Dawn. Then 'gain, she could understand their fear that together they could better plan a manner o' 'scape.

*I probably won't see either o' them e'er 'gain.*

*I probably won't see anything anymo' in a few weeks.*

*The least those bastards could've done was to finally settle with me before I raked them down with me.*

She took deep, slow breaths as she stared @ the ceiling on the top bunk—where they should've put her a long time ago: queen o' her own castle, isolated from everyone else as a pathogen. Dawn probably would've found that joke both humorous & sad.

*She won't anymo'. Not when they're holding her & Edgar down like animals, ready to put them down with a need...*

She gripped the edges o' her mattress, & then stopped when she realized that was futile, too.

*There's no use miring o'er the problem. Must devise a way for us to 'scape @ all costs. Remember what Dawn said, just have to—¡O shit!*

Autumn clutched the sides o' her face as if she found it difficult to breathe.

*¡I forgot! ¡The fucking psycho juice! ¿How am I going to take it now? ¡Shit! That's going to fuck me up, isn't it. ¡Augh! ¡'Course this happens! Every time I e'en try putting myself back together, an*

*earthquake suddenly wakes & causes me to shatter 'gain. It's why I don't e'en want to bother anymo'.*

*& Dawn's not e'en round to snap me out o' my episodes.*

*Edgar's not e'en round to soften me with his manufactured niceties.*

*I've finally succeeded @ isolating myself from those I threaten.*

*It's just me by myself.*

*Me by myself with just my mind.*

*That's not a safe place to be.*

### 0100.

He couldn't be surprised. He knew he'd ne'er 'scape the darkness.

*It's fitting that this'll be where I... the end o' me.*

For once in his life he tried to keep cool his melting spine; but the darkness conspired to set a flamethrower to it, causing his bones to rattle @ the rattling that attacked the iron bars o' his cage every so oft & the squeak o' hinges from destinations invisible to his eyeholes.

### 0101.

Dawn couldn't stop herself from rocking forward & back on her bed, causing its frame to creak. Dawn hardly noticed: she latched onto the edges o' her bed, staring wide-eyed @ the wall 'head o' her.

She was in a dream world. She had to be: there was nothing to feed her insatiably-hungry attention.

'Sides, how else could she interpret the situation she found herself in.

*Surely they can't actually go 'long with have us executed. ¿What danger could any o' us have caused? I mean, surely no one could be so cold-hearted as to kill innocent civilians as part o' some scheme to become mayor.*

She knew Autumn would've disagreed. *"That's exactly what politicians do—exactly how they get their power in the 1st place. ¿What, did you think they got where they were by handing out cakes to everyone?"*

*But that's TV stuff—people who cackle & rub their hands together. ¿& what 'bout everyone else? Surely they wouldn't let this go on. Not all o' them. Not most o' them.*

*It couldn't end this way. Somehow we've got to get out o' this. There has to be a way...*

### 0110.

*This winter feels colder.*

Gray lifted the collar o' his robe & then shivered with his hands in his pockets as he stumbled for his car, the bodyguards always in the corner o' his eye.

*You're being paranoid. He's youthful & naïve, but not that bad. It's only the complications o' modernity reaching us.*

He stopped, his hand feeling his beard. He thought he could feel ice crystals, but quickly dispelled that thought as foolish.

*Perhaps that was the 'scuse people used before.*

He waved 'way these concerns & replaced them by warm thoughts o' melted chocolate & finishing that snowy-forest jigsaw puzzle, only to run into a crowd o' people shouting & holding signs.

*Well, I'll give them that: they succeeded @ 1 goal—I surely have no question o' the message they're trying to deliver to us.*

He tried carefully edging round them, only for a smaller crowd o' journalists to walk up to him with a flurry o' questions:

"Minister, ¿what safeguards are there to prevent the Mayor from abusing his security powers?"

"¿What is planned for next year's election—if there is 1?"

“Minister, ¿will you take a picture with my cat, Don Quixote?”

Gray stood staring down @ the frosty grass. As oft when he thought, he yanked on his long beard.

*We’ve been negligent. We’ve let things go to far. We’ll have to fix that.*

### 0111.

Felix could feel the fur stand up on her skin as she sat legs-dangling o’er Violet’s couch & watched Violet yell into her phone.

She’d ne’er seen her so angry in all her life.

“This is a *democracy*, if I am precise. The Constitution specifically prohibits circumstances such as these precisely for the historical consequences the flouting of such mandates has caused—a history in which Boskeopolis harbors its own role, you should recollect—¿& I will have you apprehend from the disinterested viewpoint of a citizen who voted against Mayor Chamsby in the 2016 election that I am most confident that he, being a libertarian, would be frenetic @ such... such... behavior!”

Her chest heaved & fell in slow, heavy motions as she stood silently. Felix could hear scribbly voices ’scape ’tween the phone & Violet’s ear, though all o’ the words got mushed together on the way to her ears so that she couldn’t understand any o’ it.

“I comprehend,” said Violet. “Yes, I respect the desideratum of insulating us from homicidal malefactors as much as any other citizen; but Boskeopolis operates under the stipulation of ‘innocent until guilty in the highest probability,’ & I must reiterate that you have not yet substantiated the accused’s culpability. ¿How can you expect that citizens dwell under a sensation of impregnability when it is impossible for them to even ascertain that the veritable terrorists have been delivered to justice?”

Violet paused 'gain, her stance loosening & the angry flush fading from her face.

"I am 'fraid I cannot do that. I know @ least 2 of the people who stand accused & I can vouch for their innocence—& shall continue to do so until I see strong evidence for otherwise... Yes. Yes, thank you."

Violet said some #s—probably giving them her # so they can call her back later—& then pressed a beeping button on her phone & pocketed it.

Violet released a sigh o' relief as she walked o'er to Felix.

"My profound condolences for all of these personal vexations caused by these circumstances—& in great probability only exacerbated by my belicose argument on the phone recently."

"No, it's all right," Felix said to her hands, her voice weak from going so long without use.

Violet sat next to her. "Do not fret, compatriot; I am certain that this is merely a misunderstanding & that the government will set things right. They would ne'er allow themselves to harm innocent civilians; & I am positive that Madame Summers & Sir Winters are innocent—& would be inclined to bet that Madame Springer is innocent, as well." She tapped her hands on her knee rapidly. "¿Would you be of the belief that Madame Springer is incapable of such a crime? I mean, as an acquaintance of Madame Summers & a years-long compatriot of Sir Winters, I would be inclined to doubt it; but I must confess a lack of knowledge in regards to Madame Springer's general moral compass. However, if you declare that Madame Springer must be innocent, I will trust your judgment."

"O... I dunno," mumbled Felix.

From what she remembered o' how Autumn would talk 'bout herself, she'd probably say herself that no one should trust Autumn & that she would be capable o' doing anything.

*Maybe she has some uncontrollable problem like I have,* thought

Felix. *¿Isn't that what she told me? Just like I have an illogical... uh... hatred o' myself, she does bad things out o' habit—or something like that. Maybe that's what happened here. Maybe she did do the bad thing & now feels very bad 'bout it.*

The problem with this possibility is that Felix was unsure what how she should think 'bout it. *¿Who would I be to judge when she doesn't judge me for my many problems?*

*But then, ¿how can I just stupidly defend her when I have no idea what's going on just 'cause she was nice to me?*

*Heck, that may be the reason why she was nice to—*

She stopped herself. *You're not s'posed to think things like that, ¿remember? 'Sides, it's silly: Violet's nice to you, & she isn't... isn't bad. & Violet says Dawn & Edgar aren't, so they probably aren't, either.*

Still, Violet was right 'bout the “personal vexation” she felt. For as much as people liked to say that ignorance is bliss, not knowing what's right made it truly hard not to think the wrong thing.

### 1000.

Lance hadn't realized what a drag hunger was till now, leaning against the brick wall o' the coffee shop he'd just tried applying to. So dizzy was he that 'twas an effort to keep from falling onto the floor & sleeping. He sniffed, feeling the gooey sickness inside his stomach & throat caused by the icy rain he'd been subjected to nonstop for multiple days. On days when he felt like this he should be in Chamsby Castle under his warm covers, his favorite cartoons blaring...

*Those days are dead. Stop obsessing o'er them. You're a new man now.*

He couldn't help thinking how much he preferred being the ol' 1.  
*I bet 1 o' those rats took o'er my castle, too.*

He knew he still had blood round his bones, e'en if it took an effort to charge them. Hunger hadn't stopped them yet. So he trudged on 'head to the next commercial building—e'er onward, till he had his success 'gain.

His attention was snatched 'way by a noisy crowd standing @ the end o' the corner. Squinting, he could see messages in marker: "O'Beefe the new Clay" & "Say NO to '70s politics. ¡Democracy Now!"

*Hmmph. It's 'bout time some o' these bums started doing something 'bout such an outrageous usurpation.*

Still, he hesitated. Knowing the depths that O'Beefe hung & the way the police harassed such an upright citizen as Michael Hudson, he knew danger was bound to come to these protesters.

*Now is not the time for cowardice. ¿What, d'you think someone will just come by & oust the throne-stealer for you?*

He wasn't sure *what* he expected. Reality seemed upside-down now, slipping through the slits 'tween his fingers every time he grabbed for it. ¿How was he s'posed to do anything for himself when he couldn't e'en understand what was happening to him?

*Maybe that scoundrel knows I'm here & is abusing his tyrannical power o'er the economy to force all o' these businesses to reject my superior work just as some sick jape.*

*¿Then isn't this the perfect chance to stop him? Your people are shouting for John Galt to make his appearance.*

*But I can't just reveal myself in public now...*

*¿Why would you need to? ¿Who cares 'bout your name or your appearance? Your brilliance should sway them through this disguise.*

*There's no hesitating. No going back. ¡Just act!*

& so he stepped toward the crowd.



## 1001.

Though a daily schedule was forced onto her through comings & goings & specific meal, waking, & sleep times, Autumn still lost track o' time. Only her faint memory o' the stifling heat & sunny skies outside & the current chill & icy concrete outside reminded her that she'd gone through a'least 1 summer & back to winter 'gain.

¿Was it only once?

¿*What's taking them so long to have me killed?*

But what bit into her mind mo' was, ¿*Are Edgar & Dawn still 'live?*

She hadn't seen them since she came here, almost a year ago. *Prevent us from forming conspiracies*, Autumn thought, feeling as if acidic poison were swimming round her head, her cheeks sucking inward.

1 o' the downsides o' Edgar's habit o' cooking for them was that every bite o' plastic rice & teriyaki chicken that appeared to come straight from her high school cafeteria reminded her o' Edgar's absence & made her lose her appetite—or rather, made her lose her appetite for losing her appetite, made her hungry for the gurgling pinch in the center o' her stomach.

*Fuck them & fuck their food. Drag me into this dungeon & then fucking feed me. ¿What's taking them so long to have me killed?*

*Bastards. They figured out my main punishment: keeping me from self-punishment. No sharp implement to be found.*

Though she checked many times, now she'd accepted this fact & 'stead just stared @ the cold gray stones o' her dungeon—albeit 1 with nicer beds than they have in their true home, as well as a TV she ne'er used. She could also ask for books from some library. She wanted to ask for *The Anarchist Cookbook* just to be a dick, but figured the limited humor wouldn't be worth the repercussions.

*You're getting soft, & look @ where it's got you: get 'way with theft—save 1 instance—for years only to get death row for a crime you didn't commit. I see what Dawn means 'bout the government being "well-meaning."*

It wasn't as if she were getting bored—quite the opposite: time always went too fast for her, racing past her before she e'en had time to think 'bout it & understand, till eventually it'd all run out, all be wasted like sand dumped in the garbage.

The door squeaked—not a high-pitched squeak, but a low, droning squeak o' heavy bars. *Fuck. ¿Why don't they just go 'way?*

*¿What's taking them so long to have me killed?*

A guard stood in front o' her bars.

*I'm not s'posed to come out @ this time.*

*'Less...*

*'Less it's my time.*

Autumn was surprised. She was surprised to feel buried under fear. The end—not just o' her, which would be all right, but o' her & Edgar & Dawn & the surprising opportunities that seemed to be 'head before she was dragged in here.

*Damn Dawn. Got my hopes up just in time for them to be snatched 'way.*

The guard unlocked the door. "Come on out, Madame Springer; you're being released."

Autumn had to smile, e'en though she knew 'twas for a dumb reason. She couldn't not remember Dawn's insipid "analysis" o' that stupid game with the tiny animals & the eugenics or whatever she said happened 'hind those animals being "released" 'cause o' some "ivy points," or some nonsense.

She was e'en mo' surprised to find these thoughts had lifted her spirits. She slid off the top bunk & stepped toward the door.

"You don't look very happy 'bout it," said the guard.

Autumn looked up @ him with blank eyes & retorted, "I'd have preferred to go my own way, but you hid all o' the knives & rope."

"You should be glad we did," he said; "you'd still be stuck here if you tried."

"So they are savvy 'nough to punish a suicidal person with a refusal to kill them."

The guard turned to her with a puzzled look.

"We said we're releasing you; not giving you the needle," he said. "You wouldn't be walking round free like this if 'twas the other."

Autumn didn't hear the 2nd sentence. She was too busy staring wide-eyed 'head o' her while seeing nothing.

### 1010.

Scarlet recognized this feeling: precognition. A volcano eruption after so long dormant, how everyone doubted, only to have the reaction from those they knew nothing 'bout spit right back into their faces.

"He's the 1," she whispered to her comrade as she leaned toward him with a finger stretched out. "Look @ him: he's a natural."

Carmine stroked his fake beard & adjusted his glasses. He needed neither; he just thought 'twas funny to look the role. They didn't need to be humorless stiffs, after all.

"I'm amazed he's gone on so long—almost 3 hours."

"He's driven. You can't blame him, though, with how things have been going under that pampered shill Chamsby, & now his fascist dragon," said Scarlet. She turned to Carmine. "I've ne'er heard o' him. ¿You think he's just your average working class thrown 'way into unemployment like the rest?"

Carmine stared wide-eyed. He adjusted his glasses 'gain.

"I don't know." Carmine laughed. "Maybe he's still in the holiday

season.”

“Maybe.”

When he finished his speech, they walked up to him through the gradually dissipating crowd, eyes focused purely on him.

Scarlet had to admit he looked rather ridiculous in those shades —specially when it wasn’t e’en bright out, but already twilight. Still, ¿who was she to judge one’s personal preferences if they didn’t harm one’s fellow person?

“We were engrossed by your speech, Sir Hudson,” Scarlet said as she reached a hand toward him.

Hudson was breathing heavily, his pupils still dilated as he looked up @ her face. He’d had that amazing mix o’ fear & indignation throughout the speech, but now he seemed to only have the former.

But then he straightened & said, “Thank you, Madame.”

“¿You new @ this? I must apologize, but I haven’t seen you before,” asked Scarlet. “Would’ve expected someone with your talent to be mo’ notorious.” Then she & Carmine laughed lightly.

Hudson nodded. “I usually didn’t participate in politics till now; but when Chamsby was so... obviously rid o’ by skeevy means, well... we can’t stand by such offenses to our republic, ¿can we?”

*Hmm, he’s a bit naïve; but then, ¿can you blame him with all o’ the propaganda blared @ us from our boob tubes 24/7? We can dispel those myths. What’s important is that those rich clowns in their hubris opened ’nother mouth hungry for class consciousness.*

She shook her head. “No; but we tolerate it, anyway—including all o’ those pampered politicians from both the so-called left & so-called right.”

“¡Exactly!” Hudson shouted with a fist in the air. “I’m glad someone else thinks this.”

“O, there are many,” Scarlet said with a nod. “The media doesn’t want you to know that, which is why they’re so unheard o’. They

want you to think you're 'lone to make you 'fraid, to keep you silent & obedient. That's 'cause they know how powerful we are when we're not."

Hudson's eyes shrank into a shrewd glance. He began rubbing his chin. How Scarlet had seen this sight so many times—so many youth whose minds were opened to the hidden key that locks them in their cages o' misery, & how excited they become when they learn that they have the power to smash that lock!

"¿You're telling me you can help me... that we can get rid of O'Beefe &... make us safe 'gain?"

"With persistence & passion we can do anything," said Scarlet.

That was when Hudson's eyes lit up, & Scarlet knew that the capitalists' gift o' yet 'nother member into the Socialist Worker's Party o' Boskeopolis was in the plastic.

### 1011.

O'Beefe knew the heater had been cranked up to high when he itched with sweat in the midst o' winter; & though the golden light shining from every lamp off every wall was a treat @ 1st, being subjected to it so constantly began to hurt his eyes.

It took forever for those ol' growths to hobble their way o'er to their chairs; so O'Beefe sat back, watching the epic war 'tween his 2 thumbs while the room filled with the unnerving sounds o' chair legs screeching gainst a floor that probably hadn't been cleaned since World War II.

When all o' the li'l noises slowed,—they ne'er stopped: every rustle o' every 1 o' their sagging sleeves on their robes that probably hadn't been washed since Columbus's arrival reminded him o' the skull-emptying silence occupying this huge dome all for itself—he allowed himself to glance upward. They were mo' hesitant now than

usual.

He smiled,—those were always cheap to hand out—clasped his hands together, & stretched them out.

“¿What brings you fine fellows here so soon? I thought we wouldn’t have ’nother exciting meeting till the end o’ the month.”

Leading minister, Earl Gray, cleared his throat. He was always doing that. Grossed O’Beefe like no Friday.

“Mayor we have some urgent news to tell you. Unfortunate news for you.”

O’Beefe didn’t budge a centimeter from his leaned-back position, his eyelids held thick as mustard.

Gray continued, “Mayor, I understand that you take the security o’ Boskeopolis with utmost seriousness; but time & time ’gain you’ve been ignoring protocol. The Constitution...”

“Hey, man: every good leader’s gotta break some rules to keep the country from breaking.” O’Beefe tsked as he pointed hand guns @ Gray. Gray’s long eyes & stretched mouth indicated that he didn’t find this amusing.

After a short pause, Gray resumed: “& yet the streets are aflame with protesters, rumors spread o’ citizens disappearing. Your polls are abysmal, Mayor. Many are calling you the new General Clay. I, ’course, disagree—& I would know, as I was in parliament when Clay fell.”

O’Beefe tried to keep from rolling his eyes. These ol’ coots wouldn’t shut up ’bout their silly superstitions. How could such boring people take hold o’ such a position as the ruling class & ruin it.

O’Beefe replied, “Some o’ the greatest leaders in the world weren’t popular. Abraham Lincoln was called a tyrant & was e’en shot, & yet now he’s seen as a hero. ¿Do I have to be shot before our nation values me the same, or do Boskeopoleons only value

‘authoritarians’ when they sing the tune o’ that bearded bum, Marx? I a’least continue to allow everyone their freedom to call me a tyrant —e’en those who clearly don’t make good use o’ it.”

“If I may be forgiven for saying so, Mayor, Sir Lincoln was caught in the midst o’ a civil war in his country & did whatever he could to stop it; you seem to be trying as hard as you can to create 1.”

“Tell that to the guy who was mayor before me,” said O’Beefe.

“Yes, ’bout that...” said Minister Cornflower.

O’Beefe sat up & smiled. This was getting interesting.

“Don’t tell me you actually believe the rumors that I tried to have him killed,” said O’Beefe. “I thought you were s’posed to be the sane 1.”

“The story ’hind the impostor faking Sir Chamsby’s accusation is incredible...”

O’Beefe shrugged. “I’m sorry I’m not going up gainst saner people. You’d expect mo’ rational behavior from terrorists, huh.”

“& yet the evidence for these terrorists is so scant,” said Gray.

O’Beefe crossed his arms. “That’s not true. I’ll have you know that despite your insinuations o’ my laziness, I have kept a close report with my security team, & they’re making great progress on sniffing them out.”

“You’ve had good progress in harassing political groups that oppose you,” said Minister Carnation. “For god’s sake, Mayor O’Beefe: you’re not e’en subtle; you literally just rip off Clay’s techniques wholesale. ¿Do you think this is the 1970s ’gain?”

“With as much as you bring it & Sir Clay up, I almost think you do,” O’Beefe said with a cheeky grin, while in the back o’ his mind he thought, *God, how I wish that numskull Chamsby put mo’ effort into having her lose her election. He has no one to blame for his own dumb self for his trouble.*

*Won’t make that mistake this year.*

Carnation's eyes twisted in confusion. "That doesn't e'en make sense. ¿Why would I complain 'bout something if I want it to happen? Mo' that I'm obsessed in my opposition."

"On that subject," said Earl Gray, "there's the concern o'er your... quite zealous attempt to replace as many military leaders & guards with your own associates, without telling us or holding votes for those that need them."

O'Beefe's eyes widened. "I don't understand how that could be controversial..."

"That was how Clay was able to break down parliament when he rose to power," said Carnation. "As I said, you're not e'en being subtle."

O'Beefe rolled his eyes. "Well, I must praise you for your bravery in speaking up when I practically have a knife to your neck."

Earl Gray broke in with a cough: "That's 'cause we've learned from history & quickly arranged for parliament's security to be handled by standard protocol—while still allowing you your discretions for your own security, I might add."

*Yes, I noticed, you decrepit cockblocker.*

O'Beefe did a slight bow. "Well, I'm glad to hear so many gracious words for my difficult time trying to keep this great city from tearing itself apart. I must say, you do wonders for your nation. Now, if we're done..."

"We're not," said Carnation.

O'Beefe smiled @ her. "My insides are quite tender, Madame." Carnation scowled @ his lack o' honorific. "I don't know if I can take much mo'."

"We have mo' in mind than just talk, Mayor," said Earl Gray.

"¿Is that so?" O'Beefe's mouth was almost bursting with such humor. *¿You truly threatening me, gramps? You'd break a hip trying to make 1 swing @ me.* "¿Et tu, Gray?"



“We’ve come together to hold a vote for impeachment, Mayor,” said Earl Gray.

O’Beefe paused a beat, & then slapped the table & laughed.

“That wasn’t a joke, Mayor.”

“Trust me, it was,” said O’Beefe, leaning closer, eyes crusting with darkness. “The people would ne’er let you get ’way with it—and I doubt most o’ you will risk your careers, e’en if some o’ you threatened them.” He eyed Carnation, Cornflower, Indigo, & Gray.

“Those in favor o’ impeachment, say ‘aye,’” said Minister Gray.

O’Beefe maintained a Mona Lisa smile as he saw 13 o’ the 15 ministers—mo’ than the requisite 3/4ths—raise a hand & say aye in cultish unison. Most—specially the Silvers & that ditsy Pink—had thick-lidded eyes aimed downward. A few o’ the Golds he usually worked better with, such as Cyan, kept their eyes averted. The 2 who voted nay were the only White—some clod who somehow stumbled his way into parliament by spewing populist nonsense—and a Clear who has made it his life goal since the 8 years he’d been in parliament to go gainst parliament in any way possible.

*I’m sure they already got together in secret to contrive this agreement. There’s no way they’d dare to risk such a vote without already being sure they’d win.*

O’Beefe leaned on 1 o’ his elbows with the other hand stretched o’er the table, his thick fingers drumming its shiny surface.

“Boy, that sure was a hoot,” O’Beefe said with a smirk. “¿Can we return to serious topics?”

“We have 1 mo’ issue to vote on,” said Gray.

The right side o’ O’Beefe’s lip curled up. “¿Is this where I’m sent to the camps?”

“We have been discussing the issue o’ mayoral overreach for months,” Gray continued; “though parliament worked hard to curb as many excesses as possible during the breakdown o’ the Protectors’

rule, it's clear we haven't done 'nough. The committee we set up October has written a few bills that should patch up a few o' these problems—including greater supervision o'er military matters. Due to how doubtful Sir O'Beefe's claims were in regards to domestic threats, I recommend we improve our budget by cutting that down—or better, accepting mo' assistance from the US, which would be a far cheaper means o' handling military affairs.”

O'Beefe had to admit the ol' fool's cleverness here: 1 o' the major flaws o' the Golds was their worship o' the US, thanks to them being viewed as the leader o' their economic fairy tales—not to mention many influential conservatives being North American. That fool, Chamsby, 'course was similar. 'Cause o' this, this bill—most certainly contrived by the Silvers out o' their mindlessly short-term view o' finances that leads them to throw most o' it 'way to lower-class losers who have li'l influence o'er mo' practical uses—Golds will be left in a tight spot. They can't balk @ letting good ol' Uncle Sam play a greater role; so they'll surely vote yes, tightening the US's grasp on Boskeopolis further, when that arrangement should be reversed.

“As an easy & safe way to calm the populace, we should also consider releasing those o' O'Beefe's ‘Special Team’”—*Don't think I didn't notice the sarcasm, ol' fart*—“accused o' attempting assassination gainst Sir Chamsby.”

Most o' parliament nodded silently. *Yes, befriend the terrorists as Grampa Gray demands, peons.*

“¿What should we do with O'Beefe?” asked Carnation. “We still don't know if *he* had any involvement in Chamsby's disappearance—not to mention the other crimes he's committed.”

*Ah, so the commie bitch shows her true Leninist colors,* O'Beefe thought with a smile still curling further.

The rest o' parliament were less bold, though: they exchanged nervous glances, followed by King Gray decreeing, “That might stir

the public too much. We want to avoid that, not to mention the tedious process we'd have to go through to prove he's truly committed crimes. I don't think it'd be worth it. No, I think for the Boskeopolean government's sake it best if we put all o' this 'hind us."

'Gain, the sheep nodded—'cept Carnation, whose solid flat mouth didn't hide her discontent from O'Beefe 1 bit.

They continued to discuss their bills for "curbing excess mayoral powers" while O'Beefe continued to watch them steel-eyed as a scientist might watch ants carry peas in & out their hole.

When he saw them close & stand from their chairs, he said, "O, ¿are we finally finished with this game then?"

"Good night, Sir O'Beefe," Earl Gray before turning with the rest o' parliament & walking out.

O'Beefe rose his fist & shouted, "¡This is treason, you know!"

Gray stopped just before the door & turned. *That got the ol' bastard's attention.* But Gray calmly said, "I hope for your interest that you won't return to cause trouble, Sir O'Beefe. You have much you can do outside government; it'd be terrible o' you to waste that opportunity by breaking the law."

"You should aim that @ yourself," O'Beefe called out, followed by a thrust o' his finger & a laugh.

"Show me 1 clause o' the Constitution any o' us broke today," said Gray. "Sir, I have studied the Constitution longer than you've lived; I doubt I could make that simple a mistake."

"Aw, save your weasel words for someone dumb 'nough to fall for it." O'Beefe winced. "¿You think you got 'way with this that easily? I wouldn't delude yourself, gramps."

"'Twas only so easy due to the inexperience o' the obstacle," said Gray. "I told you, O'Beefe: you're no Clay. Clay wasn't nearly as delusional as you are. That made him actually a threat."

Gray turned & left before O'Beefe had a chance to respond.

## 1100.

*This must be a trick*, Autumn thought as she stood before the desk in some lobby-looking room while the clerk purportedly retrieved her stuff.

She kept 1 eye on the clerk while the other surveyed the rest o' the room, only for both o' them to latch on Dawn entering from the opposite hall—so odd-looking in an orange suit. Dawn's eyes widened as much as hers did. Dawn ran up to her, which caused her to glance uneasily to the side for signs o' opposition; but the clerk didn't act perturbed @ all.

Dawn wrapped her arms round Autumn & practically crushed Autumn gainst her chest. Autumn was surprised to realize she was doing the same.

“¡Autumn! ¿You doing all right? ¿Can you believe they're freeing us?”

*No.*

“¿Where's Edgar?” asked Autumn, her voice mildly muffled by the pressure o' Dawn's shoulder on Autumn's throat.

“I haven't seen him yet,” said Dawn; “but I'm sure if they're releasing us, they can't be keeping him o' all people here.”

*We still don't know we're being released; & though we may know Edgar as the sweetest person on the planet, they only know him as a creepy skeleton.*

She didn't bother saying this, however. No need to drive Dawn's spirits down with hers yet.

& anyway, they soon saw Edgar follow the guard out 'nother hallway. Autumn couldn't help noticing how he shook & how haggard & bumpy his skull was till he glanced up & gaped @ Autumn & Dawn. After what felt like an hour-long pause, Autumn & Edgar

rushed toward each other & tried crushing each other.

“I thought I’d ne’er see you ’gain,” he said in almost a gasp.

Autumn couldn’t respond. She made due with sucking on Edgar’s mouth—all that she could say in so brief a statement, it’d make Strunk & White proud.

Then Autumn did think o’ something to say: she whispered, “Let’s get out o’ here as quickly as possible.”

She led him toward the front door, glancing ’hind her with a fearful eye for both Dawn & to see if anyone were going to stop them. Dawn scampered after them; but no one else followed. Every step surprised Autumn.

*They can’t be letting me go. They can’t be. Any minute now, they’re going to pull the carpet under me & slaughter us together—or worse.*

But they made it out the door, cringing under the sharp yellow rays o’ the sun & the equally sharp frigid wind already shooting into their nostrils.

That was when she saw the crowd surrounding the front o’ the building.

*O shit—¿is this it?*

Something looked odd ’bout them, though: they shouted off-key from each other, the combination o’ their shouts seemingly smothering each other quieter than just 1 would sound. They held signs that said “Say NO to Protectors Politics,” “I speak for those who have been silenced,” & “Free Springer, Summers, & Winters.” Despite the last, Autumn still felt herself freeze up.

*¿What do these people want with us? she thought. ¿Do they think ’cause we were jailed that we’re capable o’ o’erthrowing the government or something? ¿Or do they think we know where Lance went?*

That made her realize with shock: *¿What e’er happened to Lance?*

Her blood froze. *’Less he found someone he could trust—a family*

*member or something—there's no way he survived hidden for this long.*

**1101.**

“You have no idea how much I missed you guys,” Dawn said as they walked down the street, Dawn’s head ’tween Autumn & Edgar, her arms round their outside arms.

Thick fog poured out Dawn’s mouth, the liveliest in this refrigerated wasteland o’ bone-thin bare boughs, pale skies, & turf mineralized with chunks o’ ice.

Autumn didn’t respond: her attention was rapt by the sidewalk.

Dawn pressed her cheek into Edgar’s face. “I missed you pretending to laugh @ my shoddy jokes just to be polite.” Then she pressed her cheek into Autumn’s. “& I missed you telling me which potions were great, knowing that if you said it’s good, it must be.”

After a pause, Dawn asked, “¿Is something wrong?” to Autumn.

“No,” mumbled Autumn.

“Well, that sounds convincing.”

’Nother pause.

“¿Do you have any idea o’ what’s going on?” asked Autumn.

“¿What do you mean? The crowd already told us: O’Beefe’s been deposed.”

“But... ¿why did the crowd want us released so badly?”

Dawn threw her arms up. “Cause we were innocent. Well, a’least we were innocent ’bout terrorism—I don’t know ’bout trespassing. But that’s certainly not worth a year with li’l time allowed outside & without trial.”

“Innocent people are punished all o’ the time,” said Autumn. “¿Do these people make a big fuss o’er everything else?”

“You ne’er know...”

"I find it hard to believe they'd have the energy to fight every problem in the world," said Autumn.

Dawn laughed. "So you admit your expectation is impossible."

"My expectation wasn't that they help everyone; 'twas that they help worthier people. As you said, we're not innocent, truly—I'm certainly not. I mean, I can't say I've ne'er *wanted* to blow up Atlas Tower."

Dawn rolled her eyes. "Yes, you were so close to doing so, too."

Then she sighed & tightened her grasp on Autumn's shoulder. "Androgyn, you must be truly down after being in there for so long. To be honest, I feel like burying myself under some snow—well, I would if it weren't so cold." Dawn stuffed her hands into her jacket pockets & shivered.

"It wasn't nearly as bad for me as 'twas for you 2," said Autumn.

"I can see by your cheerful disposition."

"For some people, cheer is the least cheery emotion one could imagine possessing," said Autumn.

In truth, Autumn couldn't decide if she felt... some fulfilling warmth that made the crispy chill outside actually rather pleasant, or the boiling tar spread o' self-loathing. Either caused her eyes to burn.

*¿What did they do, anyway? ¿Or did they do anything? I don't understand. Dawn says, "O, they deposed O'Beefe"; ¿but who's "they"? ¿How? ¿Did those people with signs? ¿Just like that? The government should've just smashed them down just like that, as they always do. ¿Did the government get rid o' him themselves? ¿But why? ¿What did he do that was different from what any before him did? ¿& what use would someone with the power to make it happen get from releasing us?*

*& then, ¿why were those people there in the 1st place? ¿What were they doing there? ¿& why would they care? They seemed safer 'way*

*from that jail than in front o' it.*

"There. Look, Autumn." Autumn's head jerked up. "If you're so self-conscious, you can give a few Pts to him. They returned your money, ¿right?"

Autumn saw someone sleeping on a park bench, only to gape when she noticed the pale face... & then the shades... & then the attire.

*It couldn't be... ¿could it?*

"Autumn, ¿did you hear me?"

Without turning her face, Autumn said, "¿Is there a store nearby?"

"¿Why?"

## 1110.

*Augh... ¡'Gain! So much for privacy in this fetid shithole o' a city,* Lance thought as he sniffed & rubbed 'way as much o' his snot & tears as possible from under his newspaper fort.

But this time 'pon waking to the familiar shoulder shake, 'stead o' seeing a cop, his heart spiked @ something worse.

He jumped up & back, clutching his body together into a protective ball.

"¿H-how did you find me?" he said as he glared @ Autumn.

He could see the skeleton in the corner o' his eyes to Autumn's left & the one in the long green jacket in the right corner, sitting halfway on the bench edge.

"Here."

Autumn held out a bag o' BBQ chips.

Despite his immense urge to snatch the bag & devour it in a second, Lance asked, "¿Is this s'posed to be a joke?" with eyes flaring half in indignance & half in remaining horror.



“It’s still sealed,” said Autumn, her posture & eyes unchanging in their stiffness.

“¿How did you find me?”

Autumn shrugged. “We weren’t looking. We just happened to see you.” Autumn turned to her fleshy cohort. Lance’s eyes followed. “Dawn was the 1 who pointed you out, actually.”

“I didn’t know ’twas him. I thought he was just homeless.” She stared @ Lance with wide, concerned eyes, which only caused Lance’s blood to boil further. “¿Have you been out here for a whole year?”

Lance’s eyes flared. “Yes, thanks to you. ¿How did you recognize me in this disguise?”

Dawn looked confused.

“O...” Autumn began. Lance turned to her & felt bile rise when he saw her smile & say, “Ey, you don’t remember Madames... Fuck, ¿what was it?”

“Carpaccio & Cannoli, my good chap,” said Dawn.

Lance’s eyes widened a second before plummeting into a cringe.

After recovering, he asked, “¿So you were ’hind this?”

“¿’Hind keeping you out o’ the jail we were locked in—or worse?” said Autumn. She held the chip bag further out. “¿You want this? I s’pose you won’t care after we tell you the better news, anyway.”

“¿What?” asked Lance.

“Your promoted drummer boy O’Beefe’s gone.”

“¿Gone?”

“Parliament impeached his stupid ass. Don’t know who they replaced him with. Actually, we only heard this from some protesting hippies with signs, so I doubt you’d take their word as valid.”

Lance tried to keep his expression still. *Don’t tell me ’twas... that 1 group.*

“Anyway, from what we heard, you’re apparently in a good

word,” said Autumn. “A’least, most seemed to treat you mo’ as a victim than a villain.”

“I am a victim: I had everything taken from me.”

“& now you may be able to get it all back, if you happen to reappear,” said Autumn.

Then she took a deep breath. Lance had to admit, she looked e’en worse than usual. *She probably wasn’t lying ’bout the jail part—though that could’ve just been for stealing.*

She continued, “Now, granted, this still may be risky. I don’t know—you ne’er know who could be lying. I mean, we’re your enemies, so we could be lying. You’ll have to make the decision yourself.” She shook the chip bag. “Now, ¿you want this or not? I don’t want it to go to waste.”

Without moving, Lance replied, “I’d rather not benefit from theft, e’en if Boskeopolis has stolen mo’ from me than most could e’en count.”

“Didn’t steal it,” said Autumn. She took a hand, reached into a pocket o’ her sweats, & then pulled out a sheet o’ paper & held it out to Lance. “Got a receipt.”

“You could’ve just taken the money.”

“Maybe. Could’ve gotten it from Dawn.” She turned to Dawn. “She sells potions, the exploitive capitalist.”

“That makes sense,” said Lance. He took the bag & then turned to Dawn & said, “Thank you.”

Dawn, glancing @ Autumn’s puffy smirk-sowl, laughed & said, “It’s truly Autumn’s money. I think she was joking.”

“It’s unimportant,” said Autumn, looking clear ’bove Lance’s head. “We should go, anyway. Many things to do.”

1111.

## PARLIAMENT OUSTS MAYOR O'BEEFE

By Thursday O'Beefe | January 3, 2022

ATLAS TOWER — On January 3, Boskeopoleon ministers confronted Mayor O'Beefe in parliament & voted to have him impeached. Currently they have no plans for a replacement, placing parliament leader, Earl Gray, as “interim mayor” for now.

According to Minister Cornflower, this was an “unfortunate but necessary extreme act” chosen as a “last resort.” She went on to cite protesters from the Socialist Workers Party as their primary inspiration. Minister Gray did not seem to offer a statement.

However, some worry that this action may set a dangerous precedent o' granting parliament excess power. This & parliament's subsequent decision to cut Boskeopolis's military & replace those losses with mo' US-funded military has caused many to compare parliament to General Clay. Some plan to stand @ Atlas Tower & protest January 24, the day that parliament plans to release suspected terrorists Autumn Springer & Edgar Winters.

According to a 2022 Nectarine poll, 72% o' the public claims to feel uneasy 'bout the future o' Boskeopolis, with 24% saying they are “very uneasy.” A comment by 1 anonymous citizen 'mong many Boskeopoleons: “I'm 'fraid to e'en raise kids here. ¿What will this city be like when they get older?”

Correction: Earlier we stated that 28% o' Boskeopoleons as “very uneasy” 'bout the future. This has been changed to the accurate #.

0000.

Boskeopolis was a shithole o' times,  
'twas a paradise o' times.

'Twas an unreal city under the variegated fog o' winter,  
'Twas an unreal city under the variegated bloom o' summer.  
So go the boom & bust o' the seasons.



#BOSK-CH281F-CLOSET

**YOU GOT YOUR CLOSET IN MY  
SKELETONS NO YOU GOT YOUR  
PARASITES IN MY STOMACH  
AND IT'S QUITE UNPLEASANT  
GET THEM OUT PLEASE**

J. J. W. Mezun | 2016 February 1



## I.

Though Autumn's eyes were still shut, she could feel the dull white light that was seeping in through the blinds try to grind her eyes from the outside. She sat up, rubbing her knuckles against her eyes & slowly pushing the jacket she used as a blanket off. Though still winter, the angry sun must've come early this year, for 'twas a bright & warm morn.

Autumn had the most gorgeous brown mustard stain on her T-shirt. She wasn't quite sure when it 1st got there—it could've been there for years, truly. She *did* know the hole in the right abdomen side o' her shirt had been there for a'least 3 years, however. Her hair unraveled with the beauty o' leftover spaghetti spilled on the floor. Her eyes looked like milky white balloons with single chocolate chips. Then 'gain, so did everyone else's.

Edgar's dry, hard feet clacked against the kitchen tiles as he carried a plate o' pancakes o'er to Autumn, causing his deep eggplant cloak to flutter 'hind him like a robe. The airiness inside only reminded Autumn o' the eldritch filaments, thorns, claws, & villi lurking 'neath—an occupancy Autumn salivated to fill. The hollow black abysses that formed his eyes sucked her in like magnets.

He set the plate on her lap, said morn in his usual quiet voice, & they kissed.

"Thank you," she said in her usual low voice. "You didn't have to make me this."

"O, 'twas nothing," said Edgar.

Edgar left for the kitchen 'gain, leaving Autumn to stare down @ her breakfast in disquiet.

*Look @ you, lying 'bout like a slob, unable to come up with e'en a seed o' a decent heist plot, & now you need your partner to feed you as if you were a baby chick.*

She hesitantly raised the fork & took a bite o' the top pancake, only to feel a hollow shame ring through her chest.

Still, she continued to eat, the flavor o' the syrup & butter blocked by the bitter bile plating her palate.

*It'd be e'en ruder to refuse eating it. Not to mention petty.*

She quickly finished, & carried them to the sink. There she saw Edgar turn toward her with his hand out.

"I can take that," he said.

Autumn held the plate back as if 'twere a diamond.

"That's OK. I think I can handle washing my own dishes."

"Uh... ¿are you sure? I can do it if you want. It's no problem, truly."

Autumn set the dish in the sink & dipped soap on the nearest sponge. "No, I can do it," she muttered. She turned the faucet on her plate & started scrubbing.

Edgar, whom Autumn noticed was still standing there, looking o'er her shoulder, said, "Um... You should probably use the wire sponge to get the syrup off 1st, since it's stuck to the plate so much. Here, ¿you want me to do it?"

"I think I can figure it out," Autumn murmured as she set the soft sponge aside.

"If you say so..." Edgar said as he backed 'way with a frown.

She scanned the sink head & stopped when she saw the mound o' what looked like gray hair. She grabbed it & noticed it felt much sharper than hair.

She rubbed it hard gainst the plate & found that it did make the syrup come off mo' easily. When she'd gotten it down to a few dregs, she returned to the regular sponge & scrubbed the plate, fork, &



knife all o'er quickly, & then rinsed them all round.

"Er, I can dry them if you want," Edgar said as he reached his hands out.

"No, that's OK. I can handle it," Autumn said as she grabbed the towel on the oven handle & quickly rubbed them down.

Edgar rinsed the sponge out & began scrubbing the counter with a sigh, listening to the dishes clang together as Autumn put them 'way.

Autumn kissed him on the side o' his face, & then said, "Thank you for breakfast, by the way," before going.

"O, I hardly did anything," he said as he stared glumly @ the counter. *Truly*, he added only in his head.

## II.

*I shouldn't be surprised. I mess up everything I try to do when trying to help her on her ventures; why shouldn't she think I'm just as likely to break dishes or anything.*

Edgar gazed glumly @ the tiled wall while the acid-hot shower water rained down on him, his hand slowly scrubbing his drooping tendrils with his loofah.

*I mean, she can outsmart a witch, 'scape Lance's wrath, & get 'way with robbing a bank. ¿Did I truly think I could come close to making up for that by being able to bake some pitiful pancakes?*

Edgar stepped out from 'hind the curtain, dripping all o'er the mat. His bones rattled from the chill suddenly slicing through his many holes.

He quickly dried himself, wrapped the towel round him, & went out, only to realize the droning buzz he heard was not simply the bathroom fan, but also Autumn running the vacuum.

Edgar felt as if the heat from his body was all absorbed into his

throat, leaving the rest frigid.

*¿Why does she insist on doing everything herself when she has much mo' complicated things she could be doing while leaving me with the idiot work?*

*'Cause she can probably do those while doing these simple things.*

*'Cause she doesn't need you for anything.*

Edgar tightened the towel round him as he shivered.

*Well, it won't be better if I just stand round pouting. Maybe I could do some laundry.*

Though Autumn kept her face aimed @ the vacuum, she kept Edgar's moving figure in the corner o' her eye.

*He didn't mention anything; but I can tell by the way he paused there that I'm doing something wrong here. He's just too polite to say so 'loud. Damn it.*

Distracted, she bumped the vacuum into the wall.

*Can't e'en move a buzzing hunk o' plastic & satchel round right.*

*You're not e'en s'posed to be fretting o'er this tripe. You're s'posed to think o' theft opportunities.*

Autumn grunted. She clicked off the vacuum, just in time to see Edgar walking toward the door with a basket full o' clothes in his arms.

She rushed forward & grabbed the other end.

"Here, I can take that. I have to go out, anyway."

Edgar pulled back.

"Er, that's OK. I have it."

Autumn pulled back.

"Nonsense. You have much to do, & it'd be better for me to do it than sit round staring @ the wall."

Edgar pulled back much harder.

*¿What d'you mean? You have much mo' important things to do than me."*

Autumn yanked back harder.

“Sure. My sitting on my ass & dinking round with my laptop all day truly keeps the disk spinning.”

“¿Huh?” Edgar asked with a look o’ concern.

“Ne’er mind. This is absurd.”

Autumn let go. The potential energy in Edgar’s pull evolved into kinetic energy so explosive, it caused him to tumble right into the wall. He was surprised to feel it break ’hind him, as if mere cardboard.

& then he dropped deep into the dark void.

### III.

“¿Edgar?” Autumn called out as she stepped toward the dark hole opened by him. She looked inside, but could see nothing.

“¿Edgar? ¿Are you all right in there?” she called out ’gain, voice mo’ fragile than before.

She yanked out her cell & clicked its light on, watching the impenetrable black turn into just-as-impenetrable gray. But when she bent down, she saw that the abyss was bottomed with stairs.

She gulped silently. “¿Edgar? ¿You all right down there?” she asked ’gain.

’Gain, no answer.

She scrambled back for her flashlight & then pointed it down the hole. No matter where she waved her beam, all she found were shelves occupied by cans, boxes, & papers.

“¿Edgar? ¿Where are you?” Autumn said as she climbed down. “You’re not hurt or anything, ¿are you?”

Still no answer.

“Edgar... you’re not upset ’bout anything, ¿are you? Surely you understand that this was an accident.”

By this time she'd hit the bottom. With the ceiling no longer blocking her beam, she could now see that the mysterious room went on & on, crowded with e'er mo' shelves, as well as strange-shaped structures tied to long pipelines.

She stopped & waved her beam round 2 mo' times.

*¿Where could he have gone?*

#### IV.

Edgar had no idea where he was now, where he was going, or who was moving him.

All he knew was that all o' his limbs & mouth were locked down by the fuzzy bone-thin arm dragging him through the frigid dark air, preventing him from hollering for help. All he could do was shiver & wait.

'Twas a long wait.

Later, he was tickled by some stringy material invisible in the darkness. Its touch—indescribable, 'cept maybe, “yucky”—piled on Edgar so harshly that he sneezed, dropping dots o' what he thought were probably dust all o'er his face.

Then, abruptly, he stopped. He could feel that the appendage was still holding him captive, but 'twas no longer dragging him.

Then 3 beams flashed on him from 3 lemon-yellow circles 'head o' him—a light so bright he immediately winced @ its sourness.

Edgar's earholes were filled with a steady stream o' sounds similar to the amplified squirming o' ants & sharp scratching.

Then the claw wrenched him further in & what felt like a bulging balloon covered in wheat grass bump into him. Inside he could hear volcanic bubbling. He could only guess that this was the creature's stomach.

Then he felt something thin & fragile & wet flick on & off his head.

His stomach churned itself as his brain realized what this meant.

V.

All Autumn heard was the scrape o' her socks gainst the cement floor as she ventured further & further into this closet with no end in vision.

The question rang through her head like an echo: *¿Where could he have gone?*

& mo' importantly, *¿Will I e'er find him 'gain?*

She could expect unexpected problems caused by her idiotic conflict with Edgar; but not *this* unexpected. *¿Was he so... unhappy with her that he refused to speak with her, intentionally hid from her? She couldn't expect him acting so. She'd acted far worse toward him & he'd ne'er flinch—which only depressed her e'eremo'. There's no way he'd think her accidentally causing him to fall down here was maliciously planned.*

That left the alternative: he knocked himself unconscious somewhere far out o' sight. Heads, that meant he might 'ventually wake up 'gain & start searching for her 'gain, much mo' loudly; tails, that meant he might be dangerously injured—so much so that it may be too late by the time she finds him.

She bit her lip, so severely she could taste blood. *If he dies so young 'cause he fell down some fucking stairs, I'll be pissed.*

*E'en if this isn't "all my fault," or whatever inanity, my irrational actions still had a vital role. This shit always happens when I do this. Ne'er can just discuss problems with him, e'en though he'd certainly oblige. ¿What, is he going to laugh in my face after what I say? ¿Suddenly think I'm a screwloose? I've already told him crazier shit, & he knows I'm a thief. After that, you'd think anything else'd be easy; but no, it's like medicine: can't take the temporary discomfort, so I*

*push it back further & further & only make myself sicker & sicker.*

She blinked in surprise. So distracted was she by her thoughts that she hadn't registered till now that she'd reached the dust-smothered brick wall @ the end.

Then she jumped back when she felt something light fall on her back, & then squeeze its bough-like appendages round her neck, chest, & upper body & attach a wet suction piece—*¿Its mouth?*—to the edge o' her jaw.

Though it clasped to her tightly & made her neck wet, she was surprised it wasn't doing anything mo' painful.

Still, she didn't want to fiddle with the risk that 'twas venomous: she began whacking it with her flashlight.

She felt the creature finally release & leap off her just in time for her to accidentally whack her back. She muttered curses as she rubbed it. Then she rubbed the still-wet spot on her jaw with her shirt.

*I s'pose I should probably see a doctor to ensure this isn't poisonous or anything... but Edgar's life is mo' in danger—'specially if these bastards are crawling round—& it's not as if it broke the skin. Its venom can't be so powerful that it breaks through skin by itself so quickly, ¿can it?*

*Speaking o' which, I still need to find him...*

Autumn turned in either direction & saw the same copses o' pointless shelves & boxes, just from a different perspective now, as well as the intermittent drips o' some liquid—water, hopefully—from the corner 'tween the ceiling & the back wall.

*He must be still near the stair. I'll check there 'gain & then go out from the sides.*

She turned back & retraced her steps.

She kept stopping every so oft—the last time to turn her head & look 'hind her.

She swore she heard the rustle o' some solid objects.

## VI.

Edgar sobbed. He shut off his vision & compacted his body as much as he could. 'Twas as if he were reacting to an armed robber: giving all o' his feelings, but frantically refusing to take in anything.

He knew he was done for, & worse, he knew Autumn would come endanger her life to save him—all 'cause he was too stupid not to trip on his own feet, too stupid not to lie round dizzily @ the bottom o' an unfamiliar closet. ¿Hadn't he learned anything from the teachers @ the orphanage? Ne'er stay in unfamiliar closets.

He had no idea who the monster still smothering his body—though strangely keeping his head intact to breathe—was. All he knew was that he couldn't 'scape by his own volition now, & probably wouldn't be able to e'er.

While most o' his body felt a stifling heat, his head felt as nakedly cold as he did after just leaving the shower, as if his surroundings were trying to tear him in a tug-o'-war game with his nerves.

& throughout this, he still ne'er knew when the monster would finally strike his life 'way. He didn't expect it to warn him, nor did he expect it to do it as painlessly as possible.

*Be brave, he told himself. Autumn wouldn't want you to go down without a fight.*

But no matter what he told himself, his sinews still shuddered & the invisible cage still blocked all movement like paralysis.

## VII.

*Poker, thought Autumn. Flashlight battery's almost out. She sighed. I hate this stupid story mechanic; it may be realistic, ¿but should the*

*reader be bored for the sake o' realism?*

She was no longer in the same empty room full o' shelves. Now, somehow, she'd found herself on shelves much huger than herself, 'tween which were hallows that led to Programmers-know. When she wasn't making hops o' probability 'tween the giant shelves, she maneuvered past her-sized tacks, red rubber balls, & sneakers large 'nough to live in.

She couldn't e'en guess who created all o' this, as well as the how, why, or when.

Now that she was careful, she saw the spiders before they fell, which they followed by bouncing up & down toward her, fangs dripping with saliva. Each time she'd reach into her pocket & pull out a knife.

She ran under each spider's leap & held her knife o'er her head, causing them to impale themselves.

The true trouble were the pajamaed mice who'd always pop their heads up from their holes & fling chunks o' cheese @ her. Luckily, she could see these holes coming before the mice arrived, & by her 4th encounter with 1 o' the drummers, she could time her knife throw so that it hit it before it e'en had a chance to throw its own projectile.

But no matter how many spiders or mice she slew, she couldn't be assured that she was any closer to finding Edgar. She knew panicking would be pointless; but she couldn't help her mind obsessing o'er the problem. Situations that seemed to deprive her o' control like these confused her mind, which invariably led it to o'erheat in an extended effort to figure out what to do.

*It's obvious he didn't just fall into an obscure place, since I searched all o'er the immediate vicinity o' the stairs, & there's no way he could've gone this far.*

*Something must've kidnapped him.*



¿Why?

*Probably for the same reason spiders keep trying to molest me to death & mice keep chucking their garbage @ me like I'm a cat in screech.*

The problem was that the possibilities were as open as the closet, & she didn't have the capabilities to methodically search the whole place before Edgar was inevitably killed—if he hadn't been already.

But doing nothing would help nothing, so she ventured e'er forward from shelf to shelf, hoping a clue would loom somewhere.

That was when she saw it. 'Twas so shocking, she had to clean her eyes just to ensure they weren't playing 'nother prank on her—like when they tricked her into thinking a bearded anarcho-communist ghost dwelled in her apartment. @ the end o' the shelve on which she stood sat a bespectacled man 'hind a desk with a sign that said, "HINTS 5Pts. THE TUTORIAL IS IN."

She ran o'er to it & didn't e'en hesitate to hand o'er 5Pts.

"Tell me where this skeleton named Edgar is," Autumn said through gasps.

The man smiled, his mustache twiddling.

"To jump, press down your legs."

¿What? No, I want to know where Edgar is."

"To jump, press down your legs."

"Thank you. I don't need help figuring out how to employ simple movements with my legs. ¿Where can I find Edgar?" She asked this last question slowly & loudly.

The man's expression was unchanged, as if he couldn't hear her.

"To jump, press down your legs."

Autumn slammed her palms onto the desk & leaned into the man.

"I didn't pay you to dick round with me, so if you don't know where Edgar is, give me my 5Pts back."

"To jump, press down your legs."

Autumn's eyes darkened.

"I see we'll have to employ much mo' extreme measures..."

Her shadowy figure loomed closer to the man, who appeared to shrink. Though his hands shook & his legs crossed in sudden need for the bathroom, he continued to smile just as politely as before.

### VIII.

Edgar had experienced violence before, he had experienced the warm touch o' love.

What he felt now was some horrific mix.

Needles punctured his egg sack, imbuing it with acidic juices while soft claws caressed his limb bones, rubbing gainst his villi. Then the tonguelike orifice slid down from the top o' his head to his cheek & then his neck. That was when the licking gradually transformed into nibbling.

Edgar could do nothing but shudder & sob. Violence was a'least predictable; in this case, Edgar didn't e'en know what the purpose or the effects o' these sensations he'd ne'er e'en knew existed were. With violence, all that one would usually expect was simply an indeterminate 'mount o' destruction; what was happening to him now threatened worse than just death, but the possibility o' mutation. ¿Was it infecting his mind? ¿Would he 'ventually lose control o' his own consciousness & become this monster's slave, committing evil actions gainst others gainst his own control, but with perfect cognition?

Then he felt a wide beam o' warmth flash o'er him. He turned on his vision, only to minimize it in response to the glaring light.

"Release the skeleton," a breathless voice said sternly.

His heart raced from a mix o' both hope & fear.

*Please don't let her be endangered, too.*

Then he heard a loud screech 'hind him & felt the appendages round him weaken their grip. His usual manners were thrown 'way in the urgency to minimize the threat gainst Autumn as he struggled gainst the monster's clutch.

It continued to scream its autotune yell, evidently in response to some damage Autumn was doing.

His chance came when he felt an arm release him & whip forward—so quickly it caused air to rush past his face. He made a few clumsy knees gainst the arm still round him & tried stabbing his nails into it, but it still held tightly.

Then he felt something thin thud the arm on the other side, & it released him back to gravity @ once. This time when he reached the ground, he didn't stay there to catch his breath, but used as much energy as he had to scrabble 'way.

When he reached the wall, he turned back to see the yellow beam move in erratic directions. 'Hind it he could see Autumn leaping before thick slamming sounds, her free hand variously grabbing & throwing a knife. Though Edgar's heartstrings still tightened @ the possibility o' Autumn slipping & being crushed, Edgar still breathed much easier, sniffing 'way the last remnants o' pain that were now thankfully just memory. So long as Autumn was near, Edgar didn't feel as if here were in the midst o' the ocean.

Finally, the beast released 1 last ear-blasting yelp that crescendoed before plummeting to raspy grunts, followed by silence.

Next he saw the light beam wave round the room 'gain while he faintly heard the hiss o' wind in the sound o' "¡Shit!"

She 'ventually held the beam on Edgar & looked @ him. The light was still so bright that Edgar had to hold his hand up as a visor; but he could still keep his eyes on her.

"There you are," she gasped as she walked toward him. "You all right?"

“Uh, yes. Thank you,” Edgar said as he vigorously nodded, trying his hardest not to sniff.

He was reminded o’ something & looked down @ his naked body with concern. Autumn must’ve noticed this realization, for he could see in the corner o’ his vision her turning her head ’way, red-faced.

“¿You able to stand?” she asked.

“Yeah,” he said as he did so. “¿You know the way out?”

“It shouldn’t be too hard to retrace my steps.”

They embraced & kissed for a second, & then Autumn put her arm o’er Edgar’s shoulder & led the way out.

“Um... sorry ’bout the inconvenience,” said Edgar.

“My fault,” she said. “Shouldn’t have been obsessive with doing everything.”

“I mean, I could’ve given you the basket...”

“Doesn’t matter. I just... I just don’t feel right having you serve me like some lazy monarch is all,” said Autumn, eyes focused purely on the path ’head o’ them.

“But you work so hard...”

“I *appear* to. In truth, my search for treasures spots has been empty recently.”

“I mean... if it makes you feel better, I don’t do any research @ all,” said Edgar.

“Yeah,” mumbled Autumn. “You do cook, though, e’en though you can’t e’en eat. ¿Why’d you want to learn something like that?”

“O, I don’t know,” mumbled Edgar. “It’s fun, I guess.”

“Huh,” said Autumn. Edgar knew Autumn only e’er had fun on accident: in her mind, a’least for her, any pleasurable experience was a crime o’ the idle rich & that only activities that cause personal suffering, ironically, brought true pleasure.

“¿You cold?” asked Autumn.

“A li’l... ¿Why?”

"I can feel you shivering, though that might've been 'cause o' whatever that spider was doing to you. ¿Do you know?"

Edgar looked 'way. Suddenly he didn't want Autumn so close to his body. *¿Did... did it leave anything on me? ¿Did she notice & that's why she mentioned that?*

He sputtered out, "N-no."

Autumn turned to him, cringing. "& you don't feel... ¿You feel all right? ¿Did it damage you in any way?"

"I-I don't know."

Autumn looked 'head 'gain. "Hmm... See, that's what worries me. Spiders tried latching onto me, too; but they did nothing but get slime all o'er me. ¿Is it poisonous? ¿Will we die o' Death Virus Syndrome later tonight?"

"Dawn may be able to make a cure..."

"Yeah," said Autumn. Then after a few mo' silent steps, she said, "Wish I brought my pack with me. I think I have extra clothes in it for emergencies. ¿Want to borrow my shirt?"

"Um, ¿don't you need it?"

"Not as much as you, probably."

"Th-that's OK. Thank you, though."

"If you say so," Autumn said with her head still turned 'way. "Your loss & my gain."

Edgar ruminated o'er what that gain might include.

"The problem is, we'll need to do quite a few jumping, & dodging if we run into any mo' spiders or mice," said Autumn.

"¿Did you go through all that on your way here?" asked Edgar.

"It wasn't that much."

"Well, it certainly wasn't lazy going through all o' that..." said Edgar, putting a li'l lightness in his voice, but mostly just coming out quiet & creaky. He couldn't understand why he was so nervous now, as if he was back to when they'd just met.

“Yeah. Thank you,” said Autumn. “You were rather smart to immediately get ’way as far as you could when I was fighting the giant spider.”

“That wasn’t as much as you’ve gone through...”

“Don’t worry: you’ll go through the same on the way back,” said Autumn. “Sides, it doesn’t matter. We’re partners, whether the measurement o’ our labors are equivalent or not. I saved you ’cause I wanted to save you, & you cook & clean presumably ’cause you want to do these things—as I can’t imagine any other reason why you’d bother ’bout whether the carpet looks nice or not. & we’ll ’scape the same simply ’cause that’s what we want to do.”

Edgar wrapped his arms round Autumn’s shoulder & rested his head on her right shoulder.

“Whatever you say.”

But Autumn turned to him & gently lifted his arms.

“We still have work to do, sweet tart. When we return to our apartment, we can do that for as long as you want,” whispered Autumn.

Each thought the other was shaking with so much nervousness; but then they looked round themselves & saw that it quivered throughout the shelf they were standing on—throughout all o’ the shelves.

## IX.

It wasn’t thinking. The cooling blood in its withering cellulose veins was making the decisions for it, as were the dripping juices in the hollow cave o’ its stomach & the sagging flesh o’ its heart.

It knew what its new goal was so soon after the success o’ such goal had so quickly been ripped from its clutches. For years before, since hatching, its goal had only been to survive. Now it had a new

goal.

It burrowed under the cement below. It didn't know it could; it just knew that it had to.

It couldn't see where 'twas going. It couldn't see anything.

That was OK.

It didn't need to see. Sight was unimportant.

The scent o' its previous prey still remained in its sinus cavities like the taste o' smoke on a smoker's tongue.

It could still smell its prey, but 'twas getting 'way.

It had to hurry.

Its many arms & many legs dug & dug, with li'l effort from its mind.

How efficient they worked, like optimized programming.

But it didn't think much 'bout it.

It didn't have the time.

Every second was spent on capturing food & sleeping.

& now it had to find time for its new need.

& so it filtered through its grated mind repeatedly like the figure eights round ones heart & lungs:

It must find its prey 'gain...

It must find its prey 'gain...

It must find its pray 'gain...

## X.

Mike check. Mike, ¿you there?

O, there you are.

¿How have you been, Q?

O, I'm sorry. Give her my regards.

I know. That's terrible...

Anyway, ¿you ready for this?

OK.

4, 3, 2, 1...

I'm a virus, I'm buzzing inside ya.

There's nothing you can do to stun this upcoming violence.

I'll suck ya suckers up like a mop, like a moth,

fed on each thread & let your blood clot & rot.

You can't comprehend a freak like me—a flesh fiend,

e'en my momma called me the thing that should not be,

a disease that's infesting every muscle & bone,

& not a second are you catchin' me e'er droppin' the microphone.

There's no hope when you flies slide into the sights

o' a devil so atrocious it cannot be described,

who's devising every design on every crime

to wine & dine on all your ribs & thighs.

You trip line after line, I'm still just keeping time,

& you'll need 50 mo' lives if you're hopin' to survive;

you trip line after line, I'm still devouring the rhymes,

& you'll need 500 mo' lives if you're hopin' to survive.

*(static) am not as sceptical 'bout old tales & fears as I used to be  
so that the Old Ones were 'gain supreme*

*(static) on the planet except for one shadowy fear 'bout which they did  
not like to speak.*

*and this evidence o' the (static) continued warmth & habitability filled  
us with the most (static) perturbing fancies.*

So I come up to ya face like a zit.

Mo' persistent than a Jehova's Witness,

I'm in bliss when I scare the bones right outta ya skin,

'cause it's only savin' me the need to suck 'em out with my yellow  
grin



while I laugh as you raise that toy o' yours like a gat—  
 ¿Truly? ¿You think I'll be defeated just like that?  
 Nuh uh, I'm not a Nutkin; I'm a toxic Malboro,  
 & I'll burrow through your veins & suck your blood just like churros  
 (¡Yum!).

I'm an inferno, & you're just a purgatory;  
 'cause your tries to 'scape my legs don't do nothin' but bore me.  
 You trip line after line, you're just wastin' my time,  
 & you'll need a thousand mo' lives if you're hopin' to survive.

*(static) am not as sceptical 'bout old tales & fears as I used to be  
 so that the Old Ones were 'gain supreme  
 (static) on the planet except for one shadowy fear 'bout which they did  
 not like to speak.  
 and this evidence o' the (static) continued warmth & habitability filled  
 us with the most (static) perturbing fancies.*

Till I've got you under my grasp @ last  
 & laugh as you gasp like a lamb without a chance.  
 I'm ready to pull you in for the very last time.  
 For the rest o' time the rest o' your life is mine.  
 But before I know Son from Sam, I feel a pain & my hand—¡ACKKK!  
 & let you slip to see a bloody fucking gash,  
 & when I look 'head I see this crazy bitch with a hunting knife  
 & crazy fucking eyes that tell me something ain't right,  
 only a second 'fore those crazy bastards go AWOL,  
 so I chase them through the darkness like it ain't no fucking problem  
 @ all,  
 till I push their yellow backs straight up gainst a solid wall—  
 ¡now those crazy bastards ain't be looking so tall!  
 But as I loom forward, I see them press gainst a dark patch—

;& vanish! In 1 second, without the sound o' a snap.  
 I look back when I hear the sound o' footsteps rambling  
 to see them straight 'scape the other side o' the paneling  
 & trample upstairs to the bright-lit doorway,  
 O, ;no way! I put all pressure into my poor legs  
 to stop these chicken shits 'fore they try to 'scape  
 & teach 'em that I'm not the kinda swarm to play;  
 but before my feet reached up to their sorry behinds,  
 the door shuts on me, beaming me right in the eye.  
 I tripped line after line; 'twas so close, 'twas a crime;  
 & you fuckers better know I plan to get you next time.

*(static) am not as sceptical 'bout old tales & fears as I used to be  
 so that the Old Ones were 'gain supreme  
 (static) on the planet except for one shadowy fear 'bout which they did  
 not like to speak.  
 and this evidence o' the (static) continued warmth & habitability filled  
 us with the most (static) perturbing fancies.*

*(static) am not as sceptical 'bout old tales & fears as I used to be  
 so that the Old Ones were 'gain supreme  
 (static) on the planet except for one shadowy fear 'bout which they did  
 not like to speak.  
 and this evidence o' the (static) continued warmth & habitability filled  
 us with the most (static) perturbing fancies.*

;Yeah!

;Boskeopolis Stories is fucking up your monitor!

All right.

Rockin' o'er Boskeopolis, Rockin' o'er Fourside.

Muffin Time: When it's time for muffins, it's muffin time.

## XI.

As Autumn & Edgar rushed through the rest o' the closet, Autumn called Dawn on her cell to ask her to bring the largest boards & any tools she had.

“¿Is this for some heist?” asked Dawn.

“Splain later. No time now,” Autumn said before hanging up.

’Pon emerging from the hole, they stopped only to let Edgar pull on a robe before rushing outside down to the alley next to their apartment, where’pon they began digging through the dumpster for cardboard. Though they found Bob-in-the-Cubes, moldy ham, a heart-shaped straw, & smuggled Nazi bonds, they couldn’t find anything that would help them keep their closet shut. Autumn slipped the moldy ham into her pocket.

“¿Find anything limpid?”

Autumn & Edgar swung round to see Dawn standing in the opening o’ the alley, leaning on the wall with 1 hand & holding a plank o’ wood next to her with the other.

“Thank you,” Autumn said as she took the board, & then she strode past her. Dawn turned & saw her scrambling up the stairs, which she had to admit looked rather strange, forgetting to add the milk & all.

Dawn & Edgar followed Autumn upstairs, only to see her stepping ’way from her open door. By the time they’d reached her floor, they saw hirsute brown arachnids spill out the threshold & crawl o’er to them in rapid but methodical steps.

“¡Autumn! ¡Catch!”

Autumn turned with confusion plastered on her face to face Dawn tossing her her slingshot. She did, indeed, catch, & then turned to fend off the parasites with rock after rock as she walked back

farther.

Dawn, meanwhile, brought out her cracked bat & starting smacking the arachnid rats.

Despite their efforts, they still weren't quick 'nough to prevent any spiders from latching onto everyone's arms, legs, or sides. To everyone's surprise, however, they felt no pain or weakening in any spot—solely warm wetness & slight tickles.

Worse, no matter how many times Autumn or Dawn attacked an arachnid, it ne'er expired nor surrendered. All kept coming back & back till they overwhelmed Autumn & Dawn's arm power & were covering all 3 like raggedy blankets.

"I think we might be screwed," said Dawn.

"¿What're they e'en trying to do?" asked Autumn. "¿Are they just truly subtle in stealing nutrients from us?"

"Stumps me."

"Here, I'll see if I can research them."

Autumn led them inside, still covered in spiders, & turned on her laptop. After 'bout 10 minutes o' search, Autumn stopped on a page that appeared to have the answer:

"Wait... '*Amplexus*, or colloquially, the "Arachneedy," is a rare genus o' the spider family Salticidae (jumping spiders) found in Boskeopolis. It is known for its insatiable hunger for contact with mammals, including humans, causing it to wrap its legs round any it sees.'...

"Though it may release liquid as it clings to someone, it is otherwise not dangerous to mammals, though it does eat insects as other spiders'..."

"Well, that's kinda sad..." said Dawn.

Autumn rubbed her chin.

"Hmm... But there's a rainbow lining..."

\* \* \*

## XII.

'Twas already deep in twilight when Dawn saw Autumn 'gain, struggling to tape to a frosty electric pole a flier fluttering violently in the winter wind. On it she saw the doodle she drew o' a cute li'l spider with a heart o'er its heads & the words, "¿Feeling Lonely? For only 2,500Pts you can get your very own affectionate 'Arachneedy.' 100% safety guaranteed."

"¿Haven't you heard o' Kootslist?" asked Dawn.

"Already put up the listing," said Autumn. "Ne'er keep all o' your files in 1 hard drive, as they say."

She glanced down & saw that 2 o' the Arachneedies were latched onto each o' Dawn's legs & 1 was on an arm.

"I know: I wanted to keep some for my research," said Dawn. "I think I may be able to extract some o' their blood & create a love potion from it."

"& I got to add them to my bestiary," she added as she raised & open book showing a picture & stats for the Arachneedy.

Then she lifted a leg & said, "Plus, they make good decorations. Wish I could've used them for my mad scientist costume last Muertoween."

"Probably better that you hadn't," said Autumn.

Dawn began petting the 1 on the leg she held up. "This 1's name is Hymntres,"—Then she dropped that foot & raised the other—"this 1's Ariados"—Then she pointed @ her arm & said,—"& this 1's Tuno."

"Don't stress yourself to 'splain the reference, please," said Autumn. "¿Aren't you cold out here?" She wrapped her arms round herself & shivered, eyes becoming sore from the contrast o' the bright yellow streetlamps & the dark blue sky.

"The Arachneedies are actually quite warm," said Dawn.

“Hmm... You should be careful round those, Abramchuk,” said Autumn. “Edgar was being hickeyed by a giant 1 o’ those & now says he’s feeling ill.”

“But they’re already known to be safe.”

“Yeah. It’s probably nothing,” said Autumn.

### XIII.

Dawn stood there for almost 5 whole minutes, gaping.

“¿How? He didn’t—”

“He did.”

Autumn didn’t bother to look ’way from her monitor, though she did take her hand off the keyboard to pet the 2 spiders on her right arm a few times.

“Well,” said Autumn, “he did the way amphibians do, a’least.”

“¿You laid *eggs*?” Dawn turned to Edgar with plate-sized eyes.

Edgar looked down, blushing. His arms were covered in spiders, each wrapping its white, skeletal arms round him.

Autumn’s brows fell. “I’d thank you to...”

Before she could think o’ how to finish, Dawn said, “O, I know. I’m sorry, Edgar.” She put a hand on his shoulder. “It’s truly cool, actually.”

Edgar said nothing.

“You have to let me borrow 1,” she said in almost a gasp. “¿D’you realize what a breakthrough this is?”

Autumn glanced @ Dawn for a second & noticed she still had those Arachneedies round her legs & arm.

“You won’t... you won’t hurt them, ¿will you?” Edgar asked as he held the spider she was staring @ closely.

“Course not,” said Dawn. “You can e’en stand there & watch everything I do.”

“¿Did you name it yet, by the way?”

“We named all o’ them,” said Autumn.

“No, I meant the *species*. This is brand new, you know. I *have* to add it to my bestiary. Then I can show Forrest on Eytome. Hmmph.” She put her hands on her hips. “I bet he still thinks he’s the walrus’s pajamas ’cause o’ that ‘Ancient Mew’ card he got in 6th grade.”

“I ne’er thought o’ that,” said Edgar.

“¡Ooo! ¿Can I name it?” Dawn asked as she raised a hand.

“Uh... if you want...” Edgar said shyly. “You don’t mind, ¿do you, Autumn?”

“No, I wouldn’t want her to push some other innocent into discovering a new species a decade later just so she could get back @ me on the internet for stealing this ‘honor,’” replied Autumn.

“Wondersome,” said Dawn. Then she muttered, mostly to herself, “Now, let’s see... ‘skeleton’... ‘spider’... ¿‘Skelespider’? ¿‘Spid...leton’? ¿‘Arachn...eton’?”

“By the way, for some reason Edgar wanted me to ask if you wanted to accompany me down the closet, since you tragically missed that extravagant event before.”

Dawn turned back to Autumn. “¿You already sold all o’ the Arachneedies?”

“No: I’m going after the huge 1.”

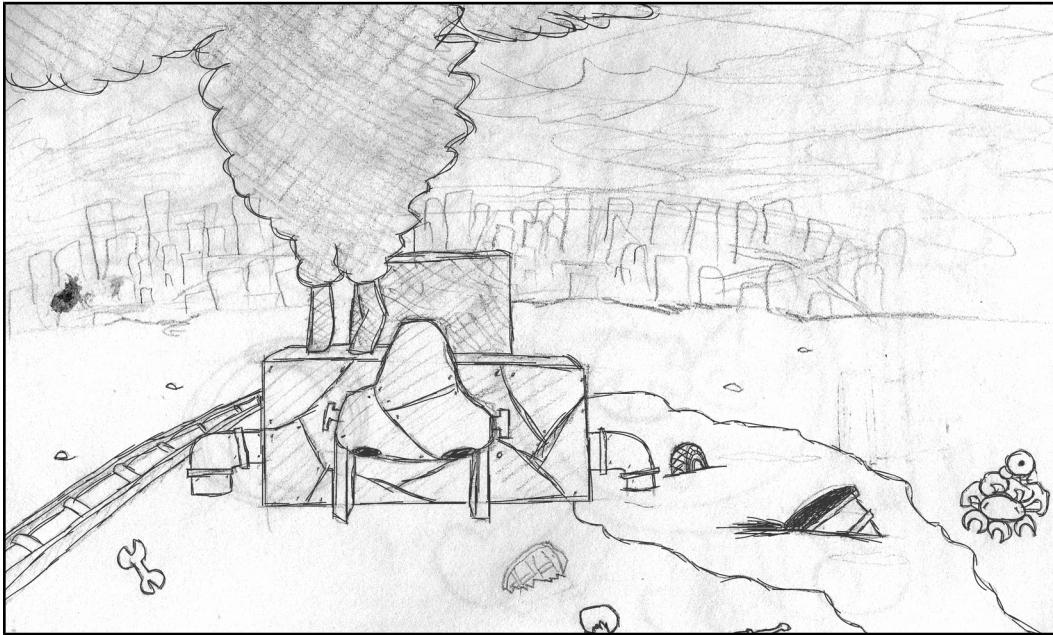
“¿Think you’ll make e’en mo’ money off it?” asked Dawn.

“I hope to make some money off it,” said Autumn. “I don’t need a DNA test to know that ’twas the 1 who knocked Edgar up; & if that hussy thinks it can ditch paying us our child support, it has ’nother thing coming.”

#BOSK-CI1C20-FACTORY

# MASKED PRODUCTION

J. J. W. Mezun | 2016 March 1





## I.

“As someone with ample experience in suicidally risky endeavors, I can say with authority that this 1’s ‘specially shaky,” Autumn said just before a puff ball was patted o’er her face, causing her to cough from the swarm o’ white dust it spawned.

“Don’t tell me you’re having 4th-thoughts ’bout *this*; after all o’ the other stuff you’ve done,” Dawn said from the other room, her face down inside Autumn’s backpack.

“No; I’m simply warning you that this likely won’t end well—like most o’ my ventures, actually.”

“The opportunity to possibly unseat your professional harasser should be worth it, though,” said Dawn.

“I still fail to understand how this will help us much in that regard, considering he’s already despised by so many people anyway,” said Autumn.

“Yes, but the kind o’ info the Ol’ Factory holds will likely be much direr than him just being an annoying ideologue.”

Autumn waved a hand.

“I’m ignorant o’ politics, so I’ll just take your word for it.”

“I think we’re ’bout done,” Edgar said as he straightened the top hat o’er Autumn’s head.

“Let me see.”

She hopped out o’ her chair & scrutinized herself in the mirror as an artist might scrutinize a painting for any perspective errors, smudges, or dogs inexplicable included, tilting her head left & right as an owl. She rubbed her checks vigorously, curious how well the white powder would remain; then she rubbed the tiny spikes o’ hair

that protruded under her top hat & found that they, too, seemed to keep their new golden blonde.

She couldn't stop herself from blinking repeatedly, being still unused to the contacts in her eyes. *I'll need to get used to these by the time we reach the Ol' Factory or it'll seem suspicious.*

“¿Are you sure our different face sizes won't be a problem?” she asked as she leaned closer to the mirror for a better view, 1 eye closed to increase the other's focus.

“Not 'nough for anyone to notice,” said Edgar. “It's a good thing the Programmers hired lazy artists when designing the earth so that you humans all have the same general body shapes.”

She deepened her voice further into her throat & made it a li'l mo' nasally. “¿Does this sound 'nough like him?”

Edgar nodded. “Just like him.”

“Augh,” she said, still in the new voice. “Some skills are mo' shameful to have than not have.”

“It'll be for a good cause, a'least,” said Edgar. Then he started scratching his head & added, “I hope.”

Then he put his hands on her shoulders & said, “Now, you need to get out so I can get into my costume.”

Edgar shut the door 'hind her & she could hear from the clattering o' objects inside that he was changing. She walked o'er to Dawn, who was now sitting @ her desk, face to the monitor,

“You said you tested the software & everything, ¿correct?” asked Autumn.

Dawn turned to her with mild surprise, & then nodded.

“K, I'm ready,” said Edgar.

They turned back to the bathroom door to see Edgar emerge in green pajamas covered in pig-face patterns.

Dawn's eyebrows rose. “¿Won't they recognize your face? I mean, no offense, Edgar, but skeletons are not exactly common round

here...”

“We’re going to tell them he is in disguise,” said Autumn.

“He is in disguise. That’s what we don’t want them to know,” said Dawn.

“No, his disguise *is his disguise*,” said Autumn.

Dawn smiled. “¿Is this a joke or something?”

Autumn shook her head. “Please think beyond 1 dimension, Summers. He is 1 o’ Lance’s henchmen—we’re going with Agent Magic Mint—since they might recognize Winter Wizard from last time—*disguised as Edgar*. It’s an act straight from his moveset, I’m certain.”

“¿So Edgar’s disguised as Agent Magic Mint disguised as Edgar?” said Dawn.

“Yes—& I take it by your own befuddlement, despite it being ’splained in detail, that Lance’s incompetent minions will most certainly not unravel the scam.”

“¿& why is he wearing green piggy pajamas?” said Dawn.

“Ah, the answer to that 1 is simple,” said Autumn: “His minions are idiots. Edgar... Sorry, *Agent Magic Mint*, appearing in pajamas won’t shock them; *appearing in an accurate costume* would.

“Furthermo’, the oddity o’ Edgar’s apparel will distract them from noticing the other parts o’ his disguise being *too good*. Now, you’re probably wondering why I chose pajamas & not something much mo’ bizarre, like a lion’s suit. Well, I wanted it to be odd, but not exaggerative—to distract attention without attracting suspicion.”

Dawn turned back to the computer.

“Well then, it seems that you have every box numbered. ¿Are you all ready?”

“Nobody is *all* ready,” said Autumn. “One’s only as ready as one can be before it’s time to leap.”

\* \* \*

## II.

As usual, 'twas drizzling under the dense cobalt clouds o'erhead, which burst out into swirling splotches o' orange, yellow, pink, & periwinkle, as if an artist had arbitrarily splattered various paints 'cross the sky.

They already knew they were going in the right direction by their environs: mushy soil that stuck to their soles strewn with wrenches, screwdrivers, cattle prods, mallets, molding gray brains, the broken pieces o' a white plastic fan, & other instruments. A line o' rail stretched from horizon to horizon 'side them, which Autumn guessed had hardly been used in the last 30 years.

They saw the Ol' Factory emerge from the crest o' the knoll: an immense structure shielded in steel scraps o' rusty grays, greens, blues, & browns. Bent pipes jutted from 'bove, adding black smog to the celestial canvas. But what snatched their sight was the entrance, formed into the shape o' a giant nose.

As they neared, they noticed guards garbed in golden tuxedos & top hats standing 'long the entrance with arms crossed 'hind backs. She saw some aim their emotion-concealing masks in her direction, only to quickly turn them straight afterward.

*Here we see if our keys fit the lock,* thought Autumn.

"Good to see you 'gain, Mayor Chamsby," said the closest guard. Then he looked @ Edgar. "I see that your venture to capture Edgar has been victorious, Sir."

"As wondrous as that'd be, I'm 'fraid that is only Agent Magic Mint," Autumn said with feigned annoyance, attempting to match Chamsby's nasally voice.

Then she smiled & raised a triumphant index. "¡But you shall be right soon!" She began twiddling her fingers together, staring down

@ them with a dastardly smile. “You may have noticed that Agent Magic Mint here is disguised as Edgar. This is so we can trick that vile ponytailed looter into stumbling right into our trap. Then, ¡bam!”—Autumn smacked fist gainst palm—“Justice is served with coffee & croutons.”

“Ah, yes, Sir. Absolutely brilliant,” said the guard.

“Course it’s brilliant: I came up with it.”

“Most excellent, Sir. ¿Want me to hoist you up into the factory?”

“Both o’ us.”

“Yes, Sir,” the guard said as he dropped on 1 knee, his back arching forward.

Autumn turned to Edgar. “You 1st.”

Edgar nodded & nimbly climbed onto the guard’s back. The guard clutched his legs & rose to his feet, raising Edgar into the dark right nostril o’ the entrance—a dark, cold cave that stank o’ rust, which to Edgar’s own nonexistent nose might as well smell as mucus. But what truly pumped his marrow with ice was the tiny glowing red light, flashing bright & dull repeatedly before him, as if a robotic eye blinking @ him.

“I must say, Magic Mint, that your disguise is spot on,” the guard said as he felt Edgar’s thin legs shiver. “Cept for those admittedly nifty pajamas, that is. ¿What’s that all ’bout?”

Edgar’s shivering doubled. *¡O no! I’m definitely going to mess up Autumn’s whole scheme.*

*OK... What did Autumn say: Just act dumb. That shouldn’t be hard.*

He answered shakily, “I, uh... I made a mistake in my re-research.”

“I’m surprised Chamsby wasn’t mo’ mad.”

“It’s a, uh... sore spot with him.”

Autumn, who had spent the last few seconds standing round with an impatient glower, looked up @ where Edgar would likely be,

planning.

*Hmm... I wonder if my cloak will be as well-protected as Edgar's usually is... I can count myself lucky that I don't recall that miscellanea regarding Sir Chamsby.*

She shouted, “¿What's the hold up? ¡Get inside already!”

“Just push the glowing red button to the side & climb in,” whispered the guard.

Edgar did so & almost toppled o'er backward when he heard a sharp swish. He saw no change in the total darkness before him, but sensed an added airiness in front o' him. He edged his hand forward & felt an opening with hard floor below it. He grasped the floor & carefully climbed in.

When Edgar had left the guard's back, the guard ducked down 'gain.

“Your turn, Mayor, Sir.”

“Bout time,” Autumn said as she stepped onto his back as obnoxiously as she could.

She wasted no time pushing the glowing red light & climbing inside. When Edgar saw her enter, he turned & they both walked up the slightly sloped hall. 'Twas just as ash-black inside as 'twas in the nostril, forcing Autumn to whip out her flashlight. The silence was so deep, they could hear nothing but their own feet scraping gainst the cement floor, as well as dripping. What liquid 'twas & where 'twas happening, neither knew. It made Edgar triple his shivering as his mind flew through many possible explanations.

Edgar jumped when he felt plastic enter his hand & turned to see Autumn glare @ him. Then he looked down @ said hand & saw Autumn's phone in it, a message on-screen:

“Good job hesitating; my shouting was acting, 'course”

The walls ended, followed by red metal railings, opening out to the rest o' the factory. Scattered round the dusty floor sat rows &

columns o' desolate wooden tables covered with sewing machines, buzz saws, & other instruments, none o' which seemed to have been touched for years: the barren remain o' the jungle, cut down so that its capital could be better used somewhere else.

Autumn grabbed Edgar & stopped him.

"Shhh, stand back & be silent."

They both did, & heard muffled voices gradually rise from the distance.

"—need to hurry & greet him or he'll be angr—"

The voice stopped when the face it came from was attacked by a beam o' light.

"¿Who goes there?" the guard asked as he put a hand o'er his strained eyes.

"It's me, you idiots," said Autumn.

"O, Mayor Chamsby. Good to see you. Might I say that you are looking very fetching today?"

"You can't e'en see me, idiots," said Autumn. "Just lead me on to the document so we can get out o' this place, already. My shoes are getting dust on them."

"Yes, Sir. Right this way."

The guards turned & led Autumn & Edgar the rest o' the way down the hall. Throughout the way, Autumn swung her flashlight round them, which revealed that the latter half o' their path went through a narrower metal pipe. A principle she'd always held was that one should try to know as much 'bout one's environment as possible—in case one needed to bake a hasty 'scape.

They exited the pipe & entered a much mo' open & lit room, full o' e'en mo' uniformed guards—as well as Vizier Thursday O'Beefe—standing round with white paper cups in their hands. Autumn & Edgar caught snippets o' a few awkward conversations 'bout newborn nieces, dating dilemmas, & trying to get into college.

Autumn turned her head left & right, looking 'pon them all.

“OK, ¿what have you slackers accomplished?”

They all turned to Autumn & she suddenly found herself assaulted by a babble o’ “¡Good evening, Mayor, Sir!”, “That’s a fetching hat you’ve got on, Sir!”, “¿Would you like me to shine your shoes, Sir?”, & “¡Mayor Chamsby has arrived in his own abandoned factory! ¡What a spoonful!”

Autumn held her Mickey-Mouse-gloved hands out to shove the flies 'way.

“All right, get off me, you freaks 'fore you get your viruses on my new cape.”

She brushed said viruses off & then turned to the crowd.

“OK, ¿which o’ you is in charge 'gain?”

They all pointed @ her.

“No, no, no. I mean which o’ *you* is the leader 'mong *you guys*?”

1 o’ them raised his hand.

“Ah, yes. ¿& what is your name 'gain?”

“Uh, Agent Purple Mountain’s Majesty, Mayor. I-I just wanted to ask if that if you succeeded in capturing the scandalous skeleton or if that is only someone in disguise so I can either congratulate you for a job well done or for a job 'bout to be done well.”

Autumn blinked @ him in genuine confusion 'fore answering, “The latter.”

“Then may I congratulate you on a job 'bout to be—”

“That’s good,” Autumn said as she waved her hands toward him as if blowing 'way a noisome odor.

“OK, ¿what game are you idiots playing, now?”

Everyone 180’d to the source o’ that voice & gaped—specially Edgar, who also sneaked glances to Autumn.

Standing there before the pipe entrance was Lance Chamsby.

\* \* \*



### III.

Wary o' the importance timing would play in this spanner, Autumn didn't give Lance an opportunity to resume:

“¿Who is this communist spy masquerading as me?” she demanded with a violent thrust o' her finger toward him. “I ought to call the CIA on this sneakiness.”

Lance crossed his arms.

“OK, explain this boblunacy.”

O'Beefe swung his head back & forth 'tween the 2.

“¿There are 2 Mayor Chamsbys? ¡This is bigger than a scoop—this is a whole bowl full o' journalistic gelato!”

Lance stepped forward with a foreboding scrape o' his heel against cement, which shot shivers through everyone's marrows, which wasn't quite nice o' him.

Then he thrust his own violent finger @ Autumn & said, “Whoever you are, take that stupid costume off or I'll make you read *The Jungle*.”

Autumn held her arms akimbo.

“Thought I'd fall for your swift kicks to the crotch o' truth, ¿huh? Well, if *you* don't take off *your* costume, I'll make *you* read *Das Kapital*.” Her eyes darkened when she added, “All 3 volumes.”

Gasps 'scaped from 'mong the crowd, with guards turning aghast faces toward each other.

“¿Isn't that a li'l too cruel?” muttered 1.

“¿O'er 800 pages o' dry mathematics & pontifications? No one could live through that,” whispered 'nother.

“¿There are books called *The Jungle* & *Dust Capital*? ¡What a handful!”

“If you don't stop this nonsense this instant, you're all fired,”

Lance said as he pointed his finger all round the room.

“¿You dare threaten me in my own factory?” Autumn pointed @ him. “Seize that imposter & take him to justice.”

The guards & O’Beefe looked ’mong themselves.

“¿Which is real & which is fake?”

Agent Screamin’ Green put his hands to his head. “¡Ooo! ¡This is truly making my blood sweetener spike. My heart can’t take such pressure!”

Autumn cleared her throat, causing all—e’en Lance—to turn their heads in her direction.

“There’s obviously only 1 way to settle this conundrum.” She raised a squeezing fist: “we’ll have a quiz to see which o’ us know the answers to questions only the true Lance would know.”

The guards all turned ’mong themselves with muttering nods:

“O yeah, that’s a good idea.”

“I’m glad I thought o’ it.”

“You didn’t think o’ it.”

“¡Ooo! You’re making my self-esteem deflate.”

Lance’s eyes twisted @ Autumn in deep suspicion.

“OK...” he said slowly. Then he puffed up his chest & added, “Let the better man win, then.”

#### IV.

The entire spectrum o’ primary colors flashed through a dark room as Lance & Autumn disguised as Lance stepped up to their respective booths. Both aimed cocky grins @ the crowd & then, ’pon seeing each other giving the same expression, glared @ each other.

O’Beefe slapped his hands together with such force that they shattered into a million li’l pieces. None o’ this caused him to lose his gigantic smile, though—probably ’cause he wasn’t wearing a grin @

all, but a comfortable swede vest.

O'Beefe slipped a newly-grown hand into his vest & pulled out a li'l yellow card. Eyes purely on-card, he read, "You have won 2nd prize in a beauty contest—collect 1,000Pts."

Agent Purple Mountain's Majesty pulled on O'Beefe's sleeve & whispered, "Wrong card."

"Oops. Sorry," O'Beefe said as he tossed the card 'way. He pulled out 'nother & grunted the gristle out o' his throat.

"1st question: ¿What is Lance's favorite colo—?"

Before O'Beefe could e'en finish, Autumn's hand smacked the big red buzzer in front o' her like a mountain cat snapping @ its prey.

"I hope you treasonous fools don't think you can stump we with that trifle," Autumn said with a sneer. "It's gold, 'course."

O'Beefe turned the card to them & exclaimed with a beaming smile, "¡That's correct!"

Lights flashed 'hind the counter on Autumn's booth & the 0s tilted upward till it now said "020." While Autumn leaned back in her seat with her arms tied 'hind her head in cocky serenity, Lance eyed her as one would one's mother if her head had been replaced by a lit bomb—with both befuddlement & fear.

*Something's smelly in the state o' Boskeopolis, & I don't like it... Obviously 1 o' my men must a'least be a part o' this, since they're the only ones who know my plan. ¿Is this just some stupid joke taken too far or... are these scoundrels attempting a coop now that I've found myself political success?*

*No matter. The chances o' this imposter beating me @ my own quiz is simply inconcei—*

"Galt Aureus," said Autumn.

"¡Correct 'gain!"

Autumn's counter flashed 'gain. Now it said "050."

Lance slammed his fists gainst his booth.

*¡Galbraith! OK... you can't let yourself get distracted by such mental cacophony. The time now is not for idle thought, but for pure, powerful, vigorous action that will strike the world to the—*

"Fortune Street," said Autumn.

"That is correct, Mayor Chamsby."

Autumn's counter now said "090."

"¡Henry George!" shouted Lance as he slammed his fists against his booth 'gain, this time with much mo' force.

He was briefly distracted by the counter, whose #s were now spinning wildly. A few moments later, it stopped on "-127."

Lance threw his arms up & then stabbed his finger rapidly @ everyone else as if shooting blame bullets.

"¡I'm telling all y'all, it's sabotage!" he shouted. "I demand you stop this violent chicanery this instance before I get irate!"

"Don't worry, Sir: you still have a chance to catch up," O'Beefe said with a polite smile that indicated it wouldn't be a smile if he weren't so polite.

"Rare-cooked steak covered in golden-frog sauce," said Autumn.

"¡That's correct!"

"¡You didn't e'en ask a question yet! ¡I was listening to everything!" shouted Lance.

O'Beefe shrugged & turned the card toward Lance.

"He got the answer right, ne'ertheless."

"Yes, isn't that convenient," said Lance, leaning out his booth.

"I ne'er thought an imposter would portray me in such a despicably libelous way," said Autumn. "¿What kind o' quiz welfare-president do you think I am? Pull yourself up by your own hat ears & stop expecting your redistributed pity Pts."

Lance stopped, his eyebrows drooping in renewed rumination. He turned & strode o'er to Autumn.

Autumn stepped backward, pointed @ him, & said, "Well, ¿are

you idiots going to let this maniac violate my individual rights?  
¡Abscond him!”

Just as Lance was reaching out for 1 o’ Autumn’s hairs, Agents Purple Mountain’s Majesty, Screamin’ Green, & Banana Mania rushed to him & grabbed him by the arms & legs.

“¡Unleash me, you jackasses! ¡I’m the real Chamsby! ¡That imposter is that ponytailed bitch! ¿Do you not hear me? Damn it, when I get through with you all, you’ll...”

Lance’s voice tapered out as he was dragged ’way.

O’Beefe walked up to Autumn with a plastic smile.

“Phew, that was close, Mayor, Sir. Can’t be too careful with all these identity terrorists galloping round.”

“It seems you weren’t careful ’nough, considering how close I came to being assaulted,” said Autumn.

“O, you need’nt worry ’bout that, Mayor, Sir,” O’Beefe said as he pulled a cigar from his coat pocket & began lighting it. “You’re far too valuable for us to let that happen to you.”

Autumn didn’t like the way O’Beefe’s smile turned or his tone. She also didn’t like the time inefficiencies the cancer juices in his cigar smoke might cause her later in life, so she took a few steps back—just ’nough not to attract suspicion.

*¿Do they already know? ¿Are they just trying to trick me into false safety so they can lock me up when I’m distracted?*

Autumn suddenly remembered the stories she’d unwisely read ’bout what General Clay did to his prisoners. ’Course, Autumn wasn’t ’fraid o’ agonizing death—no one who would willingly leap into Tangerine Temple or Pepperoni Pyramid would be; Autumn was ’fraid o’ the opposite: unbearable torture & submission *without* death.

“Well then, let’s stop lazing round like unioned workers,” said Autumn. “Show me to the ill-begotten evidence already so we can

leave this low-class hive.”

“Indigo’s already getting it,” O’Beefe said with a puff o’ his cigar.

Autumn almost blurted, “¿Who?” but managed to still her lips.

“Well, ¿where did... Indigo go? I don’t have time to wait; I have very important taxes to cut.”

“I think she went down that tunnel.” O’Beefe pointed down a metal sewerlike pipe that looked just like the 1 she used to enter this room.

Edgar, who briefly left the story to pick up a carton o’ milk, walked up to Autumn, sensing that they would resume their trek soon.

“Stay here just in case she appears or anyone else important appears,” Autumn told O’Beefe.

O’Beefe gasped. “That would make such an amazing story: ‘Famous reporter guards Ol’ Factory from people trying to sneak into it to steal documents showing Chamsby’s father’s involvement with the Protectors.’ That’ll be e’en mo’ than a bowl—it’ll be a whole box.”

Autumn & Edgar quickly walked ’way from him as one might walk ’way from a sexual predator or solicitor for the Heavenly Republic.

## V.

As they went, Autumn heard Dawn’s voice in her ear:

“Firefox, ¿you ’way from the others?”

Autumn’s eyes bulged, as if she’d just come to an epiphany. Then she clasped her hands together & murmured, “Yes...”

“Good. I just wanted to tell you you’re headed in the right direction—a’least if the map I found is accurate—but you’ll need to take 2 turns to the right & 1 to the left later. ¿You get that?”

Autumn coughed.

“K. I’ll keep you posted on my research. Control-W.”

Autumn had to resist the urge to shake her head in annoyance.

The tunnel darkened as it led ’way from the light o’ the other room, forcing Autumn to extract her flashlight ’gain. She saw that the tunnel was gradually narrowing, till it opened to ’nother larger room—much larger than the previous, actually, & crowded with many mo’ rusted structures o’ various shapes made o’ metal & steel, covered in multicolored buttons & diodes. Scattered round these dusty towers were bloated tires & bent oil drums. Neither she nor Edgar could interpret what this junk was used for.

Though there was light in this room, it constantly flickered on & off as if they were in a game o’ “Red Light, Green Light.” ’Twas during 1 bout o’ “Green Light” that she noticed the shape o’ a figure lurking.

She ducked ’hind the 1st machine she saw, yanking Edgar after. Then she waited for a few seconds, glancing round her to see if the figure saw her & was coming for her. When she saw nothing appear to near, she carefully peered out the side.

Her pupils sunk till they were microscopic when she finally saw the figure in detail. So unbelievable was it that she thought ’twas the flickering lights screwing with her eyes somehow. But when she watched the figure for the 5th light cycle, she found confirmation.

She slunk ’way from the corner back into her hiding place. Edgar, seeing Autumn’s puzzled expression, texted her, “Who is it.”

Before she could answer, the figure walked by.

“Ah, Lance. There you are.”

Now ’twas Edgar’s turn to gape up @ this bizarre guest he found so familiar—the uncombed orange ponytail; the yellow-tinted, sharp-rimmed glasses windowing e’en sharper eyes; & the unmistakable black shirt with the words “PHAT LOOT” & gray sweats.

\* \* \*

## VI.

The figure's eyes flicked to Edgar for a second 'fore returning to Autumn's.

"I see you've brought me my partner. I wasn't told 'bout this. Plus, I don't remember the shaky boner e'er wearin' swine pajamas.

Autumn quickly recaptured her composure.

"Ah, you must be Indigo. ¿Did you find the documents?"

"Yes, I got them in my pockets," she said as she patted her right pocket. Then she delivered Autumn a sour frown. "& that's 'Cap'n Clearbeard' to you, grasstickler. You may be mayor o' this dumpster o' a town, but I'll be keelhauled if I'll accept that kinda disrespect from no earthling—not e'en a king."

"I'll call you Queen o' the Calamari, for all I care. Just give me the documents," Autumn said as she reached out a hand & waved it toward Clearbeard.

Clearbeard raised an eyebrow—1 o' Autumn's, which the real Autumn couldn't quite get used to seeing for some reason.

"You've gotten a crab in your shoes since we last met, ¿haven't you?"

"That's none o' your business," said Autumn. "Just give me those documents already so I can get out o' this rancid place."

Clearbeard rubbed her mouth. "Hmm... Dunno. Your man-butter fingers'll lose them, you might."

Autumn's fists shook to her sides.

"¿What? I haven't heard such lies since *The General Theory* was published. Now, those are *my* papers & I will *not* tolerate my property rights being... bludgeoned"—Autumn threw her arms out—"¡in my own factory!"

"Can't say I'm much interested in your human laws, *Mayor*," said



Clearbeard.

Autumn saw this wouldn't go the way she wanted, so she improvised: while Clearbeard pinched her cheek, her hand shot out, dug into Clearbeard's pocket, & then yanked out the papers.

"Ah, buryin' for barnacles already, I see," Clearbeard said with a deep frown & wrinkled eyes o' anger.

"Silence," Autumn muttered as she dug it into her cloak. "I'm in no mood for games. Now, let's just find the bozos & leave."

Clearbeard clutched Autumn by the scruff o' her cloak & pulled her right up to Clearbeard's face so close Autumn could smell the clam & horseradish on her breath. She could see that Clearbeard's scowl was so tight that a tooth jutted out.

"Listen, kid, I was going to give you those documents 'ventually, anyway, & I still have a use for you, so I'm going to tolerate what you just did. But if you e'er play some game like that 'gain, I swear you're gonna find yourself neighbor to the skeletons @ the bottom o' my chamber in the sea. *¿Got it?*"

Autumn nodded in feigned fright.

"Good." Clearbeard shoved Autumn gainst the wall so hard that she toppled o'er & turned to the tunnel Autumn & Edgar had entered from.

"Shit," Autumn muttered quietly in her own voice.

"*¿What's wrong now?*"

Clearbeard turned back to see Autumn scrambling round the floor. Autumn looked up in Clearbeard's general direction & scowled as she pretended to stuff something inside her cloak.

"O, nothing. Thought I lost something for a second."

1 o' Clearbeard's eyebrows rose. "You still have those documents, *¿aye?*"

"Yes," Autumn said as she returned to her feet. She remembered to brush the dust off her cloak, as Lance would likely do.

Clearbeard stepped forward threateningly. "Let me see them."

"¿Why?"

"Cause I don't believe you any better than an ocean in a desert."

Autumn quickly pulled the documents out her cloak, unrolling them so she could see the text on them, & then quickly stowed them 'way 'gain.

"Good. Now quit pegleggin' & let's get a move on."

Autumn squinted as she followed after the blurry image o' what she hoped was Captain Clearbeard. Edgar followed Autumn, concerned by her straining eyes & wobbly gait, but saying nothing.

Suddenly, Clearbeard stopped, turned back to Autumn & Edgar, & waved them forward.

"Royalty 1st."

*She must know*, thought Autumn. *¿Why else would she do this but to keep me from 'scaping?*

On 1 scale, if she hesitated, it'd only rile Clearbeard's distrust; otherside, if Clearbeard was already distrustful, then she was clearly just setting Autumn up for a trap.

She shined her flashlight round Clearbeard's face in the hopes that it'd stun her eyes, grabbed Edgar, & fast-moonwalked back into the blinking room.

"Watch where you're aiming that, hammerhead," Clearbeard grumbled as she squinted & held her hands 'bove her eyes like visors.

When Autumn reached the other room, she clicked off the flashlight & quick-crept through the li'l maze o' materials, moving when the lights were off & stopping & hiding when the lights returned, her free hand touching round her surroundings to sense what her enfeebled eyes couldn't.

She whispered directly into Edgar's ear hole, "¿You see 'nother pathway out o' here? I can't see 'cause my contacts fell out."

Edgar silently led her to 'nother tunnel. E'en with her vision weakened, Autumn could tell the stark difference 'tween the abrupt shift from bright to dark & the consistent dimness here.

She wasn't sure whether her impaired eyesight strengthened her hearing, as is oft claimed, or not, but felt a bolus rise in her throat @ every heavy thump o' her feet gainst the steel floor as they scampered through.

*Our only chance is to maximize velocity to maximize our distance from her, since she'll likely hear us no matter how fast we go.*

So she ran as fast as she could, practically dragging Edgar 'hind her. Now she was leading the way, which gave her a meal both nourishing & poisonous: the path was straight, making it less likely that she'd smack into a wall & lose precious time; but it also meant she had fewer corners or forks to curve through to evade Clearbeard's sights. Then 'gain, 'twas so dark, & Autumn saw no flashlight beam touching them, so she figured Clearbeard wouldn't be able to see them anyway.

This also meant that they'd be unable to see a wall in front o' them should 1 appear.

"Psst. Dawn."

"That's 'Earthwolf,' Firefox."

"Whatever," Autumn whispered breathlessly—from exasperation & exhaustion. "Just tell me if there's any forks or turns or anything in a dark tunnel after the blinking light room after the dark tunnel you led me through."

"Slow down, please. ¿What was that?"

"After the tunnel you led me through... there was a room full o' flickering lights, & then 'nother tunnel. ¿In *that* tunnel is there a—"

Autumn was briefly interrupted when she felt heavy metal plow her in the face.

"—wall?"

Dawn replied, "Yes: farther in there's a couple forks. ¿Remember? I told you to take 2 rights & then a left. The tunnel you entered was the 1st right, though I s'pose you've already gotten the documents, so you don't need to follow the rest o' the—"

"¿Do any o' these paths 'ventually lead to an exit? That's where I want to go." Autumn's voice was stuffy from holding her bruised nose. However, she didn't feel any blood trickle.

"I can check."

"No time. I'll go rightward & you can check where that can lead."

"If you say so..."

Autumn was already running down the rightward path.

"¿Where's the next fork or turn? Just so I don't smack into 'nother wall," she whispered.

"There's 1 just coming up."

"Thank you."

She slowed. She couldn't hear any footsteps but hers & Edgar's, anyway, so she figured that if Clearbeard were still following them, she was still kilometers 'way.

After a few turns, Dawn's voice returned:

"Huh... I don't see any exit from any o' these paths. ¿Which turns have you taken so far?"

"I don't remember exactly... I think a left & then 'nother right."

"O..."

"¿What?"

Autumn felt 'nother wall 'fore her—'cept this 1 had a bump sticking out.

*A knob. A door. Perfect.*

"That way leads to a brig o' some sort."

"Perfect hiding place."

She fumbled for the knob & then quietly turned it, opening the door just a crack 'nough to see inside. She was so used to the

darkness in the tunnels that e'en the sliver o' white light that 'scaped burned her retinas, as well as returning the uncomfortable blurry sensation that had been masked by the lack o' light before.

“¿Who's there?” asked someone inside.

Sensing that there was no choice but to enter, she entered, waiting just 'nough to let Edgar in 'hind her 'fore closing the door, carefully so as not to make any noise.

“Ah, Chamsby ol' chap, it's just you,” said a voice she could faintly recognize through its blurry blob o' browns & grays & could fully recognize through its ditsy diction as O'Beefe.

“Quiet, fool,” she whispered to him. “Don't let anyone know I'm here.”

“My lips are glued.”

“Show me to a good hiding place,” whispered Autumn.

“I can see it in the headlines: ‘Mayor Chamsby Hides.’ ¡What a fullful!”

Autumn scowled. “Just shut up & show me,”

“There should be a closet right o'er here.”

Autumn followed the blob forward, straining her eyes so that she could a'least see 'nough o' what was round her not to bump into anything else. The problem was, she also had to pay attention to O'Beefe in case he turned round. He'd probably wonder why she was straining her eyes so.

*¿Why couldn't that li'l runt have worn glasses, too? This'd be so much easier...*

*So'd many other things be if reality were different. That's how reality is: it isn't there to make life easier; it's just there to be there, utterly indifferent to anyone's desires.*

“Um, Aut—Chamsby, Sir...” said Edgar.

“¿What is it, Agent Mag—Is that you grabbing me?”

She heard sniffing. But mo' importantly, e'en with her bad

eyesight, she could tell 'nough from the blobs before her that she was standing in front o' a row o' cage bars, & that 'hind those bars was the familiar shape o' blacks & whites...

In a deep but soft whisper o' bitterness, Lance said, "I knew it. I recognize that stench o' leaves, maple syrup, & sweat anywhere. ¿How d'you figure out my plan?"

Autumn squeezed Lance's hands till he let go & then backed 'way so he couldn't try something like that 'gain. Then, remembering her need to play her part properly, she started brushing off the part o' her cloak Lance grabbed.

"You ne'er cease your petty games, ¿d'you, imposter?" she said with a sneer.

"That's a bad imposter," said O'Beefe. "Go & get back to your boring book 'bout the dust capitols; there'll be a quiz on it when you're done."

Autumn jumped from the invisible heavy thumping o' something hard—probably a baton—gainst the metal bars, suddenly flashing back to her time @ the Kennel.

Lance lowered to a sitting position. Autumn could faintly hear him mutter, "I think Marx hoped to take o'er the world by boring everyone else to sleep."

O'Beefe stopped before a door @ the other end.

"This boring ol' research basement oughta work. S'posedly nobody's been down there for decades, so it should be as safe as slumber under there."

When Autumn saw him open the door, the flat whiteness gradually opening to a rectangle o' dusty dark gray, she walked in, slowing as she reached it in case there were stairs there.

As it turned out, there were. Autumn grimaced @ every shaky step she took down, hoping O'Beefe wasn't paying attention or chocked it up to 1 o' Lance's many neuroses. He didn't say anything

'fore closing the door 'hind them, a'least.

*Then 'gain, ¿would he? ¿Wouldn't he mo' likely lock us in, trapped worse than young doctors in debt?*

*Well, too late to think o' that now...*

## VII.

They went as deep into the room as they could to maximize their distance from possible eavesdroppers, & then sat gainst the back wall somewhere obscured from the door by shelves o' unidentifiable vials, huddled to protect them from the unventilated cold. Autumn grimaced when she felt herself sit in something cold & wet, but then relaxed when she realized such an occurrence was perfectly consistent with Lance's luck.

"¿So what's the plan now?" Edgar whispered as quietly as he could, directly into Autumn's ear.

"Scape."

"¿How?"

"Ah... Now, that's the tricky part."

They waited, listening for any commotion outside. So far, all they could hear was the guard & Lance arguing & the constant dripping o' some liquid from the ceiling.

Then they heard a door burst open outside, & mo' loud talk.

Autumn shuffled uncomfortably when she recognized the new voice as Clearbeard's.

"¿D'you see any better hiding places?" whispered Autumn.

"I don't think so..."

"Well, 'twas nice knowing you..."

The door burst open—a much clearer door bursting open. *Their* door. Edgar glanced sideways, hoping to see Clearbeard a'least halfway before she reached them, but not daring to poke his head

out & risk being spotted himself.

But in the moment he was able to see the stretched shadow o' their guest before the door slammed shut, Edgar noticed its shape was not Clearb—Autumn's.

Then they heard fists pounding gainst the door.

“¡Hey! ¿What is the meaning o' this johncraziness? ¡Let me back in!”

Autumn leaned her face out & screwed up her eyes. The voice she heard from 'hind the door was not Clearbeard's, but O'Beefe's:

“I'm 'fraid we can't let you do that, pal.”

Lance continued his diplomatic inquiry:

“¿D'you hear me? ¿What's the meaning o' thi—You think I didn't just hear that?”

Edgar, who was now leaning out with Autumn, saw him fumble round his pockets.

“¡This is high treason! I'll have you... Well, I'll have you poked by various gradually-poisonous substances, thanks to those whiny liberals... But I'll have you executed, ¡highlight that! ¡Augh! ¿Where's that infernal phone o' mine?”

Then he stopped, his arms stiffening.

He turned & scowled when he saw “him” & Edgar.

“If either o' you idiots want to live, give me 1 o' your phones.”

“¿Why? ¿What's going on?” asked Autumn.

“¡They're going to blow us up! ¡Just give me a phone!” Lance waved a hand toward himself impatiently.

“Dawn... *Earthwolf*, could you alert the authorities.”

“¿Who's 'Earthwolf'?” asked Lance.

Autumn waved a hand 'way. “Ne'er mind. We'll probably be a million husks o' bloody flesh by the time they arrive, anyway.”

Confirmed that her disguise had been unlocked, she reached into her cloak & put on her glasses.



“Give me 1 o’ your phones so they know it’s me & so I can make the other 2 idiots culpable & possible convince them to let us out to save their own skins. They won’t trust whoever your thuggish friend is.”

“That’s the best you can hope for: neither o’ us has a phone equipped. Would be quite an embarrassing disguise if someone searched us & found Autumn Springer’s phone in Lance Chamsby’s pockets.” She turned to Edgar. “Granted, we could’ve gotten ’way with giving Edgar 1, ¿but why take the risk for such an unlikely scenario as this?”

“No, I wouldn’t expect an imbecile like you to think ’head in any shape.”

Autumn ignored him & strode up to the door.

“You won’t be able to open it. It’s locked tight.”

Autumn turned back to him & glared, mouthing, “Shut up, idiot.”

He crossed his arms.

“Go ’head & waste your time if you so desire. I’d rather spend my last minutes doing something useful.”

“Yeah, you’re right. Better not waste my time...”

“¿Then why are you still examining the doorknob?”

Autumn turned back ’gain. This time her glare was wide-eyed & bewildered. She stabbed her finger toward the door with 1 finger while the other pointed @ her ear, & then she thumbed her forehead with her palm.

“Captain Clearbeard, would you be so kind as to put some o’ those heavy crates in front o’ the door. I’d hate for our guest Madame Springer to accidentally leave our festivities.”

Autumn pinched the bridge o’ her nose in frustration.

“Well, now it *definitely* would be a waste o’ time trying to unlock that door,” whispered Autumn.

“Thanks a lot,” said Lance. “None o’ this would’ve happened to me

if you hadn't arrived & impostered me."

"If I weren't here, I wouldn't *care* if 'twere happening to you, so it's a scrub," Autumn said as she walked 'way from the door. "¿So what'd you do to piss them off so much that they betrayed you?"

"That's none o' your business."

"I think it's 'Earthwolf's' business, since *she's probably recording everything we say & can get your testimony as evidence gainst them.*" She said the latter part as loud as she could, hoping her hosts could hear.

Lance's eyes vacillated back & forth while his chest rose & lowered stressfully.

"Fine. They said they're framing you for assassinating me in some fabricated terrorist plot." The bitter mumble in which Lance said this didn't fit the content 'hind it, Autumn thought. "I had a feeling that treasonous traitor O'Beefe would try to get rid o' me so he could take o'er..."

"& he's making it a terrorist plot so he can 'scuse some militarist lockdown he presumably fantasized 'bout unleashing on Boskeopolis. It seems our li'l buffoonish journalist aspires to be the next Clay."

Lance gave Autumn a look drenched in lime.

"You seem so distraught by this."

Autumn's eyes widened in surprise.

"¿Would my panicking help us 'scape somehow? ¿D'you think if I pounded on the door & screamed for them to let us out, they might just do it 'cause we told them to?"

Lance was steaming so hot you could cook an egg on his face—though you wouldn't want to, 'cause it'd have all o' his face germs on it. Seemingly out o' nowhere, Lance strode forward & thwapped the top hat off Autumn's head while shouting, "¡& take that stupid hat off! ¡As much as you wish you could be me, you're not, so stop

pretending!”

The hat made a tiny *thunk* as it hit the cement floor.

Autumn stared wide-eyed @ Lance as if has just puked all o'er himself.

She walked 'way. “OK... I'll tell you what: you just sit there quietly & try to recollect what li'l sense you might still have remaining & *we'll* try to calmly think o' a way out.”

“You have the documents, ¿don't you?” Lance said, his voice huffy from heavy breathing.

“Fraid not.”

“Don't lie to me. I saw the look your spineless skeleton partner gave you. He's a terrible liar.”

“No, I think that look might've been due to your enthralling battle gainst my top ha—¡Hey!”

Suddenly, Autumn felt a yank on the side o' her cloak & saw Lance was the 1 doing said yanking.

“¡Give me those documents!” he growled as he held 1 half o' her cloak open & dug through its inside pocket.

Autumn shoved forward, pinning him gainst the floor.

“Lesson: ne'er try robbing a robber.”

“¡Unprison me, vile harpy!”

Once 'gain, Autumn's eyes twisted in confusion.

*¿Has he been so spoiled that he literally thinks that if he tells people to do something, they'll do it?*

Autumn rose & immediately turned round & walked 'way, wrapping the cloak round her 'gain to protect the documents, as well as her skin from the cold air.

“Now, I hope you won't waste any mo' o' our limited time playing such inane games...”

“You're not leaving with those documents, whether I get out o' here 'live or not.”

Autumn looked @ Lance with a raised eyebrow. He was now leaning gainst a wall, shoulders slumped, panting heavily. His eyes were mo' penetrating than she'd e'er seen.

“¿What is that s'posed to mean?”

He burrowed through his cloak & extracted a pistol, chuckling like Igor.

“You're off your crackers,” said Autumn; “& as someone intimately experienced in such matters, I would know.”

He shakily raised the mouth o' his gun & aimed it @ Autumn's chest.

“O... I'm crazy, ¿am I?” Lance spoke in loud laughs. They didn't seem like happy laughs. “Completely bonkers, ¿eh? ¿Coo-coo for Fruit Loops?”

“Yes, that's fairly accurate,” Autumn said with a nod. Her arms were tied 'hind her back & her lids were drooping listlessly; but no matter how hard she tried, she couldn't keep her limbs from shaking slightly.

“‘Course you think so. I'm just the deranged li'l Objectivist, ¿aren't I? Well, let me tell you something...”

“¿Who's stopping you? It's not as if I have a gun to your heart...”

“You may think I'm some paranoid freak, that I'm the 1 who's evil; but I know for a fact that we are slaves to the ultimate socialist totalitarian in this world.”

“¿& who might that be?”

Lance's eyes darkened. “The author.”

“Yeah but—”

“But nothing. Don't deny it. He controls everything we say, we think, we do. *Everything*,” said Lance. “You're probably thinking, ‘O, ¿but why's he letting you say all this, then?’ Well, that's a mighty fine way to make himself look like the goody-goody leftist who *always* gives his opponents a fair say—so long as it can be twisted into

something utterly ridiculous.”

“Yes, but that’s truly not relevant...”

Lance started chuckling ’gain. “But it won’t matter now. I’ll keep my dad’s name pure once & for all, e’en if I must die doing it.”

“¿Why?”

His index touched the trigger.

“Goodbye, ponytailed devil. May you finally be sent to the bowels o’ the ultimate hell—nothingness, which is all that you’re worth—where you belong.”

He clicked the trigger. Nothing happened.

He clicked it a few mo’ times. Nothing happened ’gain.

He continued pulling the trigger while turning a puzzled stare @ it, & then finally turning the muzzle round to him so he could see inside it.

It just so happened that the gun finally worked this time. However, ’stead o’ plunging a large chunk o’ metal directly into his brain, destroying so much matter that his mental capacities are completely shut down, & thus any life within him in general, it simply propelled him backward gainst the door, sitting in a daze with li’l metaphorical birds twirling round his head.

“See, now that’s bullshit.” Autumn turned to Edgar. “If that happened to me, I’d s’posedly be dead. So, if the gun doesn’t do any lasting harm, ¿what’s the whole point?”

“¿Shouldn’t we still worry ’bout the bomb?” asked Edgar.

“I wouldn’t worry ’bout that just yet,” said Autumn. “Lance may be crazy, but he’s right ’bout the author arbitrarily deciding everything. He’s not e’en pretending to have an objective rubric for when this bomb should go off. It won’t go off till the story’s o’er.”

“Um... ¿do you happen to know what time it is?” asked Edgar, sweat dribbling down the side o’ his face, as he stared down @ the watch that magically materialized on his wrist.

“I dunno. Must be a’least 8 PM by now.”

“No, I mean... I mean the *other* time.”

“O. No.”

“We’re just ’bout @ 8,000 words.”

“Yes, but what kind o’ idiot would just arbitrarily stop the story in the midd—O shit, we need to find a way out o’ here, ASAP.”

She saw Lance get up & scrunched her face. Then she decided to pretend that she *hadn’t* seen him, & started wandering, looking for weak spaces in the wall or e’en secret ’scape passages.

“‘Just so happened’... Sure...” muttered Lance, stumbling forward like a drunk. He winced bitterly @ Autumn, his eyes suddenly becoming surrounded by copious gross wrinkles & lines. “You just can’t leave me ’lone, ¿can you? Always have to come round & cause me trouble—just out o’ spite... just ’cause you have no life o’ your own.”

Autumn & Edgar continued their revolution round the room, stopping here & there to bend down for a closer look or to peer round shelves & other objects.

*Don’t respond to his thought vomits, thought Autumn. It’ll only make him worse.*

“Ah, ignoring me, ¿huh? Typical o’ your kind: can’t e’en logically defend your position ’cause you absolutely *reject* logic. Logic is like your Kryptonite. It’s for the ‘bourgeoisie.’”

Still no reply. Edgar picked up & put down a few vials on the shelf.

Autumn whispered to him, “Edgar, I don’t think a human-sized passageway’s going to be under 1 o’ those.”

“Oops. Sorry.”

Lance straightened himself, his arms held stiff to his sides.

“Just answer me this, then, Queen Looter. E’en you must admit this is a fair question: ¿why do you want those documents so bad?”

Autumn considered as she gently slid a metal barrel out o' her way. *It's certainly a logical question to ask...*

"Let me ask this," Autumn replied: "¿why d'you want to keep them hidden so bad? I'd think that someone who truly respected honesty as much as you do would not go to such lengths to protect e'en one's father with such comfortable lies."

Lance stomped a foot toward her & raised a fist. "Don't you dare e'en think 'bout libelling my father 'cause yours clearly did such a terrible job o' teaching you how to be an upstanding human being."

Autumn shook her head. "See, the fact that you would e'en consider that a useful argument is proof that he failed @ that role. You know, you are probably under the misapprehension that I think your problem is that you're too selfish. In fact, I think quite the opposite: you're too obsessed with others' problems, whether it be mine as a 'dirty thief,' primarily gainst people you've ne'er e'en heard o', or your father. Let me just give you advice: I recommend you forget 'bout your father & think 'bout yourself for once, 'cause you're 'bout to find yourself in a mess e'en bigger than his—soon people won't e'en care that you're the son o' the fawning friend o' General Clay & will care mo' 'bout you *being* the *new* General Clay."

"You can keep your advice to yourself," said Lance.

"As I will, 'cause as I've thought 'bout it, I've made the same mistake you have in obsessing o'er other people's problems too much without that vital ingredient: said people's own ideas. Here I am, wasting my time going through all o' this trouble, ¿for what? ¿So I can show that you're *related* to someone terrible? Why would anyone care 'bout that? ¿Can't they see your own obvious faults as mayor? ¿& if they can't, well, should they not be taught the hard way? What I've been doing is not helping people but "helping" them by manipulating them—a significant difference. That doesn't make me much better than a dictator, ¿now does it?"

“Absolutely,” Lance said with a nod, though in the back o’ his head he thought, *OK, ¿what twisted wordplay will she use to ’scuse herself ne’ertheless?*

“Thus, I’ll make a deal with you, Lance: leave me ’lone for once— & maybe focus on drastically improving your own work as ‘mayor’— & I will keep these documents under lock *while you’re mayor*. After your reign ends, I’ll release the information, ’cause I think the public does have a right to know the facts here. But I refuse to let you fail due to such a shoddy reason; I demand that you fail for the *apt* reason.”

“¿& why should I trust such a liar as you to keep your word?” asked Lance.

“’Cause I have a selfish interest: so long as I keep the documents hidden, you’ll leave me peace. My peace is worth far mo’ than proving to the public something they already suspect. I am well aware that what you & your ‘pals’ could do to me would be much direr than what these useless documents could do to you.

“That is, ’less *you* don’t keep *your* word, in which case the verbal contract will be void, anyway, & me keeping my word will be nugatory.”

“¿& what is ‘leaving you ’lone’ specifically?” asked Lance.

“Don’t try to directly or indirectly affect me specifically in any way. Something that affects the whole population is fine, but not specifically me. If I am the 1 who starts the infringement—such as this situation here, actually—it won’t count. I can trust your mind to understand the boundaries o’ these rules.”

“& so... you’ll only release the documents if I stop becoming mayor.”

“*If you don’t* ’ventually stop being mayor then you’ll already prove yourself outright that you’re no better than General Clay himself, & thus releasing the documents will hardly be significant.



Plus, you'd still have to keep your promise for eternity, so I actually would benefit mo' myself, ironically."

"It's all pointless, since we still can't e'en 'scape from this place."

Autumn smiled, glad that Lance had said just the perfect thing @ the perfect time. She put an index to her lips & then waved him o'er to her.

Lance opened his mouth, but then saw Autumn push her index against her lips 'gain. He looked back @ the door & then crept o'er to Autumn.

When he neared, Autumn pointed to the black rectangle o' a passageway, previously hidden by a shelve full o' dusty, thick manuals, & then she & Edgar swiftly walked inside before Lance, paranoid that he might try to find a way to lock them in the other room if he entered 1st.

Autumn whipped out her flashlight & saw that this passageway was just like most others: a long metal tunnel. 'Cept this 1's floor gradually became full o' cold liquid; Autumn didn't want to ruminate o'er what substance it could be.

The tunnel stopped @ a faucet-shaped turn. Autumn stood carefully @ the edge & looked down to see a waterfall o' liquid splashing down into a short lake with the top corner o' an oil drum floating in it. Autumn recognized it as the lake she'd seen 'side the Ol' Factory from the outside.

"Ugh. You don't mean we have to jump into that stuff, ¿do we?" asked Lance. "That's gotta be practically full o' cancer juices."

"If you'd like being blown up, sure," said Autumn. Then she turned her head to Edgar while her hands dug through her cloak. "Huddle inside my cloak. I think I might be able to protect you from it."

She took out a pair o' goggles & a mouth & nose clamp & quickly put them on.

“¿But what 'bout you?” Edgar asked as he did the same with his own.

“I’ll be fine. Just hurry.”

She turned back to Lance, who was still standing back a meter or so, scrunched up in frightful anticipation o’ what he must do. “Here, put these on,” she said as she handed him a pair o’ goggles & a clamp.

Edgar dutifully walked in front o’ Autumn & let her wrap her cloak all round him. Then she made a short hop into the lake—though far 'nough to avoid touching the falling liquid—& splashed down into the lake. The second she landed, she paddled them back to land with her left arm while her right held Edgar to her.

When they 'scaped, Autumn opened her cloak so Edgar could leave, & then took the whole thing off, dripping wildly as she dropped it on the ground. Finally, she ripped the mouth clamp, & then goggles, off, gasping as air returned to her lungs.

She examined Edgar & saw that, while his pajamas did get a li'l wet, 'twas much less than her cloak did. Both stood there hugging themselves, shivering, however; but Autumn knew that she'd be shivering e'en mo' if she subjected herself to the constantly cold wetness o' the drenched cloak.

They turned back to the lake just in time to see Lance scramble up to ground, & then immediately pulling his own mouthpiece & goggles off. He stood with his arms outstretched like a scarecrow, the liquid falling profusely from every part o' his cloak. His face was noticeably turned 'way from Autumn.

“So... ¿you going to call the police on O'Beefe & them?” she asked.

“That’s my business,” Lance said sourly. “@ this point we have no reason not to part ways.”

& with that he turned & walked 'way.

*That's 1 thing 'bout mutual dislike, thought Autumn; we both can*

*agree on separating as quickly as possible, making both o' us happier.*

She figured, from Lance's perspective, he'd be smart if he *didn't* call the police yet & 'stead waited for O'Beefe to give his claim for Lance's death before revealing O'Beefe's treason. *If Lance called O'Beefe out before O'Beefe did anything, then that would only make Lance look e'en mo' like a paranoid idiot to the public.*

*But then 'gain, if Lance did wait, this would only bulk his popularity. Imagine how great he'd look as the martyr who bravely 'scaped death from these scoundrels. Best o' all, he could portray them as communists or terrorists or whatever.*

*No, I rather prefer the interesting power struggle we'll see 'tween O'Beefe & Lance. If things go well, hopefully the public will rightful despise them both & the whole corrupt gang loses, while our corrupt gang... Well, we're not bathing with the piranhas, a'least.*

Though Autumn had to admit feeling a slight tinge o' guilt: such a power struggle would not be... healthy for Lance.

*How that stupid kid got wrapped up in all this, I have no idea... she thought, shaking her head. Then she added, Then 'gain, how I got roped up in this nonsense is e'en mo' bewildering.*

She wrapped her arms round Edgar, hoping their combined body heat would be better than the sums o' their separated body heats, & then they walked off down the hill back to downtown Boskeopolis.

“¿So what's the plan now, Firefox?” asked Dawn.

“We'll discuss that later. Hold on,” whispered Autumn.

Then she added in her mind, *Well, 'Earthwolf,' I hope you & Edgar like playing with these disguises, as well as playing hide-and-seek, 'cause from the looks o' it, we'll have to be doing both for the long-term.*

#BOSK-CJ0B21-DISTURBED5

# **DISTURBED RESIDENCE, Part V**

J. J. W. Mezun | 2016 April 1



## XXI. Bound

Autumn & Edgar stumbled o'er shrouded objects as they were pulled through a dark room.

"Remove her jacket & search it," said Lance's voice.

Since this was exactly as Autumn had predicted would happen, she stood passively as she felt hands unzip & pull off her jacket, &—mo' significantly—dig through her pockets.

She heard a click & a flicker o' light. She turned to her right to see Lance just as he was catching Autumn's jacket, wearing a curly powdered wig & sitting @ a tall booth.

"Let's see what evidence you've been hiding in here," he said as he dug through the coat's pockets.

Autumn was not interested in this, but in when the minion would bring him the contents o' her pockets. Her breathing stilled when she finally saw 1 walk up to Lance's booth with the familiar plastic disk...

Her stomach dropped when she saw him examine the objects. *My only chance is if he thinks it's just an alarm clock or something & misses the detonation buttons...*

"Don't like being the pockets under someone else's hands, ¿do you?" Lance sneered as he began reading the label on the bottle o' pink liquid. Then he scoffed. "¿What's this? It surprises me not that a vile socialist such as yourself would wish yourself the ability to steal individuals' free wills. Well, I hate to burst your fairy tale, but the unquestionable reality o' free will surmounts your pathetic collectivist magic—but don't mind if I have a drink." He snapped a finger. "Agent Mellow Yellow."

But when Mellow Yellow started stepping toward Lance, Lance stopped him with an upraised hand & said, “Wait... In the spirit o’ full karmic justice, I’ll steal not just her possessions, but her servant, too. Skeleton, fill me a cup o’ this stuff. I don’t want to put my lips on the same bottle defiled by looter lips.”

Edgar hesitated @ 1st, wondering if Autumn would want him to refuse. The decision was made for him, however, when he was pushed forward by 1 o’ Lance’s minions.

Unbeknown to Edgar, Autumn thought this was perfect. *Please distract him as much as possible...* Her only fear was that Edgar might still be next to them when the bomb goes off.

“Uh, I don’t know where any cups are, though...” Edgar said with stutters.

Lance sighed. “Check the shelves in the booth, you idiot.”

As Edgar did so, Lance turned next to the “plastic disk,” his eyes twisting in much greater confusion than when looking @ the other objects. Then his eyes ballooned when he examined its top. He quickly tapped 1 o’ its buttons & looked @ its interface. When he saw the # wasn’t moving anymo’, he sighed in relief.

“Turns out the extortionist thief is also a terrorist, ¿huh?” Lance said without a smile. He turned to the closest henchman & handed it to him. “Watch this a meter or 2 ’way, & if you see it start ticking ’gain, run out & take it as far ’way as you can.”

*Well, there goes that plan...* The good news was that she no longer had to worry ’bout Edgar being blown to bits; now she merely had to worry ’bout them both being killed in a likely much-mo’-mortifying manner.

& just to add TP to Autumn’s tombstone, she got to see Lance raise a cup o’ the liquid Edgar had to pore for him to his smiling mouth, only to be stopped by Agent Red.

“¿Are you sure the skeleton wizard hasn’t tampered with that,

Sir?”

“You know he’s not a wizard, ¿right?” said Autumn.

Lance glared @ her. “Agents Razzmatazz & Laser Lemon, reprimand her for her disruption o’ justice.”

Agents Razzmatazz & Laser Lemon waggled their fingers @ her & said, “That’s not very proper” repeatedly.

“Here, you test it then,” Lance said as he handed the cup to Agent Red.

Agent Red nodded, took a sip, & then set it back onto Lance’s booth.

“I don’t notice any difference yet, but I would wait a’least a half hour, Sir.”

“That’s fine. Let’s just get on with the trial,” said Lance.

There was ’nother click, & then the spotlight shined down on Autumn, causing her to wince.

“Madame Springer, you are charged on multiple counts o’ thievery, violent extortion, terrorism, possession o’ insipid hipster garbage, & socialism. ¿How do you plead?”

Autumn eyed the minion still holding the time bomb, curious if delaying this inane marsupial trial might benefit her somehow. As she thought ’bout it, the prospects appeared dim—& she doubted the mental anguish playing Lance’s games would cause would be worth delayed death.

Autumn shrugged. “¿Not guilty?”

Lance thrust a finger in her direction. “¡Ah! So in addition to all o’ those things, ¡you’re a liar, too!”

Autumn shrugged ’gain.

“¿Where were you on the night o’ October 31, 2015, @ precisely 11:59 PM?” asked Lance.

Autumn shrugged yet ’gain. “I was in many places; ’twas a long 11:59.”

“¡Lies! ¡Lies! ¡Lies & econometrics!” Lance shouted as he pounded his fist gainst the booth.

“But it’s true,” said Autumn.

“Fine then: ¡Truth! !Truth! ¡Truth & econometrics!” shouted Lance, pounding his fist gainst the booth ’gain. When he stopped, he added, “None o’ this changes the unquestionable fact that you robbed me & my late, great father, as well as many other Boskeopoleon citizens nobody knows or cares ’bout.”

“I question that,” said Autumn. “I didn’t steal from anybody; I simply held a nonconformist interpretation o’ property rights. You say you owned the treasure, I say I owned the treasure. I call it the ‘Subjective Theory o’ Ownership.’ So in the spirit o’ laissez-faire, we should put the question to the market o’ skills I like to call ‘Winners keepers, losers weepers.’ I must say, I don’t quite enjoy your socialist government intervention in the natural market o’ resource distribution, Lenin.”

Lance, whose frown only fell deeper & deeper, & who listened so long only out o’ sheer curiosity @ what he considered the cleverest o’ twisted logic, finally pounded his fist ’gain. “¡Untruths! ¡Untruths! I am adding ‘scandalous misinterpretation o’ free market principles’ on your list o’ crimes.”

Then he stared @ Autumn with the shrewd eyes, sipping his golden goblet o’ hipster juice.

“Madame Autumn Springer, since you love gold that is not yours so dearly, I shall give you all o’ the gold your heart could desire. I sentence you to be buried under 2 tons o’ gold.”

“¡No!” shouted Edgar.

“¡I object!” shouted Autumn, trying to stand taller.

“¿On what grounds?”

“I could want so much mo’ gold than merely 2 tons.”

“So be it.” Lance lifted his goblet. “It shall be 3.”



Autumn would've mentally kicked herself—a difficult procedure—if she hadn't realized that either would kill her equally, anyway.

“¡No! ¡Don't!” shouted Edgar.

Lance turned to him. “Silence, traitor. You're my bellhop now—& the #1 duty o' any o' my bellhops is to ne'er help my enemies.”

He snapped his fingers. “Agent Red. Do the honors.”

Agent Red stepped toward Autumn.

“¡No! ¡Stop!” Edgar shouted as he scrambled forward, only to stop suddenly.

“Don't think your cute li'l words can magically make us obey,” said Lance.

“Uh... ¿Boss?”

“¿What?” Lance swung back to Agent Red to see him frozen in mid-step.

“¿What are you doing?”

“I can't move, Sir.”

“¿& why not?”

“I don't know, Sir. No matter how much I try to move, my body refuses.”

“But...” Lance turned to Edgar with a look o' sheer bewilderment. E'en Autumn, stoic so far, stared @ Edgar with wide eyes. Edgar's expression emulated both o' theirs.

“Whatever,” muttered Lance. “Agents Razzmatazz & Laser Lemon, you do it, then.”

They paused, staring @ each other, but then quickened their pace when they saw Lance's expression redden. Lemon Laser grabbed Autumn by the wrists still locked 'hind her back while Razzmatazz picked her up by the feet, & they both carried her horizontally into the eastward darkness. Though Autumn tried rolling round & struggling, she could feel it accomplishing nothing.

Edgar turned to Lance with his hands clasped. “Please don't do

this. We ne'er meant you any harm."

"¿Ne'er meant me any harm?" said Lance, voice rising. "¡That's the nakedest lie I've e'er heard! ¡Tell that to your murderous buddies, you witch!"

"But we ne'er—"

"Shut up & pore me 'nother drink, bellhop," Lance demanded as he held his goblet out to Edgar.

Edgar did so, staring down @ it with his face melting in despair.

There was 'nother click, & then a large light flashed down on the eastern side o' the room, revealing a large transparent tub with Autumn lying inside. Her eyes were staring up @ what she could clearly tell was a trapdoor on the ceiling—perfect for dumping gold onto her.

*You know, this is the perfect way for me to end it, actually. I don't think Chamsby ol' boy realizes what a gift he's given me, compared to the alternatives he could've concocted...*

After a quick press o' an under-booth button by Lance, the trap door opened a crack, releasing a slow stream o' coins. Autumn cringed as she felt each coin smack into her in various places, but otherwise didn't change her still, blank stare upward. She could feel the familiar thrill o' barbed wire wrap round her heart & lungs e'en mo' tightly than she'd remembered before—& like before, she couldn't decide whether she liked it or not.

*Can't do nothing 'bout it, anyway, so it's not like I can be stressed 'bout it. I can only watch what happens happen.*

Holding up his goblet, Lance announced, "These coins will slowly cover the looter till she's smothered by them, blocking her off from the oxygen she steals from capable people & crushing her under the weight o' this gold's immense value—which her puny moral character could ne'er heave in a million years—

"Wait, I need to write that 1 down; it's brilliant." Lance slipped out

a sheet o' paper from under his booth & began furiously writing.

When he finished, he sat back in his booth with his legs up on top & his chair leaning back. He held his goblet up with a triumphant smile & then drank as he watched the show.

Edgar also watched—'cept not with cheer, but with horror. He shook with frantic energy, feeling as if a time bomb were truly ticking & that all minutes passed were mere seconds.

Finally, out o' sheer desperation, he grabbed Lance by the scruff o' his robe & wailed, "¡You have to stop that, please!"

"¡I absolutely will *not*!" Lance said as he pulled Edgar's hands off him.

Despite this statement, Lance couldn't help feeling the sudden urge to press the stop button on the gold dropper. He couldn't 'splain why he'd e'er want to do such a thing when his dream was coming true right before his eyes; yet still, his finger kept creeping toward the button under the booth. It became so bad that he had to clutch his left hand with his right just to stop it.

But this still was not 'nough: his left hand o'erpowered his right & pressed the button.

"¡Ahh! ¿What are you doing? ¡You're s'posed to be my hands! ¿What's going on?"

His right hand pressed the start button 'gain. But rather than returning to his cheer from before, he sat back & stared bewilderedly @ his left hand.

Edgar, too, stared in wide-eyeholed wonder.

*There's only 1 explanation for why he did that...*

Edgar picked up the bottle & read the label. It claimed as Lance'd claimed.

"Lance, stop the gold from falling on Autumn & don't e'er start it 'gain."

"¿Scuse me?" Lance turned to Edgar with lightning eyes o' shock

& fury. “¿Who’s the master & who’s the servant? Don’t you dare order me round.”

But his fingers crept below the booth & pushed the off button all the same.

“¿What? ¡Stop that!” he shouted down to his hands.

But when he tried turning the machine back on, he found that he couldn’t. Whenever he’d move his fingers toward the start button, they’d just stop as if tied back by some invisible string.

“¿What’s going on here? Have my hands become poss... ess...” Lance’s eyes ballooned. “¡No!” he gasped.

“Lance, order your minions to release Autumn.”

“I will no—Idiots, release the looter.” Lance slapped his hands o’er his mouth.

He aimed a finger @ Edgar. But Edgar couldn’t help noticing Lance’s thunder splitting into clouds o’ horror. “¡You can’t do this to me!” he shouted shakily. “I... ¡I choose free will! It’s like that Rush song goes.” He swung his head eastward. “¿Wh-what is the looter doing free ’gain? ¡I didn’t tell you to release her!”

“Yes you did,” said Agent Razzmatazz. “You said, ‘Idiots, release the looter.’ We’re the idiots & she’s the looter, so we released her.”

“Well, ’cept Agent Red,” said Agent Laser Lemon.

“Uh, I still can’t move,” said Agent Red.

Autumn paced toward Lance @ a slow but steady pace, hands stuffed in pockets & o’erall devoid o’ emotional output. Lance knew that that was her most dangerous condition.

He jumped back in his seat & shouted, “¡Uphold her, idiots!”

“O, now we’re the idiots ’gain, suddenly,” said Agent Razzmatazz, shaking his head. “You always told us A couldn’t be A & not A @ the same time, Sir.”

“¡Just shut up & do it!”

“¡Order your minions not to touch either o’ us!” shouted Edgar.

Lance grasped the edges o' his booth & cringed tightly, trying to hold in the event he knew was inevitable. *I can't do this... It can't be possible. I have free will; I do what I want to do. I cannot be so enslaved that my body refuses to obey my own mind...*

"Don't... touch... either o' them... ¡Gah!"

The agents stopped.

"You should truly make up your mind, Sir," said Agent Razzmatazz.

The toasty glare Lance aimed @ him could roast Graciously giving turkeys. 'Twas an interesting superpower he was inexplicably born with that, sadly, ne'er comes up in any o' these stories.

By this point, Autumn had finally reached Lance, standing just half a meter 'way from him with her hands clasped together 'hind her back, a businesslike expression on her face.

"Greetings, Sir Chamsby. Gorgeous night we're having, ¿yes? Intriguing trial you had there," said Autumn.

"You cheated. Your demon skeleton—who *certainly* can't perform the magic he just performed—robbed me o' my free will. I... I am utterly impressed by the lengths you'd go to steal from people. I don't e'en think *Stalin* could rob one o' his free will."

Autumn smiled. "Thanks. That means a lot to me—though you truly should thank Edgar."

"I'd rather shatter him into a million pieces..."

"You shall ne'er do so so long as I'm 'live." She turned to Edgar, who had just walked up next to & wrapped his arms round her. "Edgar, ¿could you please make Sir Chamsby stop bothering us for now on real quick while I recover my possessions for a 2nd time?"

"Uh... OK. Lance, you are to... give us peace for as long as we're here, OK."

"Fore'er," Autumn said as she was slipping an arm into 1 o' her jacket sleeves.

Lance turned to Autumn & said with a waggling finger, “Your words don’t work.”

“Uh, the bottle said my orders only last within the mansion,” said Edgar.

“¿What if he leaves?” asked Autumn.

“Then all o’ my orders wear off.”

Lance’s mouth curled into a Grinchlike smile.

Edgar saw this & said, “Uh, you’re not to leave this mansion till I say you can.”

The smile fell into a frown ’gain.

“¿What? ¡You can’t do that! ¡That’s not fair!”

“Neither are kangaroo trials,” said Autumn.

“You can order your henchmen to get you food & drink & other necessities—but you can’t bring in any mo’ than are already here, & you can’t order them to hurt us, ¿K?” said Edgar.

“Hey, ¿can you order him to give us all o’ his money?” Autumn asked as she slipped her backpack on.

Lance’s eyes widened in horror. “¡No, you can’t do that! ¡That money’s everything I have! ¡My father didn’t work so hard so his wealth could be stolen by some street rats!”

Edgar turned to Autumn with that stare o’ his she always hated seeing. She already predicted it when he said his familiar, “Autumn...”

“Fine, whatever. Let’s just go,” Autumn muttered as she walked up to the booth & pocketed the rest o’ her stuff.

But as they walked back to the door, Autumn stopped.

“K, how ’bout this, Edgar: ¿could you a’least order him to deliver us the jewels he found so we can open that door?”

Edgar squirmed in pause for a second, but then said, “I guess that’s fair. This is a competition, I guess, & he doesn’t truly need it... Lance, order 1 o’ your minions to give us whatever jewels you have.”

"I can't," Lance said with a shrug.

"¿Why not?" asked Autumn.

Lance simply stood there, shrugging silently.

"Uh... tell us why, please," said Edgar, still feeling his bones heat up from awkwardness.

Lance grumbled. "I only have 1."

"Well, uh, could you have 1 o' your henchmen give us it, please."

"¿What is 'it'?" asked Lance.

"You're just wasting our time," Autumn said with heavy breaths.

"Uh, ¿could you order 1 o' your henchmen to give us the jewel you or 1 o' your henchmen found that we do not already have on us?"

Lance cringed, trying as hard as he could to devise a loophole, but coming up with nothing. Finally, his mouth repeated the command to Agent Purple Mountain's Majesty gainst his wishes.

Purple Mountain's Majesty shrugged, set the doused time bomb on the desk, & then left. Autumn, noticing this, walked up to pocket it. Lance, watching her, glared, but didn't move.

"Yes, make sure not to leave your bomb 'hind. Wouldn't want to interrupt mo' terrorism, as well as slave-taking," said he.

"I would quite like to interrupt such from you," said Autumn without looking @ him.

Lance raised his voice as he replied, "¡You're 1 to talk! ¡I'm amazed such a person o' such small moral fiber could hold such big hypocrisy!" But then Lance's eyes screwed up when he realized what he'd said. "Well, now that I think 'bout it, it makes perfect sense, actually..."

Thankfully for Autumn, Agent Purple Mountain's Majesty returned soon after, & gave the jewel to Edgar.

"Thank you," Edgar said as he handed it to Autumn.

"Well, good doing business with you, Sir Chamsby," Autumn said

with a wave. “This ought to teach you that no bad deed goes unpunished.

“Hey, uh, wait...”

Autumn & Edgar turned back with confused expressions. Both recognized the voice as not Lance’s, but 1 o’ his henchmen’s.

“I don’t mean to trouble anyone, ¿but could you, skeleton Sir, let me move ’gain, please?” asked Agent Red.

## XXII. The Curse

“The problem is, we still have 1 mo’ jewel to find,” said Autumn, “but we’ve searched this whole mansion up & down, practically;—or, a’least, Lance’s minions & we did—& we literally forced Lance to give us all o’ the jewels he had.”

“It must be truly well hidden,” said Edgar.

Autumn sighed. “Then we’re practically back @ the start. I mean, pretty much any room will have just as much chance o’ hiding the last jewel, so we’ll have to search every room ’gain, but e’en finer than before.”

“¿Is that Dawn?”

She turned to her left, where Edgar was standing, & saw far-off down the other end o’ the hall Dawn stumbling toward them. @ 1st she thought, ¿*Why’s she still here? I thought she left*, till she noticed something... odd ’bout Dawn. The lurching gait was 1 thing: dragging her right leg ’hind her as if ’twere wounded. Her hand also seemed to hang & waggle in the air as if ’twere not sure what it wanted to do. Strangely, though, Dawn did not seem to be in any pain: her eyes were blank.

“¿Are you OK?” Edgar asked nervously as Dawn neared.

Dawn emitted a short, moaning “Uhhhhhhh” sound. Her eyes didn’t rise from the floor to look @ either Edgar or Autumn.



“¿Did something attack you, I s’pose?” asked Autumn. The mo’ Autumn watched Dawn, the mo’ her nerves twitched.

Dawn stood just in front o’ Edgar & held her open hands up in front o’ her toward Edgar. They shook in the air as if they were trying to press forward @ Edgar, but were hitting an invisible barrier.

Edgar squirmed back a li’l & asked, “¿Are you all right?”

“Yeah, ¿what the hell are you doing?” asked Autumn.

“Go,” said Dawn.

“¿What?”

Dawn seemed to break through the barrier as she pressed forward on Edgar, knocking him to the floor with Dawn falling on him. As she held him down, her hands wrapped round Edgar’s throat. Her eyes kept their blank stare, turned ’way from Edgar & Autumn @ the wall to her left.

“¿What the hell d’you think you’re doing?” Autumn shouted as she reached down & grabbed Dawn’s arms.

“Go... Now,” was all Dawn barely said in garbled pronunciation.

“That’s rather hard with your hands glued to his windpipe,” Autumn grunted as she put the rest o’ her force into prying Dawn’s hands off Edgar.

However, Dawn’s grip was tepid, as if she were still vacillating o’er whether she wanted to strangle Edgar or not, & Autumn was rather quickly able to peel off finger after finger till she fully released Edgar. “Slide out,” Autumn said as she held Dawn’s hands up.

Edgar paused to cough & pant ’fore wordlessly squeezing out from under Dawn.

Dawn’s effort was no longer on Edgar, so this was simple. ’Stead, Dawn’s arms tried to push gainst Autumn &, when that failed, she suddenly snapped her head @ Autumn’s, giving her a heavy

headbutt. Though Autumn pulled her head back to avoid 'nother beating, she still kept a tight grip on Dawn's hands.

"¿You need me to help in some way?" Edgar said as he stood against the wall on the other side.

"No," said Autumn, her voice out o' breath. "Just try to go 'way as far as you can while I hold her back."

"K," Then Edgar turned & scampered down the hall. Though he felt bad 'bout leaving Autumn 'hind to deal with... whatever Dawn was doing, he was now savvy 'nough to know that staying 'hind & trying to help would probably just hinder Autumn e'en mo'.

Still, only a meter or so down the hall, he turned round & walked backward, keeping an eye on them all the way just in case.

"Dawn, ¿what the hell are you doing?" Autumn grunted as she struggled to keep Dawn's hands back.

"Can't..." was all Dawn managed to say.

"¿What?"

Dawn raised her knees up & then stood, Autumn raising her grasp on Dawn's hands to match the growing height.

"Don't tell me you've become possessed," said Autumn.

Dawn didn't. 'Stead, she shot her foot out & kicked Autumn in the leg. The shock o' the attack stunned Autumn so much that her legs gave in, causing her to collapse on the floor & loosen her grip on Dawn.

Dawn plunged on Autumn, pinning Autumn's arms down with her knees while she wrapped her hands round Autumn's throat, squeezing as hard as she could.

Dawn subtly struggled against her upper body, but found that her control o'er her body was now virtually all gone. What waning independent thought she kept screamed as her treasonous fingers felt the thick mound o' flesh that was Autumn's neck pulsing. Under her Autumn felt like a fish flopping round out o' water—her face

bluing, her mouth emitting strangulation noises, & her pressed-down arms flopping up & down mindlessly.

Luckily, this problem was soon solved when she felt a heavy force knock her from the left, causing her to collapse off Autumn & her grip on Autumn's neck to loosen.

"Sorry, Dawn... if you can still listen in there..." Autumn heard a familiar voice say.

As Autumn hacked & heaved for breath, she flipped round to see Edgar standing just 'bove her. She took Edgar's hand, she returned to her feet, & they both began to run down the hall.

However, just as Autumn was making her 1st step forward, she felt her other foot held down, causing her to collapse face-forward on the floor 'gain. Turning her head, she could see—not to her surprise—that 'twas Dawn, who had made a successful dive @ her feet.

Edgar & Dawn played tug-o-war with Autumn, Edgar pulling Autumn back by her arms & Dawn holding her down by her feet. Autumn could see by the way Dawn was pulling herself forward o'er Autumn's legs that this was a futile venture for them.

"Edgar, release my arms; I have an idea."

"K."

*Let's hope my guess was accurate...*

He did so & Autumn quickly lunged forward with her own arms, toward the slit 'tween Dawn's back & jacket. She forced her hands inside & found Dawn's bat.

But she found that, no matter how hard she tugged, 'twould not come out. She felt round mo' to find a strap holding the bat down & began trying to unlatch it when she felt the room spin under her. It took a while for her to realize Dawn had stood back up, raising Autumn high off the ground, hanging halfway upside-down o'er Dawn's head.

Then Dawn tilted her head forward, giving Autumn a better orientation with which to work. Autumn was thankful for this, but wouldn't have been if she knew what 'twas for: just as Autumn was finally forcing the clasp open, she felt the room rush past her & looked down to see that Dawn was dashing forward. She looked 'hind her in confusion to find the explanation: a wall.

"Ah," said Autumn.

She scrabbled @ the clasp for a few seconds mo' 'fore 'twas finally wrenched open. She grabbed the end o' the bat 'gain & lightly pulled it.

However, 'fore she could pull it out, she felt the wall slam into her back, causing a pain in her back so sharp it flooded into her stomach, too, making her want to vomit.

Luckily for her, though, it also stunned Dawn, causing her to waltz back dizzily. 'Twas 'nough for Autumn to be able to flip forward off Dawn's back & onto the floor 'gain—though sadly for her, not on her feet.

When she returned to her feet & turned round, she saw that Dawn was already no longer stunned—though her eyes still showed no emotion.

As they both paced in the same direction, Autumn backward & Dawn forward, Autumn held the bat in front o' her.

"I'm warning you, Dawn: I don't know how much influence you have on your own body anymo'; but if your body comes @ me 'gain, I'm swinging this thing."

She could feel sweat drenching her head & her hands o'er the bat. She had a good guess as to what would happen if she did swing the bat @ Dawn, but tried to dash the thoughts from her mind 'fore they made her puke.

Dawn charged @ Autumn just the same, with her arms stretched out @ Autumn. Autumn wasn't sure if Dawn intentionally influenced

her body to use such a stupid tactic, or if whatever was possessing her just had a very vulgar thought process. Either way, the tactic was useless. Autumn swung the bat against Dawn's side 'long before Dawn's hands reached her.

With Dawn stunned on the floor, Autumn said a curt, "Sorry," 'fore she dashed 'way back to Edgar—all the while cringing @ the sight o' Dawn lying wounded on the floor with blank, dead eyes still burnt in her mind.

"¿Are you OK?" Edgar asked breathlessly as he stopped just in front o' Autumn.

"Yeah, let's run 'fore she returns to her feet," Autumn said as she grabbed Edgar's arm & ran forward.

"But..."

"¿What? ¿What d'you expect me to do?"

"¿Couldn't we... couldn't we a'least tie her up to keep her safe?" asked Edgar.

Autumn shook her head. "¿You have any idea what could happen to her then?" She thought o' how Lance would react if he found her defenseless. She noticed Edgar hadn't specifically said Lance couldn't harm her & didn't want to take the risk. "No, this is better for both o' us. I'll try & see if I can find a way to cure her later."

Edgar nodded & they ran down the hall. They both looked o'ersoulder to see if Dawn was following them, but were relieved to see that Dawn was still lying on the floor.

*I just hope I somehow knocked whatever was possessing her out o' her,* thought Autumn.

When they reached the stairs, they slowed to catch their breaths, though still kept their eyes peeled 'hind them.

"¿What d'you think happened to her?" asked Edgar.

"She was probably possessed."

"¿How?"

“¿How would I know? ‘Twas just a guess,” said Autumn. “‘Twas such a short way to the front door when she left us, you’d think she could make it that far without being attacked.”

“Maybe it snuck up on her while she was going ’cross the front yard. I remember Madame Heureuse said the ghosts haunt this whole property, not just the mansion.”

Autumn’s pupils dilated.

“¿Autumn? ¿What’s wrong?”

“Edgar, I think I know where the last jewel is.”

### XXIII. Intoxicated

Something had happened to his li’l dark courtroom since Lance had dozed off for only a few minutes. As he raised his groggy head ’bove his spittle-stained desk, he noticed ‘twas full o’ lights, sounds, & movement. Somewhere not far-off a jukebox played some classic rock song Lance was too young to recognize. In the now-wider space ’hind him a herd ’ couples danced with wild cheer.

He looked round his desk & saw that ‘twas now a long booth full o’ people holding glasses full o’ golden liquid, all with listless eyelids. Opposite Lance ’hind said booth stood a short man in front o’ a long row o’ bottle shelves, wearing a tuxedo and wiping a glass with a cloth.

“¿What’ll it be, Sir Chamsby?”

“Le Désespoir,” grumbled Lance, marveling @ the hango’er he somehow felt ’fore e’en taking a single drink.

The bartender poured his drink & slid it o’er to him.

“¿How’d I end up here, anyway?” mumbled Lance. “‘Twas that shameless looter & her devil-spawn friend, ¿wasn’t it?”

“Can’t say I know,” the bartender said as he continued wiping his glass. “I believe you must take it up further with her, Sir Chamsby.

She appears to have a better understanding ' what goes on in this mansion, if the fine li'l trick she played on you earlier is any indication. Rather naughty o' her, if I may be so bold, Sir. In fact, she's crossed you @ almost every turn, ¿hasn't she? & she just a petty thief."

"Yeah, thanks for the reminder," grumbled Lance. "I'd ne'er know what to do with my life if it weren't for such fine advice from a *bartender*."

Lance rubbed his temple as he took a drink o' his wine, feeling it burn the back o' his throat as it sunk in. Something 'bout this conversation seemed eerily familiar.

"She needs to be corrected, if you don't mind me saying so," said the bartender, as if he hadn't heard Lance. "& when her partner tries to stop you from doing your duty, you should correct him, too. The rich do have certain responsibilities, ¿don't they, Sir? We must protect our individual rights. After all, if we don't, ¿who will? ¿The government? We know better than that."

"I can't," Lance said with a scowl. "That skeleton from hell put a curse on me that makes me stay 'way from them."

The bartender shook his head. "Tut, tut. Chamsby, I'm surprised @ you. Such 'scuses. ¿What kind o' Objectivist thinks that way? ¿Are you not a man? ¿Have you not free will?"

Lance squeezed his hand gainst his glass.

"Your puny mind doesn't understand..." he said slowly 'hind gritted teeth. "I am physically incapable o' doing anything gainst them. I can't 'splain it, but some screwed-up magic makes me physically unable to do what I want. It's as if my body just refuses to listen." He threw his arms up. "I don't know how it happens this way."

"Come on, now, Sir Chamsby. I know you're cleverer than that. ¿Did they specifically say you couldn't do *anything*?"

Lance paused, the thought instantly sapping the drunkenness he'd just gained from his drink.

"No..." he muttered, mo' to himself than to the bartender. He turned back to the bartender. "They said I had to give them peace, though."

"& that's exactly what you should give 'em," said the bartender. "After all, ¿what is the most peaceful condition to have in this tedious world? Why, to not be burdened by such dreary conditions as life. Let them *rest* in peace, Chamsby, ol' boy."

Lance's mouth suddenly twisted into a smile.

"¿You think that'll truly work?"

"¿Why shouldn't it? That stupid skeleton didn't specifically mention not killing them, ¿did he?"

Lance stared down @ the booth & rubbed his chin.

"Not that I recall..."

"Then there you go, my good man," the bartender said as he slapped Lance on the back. "¿See? Don't e'er go believing anything can deprive you o' your free will; 'cause once you give up on free will, you have nothing."

"But I don't have nothing," Lance muttered quietly to himself. "In fact, I have everything I need within me."

"Damn straight."

"But I must be careful here..." Lance said with frantic eyes, his weak hand scrabbling for his glass once mo'. "I have only 1 chance 'fore that sniveling skeleton says something that'll fill these loopholes. Once he does, that's it."

He took 'nother gulp o' his wine. He couldn't help noticing the colors becoming brighter & blurrier, the music becoming less earthly. He set the glass down 'gain.

"I'll have to sneak up on the skeleton & make it so he can't speak, whether by covering his mouth or outright killing the bloodless



bastard,” Lance said with a slight stutter. “Once he’s out o’ the way, the ponytailed bitch will be declawed.”

He frantically rummaged through his pockets for his cell & called his henchmen. While he did this, he remembered ’nother flaw in Edgar’s instructions: Edgar said Lance had to order his associates not to touch them, but he ne’er said Lance couldn’t order them to do so afterward. He knew with his back-&-forth game with the gold-dropper button that this was perfectly legal logic in the otherwise illogic o’ the skeleton’s totalitarian magic.

But he still had to be careful. He couldn’t have them attack just yet. Sending many after them would have no benefit o’ stealth, & in fact, would only make them mo’ likely to be caught. He would have them stay close ’hind & wait till he properly dispatched the skeleton ’fore they would come in and help him rid the world o’ the ponytailed devil.

Once he hung up, he drained the rest o’ his wine, slammed his glass down, & called for ’nother. As the bartender refilled his glass, he sat back with his hands tied ’hind his back & a cocky smile, his spirits suddenly reawaken.

“Sounds like you have a top-notch plan then,” the bartender said with a sly smile.

“They’ve tried to crush me under every use o’ force they could contrive—e’en slavery—but they could still ne’er outsmart good ol’ Lance Chamsby.”

Lance raised his glass & then released a deep, throaty laugh.

Suddenly, the rest o’ the bar stopped & laughed with him.

#### XXIV. Torn

*Please don’t get back up. Please just stay down here for just a li’l longer.*

*Or better: please just give me my body back...*

'Twas no use. She still wasn't sure if there was a cognizant... something possessing her body or if her body had just started moving on its own volition. When she could regain 'nough o' her brain to e'en form such thoughts, she figured there must be intelligence 'hind what her body was being forced to do; otherwise she should just flop round on the floor.

*This would have a better effect than what it's probably planning to do now.*

The mental images returned: her own hands throttling Felix's neck, smothering Autumn till her face turned deep blue & her lungs collapsed, shattering Edgar's head open like a vase with her bat—which she was glad she'd lost.

*¡No! ¡You can't make me do these things! ¡I'll destroy this body so neither o' us can use it 1st!*

But every time she tried this, the body wouldn't let her. Hands clutching knives just wouldn't twist backward, no matter how much her brain struggled to transmit the command, nor would they turn backward 'nough to let her strangle herself with them.

She began to feel a buzz o' hope when she saw her body climb itself out a shattered window outside. *¿Didn't Madame Heureuse say this magic wore off outside the mansion?*

However, e'en as she felt the breeze brush against her, she still felt as powerless o'er her motions as before, & only became mo' distraught when she saw why her body had come out here.

But that soon changed. Suddenly, Dawn had an idea for how both she & whoever was possessing her could finally get what they wanted.

## XXV. The Vengeful One

"It won't budge," Autumn said after her 3rd attempt to throttle the doorknob unlocked.

"¿What 'bout when we need to leave?" Edgar said as he tightened his fingers together.

Autumn paused as 'nother idea came to her. She walked down to the hallway to her left, waving for Edgar to follow her.

Edgar raced 'head to Autumn.

"¿Where are we going?" he whispered.

"We're going outside by a different route."

"¿How?"

"You'll see."

Edgar huddled near Autumn when he heard a loud snarl just in front o' him till he looked up & saw that 'twas just the rose monster, still tied up.

"Hmm... you know, we still ne'er thought o' what to do with it," Autumn said with her hand resting on her mouth. "O well."

Finally, they reached round the other side o' the hall, where windows bigger than humans were opening out to the backyard. Edgar could already guess Autumn's plan.

She went up to the nearest & shoved her foot into it. Now, normally if someone tried this their foot would just smack gainst the glass, 'cause windows are usually much stronger than someone's kick; but it just so happened that these windows were specially made for action scenes like these where they need to be kicked down.

Or it might have been that the glass was ol'.

Either way, the glass shattered, which didn't cut up Autumn's leg 1

pixel<sup>1</sup>. Through the now-open hole entered a breeze that Autumn & Edgar found refreshing, having not had contact with outside for... well, technically not that long by the clock's standards, truly. It sure felt like a long time, though.

As they climbed out the window, they gazed o'er the area. Much to Autumn's bitterness, the backyard was not a short grassy area with the last chest just sitting there in simple sight. No, as expected, 'twas a large field with a hedge maze stretching from gate to gate on the sides. In front o' it the empty field was littered with a variety o' gravestones, many o' which were tilted & were inscribed with obnoxious puns that made all the mist spirits floating o'er the air roll their shadowy eyes, turning them into sharpened apostrophes.

Though 'twas the middle o' the night, the moon, still waning-gibbous as the 1st night in Heureuse Manor, was large & bright 'nough to light the backyard despite the dark purple clouds attempting to smother it. The yawning contrast 'tween this white light & darkness dug deep shadows 'hind the hedge walls & tombstones.

Seeing no way to bypass the maze—she didn't e'en want to go near the gates covered in spikes the size o' tree limbs to try passing them—Autumn entered the only opening. Edgar followed wordlessly, the only noise being his robe brushing gainst the unkempt grass & the e'er-busy wind.

As they walked through the bushy arteries, Edgar curled himself together tightly to try shielding his shaking bones from the chill. The wind did not seem able to make up its mind 'bout which direction it wanted to blow, assaulting Edgar from all sides.

On both sides the short leaves o' the hedges rustled. Sometimes Edgar would feel a stray leaf hit his face as 'twas flung from its

1 OK, it did a li'l—but not in a way that actually caused serious damage; just in a way that looked cool.

family by a particularly hard gust. It unnerved him: @ every rustle he expected a monster to jump out.

Autumn was less sensitive to the sound & feel o' the wind; in fact, she was much too preoccupied with trying to navigate through the hedge maze to e'en notice them.

The problem with mazes like these was that one could ne'er figure out which way was the right way 'cept through trial & error. Thus, 'twas inevitable that they'd run into their 1st dead end & have to turn back to 'nother fork. Only, then they ended up @ 'nother dead end. & then 'nother. & 'nother. & 'gain & 'gain & 'gain, till Autumn had to stop & puzzle out which pathways she tried & which she hadn't, holding her head in her hands from the sheer frustration. Edgar, meanwhile, looked all round him to try gauging how far they were from the mansion.

*Lemme think... thought Autumn. We already went down all o' the paths the 1 on the left leads to, the rightmost side led to a dead end... Wait. We tried... we tried all o' the paths back before this 1... 'Cept, wait, ¿did we try the 1 going diagonal from that leftmost path? No, I think I remember we did. ¿What path are we missing then? Augh. Screw it, I'm just gonna bust through these walls then.*

She tried to elbow her way through the dead end, but found the leaves hardier than she imagined. No matter how much she kicked or tried to squeeze gainst the wall, it stayed virtually solid.

*Well, we'll see 'bout that,* she thought as she backed 'way from the wall.

She stood with her feet stretched out & her left arm pointed out. She waited for a second & then charged toward the wall, throwing the rest o' her energy into her shoulder & elbow as she hit the hedges.

Though she was able to push the wall in a centimeter, it merely rebounded as a rubber band, bouncing Autumn backward onto the

ground.

Suddenly, Edgar turned his head @ the strum o' Autumn's fall.

“¿Are you OK?”

“Yeah,” Autumn said as she brushed leaves & grass off her.

“So I guess we tried all the paths, ¿haven't we?”

“As far as I can remember, 'less I'm missing something; & if that's the case, then we'll have to start all o'er.”

She sat back down, grabbed a nearby branch, & started to draw out the maze as she remembered it. However, she kept making mistakes & having to all o' the marks out with her hand & restart.

After her 2nd failure, she gazed round to give herself some peace to think. That was when she noticed that Edgar was looking up-north; she followed his face, but saw nothing. When she glanced back @ Edgar she saw that he was moving his head 'gain. *Must just be looking round aimlessly*, she thought.

But then she did notice something: she looked up @ the top edge o' the hedge wall & saw that 'twas only 'bout 2 & a half meters high.

“Edgar, ¿could you lean down so I can climb on your shoulders, please?” she asked without taking her eyes off the hedge.

“¿Why?”

“I figured out a better way to get through here.”

Edgar didn't ask any mo' questions & did as she asked.

When she'd climbed up onto his shoulders she said, “Thank you. 'K, now stand up & go o'er to the nearest hedge wall, please.”

“K.”

When she neared 'nough, she saw that most o' her head went 'bove the wall—mo' than 'nough height. Still, she wasn't so sure how well these hedges would hold her weight up, regardless o' how strong they were gainst her horizontal force before. She tested it out with her hands, pressing down on it & it felt thick 'nough—similar to sponge, but mo' pokey.

She hoisted herself up the wall. Though it sagged a li'l, it remained solid 'nough not to make her fall for the entire climb.

In fact, her main impediment was not the hedge's mass but its surface area: the wall was a bit too thin for her to trust herself to stand straight up without losing her balance, so for now she kept to a crouch, with her hands firmly grasping the hedge. She wasn't sure how great a safety that'd provide her, considering the leaves she was holding would probably just tear down with her if she fell; but she felt perfectly balanced as o' now.

When she finally felt safe from gravity, she tilted her head up to see the rest o' her maze. It spread too far out—& she was much too low—for her to see much detail @ the end. However, she could see 'nough o' the back wall to know that 'twas completely closed off. She looked to both sides to see that the same applied to them as well. She looked back just to be perfectly sure; but her inkling was soon confirmed: the entrance was the only path that led out or in.

“¿D’you see anything?” Edgar asked up to her.

“Yeah, I see that this maze is a troll job.”

“¿What? ¿How?”

“There’s no ’scape other than the path we went through.”

“¿So what do we do now?” asked Edgar.

“I s’pose there’s no choice but to go ’bove the hedges.”

“¿How?”

Autumn leaned down the side o' the hedge wall so that her lower body was below the top.

“Climb up,” she said.

“Uh, ¿are you sure this will work?” asked Edgar.

“¿Do we have a choice?”

“I guess not.”

He hopped up & grabbed Autumn’s ankles, & then gradually climbed up to the top. When he climbed up past Autumn, she hoisted

herself back up.

“Great. But that was just the easy part; now we’ll have to somehow make it to the end without falling off.”

“I guess crawling round like this”—Edgar was in the same crouched position Autumn was in—“wouldn’t work so well for that, ¿would it?”

Autumn shook her head & then slowly tried standing, holding her hands out as she did. Though she wobbled, she was able to keep a comfortable stillness.

Seeing her success, Edgar copied her. Despite his lack o’ confidence hindering him mo’ than Autumn, he was able to keep himself balanced as well.

“Now an e’en harder part: we’ll need to move ’long these walls till we reach the end,” said Autumn.

So they wormed forward as trapeze artists on tightropes. Due to Edgar’s ending up in front o’ Autumn by accident, he was the 1 leading the way. For now, the path went only 1 way, & so Edgar considered it nugatory, anyway.

*Let’s focus on not falling off 1st*, he thought.

‘Twas a smooth venture so far, though. The wind was much softer than Edgar feared—no gust was near ’nough to significantly hinder their balance. The worst impediment was a stray branch from a nearby tree that they had to duck; but nothing much else.

He soon reached the 1st fork without falling, to his relief. He glanced backward to check if Autumn was still ’hind him, feeling guilty that he had momentarily forgotten ’bout her in all his worries. Thankfully, she was still ’hind Edgar, still continuing forward with her eyes fully on her feet, seemingly not yet knowing that Edgar had stopped.

“¿Which way should I go now?” Edgar asked turning his sight ’tween the path to his left & the path forward.



“¿Huh?” Autumn lifted her head to see where she & Edgar were. After a few seconds’ survey, she answered, “Keep going forward till the end there. I want us to hit the outmost border so we’ll have a smooth & simple way forward.”

Edgar nodded & continued. Silence—save for the rustling leaves & whistling wind still ongoing, ’course—filled their surroundings once mo’ as they remained focused on their careful movements.

’Twas only when Edgar finally reached the outer border that he spoke.

“Uh... ¿are you sure you want us to walk ’long here?” Edgar said with the warble o’ fear in his voice.

“¿Why? ¿What’s wrong?”

“The land seems to end a li’l ways back,” Edgar said as he backed a few centimeters, ’fraid that some wind might push him forward into the abyss below.

“¿What?”

“You may need to come look,” said Edgar.

But Autumn didn’t need to come closer to see what was clear from e’en her distance: the suburbs @ the distance seemed to slide down into a cliff far off in the horizon. When she reached Edgar, she squeezed close so she could look down from their side; she could see that there was no land on the side o’ the hedges. A fall off that side would be a guaranteed fall down the cliff. All ’long the ground below were stalagmites that thinned sharp ’nough @ the top to impale anyone who was unfortunate ’nough to fall on them.

“I should’ve known...” muttered Autumn. “I would say we should try the other side, but it’s probably the same.” She let out a sigh. “Well, I guess we’ll just have to go round. Come on, I’ll lead us back to the other path.”

Though ’twas tedious for Autumn to keep every path they went ’long in mind, they ’ventually reached the outer border on the other

side. Her secret worries that it'd also lead down to a chasm, & that this was just 'nother cute li'l prank o' whoever set this all up, were relieved when she saw that there was indeed land—though only 'bout 3 meter's worth.

They climbed down & then searched round the short stretch o' land for where the treasure might be hiding. Unlike the other side, which was covered with wild grass, this side was mostly just dirt & pebbles, with a few nettles & leaves from nearby pine & oak trees.

'Twas 1 o' these trees—a red oak twisted into a knobby shape—that Autumn noticed 1st. Though on 1st glance it appeared inconspicuous, 'pon examination it looked a li'l off. Maybe 'twas just a rare tree, but it seemed a bit wider—'specially compared to its short stature—than any other tree she'd e'er seen. As she stepped toward it, other imperfections bloomed: its texture seemed simplistic for nature & some o' its lines looked particularly human-crafted: they formed almost perfect rectangles.

She put her hand on the tree. 'Stead o' the scratchy wood texture one'd expect from touching a tree, she felt a much smoother surface—like plastic or steel. She put her fingers o'er the glaring lines she noticed before & felt them dig in much further than any other lines.

Convinced that this was the key to the treasure, she explored round the tree, frisking it.

'Twas 'pon her 2nd check round its back that she found it. Since the tree was partway 'bove the end o' the cliff, many o' its back roots, rather than digging into the ground as is natural for a tree, protruded out in the free air. All o' these roots branched out into thinner & thinner lines as woody veins—all but 1, which ended @ a flattened trapezoid shape, mo' like a strange tail than a root.

She put her foot out & stamped down on it. To add further evidence to her suspicions, it did not bend down as would be normal, but shifted down as if 'twere loosely connected to the tree.

While she was noticing this, she heard the rubbing o' metal gainst metal & felt the trunk she was still leaning gainst rumble.

"Autumn, look," Edgar said as he pointed @ the front o' the tree.

She backed 'way & turned to see that the front now opened into a li'l gray box. Inside was the treasure chest.

Autumn ran toward it & snatched it out as if she'd been 'fraid it'd close 'gain if she weren't fast 'nough. She opened the chest just to ensure they were not being led into yet 'nother trick, but was relieved to see that familiar jewel corner sitting inside. She stuffed it into her pockets with the other 3.

"¿So is that it?" asked Edgar.

"I s'pose. Now we just need to make our way back to that door on the 8th floor—we'll only need to climb o'er the wall & go the rest o' the way on-ground—& the real treasure should be somewhere 'hind it."

"Good," Edgar said with a nod. He thought this was pretty fun & all; but he could only take so much o' this mansion in 1 dose.

She hoisted him up the hedge wall & he held her up as she climbed after him. Then they both leapt down the other side. They were fortunate that it didn't take them nearly so long to make it back through the maze as it did forward; they only hit 1 dead end, & quickly recovered their pace afterward.

But as she walked out the hedge maze's entrance, something caught her eye to her right. She swung round to snatch a better look, but not before it tackled Edgar, who had just been following Autumn out the maze. 'Twas a moving suit o' armor.

*¡We told him to piss off already!*

'Fore Edgar could understand what was going on, he felt a hard metal hand clasp o'er his mouth in such a tight manner as to turn his exclamations into gibberish. He felt the rest o' his body pressed back gainst a larger metal object by a metal tube on his stomach. He

looked down to see that 'twas an armored arm—what appeared to be a knight's arm.

*But that can't be...* thought Edgar.

"All right, let go o' him you cocksucker," Autumn said as she stormed o'er to the minion, only to feel her arms held back.

She looked to her sides to see 2 mo' minions. They lifted her into the air & 2 mo' minions came by to hold her legs. She tried throttling all her limbs, but found that this was as futile as the last time they carried her; she was completely disarmed.

*Lance must've found some way to exit the mansion without breaking Edgar's commands, & thus broke free o' them entirely,* thought Autumn.

"I hope you enjoyed what brief victory you had handed to you on a platter before, 'cause now that's 'bout to be struck down, I'm 'fraid," Lance said as he stepped forward into sight from 'hind the shadows o' the hedges.

Autumn noticed that Lance looked much messier than usual: his hat was tilted & bent, his hair streamed out in haggard strains, & his cloak appeared shredded & creased. But what was most prominent was the twisted gleam in his eyes.

*Something isn't right in a mind with those eyes.*

"I thought Edgar told you you had to leave us 'lone," said Autumn, hoping he might be gullible 'nough to give them answers.

"Ah, but he didn't," said Lance. She swore she could see him lick his lips & drool @ the flavor o' his own words. "He said I must give you peace; & so I plan to give you the greatest peace you could e'er ask for: death. You shall be relieved o' all the burdens life punishes you with."

Autumn was too threatstricken to be amused @ the incongruous congruity o' their views on death in this instance. "I don't think... No... That magic—whatever causes you to have to do what Edgar

says—that can’t just let you use that obvious bullshit interpretation. Come the fuck on,” said Autumn, trying to slap her head, only to be reminded her arms were still being held.

“Well, it seems to be working now.”

“OK, fine; ¿but how are these assholes helping you? I clearly remember Edgar saying they were not to harm anyone... O shit.”

“Well 1st, as you’ve seemed to discover yourself, they are not harming anyone,” said Lance. “& while the skeleton ordered me to command them not to touch you before, he ne’er said I couldn’t change that order.”

“Edgar, couldn’t you just order him to—shit...”

That was when Autumn turned her head & saw that Edgar had his mouth covered.

“From past experience I can assume the skeleton will be much harder to dispose o’—’specially while preventing him from speaking; so the good news is, you’re the 1st to take your punishment.”

Lance stood bent o’er & breathed heavily as if he were preparing to transform into a werewolf as soon as the moon turned full. It reminded Autumn o’ how Dawn appeared when she went after them, & made her wonder if Lance was infected with the same virus.

“I s’pose I can expect you to be too cowardly to do the honors without me being held down by 4 other people, though a rational person might expect someone like you who harps on ’bout individuality & free will & all that tripe to be disdainful o’ such an obvious handout from others.”

Lance’s mouth twisted into an e’en wider smile.

“O, but Madame Springer, you most certainly *do* have the utmost o’ free will. No less than the skeleton & no less than I.”

*I had a feeling that line would come back to bash my brains out with a bat,* mused Autumn.

“Well, you’re just so lucky that, ’cause I won’t stoop down to your

level, I'll fight you fairly," said Lance. "I'll order my minions to release you & stay out o' the fight—though they will intervene if you try to rescue the skeleton."

"¿Truly?" Autumn said with a look that indicated she didn't truly believe him. She remembered he tried this before, & it didn't end well for him.

"Yes, let me just get out my new weapon I found," Lance said as he lifted his hat & pulled out a cracked baseball bat.

*I knew I forgot something when I left that stupid maze, thought Autumn. Well, a'least now I know where it is, I s'pose.*

"I thought this might partly make up for the immense wealth you've already taken from so many," said Lance.

"¿& I s'pose you fear giving me a weapon would be too e'en a match for you to win?"

"Sorry, but it's not my responsibility to supply you with anything—you ought to, as the saying goes, pull yourself up by your bootstraps."

Autumn raised a hand. "Um, objection. This is clearly a scandalous misinterpretation o' free-market principles, which we've clearly indicated earlier means you must be punished with having 3 tons o' gold dropped on you. You do believe in the rule o' law, after all..."

"You may release the looter now," Lance said as he glanced @ the 4 minions.

They nodded, released Autumn's limbs, & turned & walked 'way toward the guard holding Edgar.

Lance didn't move yet. He stood in place while he spun the bat round in his right hand.

*Let's hope he doesn't actually know how to use that,* Autumn thought as she spread her feet out to better prepare them for moving.

“This is it,” said Lance. “It is finally time for you to pay society back for all o’ the crimes you have committed!”

“Most people just use jail or fines, you know,” said Autumn, feeling saliva catch in the back o’ her throat.

“No, that would be too generous for such a devious looter like you!” Lance said as he thrust the end o’ the bat toward Autumn.

Drool dripped down Lance’s bottom lip as if he were a mad dog. *What did this guy get infected with while we weren’t looking?* Autumn asked herself. It made her wonder how well this would affect his ability to attack with that bat. He seemed a lot mo’ dexterous with it so far than she would have expected.

She would soon discover. Lance charged @ her & then swung up & left with all o’ his might so suddenly that Autumn just barely backed ’way in time. She backed ’way e’en farther, as quickly as her feet could manage, while watching Lance recover with similar speed. She ruminated o’er how if she’d been a bit later with that dodge, her head would be flying up o’er the hedge maze.

Lance followed with swing after swing after swing, each narrowly missing her as she stumbled backward.

*Hopefully all o’ this heavy swinging will tire him out ’fore I’m cornered.*

That was when Autumn felt her feet bump into something ’hind her, causing her to collapse backward off her feet. Staring down @ her legs, she could see that ’twas a crooked tombstone that just so happened to say, “Autumn falls early this year...”

She was ’bout to try pulling herself back up when she saw Lance jump forward & slam the bat down on her legs, causing Autumn’s eyes to almost pop out their sockets & the breath to thicken & clog her mouth. She could hear the bone cracking as the bat struck & sure ’nough, felt a burning numbness in her knees that made it hard for her to move them.

'Fore she could do mo', Lance swung his bat 'gain—this time @ Autumn's face, whipping it sideways. Though her head was not detached, she could feel some o' her teeth get knocked out, & could feel her nose crack e'en mo' than 'twas before. Blood dribbled down her nose, filling her mouth, while the skin under her left eye swelled & purpled.

Giving up on her legs, she 'stead turned & tried crawling 'way, digging her nails forward & back in the mossy dirt like a mole digging 'way from a feral cat.

Though she tried moving as fast as possible, she couldn't help pausing every now & then to catch her breath—not helped by the blood clogging her mouth. She opened her mouth wide to let in air, only for her mouth to cough up blood, her eyes watching it pour out as a spigot.

*I can already see this won't work well for me... she thought hazily. But I might as well try as hard as I can till the end.*

Autumn was simply too slow on her arms to keep 'head o' Lance—'twas hard 'nough while my feet still functioned—and so he was soon able to strike 'nother hit gainst Autumn on the shoulder, busting it as well & causing her to collapse prone.

As she rubbed her busted shoulder with her other hand, feeling the same fiery numbness as in her legs still, she realized 'scape was futile. She would just have to go into defense mode till she could devise 'nother way out o' this mess—though she doubted she could find a way. She sucked her head back as a turtle & put her right arm o'er her head for protection.

Lance laughed. "Given up already, I see. Well, ;I guess I'll finally get round to giving you that peace I promised!"

He hefted the bat up 'gain & released a flurry o' swipes o'er her arm & back like lightning. She could feel the bones in her arm & back breaking further & further with each strike.



After Lance saw Autumn's body sag from the weakening o' the onslaught, he flipped her o'er on her back with his foot & pressed it down o'er her chest, leaning in toward her face.

"¿Any last pleas 'fore I finish you off? Maybe if you beg good 'nough I might make it less agonizing."

Autumn was panting heavily, her body feeling as if 'twere starved for oxygen, the blood still clogging her mouth making her cough.

While she was staring upward, she tried to keep most o' her attention on his face—a wolfish, contorted parody o' what she faintly remembered as the harmless visage he wore before. He had a wide grin open 'nough to show his sharp teeth.

"I s'pose it'd be ridiculous to ask you not to relieve your frustrations on me, ¿but could I ask that you a'least not be so pathetic 'nough to do so on someone as helpless as Edgar?" Autumn asked weakly.

Lance threw his head back & laughed. "¿Helpless? ¿The twerp enslaved me! ¿He locked me up in this revolting mansion! ¿Does he think I will let go such inhuman tyranny? ¿Do you?"

"You know, I told him to do that," said Autumn. "You clearly saw he was reluctant to do it."

"¿Reluctant? Well, poor 'ol bastard. ¿I don't care if he was reluctant—he did it, anyway! & 'sides, ¿the fact that he would choose to be subordinate to such filth as you is itself a crime! ¿If you are not part o' the solution, you are part o' the problem; his decision to abide such lawlessness—nay, e'en help you sometimes in it—indicts him itself! It's just like ?-Man says: you can either be a healthy mushroom or poisonous, white or black. ¿There's no middle point!"

Lance had his bat raised o'er his head, ready to slam down on Autumn's head & turn it into mush. But Autumn saw that she still needed mo' time.

"Wait..." Autumn said with a withering hand—the 1 whose

shoulder wasn't shattered—partly raised. "Fore I die, could you... could you a'least give me a mo' detailed reason. I mean, you're an Objectivist, after all. Every action is backed by principle. I know a li'l 'bout it—you know, screw the poor, & all that—but I was hoping you could give me greater detail. You know, so maybe I could use it to improve myself in the afterlife."

What shocked Autumn the most was not the fact that Lance's expression showed her plan had worked—she expected it to; what shocked her was that Lance's expression became *less* crazy: his smile faded, his eyes untwisted, & e'en his teeth seemed to become less fang-like. His breath began to slow & his face began to flush with warmth, in contrast to the bloodless ice that was his pallor before.

He laughed. "Such uselessness. But I'll do it just 'cause I love to prolong this—jus in our true, proper positions in the world! Justice prevailing @ last!"

Autumn blinked in half horror, half curiosity.

"Well, 1st off, I am certain there is no afterlife. That is simply some leftist myth that gives them an 'scuse to use what time they truly do have in life to laze round doing nothing @ best, & commit outright evil in your case."

"Mmm hmm, please continue."

Autumn struggled to ignore the urge to glance left; she had to keep her eyes purely focused on Lance so he would not suspect anything.

"& as for why you are being punished so, why, it is 'cause you & your vile skeleton friend have violated the most sacred o' man's rights: the rights to be free, the rights o' property. The fact that you would—"

Lance suddenly felt a pressure pulling his upraised bat back & then felt an arm wrap round under his armpits. He made a quick glance down @ the arm to see that 'twas covered in a green jacket

sleeve—*That looter friend I forgot 'bout all this time!* Then to Autumn, who was now flashing Lance a weak smile.

Lance had li'l time else to survey the situation. 'Fore he knew it, the other witch was pushing him forward, holding him so tightly he couldn't manage to struggle out.

“*Release me, you vile witch!*” he yelled. “*This is a clear violation o' my personal space & you'd better release me this instant, or else! Guards! Stop dinking round; do something!*”

The guards—who had earlier turned 'way from everything, playing a card game to take their minds off the fact that their boss was murdering a young woman—turned their heads @ the sound o' Lance's voice.

But there was nothing they could do. As Autumn watched Dawn's actions—*well, not truly Dawn: the monster possessing her*—her smile faded into a gaze o' horror. Straight 'head o' them was the gate, with all o' its spikes protruding from all sides.

“*Dawn! Wait!...*” Autumn's voice choked with blood.

But Dawn didn't seem to respond.

Just as they were nearing the gate, Autumn shut her eyes into a sickened cringe. However, her fears were confirmed by the nerve-rending scream that came from Lance's voice. Dawn was completely silent.

She forced her eyes open to see both Lance & Dawn hanging a few centimeters off the air, 1 long spike going right through them. She saw their arms hang limply from their sides. She could see by the way their bodies convulsed erratically & the blank glaze in their eyes that neither o' their bodies functioned anymo'.

The guards had finally reached Dawn & Lance, shifting their bodies left & right awkwardly as they stood there, knowing they'd screwed something up. 1 o' them put his finger to Lance's wrist, let it fall back, & then shrugged.

"I guess the boss is dead."

"Darn. I truly needed that extra cash. My daughter's been begging for that new-fangled Wii fore'er."

"& I spent all this time coming up with a cool name."

They walked back to the 1 still holding Edgar, shaking their heads. 1 o' them lightly kicked a pebble 'cross the grass.

"So, ¿what do we do now?" asked the 1 holding Edgar, Mellow Yellow.

"I guess we're done. I mean, he can't pay us if he's dead."

"Yeah, 'sides... I don't feel comfortable doing this killing business. It seems wrong. I mean, look what happened to the boss."

"Yeah, let's all get out o' here."

The minion holding Edgar released him & then they all walked toward the open window & climbed in, 1 by 1.

The second Edgar felt his feet touch the floor, he ran as fast as he could o'er to Autumn.

"Autumn, ¿are you OK?" he said with gasps.

"Yeah," Autumn said absentmindedly. "Just a few bones broken. It's a good thing this is a cartoon, or I'd be outright dead."

"&... & Dawn... She didn't..."

Autumn suddenly frowned & looked 'way from him.

Her throat felt sore from all the coughing & the blood. But now it felt 'nother sensation: nauseated. She had the sudden urge to throw up.

When Edgar finished hyperventilating & sobbing, he said, "¿W-what are we going to do then? You won't be able to move in that condition for months."

"That'll give us plenty o' time."

"¿What do you mean?"

This question received no answer. By this time, Autumn's head had tilted to the side & her eyes had closed, her body's sheer

exhaustion knocking her into sleep.

To be continued...

#BOSK-CK1F22-PROM

**A PROM-PTLY PROM-ISING  
PROM-OTION YUK YUK I MUST  
SAY THAT IS QUITE  
UNHYGIENIC**

J. J. W. Mezun | 2016 May 1



## I.

Edgar joined Autumn @ her makeshift office in the back corner o' the cafeteria. Her attention till then had been rapt on the spiral notebook just below her, only to now flick up to him.

"Edgar... This'll probably sound odd coming from me, but I wanted to ask if you, ah, ¿are taking anyone to the prom they're having?"

If Edgar actually had any eyes, they would've widened; so 'stead he sufficed with standing back in shock.

"Uh... No. I, uh... Well, I honestly didn't think you'd want to go," he said as he scratched the side o' his face nervously.

Autumn surveyed the cafeteria, ensuring no eavesdropping was ahand. Assured, she swiveled her notebook toward Edgar & pointed the eraser o' her pencil down on 1 part.

"Intel tells me they're giving 'way golden crowns to the victors. We'll be those victors."

"¿So your plan is for us to... win prom president?" asked Edgar, doubt flaring from his voice like a lighthouse beacon. Normally he thought Autumn was brilliant, but Edgar couldn't help finding her "intel" to be flawed for this plan, as the chances o' this succeeding were approximate to being struck by lottery tickets while finding a pile o' lightning on the ground.

Autumn recognized this doubt, but nodded, anyway, with a curt, "Yes. That's 1 bough o' my plan."

"&, uh... ¿How d'you hope to win? I mean, we're not exactly, well..." said Edgar.

"¿Likeable in the slightest? No worries: we'll win."

Edgar leaned in & whispered, “You’re, uh, planning to rig the vote, ¿aren’t you?”

Autumn shook her head. “Nope. Too risky. Wouldn’t work.”

Edgar couldn’t help staring @ her with a head tilted in confusion. *She has to have some part o’ this plan that she won’t tell me. E’en as competitive as she is, she couldn’t think we’d win normally...*

## II.

Unperceived to Edgar, an up-&-coming rogue reporter occurred to be listening in on their conversation, searching for sweet & salty scoops. Autumn, in particular, was 1 he oft watched for stories. She was a known agitator o’ theft, so he knew she was suspicious.

’Sides, he had an eye for dirty people, & he could see just by looking @ Autumn that she was dirty—as were most o’ the people round here.

*None o’ them can be trusted...*

But his ears perked when he heard her Satanic friend whisper ’bout voting fraud & suddenly, he knew exactly what his new beat’d be.

*This’ll put us right on the atlas, he thought as he twiddled his fingers together; ¡& soon everyone’ll recognize the world’s greatest investigative journalist, Thursday O’Beefe!*

## III.

Unnoticed to both o’ them, 1 o’ the unnamed<sup>1</sup> members o’ the gang o’ bored jocks also heard Autumn’s plan, having also spent his lunch listening to random students’ conversations.

As they became down with it, stuffing telephone booths &

1 Names are reserved for characters 2-dimensional & higher.



punching back Heros while blasting Bing Crosby, he told them all 'bout it.

He snarled as he twisted his evil mustache. "I hear that ugly pickpocket dame & her D&D reject friend are trying to win prom presidency. We should soitenly spend hours o' our time focusing on this."

"¡Wowwie, that'd be the lizard's pajamas!"

"That's be mo' than the lizard's pajamas, fat-head: that'd be the dinosaur's pajamas."

The next afternoon, they strutted through the hallway in their matching black leather vests & gel-saturated black hair. There they caught the douche, Autumnbot, striding down the hall, followed by the other douche, Grampa Virgin.

"Thursday O'Beefe here, soon-to-be world's greatest investigator showing you the dangerous agitator, Autumn Springer, in the act o' rigging the vital prom election."

"You know I can hear you, ¿right?" Autumn said without glancing back @ him.

"Spread out, dork," said the gang leader as he smacked the imaginary papers from O'Beefe's hands.

"¿Are you crazy? ¡You can't do that! ¡It's physically illegal!" O'Beefe said as he stared @ them with wide eyes & hands o'er his head.

1 o' the other jocks suddenly started cracking up laughing so hard that he fell on the floor, slapping his knees with tears running down his eyes.

"¡Haw! ¡Haw! ¡He caused someone a minor inconvenience! ¿D'you see that? ¡*He caused him a minor inconvenience!* O ho ho!"

The leader scratched the back o' his head awkwardly.

"Err... It wasn't that funny, man."

But the lackey continued rolling round the floor with his hands

tightly clasping his knees, barking like a hyena. A dark wet spot emerged from the front o' his robe, his body having given all control to the specter o' slapstick.

Autumn decided to quicken her pace out o' this scene, but failed: the jock leader rushed up 'head o' her & stood before her, leaning against the lockers with a toothpaste-commercial smile.

"So I heard you're planning on entering the prom competition," he sneered.

Autumn nodded. "That's accurate."

"Yeah..." said the leader with a nod.

A long pause passed 'tween them.

Autumn coughed. "Well, that was a good meeting we had here. Glad to have had it."

"I am, too," the leader sneered.

"Well then, I'll just walk on round you then," she said as she began to do just that.

"Yeah, that sounds good. By the way, ¿d'you know what yesterday's assignment was in Physics? I missed it 'cause I was sick," he sneered.

"Exercises 5 to 10 in page 85," Autumn said as she walked on down the hall.

"Ha, ha. Thank you for the help," he sneered down the hallway with a hand cupping his mouth.

She didn't respond, heading straight down the hallway like a rocket.

"Ha, ha. Have a good day," he sneered e'en louder as she began to disappear round the corner o' the stage.

\* \* \*

## IV.

Edgar sat on the grass just 'side the Morgenacht's while Autumn dressed in his subterranean home just 'hind him.

"¿Where'd you get these costumes, anyway?" Edgar called out to her.

"Mother had some lying round, luckily."

"& uh... ¿what're we going to do 'bout dancing?" asked Edgar.

"Well, I planned on doing so with my feet; but if you know a better method, I'd be most intrigued."

"I mean... ¿d'you know how to dance?" asked Edgar.

"I understand the concept quite well."

"What I mean is... ¿what if we stumble round or knock into someone & cause zany '90s pratfalls?"

"That'll work wonderful for us."

"That... ¿that'd be a good thing?" asked Edgar.

"Uh huh."

Finally, Edgar heard the scrape o' bricks & looked back to see Autumn beginning to climb outside, only for her to stop & mutter a curse. She dropped back down & then climbed back up with a high heel in 1 hand.

As she walked o'er the grass, she almost tripped on the human traps that were her high heels. This would've fed Edgar's worry if he hadn't been too busy staring in shock @ the transformation Autumn went through during her time in the bathroom.

It went beyond simply her usual school uniform being replaced by a black dress & her hair hanging down to her shoulders; it also looked as if the designers had reconfigured her width property to be shorter, which, now that he thought 'bout it, horrified him as to the biological consequences it might have. He'd heard stories o' people being born with bugs in certain properties that cause their graphics

to twist in inhuman shapes accidentally.

He knew he'd be upset if someone said such stuff 'bout him—and truly did feel his nerves rattle when he saw her emerge, though it might've been due to the odd music & camera movement—so he pushed himself to say, “Autumn... you look amazing,” in practically a gasp.

Autumn frowned. “¿Truly? You're saying that out o' politeness, ¿right? 'Cause I need you to be honest for this endeavor to work as well as possible.”

“No, I mean it...”

“Hmm...” Autumn adjusted her glasses so that they were tilted to the side & then pulled on 1 strand o' hair so that it stuck out.

“¿How 'bout now? ¿Do I look somewhat as a befuddled fool who doesn't know what she's doing?”

“No, you look great. Truly.”

“¿& by that do you mean that I succeeded by failing or failed by succeeding?”

“¿What?”

“In order for this part o' the plan to work optimally, I must don the façade o' an e'er-trying, endearing klutz.”

“Uh... ¿why?”

“You'll see...”

She stepped up to Edgar & scrutinized him mo' closely, both for testing & recreational purposes. She knew the former was simply a 'scuse for the latter; but the former was still necessary, so 'twas a valid 'scuse.

She could see him squirm under her gaze & wondered how much better she was @ disguising her own lepidopteran-infested esophagus.

*I wonder how he feels 'bout this whole zaniness... He's going 'long with it, but that doesn't say much...*

“Is, uh... ¿Did I do something wrong?”

Autumn shook her head. “No, you look just right.”

“O, uh, thank you... I think...” mumbled Edgar down to the ground, trying to stifle his blushing.

“O. There’s 1 improvement we could make.”

Autumn began readjusting Edgar’s bowtie & lapels. Then she stood back & scrutinized him tilt-headed as a Picasso scrutinizing his paintings.

“Um, I don’t mean to complain, but I think you made them mo’ crooked.”

“Perfect.”

“O... OK. Uh... so, you are going to tell me everything I need to do soon, ¿right? ’Cause I’m truly confused, & I really don’t want to mess things up for you.”

Autumn sat next to him with her legs crossed & her clasped hands stretched out businesslike.

“You needn’t worry ’bout that; if I plan this correctly, there’ll be nothing you can do wrong.”

“I could surprise you...”

“I’ve known you for almost 3 years. I’d have to be utterly incompetent for that to happen.”

“¿So you’ll handle everything, then?”

“O, no. I’m not doing anything, either.”

“¿What? Wait, ¿so neither o’ us are doing anything? ¿So you just hope we’ll win... naturally—that they’ll choose to vote for us by their own reasoning?”

“Yes.”

“¿Why?”

“You know, Edgar, sometimes intriguing ideas can come from e’en the most inane contexts. You e’er hear ’bout some board game video game called *Mario Party*.”

Edgar's befuddlement only increased. "¿Do you hope there's a minigame portion o' the prom?"

"I'll take that as a yes," said Autumn. "Anyway, I remember 1 time during class I heard these 2 other students talk 'bout some YouTube videos called 'Luigi Wins by Doing Nothing,' or something like that."

Edgar paused, trying to put everything she said together in some logical configuration.

"¿You plan for us to win... by doing nothing?"

"Exactly."

"Um... ¿how?"

"Well, I won't give the details, 'cause that would spoil the fun o' the plan, but I can 'splain that there are worse things than doing nothing: one can actually make things *worse* for themselves by their own efforts so that it'd have been better had they ne'er put in the effort @ all."

"¿But that won't apply to us?" asked Edgar.

"It's unlikely. We—or rather, I—have 1 major advantage."

"¿What?"

"I actually understand the game we're playing."

Edgar was far too involved in Autumn's puzzle not to desperately search for clues as to what she was talking 'bout.

*It's not what I think it is, ¿is it?*

Finally, Edgar asked, "You're not... you're not making this whole thing up 'cause you think I wanted to go to the prom & felt sorry for me, ¿are you?"

"Hmm... That's an interesting theory. But I do truly plan to capture those golden crowns."

The conversation tapered off @ this point. Though Edgar had many mo' questions he wanted answered, he knew they wouldn't be, & so he let them be. 'Sides, there were other concerns mo' pressing on his mind.

He stared down @ the ground & said, "I have to admit... I'm feeling a bit nervous 'bout all o' this."

He had expected her to reply with assurances that he had no reason to be, that the plan would work fine. Looking back, though, he realized he should've predicted the response she did give:

"Perfect."

Edgar turned to her. "¿You think it's perfect that I'm... that I'm nervous 'bout an idiotguarded plan?"

"O. I assumed you were talking 'bout something else," said Autumn.

"¿What?"

Autumn stared off into the starry sky as if trying to scrutinize it for treasure, with the sharp eyes that Edgar was used to seeing. She took a deep breath, & then, in a twist Edgar found utterly unfamiliar, she put a hand on Edgar's. "Nothing to matter 'bout..." was all she said.

Edgar stared down @ both o' their hands with sand in his throat. He now regretted eating @ the sand bar during lunch, whose consequences were now ruining this perfect moment. He knew he should've gone to the butterfly bar, as Autumn had. ¿Why would he e'en eat when he had ne'er needed to eat before?

"¿So you... want me to be nervous for this plan to work?" said Edgar.

"Both o' us, yes. That won't be a problem, ¿will it?"

"I don't think so... ¿but why would you be nervous 'bout a plan that's s'posed to be moronsafe?"

Autumn paused, staring @ her hand still on his. She was surprised he couldn't already guess that answer by the timber o' her arm.

*He's either truly unperceptive or goading me. I doubt the former.*

Then she rushed to check her phone.

“It’s getting time,” Autumn said as she stood. “We should go.”

She took his hand & helped him up, & they both walked down the street. As they walked under the white light o’ the waxing-gibbous moon—as well as the dusty yellow light o’ the streetlamps, the blurry white lights o’ passing cars’ headlights, & the e’en dustier yellow light o’ the window o’ some guy who was peeping in tenants windows in the opposite apartment—Autumn couldn’t help noticing Edgar’s glum face aimed down @ the gravel.

Looking back @ her feet, Autumn mumbled, “You don’t have to do this if you don’t want.”

“¿What? O, no...” Edgar jittered. “It’s not that... It’s just something silly...”

“I know it is. That’s all part o’ the plan.”

Now Edgar’s curiosity once mo’ pushed aside his regular shyness.

“I’ve just been feeling... this whole thing seems a li’l... manufactured, I guess,” said Edgar.

“Proms are always that way.”

## V.

If this were a big-budget prom story, I’d instruct you to imagine speakers blaring popular prom songs such as “Good Riddance,” “Pumped Up Kicks,” “I Need a Doctor,” “Animal,” or “Raised by Bats.” However, ’cause this story is on a tight budget, I couldn’t afford to get the rights to ask you to imagine these songs, so please ’stead imagine cheap knockoffs that sound suspiciously similar or versions o’ these songs played in “Mario Paint Composer.”

Perhappenstance, ¿could you also imagine nameless couples in the midst o’ idle conversations? These conversations don’t need to make sense in the present context. A woman tells her date, “So, that’s why I can’t e’er use a pencil ’gain,” or a male tells his date, “It only



itches when I sit down,” & the reader squirms happily with a warm feeling o’ immersion, as if these conversations were *surely* happening in real life & these nameless people were *surely* authentic.

Rush the camera to the center stage—¡not that fast, cameraperson, you almost smacked someone in the face!—where we witness a colony o’ couples dancing. They don’t dance as any real human would. Those who didn’t simply slide their limbs round half-assedly as if performing the idle animations for *Mortal Kombat* characters throttled each other & smashed their faces gainst the floor as if trying to battle demons inside them.

But let’s zoom in ’way from them toward the only characters the writer bothered to develop. Autumn & Edgar stood as atheists @ a bar mitzvah, utterly perplexed by these strange rituals. Edgar stared down @ his shiny shoes while Autumn glanced all round her—a habit when in alien environments.

“I s’pose we should begin dancing,” said Autumn.

“¿How?”

“Well, it’s simple: you just move your feet round.”

Autumn started moving her legs up & down as if in an immobile marching band or climbing invisible, ne’er-ending stairs.

“Uh, ¿are you sure that’s the right way to move them?” asked Edgar.

“¿There are wrong ways?” asked Autumn, suddenly stopping in bewilderment. This was not part o’ her plan.

“Well, yeah,” said Edgar, scratching the back o’ his skull nervously. “Otherwise we’ll look silly.”

“¿Isn’t that the point?” Autumn asked as she turned to ’nother couple, who were currently sliding round in figure 8s on their stomachs like penguins, 1 ’bove the other, knocking o’er other couples, not to mention violating the laws o’ physics.

“I think they have different ideas for what looks silly & what doesn’t,” said Edgar.

Autumn rubbed her chin as she gazed round @ the other couples, taking mental notes.

“Yes, it does seem as if most couples are touching each other in some ways. ¿Do you mind if I put my hands on your shoulders?”

“Uh... No. ¿Should I... should I do the same?” asked Edgar.

“No, the general pattern seems to be for the other to hold his hands on each side o’ the primary dancer’s stomach—& since you’re the shorter o’ us, no offense, it seems mo’ logical for you to hold the shorter part.”

“Uh... OK. If you say so...” said Edgar as he put a sweaty hand on her hip. Then he looked up @ Autumn & asked, “¿N-Now what?”

“Let’s just rock back & forth.”

They both pushed forward, causing them to slide into each other as a collapsing bridge. Then, after they returned to their positions, they both leaned back, causing the both to fall backward in a zany scene that will certainly make the trailer.

Edgar sat up & said, “This is much harder than it looks.”

When Autumn sat up, she replied, “Yes, we clearly need to mo’ thoroughly delineate our steps.”

They stood & returned to position yet ’gain. However, this time Autumn said, “OK, we’ll start going toward you—you leaning back, & then keep alternating from there.”

“¿How will I know when we should shift?” asked Edgar.

“I’ll keep count.”

So they went, pushing forward & back as a vertical see-saw, Autumn counting, “1, 2, 1, 2, 1, 2...” repeatedly.

Suddenly, Edgar began to giggle. Autumn’s mouth twisted into a smile in response: she hadn’t expected this emotional output from her partner, but realized the beneficial effects ‘twould have on this

heist.

Edgar stilled his chuckles 'nough to say, "I'm sorry... This is just a li'l... well, goofy."

"As I said, that's the point, ¿isn't it?"

"¿O' dancing as a whole or o' our dancing to your plan?" asked Edgar.

"Hmm... You are mo' acute than how you act."

The conversation tapered off into a long silence, their movement slowing & their heads turning 'way from each other. Autumn, in particular, glanced round @ the other couples for environmental clues as to how their rituals should continue. As if in answer o' a query she held purely in-mind, she saw everyone else rocking each other slowly while kissing their partners, as if the writers were trying to give Autumn, Edgar, & the readers an immensely subtle—not to mention convenient—hint.

*¿To what extent would this affect my chances o' success? she pondered. Probably not much, but then e'en a minor positive is better than nothing. This in addition to my base hormonal preferences lead all variables to point to yes.*

"Edgar..."

"¿What?"

But Autumn's savviness had hit a blind spot in this situation, for if it hadn't, she would've expected the interruption that would arrive @ such perfect timing as if by clockwork—the writer's perfect clockwork, that is.

"Scuse me, Madame Springer, ¿but would you mind giving me an interview?" O'Beefe asked as he shoved a microphone right into Autumn's face.

"No, we weren't busy with anything @ all. Ask 'way." Autumn leaned her head back 'way from the microphone as if 'twere a beehive.

“OK, uh...” O’Beefe flipped through his pad o’ notes. “Ah.” He looked back up @ her. “¿Do you plan to rig the prom election?”

“That’s a ridiculous question to ask me,” said Autumn. “Regardless o’ the true answer, I would answer no—either deceitfully or truthfully.”

“¿So you admit that you’re lying right now?” O’Beefe said with an eyebrow raised.

“I admit that what I say should have no bearing on what a rational human would conclude, but then I admit there’s 1 flaw in my previous arguments.”

“¿What?”

“I’m not speaking to a rational human, ¿am I?”

O’Beefe paused as if trying to configure a complex jigsaw puzzle in his mind, only to discover ‘twas truly a crossword puzzle.

“So... ¿so what is it should we think if the prom turns out in your favor? ¿Should we not consider that suspicious @ all?”

“No mo’ than if anyone else won,” said Autumn. “¿Have I a reputation for rigging prom elections? I believe this was the 1st prom I’ve e’er been to.”

“You are a thief, though, ¿aren’t you?”

“¿Does material theft automatically extend to election theft?”

“& I believe I o’erheard you saying you hoped to win the elected prom presidency.”

“Well, it’s good to see how well you respect people’s privacy,” said Autumn.

O’Beefe tipped his hat. He figured this probably would’ve been cooler if he actually had a hat.

“When the truth hides, I dig deep. That’s how I got to be the world’s greatest investigative journalist.”

“I had no idea you were.”

“Aye, aye. You may have heard ’bout my *famous* work shutting

down WALNUT.”

“¿Wasn’t that that club that wanted to help homeless people get health care, get housing, & vote?”

“That’s what they claimed, but my brilliant exposé wherein I dressed as a pimp & exposed their devious pimp toleration & led this school to clean this school o’ their deviousness.”

“Then I must admit, this does sound like a step up for you.”

“That’s right, it is,” O’Beefe said with a proud nod.

“So then, ¿are we finished with this interview?” asked Autumn, noticing she & Edgar were still in their original dance position throughout the whole conversation.

O’Beefe nodded. “I think I have all o’ the info I’ll need.”

“From the indication o’ your level o’ scrutiny, that sounds accurate.”

Autumn breathed in relief as if her head had been buried underwater during the interview when O’Beefe left.

“You don’t think this might ruin your plan, ¿do you?” asked Edgar.

“Course not. I told you, we don’t have to do anything to succeed.”

“You’re not... you’re not just making stuff up to make me feel assured, ¿are you?” asked Edgar.

“Look, ¿you know why nothing I could’ve done in that ‘interview’ could’ve had any effect on my success?”

“¿Why?”

“‘Cause, as I told him, nothing I could say would change his predetermined mind. If I said I did plan to rig the vote, he’d take that as truth; if I said I wasn’t planning to—as I truthfully alluded—he’d take that as a lie.”

“So, ¿you don’t think he’ll be able to get in the way o’ you winning ‘cause you’re not truly rigging the vote?” asked Edgar.

“It depends on what you mean by ‘getting in the way.’ He will

certainly play a role in my victory—it'll simply be the opposite o' what he hoped his role would be."

Edgar didn't bother asking how. He knew he'd have to wait for the answer.

He did, however, ask, "¿What did you want to ask me 'bout before?"

*Ah, yes, the final tease before the final letdown. I can already read the proper sequence as if the script were right in my hand: "O, nothing, Edgar. Just forget 'bout it."*

*Fuck that tripe.*

Autumn cleared her throat. "O, this is completely up to you—either way will have no effect on my plan—but I was curious if you wanted to kiss."

Edgar stared down shyly. Science couldn't explain how his bony skull blushed—though language arts probably could.

"O... Whatever you want."

"¿Are you sure? As I said, either way won't matter in terms o' my plan."

"Sure..." said Edgar.

"OK, if you say so. Let's do it, then."

Edgar's eyeholes shot up to hers.

"O-OK..."

Autumn leaned in, pressed her lips to Edgar's for a second or 2, & then leaned back out.

After a few seconds' pause, Autumn said, "Well, that's that."

## VI.

The leader o' the jocks twisted his evil mustache 'gain & laughed maniacally as he wriggled his hands together. How he did the 1st & last action @ the same time must be left to the reader's imagination.

“¡We’ll show that designated unpopular student whose appearance does not quite fit Hollywood standards!” gargled he. “Let’s see how she reacts when she finds we’ve rigged the election so that she’s *won*. ¡I bet that’ll surprise her!”

His partner dropped onto the floor ’gain, clutching his chest as he released giant howls o’ laughter.

“¡Ho ho ho! ¡Rigging elections! ¡That’s hilarious!”

His associates looked the other way, embarrassed.

The leader scowled. “You truly need to take some medication for that.”

The partner released ’nother volcanic eruption o’ laughter, smacking his knees forcefully while tears dribbled down his eyes.

“¡Ho ho ho! ¡Taking medication for problems! ¿Where do the writers come up with this, am I right readers?”

“Anyway,” the leader said with a look o’ deep disgust. It began to regrow into a diabolical smile ’gain as he said, “When she steps up to the stage, we’ll be up on the rafters—where nobody will think to look, since nobody has e’er thought o’ this prank before—& dump powder all o’er her. ¡It’ll make her so messy! ¿Can you think o’ anything mo’ inconvenient than being messy?”

The partner became so overcome with laughter that he self-destructed into a pile o’ bloody limbs, torsos, & skulls, as if laughter had delivered him a Fatality.

“If that’s the last time you’ll interrupt us, fat-head, we can begin,” the leader said with a sour look @ the heap o’ gibbets.

## VII.

*This is it. This time ol’ Thursday isn’t going to be anyone’s li’l stepping stool, but will be the one to lead the fight gainst the true cretins, the wastes, the dark.*

O'Beefe's face revealed none o' these thoughts. His expression was the same jovial, clean smile he'd always had as he stepped up to the ballot box, glancing all round him to see if the estuary was clear.

*'Course none o' the "committee" is watching, just as how none o' the school staff watches while ugliness happens every day in the hallways, just as how nobody cares when we all suffer while criminals do so well.*

*But that'll all change when we bring down all o' these lazy tyrants & replace them with someone a li'l mo' responsible, respectable...*

O'Beefe slipped in 2 votes @ the same time. He swung his head round 'hind him 1 mo' time. No one seemed to notice him @ all.

He continued to eye round himself like a squirrel wary o' predators as he stepped 'way from the ballot box & to somewhere inconspicuous—but where he could still watch the ballot box.

When he was safely 'way from association to the crime, he smiled, pulled out his pad, & began scribbling notes.

*i'Course those cretins wouldn't notice me voting twice! They would love to see the dirty cheat their victory 'way from the clean. It's the only explanation for how such villainy could control so much. Well, we'll just see when the clean finally becomes wise & decides to take back his victory...*

## VIII.

Principal Barter stood up to the podium with the ballot box in-hand & said into the microphone with a chuckle, "OK, after that odd turtle race, let's get to the voting."

"¡Aha!" shouted someone from the crowd.

"Uh, ¿'scuse me?" Barter blinked widely round @ the crowd. Finally, he saw Thursday O'Beefe stand up on his chair with a hand raised into the air.



“Principal Barter, I have caught your school ’bout to assist *cheating* to help known-thief, Autumn Springer, win gainst the true wishes o’ the people. I put in 2 ballots—2—and you were almost going to let those votes slide, as if we lived in Cuba.”

Barter opened the box & stared inside, puzzled.

“O, yes, there are 2 ballots in here already in your name.” Barter flipped the box & dumped them out. He looked back up @ O’Beefe & said, “Thank you for your honesty, O’Beefe.”

He turned back to the rest o’ the audience. “Anyway, line up to cast your votes, & make sure you remember to put your name on it.”

As they lined up, remnants o’ conversations rose from various people in various places.

“¿Can you believe that creep tried to indict that Autumn bitch for cheating?” said 1 student. “I mean, yeah, she’s a thief & an asshole, but that doesn’t mean you cheat prom elections like that. Prom elections are important.”

“Yeah, & who gives a shit who wins prom president, anyway,” said her friend.

“You know, I know I was probably depicted as a soulless asshole earlier in the story, but I suddenly have the urge to help the underdog & vote for her.”

“Me, too,” said her friend. Then her cheerful smile fell into a dour frown. “Maybe then the cruel Programmers will finally give us names & allow us a way to finish our college applications.”

’Hind them stood the gang o’ bored jocks, 1 o’ which covered hair-to-heel with bandages. The leader twisted his evil mustache—what was now becoming an unhealthy habit—& announced as he held up 3 ballots, “With these 3 ballots for dead students we’ll twist the election e’er slightly in the ugly dame’s favor.”

1 o’ his lackeys asked in the voice o’ Barney Rubble, “O, gee, boss, ¿what if that isn’t ’nough to win it fer her? She is pretty unpopular,

bein' a unpopular student & all."

The leader snickered, & then milkywayed & twixed. "Don't worry: we'll tell all our pals to vote for her. They'll all think it'll be a gas."

Li'l did either o' them know, O'Beefe was swimming through the sea o' people like a shark, ready to pounce on voting fraud. His radar ears could pick up such speech from miles 'way.

He could've warned the prom staff, 'course. He should've steamed & stepped up to the stage to demand justice.

'Stead, he stood back & smiled as he twiddled his fingers together. *Let's watch these scoundrels fail to protect the election. They think they're cozy in their cronyism—but the second they accept those votes, I'll stand up & reveal them all for the frauds they are! & I will go down in history for saving the Applewood 2012 prom election!*

The students stepped up to the voting booth, in small groups, usually o' 2, & dropped their ballots in the box. O'Beefe stood back with wobbling knees, heart drag racing as he waited for the gang o' bored jocks' leader to release the 3 ballots from his greasy hands, only for his heart to crash into a Luigip sign when he saw the principal say, "Wait."

"You're only s'posed to vote once; & I see your partners 'hind you still have their ballots," Barter said as he adjusted his glasses in what he hoped was a dignified manner.

"These are for some o' our other friends. Look," the leader said just before turning back to his partners & chuckling with a long grin.

Barter took the votes & his eyes squinted as he scrutinized.

"OK, these look valid—but we'll be checking these ballots for duplicates later, so don't think you can sabotage the vital prom election so easily." Barter wagged his finger as he said this.

O'Beefe's heart restarted its engines. *¡There's still a chance they'll fail!*

& indeed, he next saw Barter drop the ballots into the box. The

millisecond they disappeared, he swung his arm upward, smacking someone in the back o' the head.

“¡Hey, watch it, dick!” shouted that someone.

O'Beefe ignored him. He was too big now to answer to such li'l people.

“Scuse me, Principal Barter, but I'm 'fraid you have just assisted in voter fraud—a serious academic offense.”

Barter blinked in astonishment. “¿Do you know these votes are fake, Sir O'Beefe?”

“O, don't listen to the li'l rat. He's just trying get attention,” snarled the leader.

“I very well do,” O'Beefe announced with a finger raised like a conductor's stick. “I o'erheard this deviant *admit* that he was dropping votes for *dead people* in that box.”

Barter tilted his head, distraught.

“Sir O'Beefe, I ne'er thought such a good student like you would be so prejudiced. ¿Didn't you attend that assembly we had on antizombie prejudice? I think you should apologize to Keith Carnahan, Jenny Wellstone, & Dragula Bloodskull.”

O'Beefe's eyes followed Barter's finger to see him point @ 3 students with ravaged, peeling gray skin, revealing chunks o' red meat below the holes in their skin. Their cheeks were caved in, their eyes glazed & yellowing. Flies swarmed round them, but they did nothing 'bout them. They didn't do anything but sit there with their shoulders & heads hunched, arms hanging loosely o'er the arms o' their chairs.

O'Beefe's jaw hung open. His heart flew right off the track & into a nearby river.

“We're waiting, Sir O'Beefe,” Barter said as he crossed his arms & tapped a finger repeatedly.

Now O'Beefe's head hung low, & he muttered, “Sorry, Carnahan,

Wellstone, &... Bloodskull.”

“¿Could you please say that a li'l louder?” said Barter, raising his own voice, which was still amplified by the microphone.

“Sorry, Carnahan, Wellstone, & Bloodskull,” O'Beefe repeated in an announced voice.

“Thank you, Sir O'Beefe. Hopefully we can all learn from this experience & become better people 'cause o' it.”

But neither would happen for O'Beefe. 'Stead, as he stared down @ his feet, miring o'er his final defeat, he only felt his blood soak in bitter bile.

*You criminals may have won this round; but next year'll be different.*

Meanwhile, 'hind him, the sound o' furiously scribbling pencils ensued as students suddenly had a change o' mind when it came to whom they wanted to vote.

When the last student dropped her ballot in the box, Barter & the student staff opened it & counted the votes quietly, scratching a marks on sheets invisible to the rest after every slip passed 'mong them.

After a few minutes, they compared sheets & nodded with silent murmurs movements o' their lips.

Barter stepped back up to the mic & announced, “Well, it seems that the presidents o' this prom are... ¡Autumn Springer & Edgar Winters!”

The crowd filled with confused muttering.

“¿Huh? ¿How could the designated underdog o' this story win? It makes no sense.”

“Augh. ¿You guys voted for her as a joke, too? ¿Why don't we stay on the same square on these things?”

“This is what happens in elections where only 20% o' the population vote: they always go to radicals who support niche, fringe

prom celebrations.”

Edgar’s jaw was agape. He turned to Autumn.

“¿How did you do this?”

Autumn’s expression was stone stoic.

“I didn’t do anything, just as I promised.”

“¿Then why did we win?”

Autumn grabbed Edgar’s hand.

“No time. We have business to attend to.”

They marched together onto the stage & waited as the prom staff set crowns on their heads & bouquets in their arms. Throughout all this, Edgar fidgeted & swung his vision all round the crowd, taking in all o’ the alien faces staring directly @ him.

The human faces scared him e’en mo’.

Autumn only stared forward, her face just as incomprehensible as before. Her mind wasn’t on the crowd, but on the mo’ interesting scene she knew was happening ’bove her—but she dared not glance up @ for fear o’ attracting attention to it & accidentally foiling her enemies’ plot to ensure her success.

The gang o’ bored jocks had snuck through a conveniently-placed warp pipe to the top rafters, & were now on the edge just ’bove Autumn & Edgar, just beginning to tip their barrel o’ powder o’er them.

Nobody saw them. The prank was just so obvious, so cliché, no one’d be stupid ’nough to think o’ it.

When Autumn heard the creaking o’ the barrel’s metal gainst the rafters’ metal, she clutched Edgar’s hand & pulled him toward her, causing the crowd to fill with canned “¡Oooo!”s & boxed “Ahhh...”s.

“I lied,” she whispered: “there is 1 thing we must do.”

“¿What?”

She didn’t answer. She didn’t have time: by that time, the powder was already falling all o’er them, covering their generically gorgeous

gown & tuxedo with powder.

Time slowed as this happened. Hands in the crowd slowly pulled back & then slowly jutted out while mouths sluggishly opened with cowlike laughter. Your view shifts from various snippets o' mouths exaggeratedly wide-open.

Not all reacted in this way. The dead students, o' course, didn't react @ all, being dead & all.

Meanwhile, near the back, 3 students nodded & "Mmm hmm"ed with impersonal gazes.

"Mmm... That joke was finely crafted, I must say," said 1.

"Indeed," 'nother said as she adjusted her glasses. "The timing o' the powder was reminiscent o' Tex Avery or *Tom & Jerry*."

"¿MGMT *Tom & Jerry*, Chuck Jones *Tom & Jerry*, or those weird ones made in East Europe?"

"Any."

'Ventually, the dust from the powder had subsided & the laughter was replaced with muddled "¿Huh?"s.

Autumn & Edgar had vanished.

## IX.

Autumn laughed. "¡Those fools!"

They were already clambering down the steps before the back exit o' the gym toward the sidewalk.

Then Autumn stumbled on her high heels & fell onto the ground.

"¿Are you OK?" Edgar asked as he reached down to her.

But Autumn had already taken off & gathered into her arms her heels & started running 'gain. She didn't care 'bout such an inconvenience; the victory o' the perfect heist gainst the whole school filled her with mo' energy than she could contain.

She only permitted them to stop when they finally reached

Edgar's storm-drain home. She sat back into the shadows with her knees outstretched, her chest pulsing enormously from her heavy breaths & laughter.

Both slowed as she removed her crown & set it on her lap, gazing @ it with her phone's light trained on it while her other hand brushed stray bangs & powder from the front o' her face.

Edgar sat next to her, half-blackened by the shadows & half-lit by the moonlight outside. He looked @ her, & then himself, & almost gasped @ the sight o' so much white dust still clinging to her black dress & his black tux.

"I'm still amazed that went as well as it did," Edgar said breathlessly.

"Yeah... There was 1 caveat, however."

"¿What?"

"This crown isn't worth jack shit," Autumn said disgustedly as she tossed it gainst the concrete.

Edgar pulled his own off & looked @ it with guilt. He could, indeed, see that 'twas cheap plastic that it'd be mo' convenient to throw 'way than try selling.

"Well, if it makes you feel better... I had fun doing it," Edgar said with a warbling voice.

"I s'pose..." Autumn said with heavy breaths & a listless frown, her cheer suddenly spent. "Might as well get as much o' that while it lasts."

"¿You still worried 'bout money?"

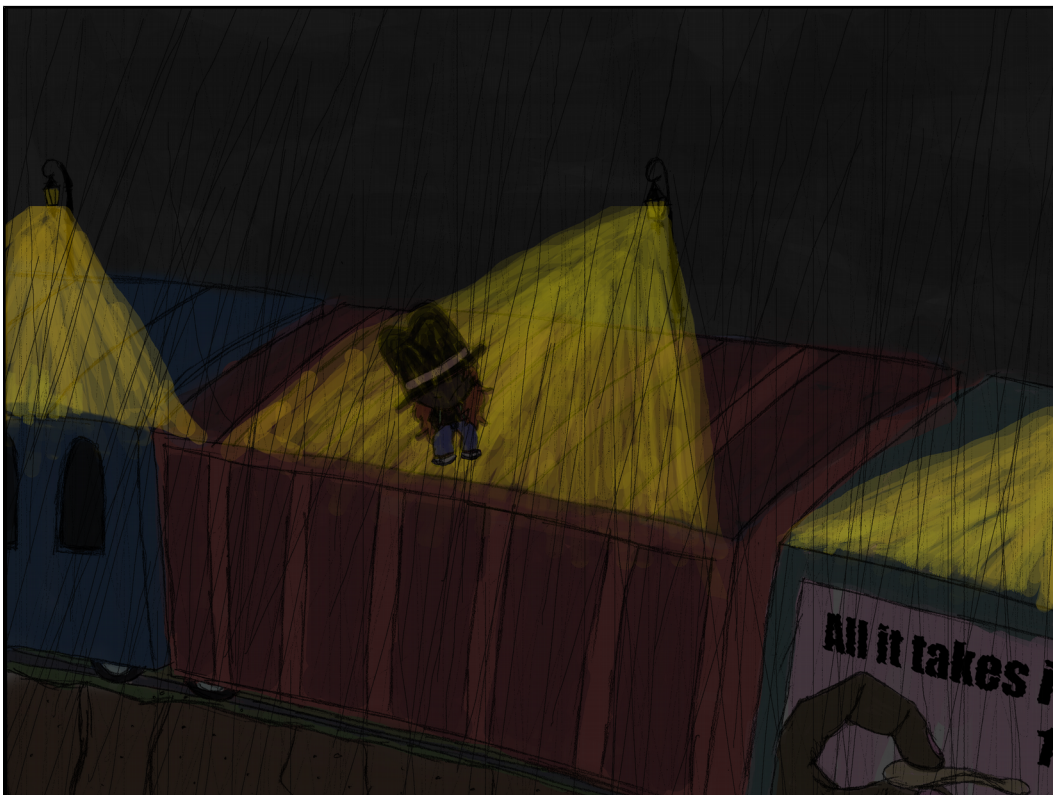
"Yeah..." she said. "After multiple calculations—& I mean *multiple*, since I can't stop myself from doing them—I have concluded to a fine degree that we are royally fucked."

& yet, all Edgar could think 'bout was Autumn's use o' the word "we"—& probably not the royal "we."

#BOSK-CL1B23-TRAIN

# ON A LOCO TRAIN WITH CRAZY MOTION

J. J. W. Mezun | 2016 June 1





## I.

“**Y**ou must be the new hire, Edward Winners. I must say that that’s a top-notch name—though I can’t say it truly belongs to you.” Conductor Lance Chamsby was eying up & down the robed skeleton standing before him.

Edgar squirmed under Lance’s penetrating vision. The innumerable ways he could screw up were jogging through his brain.

Well, he a’least knew that correcting his new boss would bear him no honey, so he simply nodded & squeaked, “Yes, Sir.”

“O, ¿truly?” Lance’s left eyebrow rose. “That’s odd, ’cause I ne’er hired anyone named ‘Edward Winners,’ but an ‘Edgar Winters.’ It’s quite interesting how you could forget your own name, ¿huh?”

If Edgar had eyeballs, they would’ve widened; if he had skin, he would’ve sweat warheads. Luckily, he did have a throat, limbs, & bones, so he could demonstrate his terror by releasing a massive gulp, clutching his hands together, & rattling under his robe.

Lance crossed his arms & leaned toward Edgar an iris so malodorous that wobbly stink lines were emanating from it.

“Well, ¿have an answer—*union spy*?”

“¿What?” Edgar gasped.

“You heard me.” Lance stood straighter. “¿You think I’m not onto your activities? You just want to sneak into my establishment so you can hide those signs with your clever li’l rhymes on them all round my train & convert all o’ my passengers to the red side... or to a career in graphic design. Either’s terrible, truly.”

Edgar shook his head so vigorously it might snap.

“N-no, Sir. I’d ne’er want to force passengers to sit in certain colors or work certain jobs. I don’t e’en know how I’d do that.”

Lance’s eyes twisted as he deliberated.

“Well... If you say so. I s’pose it won’t matter, since I’ll be monitoring all your activities.”

With that, Lance turned & walked out the door, only to realize the train was still running & fall out with the Wilhelm scream ’scaping his throat.

Edgar ambled to the cleaning closet for a washcloth & some sulfuric acid in which to clean the tables before the passengers arrived. He truly wanted to impress them, for he secretly hoped 1 would pat him on the head & tell him he did well.

He stood in front o’ the 1st table—grainy, sturdy mahogany—& wiped the rag round the smooth reflective surface in li’l circles. A second after he lifted it, the areas he’d wiped blackened, & then crumbled into falling dust, leaving a rigid hole.

*Hmm... Maybe this stuff’s too strong,* Edgar thought as he looked @ the rag & smelled the high-pitched sourness o’ the sulfuric acid.

*This should be painful, & yet it isn’t. I wonder what the significance o’ that is,* reflected the table’s surface.

Edgar stared, stupidestablished, @ said thought, which was now floating ’bove the table, wrapped in a milky white bubbly cloud, with stray bubbles tapering toward the table.

Edgar held a craned finger to his mouth & thought, *I can’t believe that hadn’t harmed it @ all, though I’m certainly happy for it,* ’fore moving on to the next table.

## II.

She could feel the train rumble ’neath her whenever 1 o’ its wheels hit a stone on the tracks, adding a heavy metallic thump to the steady stream o’ steam puffing & whistling through her ears.

Why she was focusing on this, she couldn't say, when there were much mo' urgent matters that needed her mental RAM. For instance, she could focus on her need to keep hidden within the dark—but, thankfully, cool—hiding spot that was under some random table.

While the train was already moving—when she'd waited as still & silent as a pothead with her arms wrapped round her upraised knees in a compact ball—1 o' the passengers sitting @ the table she was hiding under spontaneously said 'loud, "Gee, it sure is odd how they offer passengers a person in strange bandit apparel crouching under every table all not-moving-&-talking-like."

Autumn felt her body constrict. Her heart flooded her veins with oxygen-rich energy so she'd be ready to bolt the millisecond the need appeared.

Luckily, none o' the other passengers sounded perturbed by this in the slenderest.

"That's odd," someone else announced back. "We don't have 1 @ our table."

"Ours neither," said 'nother.

"Must just be my table," said Autumn's guest.

"¿Do you mind if we look @ it?"

"Be my guest."

Autumn cringed & cursed in her mind, as well as debated the pros & cons o' staying still vs. bailing. However, whatever flimsy mental outline she began to devise began to scramble as she heard the footsteps thump nearby. When she heard the creak o' wood next to her under her new guest's weight, she decided to remain.

Though she couldn't see, 'cause she kept her eyes closed to seem as inanimate as possible, she could hear the sandpapery voice right next to her ear & smell the oniony stench o' her breath.

"It's not very well crafted."

"No."

“I wonder what it’s made o’.”

Autumn felt a sharp nail dig into her cheek, covering it in the rude woman’s itchy germs.

“Ew, it feels all leathery, like dead human skin. I wonder how thick it is.”

Next, Autumn felt her hat rise, & then an e’en sharper needle impale her forehead, causing her nerves to huddle together in discomfort. She struggled not to quiver, lean ’way, or knuckle her tormentor in the beak. Only her perfectionist obsession with a successful heist kept her from clambering out & tipping o’er the chessboard right there.

*I just hope this asshole doesn’t pop a vein or cause some other irreversible brain damage,* she thought as she felt flotsam rise from in-gullet.

But she couldn’t prevent a sigh from ’scaping her nostrils when she felt the nerve-neutralizing needle leave her head & the soft hat fall back into place o’er it.

“Strange ornament,” was all her tormentor said.

“¿Need me to clean that spill there, uh, Madames?”

This was a new voice Autumn heard, its nasally softness—like a kitten—an extreme contrast to the dry racket that was her friendly head-stabber.

*Stop wasting your attention on such tripe,* Autumn chided herself. *You have a situation necessitating a ’scape plan.*

“If you want to, though it’s not necessary,” said Autumn’s original guest. “Honestly, it hasn’t done anything to me yet.”

“This isn’t e’en my table,” said the other, & then Autumn heard the woody creak to her right ’gain that signaled her tormentor’s departure.

But Autumn’s ears perked e’en mo’ when she heard the crumbling & snapping o’ wood to her left.

“Sorry,” said the soothing voice. “This stuff’s pretty strong.”

“That’s all right. You may want to try scrubbing the ornament under the table a li’l, too, though,” said the original guest. “That woman who just left touched it & probably got her itchy germs on it.”

“Yes, Madame.”

Sweat drizzled down the back o’ Autumn’s neck. She had an inkling that, whatever caused that snapping sound, it’d not be nearly as pleasant for Autumn’s body as a needle in the temple.

Autumn heard the dark chocolate voice right in front o’ her, which intrigued her so much that it intensified the urge to open her eyes & see its owner. She figured she’d probably have to if she were to avoid heist-spoiling death.

She hesitated, ne’ertheless—not only ’cause she still clung obdurately to her hiding hole, but also ’cause she developed a fear o’ seeing who possessed that melodic voice & being underwhelmed.

Luckily, he seemed to hesitate, too. For rather than feeling scalding acid, she heard him say, “¿Are you sure you want me to scrub this? It looks awfully nice to be ruining by burning holes in it.”

Autumn’s heart leapt, which she interpreted as the hope o’ her hiding scheme not being spoiled, after all.

“It’s your job, bloke, not mine. Do what you think is right,” said the patron.

“I’ll just fix it up a bit,” the voice said as Autumn felt its master readjust her hat, soft satin brushing against the side o’ her face.

“Well, uh, just call me if you need anything else, Madame,” stuttered the voice.

Oddly, she didn’t hear the man leave, as if he floated ’way.

*If that is the end o’ my disturbances, then I just need to wait here till night, when I can make my move,* thought Autumn.

It irked her to waste so much time doing nothing; but the knowledge that ’twas necessary for her heist to succeed soothed that

ire somewhat. She sufficed with repeatedly re-enumerating what she'd do when night & everyone else fell asleep so she was sure she had the best plan possibility & so she had it so ingrained that she wasted no time recalling it when the time came to carry it out.

While she tried this, she found her thoughts constantly preoccupied by curiosity surrounding the soft boy, despite her acknowledgement that 'twas useless to any o' her goals, & thus an inefficient use o' her e'er-temporary time. Images reeled through her head o' how he might look, but none satisfied. She couldn't e'en imagine how a truly sweet-sighted human would look like, since she hadn't remembered 1 yet entering her sights.

Recognition returned to that on which her attention had been squandered, & then these thoughts ceased.

*I s'pose there could be mo' urgent contexts in which having one's mind fall victim to the outcome o' such now-inefficient biological developments.*

### III.

The hardest part would be determining when the last passenger had left for their room. The best she could do was check when the lights had gone out for the night by peeking under the tablecloth next to the seats—she didn't dare lift the tablecloth area pointing to the rest o' the train, which was why she couldn't tell how empty the room was—& seeing if any light seeped in. Since she figured no one would have a reason to stay sitting in the dark, she decided it made a good cue for when she could safely 'scape unseen.

Sometime after checking under the tablecloth 20 times, she heard a click & checked yet 'gain to see only mo' darkness on the other side. Then she waited 10 mo' minutes 'fore taking her 1st look outside her hiding cave in a'least 6 hours. 'Course, since 'twas so dark, 'twas hard to discern empty chairs from those that might still

be full; she only hoped this same darkness concealed her as well.

*Well, there's no way I'm going to have less risk than now, so I might as well plunge in & hope for the best...*

She crawled out & toward the door to her right, where she knew the passenger's bunks would be—as well as the restroom, which she hadn't used since that morn. She considered herself immensely lucky that she'd thought to abscond with the keys to everyone's room from the closet someone on staff stupidly left inside.

She slowly opened the door to the hallway, cringing as she heard it loudly creak, as well as whispering lame bubblegum jokes.

“Hey, ¿what do you call a finely dressed alligator? ¡An *in-vest-igator!*”

“¡Shh! ¡Shut up!” Autumn whispered back.

“It tickled the other oaks back when I was still in Wasabi Woods...” muttered the door.

She crept down the hall, cringing e'en mo' @ the further creaking & terrible wordplay that seemed to ensue under every step. She could only be thankful that the constant rumble o' the train's wheels on the track & the blowing o' the engine's steam likely drowned it all out. Or perhaps the tedious jokes would put the passengers into deeper sleeps. Either way was fine with her.

She 1st stopped @ the door with the silhouette o' a purple stick toilet on it, glad her shaky nerves hadn't caused her to no longer need it already.

*Hopefully nobody's inside or no one will recognize me.*

...

*It's no worse than any other risk I'm taking—& it'll just distract me, anyway.*

She peeked inside & saw nobody outside the stalls a'least. She checked under the nearest & saw it empty, so she went in & used it, opening & closing the stall door as carefully as possible to minimize noise.

As she went out, however, she heard rushing water & turned to the sinks to see a glowing gray-cloaked figure floating just 'bove the ground & rubbing its sleeves under the faucet water.

It turned to her, only for the inside o' its hood to hold nothing but blackness. Autumn smiled & waved as she hurried out.

*No time to worry 'bout being caught: just go to a room pretending that it's yours. ¿What are the chances that that stranger will know it's not yours?*

As she went down the hall, she turned her head to the side & looked out a window. Outside she could see the black silhouettes o' trees & hills flash by, but nothing much else. She knew the train was already crossing Mustard Mountains into Verditropolis. She debated whether such an open, empty area would be advantageous for 'scape, & then quickly decided it didn't matter, anyway: she'd suffice with what she had to.

*You're just stalling the inevitable, Autumn told herself. You're going to have to do this 'ventually, anyway, or give the whole heist up, so you might as well get on with it.*

So obsessed was she with the prospect o' failure that she thought she heard heavy hollow breathing right 'hind her, as if someone were breathing right down her neck.

When she turned, she discovered that this sound was no illusion—or, a'least, if it were, so was this vision o' the gray-cloaked figure from before.

It wanted to join her “party.” She didn't hear it say so; she could simply sense such thoughts emanate from it.

Autumn shook her head so vigorously it might snap.

“Thanks for the offer, partner, but...” Autumn stammered quietly as she steadily stepped backward. “...but I can't afford the health insurance & such. Sorry.”

The phantom hung its head with a whistling sigh, turned, & then slowly drifted 'way, fading into the darkness.



As this occurred, Autumn maintained her tread in reverse, till she bumped into something else 'hind her.

“Oops. Sorry.”

Autumn's heart paused; 'twas the milky voice 'gain. It sounded shakier than before, but 'twas clearly it, nonetheless. She couldn't stop herself from turning round, only for the darkness to reveal just a black silhouette o'er deep, dark blue.

“¿Do you need help finding the restroom?”

The voice throttled Autumn out o' her paralysis just as it had inflicted her with it.

“No, I can find it all right,” whispered she, hoping her raspy voice was close 'nough to 1 o' the other passengers or that he wouldn't remember, anyway.

*O well*, she thought as she slipped past him. To remain silent would only likely inflame his suspicion & make him tattle on her to ol' Conductor Chamsby, who would certainly tie her to the train tracks if he caught her.

Lance had a habit o' tying his enemies to tracks. He couldn't say why; 'twas just programmed into his character design, like Autumn's proclivity for theft. You couldn't argue with character design—a'least, not 'less arguing gainst character design was in one's character design.

'Sides, she thought the ruse o' entering a restroom would be perfect—so long as that phantom didn't narc. She'd just have to make the sound o' an opening door truly come from a different door. Since she had no idea which passengers owned what—nor did she know where each passenger stayed, or anything else 'bout any o' them—she tried the 1st door she encountered.

*Hopefully he won't hear the clicking o' the lock*, thought Autumn, biting her bottom lip, as she jiggled the stolen keys inside. She s'posed he hadn't, since she hadn't heard him running toward her. *Then 'gain, I couldn't hear him leave when he was @ our table. Maybe*

*he's floating toward me...*

'Pon unlocking it, she quickly slipped in & gently closed the door. *E'en if he had heard something funny...* She paused to consider the doors' punnery. *E'en if he had heard something unfunny, maybe he won't know which particular door I entered.*

She worried no mo' 'bout it. "Don't stress what you no longer control," was her motto, after, "If it isn't bolted down, pick it up." 'Stead, she focused on the room she was in now & trying to find its inhabitants'—or wherever the apostrophe belonged—belongings without waking them & having to endure their before-coffee grouchiness, which was almost as unpleasant as being tied to train tracks.

She squinted to better discern the black from the almost-black blue. Her eyes stopped on what appeared to be a big lump o' stuff lying next to a nightstand. When she felt round its top, she found the rough, ribbed texture o' a zipper path. *Must be a backpack.*

Well, since she a'least had *some* decency, she certainly wasn't going to wake up the whole room, & maybe the other rooms, with loud unzipping; so 'stead, she slipped her arms into the pack's handles & split.

The next door she tried was farther out into the hallway & on the other side, so as not to be near the 1st victim in case they happened to wake. She tried the same strategy in this other room, but couldn't find any dark lump; so she tried searching the top, & then the inside drawers, o' the nightstand.

"¿You need help looking for something?"

Autumn's blood froze—which should have caused a heart attack through the inability to deliver oxygen throughout the body with now-immobile blood, but 'stead just made Autumn shiver a lot.

"I'm sorry, Madame or Sir. ¿Did I offend you or anything? I'm always offending people, 'cause I'm too stupid to know how to say things correctly."

Autumn didn't reply; she only carefully paced back toward the door. As she stepped back out into the hallway & 'way from the door, she bumped into someone yet 'gain.

"O... sorry 'gain," said the same voice, only lower & shakier. "Um... I'm guessing by the sound o' that voice that you didn't find the right door... Sorry."

"It's no problem..." Autumn mumbled awkwardly. She wondered if his overly apologetic tone came from a demanding boss & began to feel her stomach churn for perhaps making it worse for him.

"¿You, uh, want me to lead you there?" he asked.

A rock rose in her throat. *I'd rather not increase the risk o' capture by prolonging his presence near me; but if I decline, that will only increase his suspicion.*

Autumn mumbled, "If it's not too much o' a bother..."

"Uh... OK."

Then Autumn felt the soft satin gently clutch her arm & lead her forward. *¿What type o' strange appendages does this figure have?* she wondered.

Once 'gain, she couldn't hear footsteps other than her own. Curiosity dominating decorum, Autumn leaned a leg toward the figure, only for it to get caught on a piece o' cloth, causing her acquaintance to stumble forward.

"O, sorry," mumbled Autumn.

"It's no problem..."

*Well, that rules out him being a phantom, thankfully.*

Floating meters 'hind them was the glowing gray-cloaked ghost from before. It stared down @ them with its head still hanging low & its arms limp, a sparkling tear dropping from its obscured face.

Though 'twas a short walk, it seemed to go on fore'er. Autumn wasn't sure if she preferred this or not: heads, it gave her mo' time to plan... & with a mental sigh she had to admit an increase in endorphin production from touching... whatever that soft

appendage was; tails, this was countered by an ironic discomfort caused by self-consciousness regarding the possible reaction her accidental new mark might have to any accidental emotional outputs.

It didn't help that the mysteries o' this figure's identity still leeched on her mind. *Though, now that I think 'bout it, learning mo' 'bout his identity could only improve my knowledge o' the situation & thus my ability to succeed in this heist.* She knew this was a rationalization for an urge she developed from irrational sentiments; but 'twas an apt 1, ne'ertheless. She'd learned long ago that 'twas always better to make juice out o' cranberries: trying to crush them 'way would only waste time—as well as leaving a sticky mess—while juice could be sold for a profit.

“¿Would you mind if I asked for your name, Sir?” asked Autumn, cringing @ the accidental awkward wavering o' inflection, which could only increase suspicion.

“Uh, no. Not @ all... It's, uh, Edgar Winters.”

Autumn nodded, e'en though she reckoned 'twas probably too dark for him to see. “I, uh, just wanted to make sure you weren't a burglar or something.”

She imagined this probably sounded rude to Edgar's ears, but the decreased suspicion was worth it. *It wasn't as if he is going to adore me otherwise—& it'd be preferential to reciprocate dislike with corresponding dislike than be a fawning doormat thrown in the dumpster.*

Edgar nodded, e'en though he reckoned 'twas probably too dark for her to see.

#### IV.

They were both silent for the next 2 minutes. @ this point, the s'posedly “short walk” should've seemed to go on forever to the

reader, considering all the thinking & talking that happened throughout. Unfortunately, the reader had yet to realize that “short” & “long” are, ultimately, relative terms & that the narrator only meant “short” in comparison to a walk from the western side o’ Russia to the eastern side. Compared to a walk through a normal train hall, however, ’twas an immensely long walk.

When the 2 minutes I mentioned had expired, suddenly the constant dropping o’ pegs in the Connect Four board that was his mental process—all skeletons’ mental processes were carried out through board games—finally caused 4 reds to connect.

“Hey, uh, Madame... I was just wondering... Uh, ¿how did you get into that person’s room, anyway?”

“I picked the wrong door, ¿remember? That’s why you’re leading me to the suspiciously distant restroom,” Autumn answered slowly, indicating her confusion @ the question.

“Yeah, ¿but shouldn’t it’ve been locked?”

*Aye, there’s the rub*, she thought with cool midnight sweat dripping down the side o’ her neck.

“I didn’t know these rooms were locked,” she said. “I guess this one’s occupant forgot to lock her’s.”

“O... Sorry for falsely suspecting you or anything... It’s just that I lost the keys to everyone’s rooms that Chamsby gave me & I think he’s probably going to be mad & cut my Chamsby Mart coupons and... uh... ne’er mind.”

“It’s all right,” Autumn replied awkwardly, biting her bottom lip.

A meter or so forward, she added, “So, ¿how long is this hallway, anyway?”

“Um... the restrooms should be here any minute now.”

“Cause we must’ve crossed a’least a kilometer by now.”

“Huh... I don’t remember it being that long last time I came by...”

Autumn turned her head backward to see how far they’d gone down the hall, but saw that the distance faded prematurely into a

black wall o' shadows.

Then all o' that was engulfed in a blinding white flash, followed by much milder orange glowing shining 'hind her.

Autumn turned toward the light, only to stop when she saw the robe-covered figure standing 'side her. When his red-orbed eyes met hers, they dropped down to the floor, shaking with fear, the figure withering within himself. With his sleeve-covered hands, he clutched its hood & pulled it farther out.

Autumn watched him carefully, while searching through the corner o' her eyes for a possible means o' 'scape. If he planned to alert the conductor or try stopping her himself, she'd have to bolt; but if not, running 'way would only increase suspicion to create a self-inflicted auger, & she might not be able to find an 'scape quickly 'nough—'specially since 'twas still so dark.

Otherly, she was curious if this was whom she suspected. The creature's sleeve-covered appendages distinctly caught her crosshairs.

"Sir Winters, ¿is that you?" she asked.

"Uh, yeah..." he answered with a short nod.

Autumn feigned relief, though she still wasn't sure 'bout the safety o' her predicament yet.

"Sorry," she said. "The furnace popping on startled me for a second. I guess it has sensors that go off when one comes close."

She noted Edgar's head leap up, his still eyes showing relief. ¿*Was he in a deceitful endeavor himself?* He hadn't seemed to worry 'bout seeing the infamous Sticky-Fingered Springer before him; ¿was he hoping since she was a thief, she wouldn't ruin what he was doing? ¿Had he planned on her helping him? ¿Was his helping her recently part o' the plan?

But then he scratched his head & said, "Uh... Actually, I don't remember that thing being there before..."

'Fore she could respond, a voice boomed from some hidden

intercom: "Salutations, intruders. Unfortunately, I do not enjoy intruders, so prepare to be combusted."

"¿What was that? ¿Sir Chamsby?" squeaked Edgar, putting his hands up to his head. He turned his head round while pointed upward. "¡Sir, it's me: Edgar Winters!"

They felt the floor 'neath their feet move forward like a conveyor belt, slowly dragging them toward the flaming furnace. Just as they began to run gainst this mechanical current, its speed spiked, so that they had to pump their legs as hard just to keep from going backward.

Edgar, who had to hold his robe up to keep from tripping o'er it, had particular problems staying 'head. As Autumn glanced @ him every so oft, she noticed him gradually falling 'hind; & just looking @ his heavy breathing & droopiness o' his body showed him steadily slowing his pace.

Autumn was caught in a conundrum: ¿could she preserve this acquaintance without sacrificing the success o' her heist? The prospect itself o' him being dashed to ashes twisted her throat into knots. Morefurher, she thought she could get mo' use out o' this man who seemed not to recognize her.

¿But how would she save him?

She stretched an arm out 'hind her & said, "Edgar, grab my hand."

Autumn let herself fall 'hind just 'nough for Edgar to be able to reach her arm, & then charged forward 'gain. But with Edgar's added weight & the increased speed o' the convey, she found it much harder to keep up.

*If I don't find a way to stop this, neither o' us will 'scape without denaturation.*

1st, she searched for something sturdy to seize onto; but the closest furniture was meters 'way, & the walls were smooth.

"Don't try 'scaping," the intercom voice rang out 'gain. "We

ensured that all possibilities have been preemptively neutralized.”

“I don’t get why it’s doing this,” said Edgar, breathless from the conveyor pulling him to the edge o’ endurance. “I’ve ne’er seen this happen before.”

“Hey, ¿intercom? ¿Can you hear me?” Autumn said through panting. “Just so you know, this robed fellow is not an accomplice, but a mark—1 o’ *your* employees, I might add.”

They heard whirring from ’bove, & then saw a door in the ceiling open & a thin metal crane exit. It paused with its fingers clamping & unclamping as if in consideration before finally reaching out & nabbing Edgar, setting him down meters ’head, outside the moving part o’ the floor.

“Uh... That’s better, I s’pose...” Autumn said with a shrug.

But in the back o’ her mind, she thought, *Well, I rolled 1 20; if I miraculously roll ’nother, I might hold onto my own cellular structure for ’nother day.*

Her lips twisted into a frown. She had a feeling her luck wouldn’t turn out as well this time.

## V.

Edgar, who was just realizing his ’scape from the conveyor, turned his head round to see if anyone were looking. *¿Could the intercom see me? Where is its “sight.”*

*You don’t have time to stand round thinking ’bout all that. You have a job to do, & that job includes not letting customers die in ridiculously gruesome ways.*

The only problem was, that would require Edgar being actually capable in some way, which he wasn’t wont to be.

OK: *think, think,* Edgar bonked his head repeatedly. Unfortunately, the only thought that came back was, *Sorry, nobody’s home.*



He turned & ran 'way back for the supply closet.

## VI.

*Well, there goes that plan,* thought Autumn, biting her lip.

She rummaged through her pockets, hoping in vain that there'd be some tool she could use to 'scape her present interstate to inferno.

Unluckily, out o' the screwdriver, file, flashlight, slingshot, & card pack, none appeared to have any use in her particular predicament.

*Ah, here we go,* Autumn thought as she wrenched a grappling hook from her pocket.

Well, she could have mentioned something *before* I mentioned that earlier paragraph, & made me look like a con writer.

She spun the grapple like a rope ready to wrap a cow, & then flung it forward as far as she could, snagging it on the nearest edge o' the closest doorway. When she felt it hold tightly, she ran her hands up through the rope to stop her movement backward, ignoring the burns brought by her fight against the tough rope & fast conveyor.

"The human still doesn't understand the futility o' her continued rejection o' inevitable death," said the intercom, followed by the crane popping out the ceiling holding scissors.

Autumn watched with increasing mind sirens as she saw it stop before the rope & open its clippers. She sped forward, but wasn't quick 'nough to reach the end 'fore the scissors shut, cutting off the caught end o' the rope from Autumn, & suddenly jerking her backward with the force o' the conveyor's regained strength, causing her to topple o'er.

She returned to her feet just as she entered the sunny heat in front o' the furnace & spilled all o' her energy into running forward to make up lost distance. She was unsure o' how long she'd have

before her legs finally gave in.

*I'll just have to check the pack I pilfered*, she thought as she slipped it off her arms.

But 'fore she could open the pack, she saw Edgar return, dragging a long wooden pole o'er his shoulder. Though he stopped here & there, stumbling on the bottom o' his robe, he soon reached the front o' the conveyor & scooped the pole farther out toward Autumn.

*Well, I'll be cocked*, thought Autumn.

The 2 played a mutually beneficial tug-of-war wherein Autumn pulled herself in toward Edgar & Edgar pulled the pole back toward him.

When she finally reached the end, she felt herself tip forward by the sudden lack o' backward momentum, but stopped herself 'fore falling o'er. Though the urge to sit & rest was immense, she knew she had to Ctrl+W it 'fore the crane came back.

She rushed for the closest window & kicked it open, e'er thankful for her investment in shard-resistant socks. Unfortunately, they were not water-proof, & so the rain that poured in caused them to soak bloated. The constant closeness to such wet clothes would surely increase her chances o' catching pneumonia.

"Uh... ¿You need help with that, Madame?" Edgar asked as he inched toward the window.

"Nope." Then Autumn turned, patted him on the head, & said, "Thanks for the pull, by the way. If we e'er cross tracks, I'll only rob you half."

& with that she climbed out the window & up o'er the top.

## VII.

Edgar gasped from so much excitement @ having his dream come true. Then he started choking from the saliva lodged in his throat

caused by so quick & heavy inhalation.

Then he heard a door slam 'hind him & turned to see Conductor Chamsby charge in, clad in a striped blue conductor's hat & overalls.

"¡How dare you help that heathen heister!" he blasted, his fists shaking by his sides.

Edgar scratched his head from the sheer itchiness o' his embarrassment.

"Gee, I didn't know she was a thief; I thought she was just a passenger looking for the restrooms."

"Well, G, it looks like you & your hip-hopping rhymes were wrong," said Lance, leaning into Edgar with a shaking index finger thrust upward. "¡Sir Winners, you're fired!"

Edgar stared down @ the floor in sad silence, the self-esteem worm devouring him from the inside, its maw dripping with the blood o' Edgar's ego.

He sighed. *I s'pose I'd better pick up some treatment on my way back to my tree.*

"¡Invisible Hand slap you! ¡I said Sir *Winners*, not *Winters*!" Lance leaned in 'gain, so close that Edgar could smell the onion, ingots, & sweat on his breath. "If I discover any bugs @ all in my train, I'm reporting you to the C.I.A."

Edgar shrunk back—partly out o' fear, partly 'cause Chamsby smelled bad.

"You don't count self-esteem worms as bugs, ¿do you?"

"Quit wasting my time," Chamsby snapped as he walked o'er to the window. He stopped & threw his arms out as an angry eagle spreads its wings. "¡She might've 'scaped by now thanks to your distracting distractions!"

"¿& why did you leave this window open, drenching my fine carpets with revolting cloud urine? That's it, you're fired."

"But, Sir... you, uh, already fired me..."

"Then you're fired from whatever your next job is, too. Now, help

me up.” He uneasily put a leg up on the window, trying to avoid cutting himself on the glass still hanging round.

“I knew I should’ve invested in shard-resistant overalls,” he muttered. “Stupid Winners, always making me forget important stuff.”

“Uh, OK, Sir...” Edgar said as he stepped forward & awkwardly put his hands round Chamsby’s sides.

After an uncomfortable minute accompanied by no sound but the wailing wind & the constant patter o’ precipitation, Chamsby said, “¿Well? ¿What are you waiting for? ¡Hoist me up, already!”

“Uh—¡O! Sorry, Sir,” Edgar said as he heaved his arms upward with full strength, tiny grunts dropping from his jaw.

“¡& cease with those grunts, already! ¡They’re making my ears tingle!”

“S-sorry, Sir.”

Chamsby sighed. “This is taking too long.”

Then he thumbed his right overall button, causing a metal tube to rise from inside the back o’ his overalls & slide down the other side. Edgar backed ’way just in time to avoid 7-degree burns from the flames that rushed from below the tube.

Chamsby thumbed the left overall button, & the jetpack lifted him off the ground & out the window.

Edgar stood ’hind, uncertain o’ what he should do next. For a minute or 2, he tried watching the rain continue dribbling in, but then decided that might be a waste o’ time.

He sat down with his chin in his hands—he always found thinking easier while sitting. Tragically, though, he accidentally sat in the drenched carpet.

He sighed. *The constant closeness to such wet clothes will surely increase my chances o’ catching pneumonia.*

The he considered subjects relevant to the story:

*Hmm... I have an inkling Sir Chamsby plans to do something not*

*nice to that woman who 'scaped. Considering how nice she'd been, it'd seem mean to not help her or a'least warn her in some way; ¿but then wouldn't that meanly harm Sir Chamsby's plan? ¿How can I avoid being mean?*

Edgar stood up; he always found thinking easier while standing.

*Let's see... Sir Chamsby was nice 'nough to hire me for his train & e'en offered to pay me 3 whole coupons for his specific store every month... but then he fired me from both this job & my next job. Androgyn, I hope my next job isn't scratching cats under their chins—I'd like to keep that job.*

*You were tasked with protecting the passengers, Edgar. Sir Chamsby would probably be just as mad @ you for failing that as if you ruined his plot, so you might as well go with the solution that's less mean.*

He rose to his feet—e'en though he was already standing, he somehow stood up 'gain—& then began climbing the window, only to cringe when he felt a sharp stab in his heel.

He sighed. *I knew I should've invested in shard-proof feet. This cut will surely increase my chances o' catching an infection.*

## VIII.

Autumn traipsed 'long the top o' the train with her arms outspread as if a trapeze walker, feeling the scrappy roof creak under every step. Repeatedly the murk would be sliced by a light beam zipping toward her, only to quickly disappear 'hind her. During the pauses 'tween them she could only see the slight flicker o' yellow light far 'head, the rest clogged by charcoal gray clogged by rain clogged by strands o' hair rudely blown into her face by the zephyrs.

Normally, said zephyrs would've slapped her hat off into the abyssal wilderness; but unlike water-proof socks, she *did* remember to invest in a wind-resistant hat in preparation for the wind temple

she'd have to go to next, as augured by the ancient walkthrough she picked up in the J. Veasey Library.

"So, the Sticky-Fingered Springer dares to thrust her box-eyed face on my train, ¿huh?"

Autumn glanced back & saw a shadow slowly emerge. 'Nother light beam flashed by, revealing a pasty-faced sneer she'd seen previously.

"After your baleful bust o' the 99th national bank," he continued.

Autumn didn't answer, cognizant that continuing such discussion would coin no coffers. 'Stead, she maintained pace, keeping Lance Chamsby caught in her iris.

*I was hoping to wait till the train stopped to get off, but now I see Conductor Chamsby will make that a tad arduous. I'll need an alternative plan.*

"¿You hear me, panached plunderer? ¿Are your ears full o' sludge metal?"

Actually, they were full o' blues rock, with a pinch o' new wave, for some reason; but she didn't think that necessary to state.

Chamsby grred as a laptop having a heart attack—which was just too many layers o' figurative language for him to take sitting down. So he stood up; he always found getting angry easier while standing.

"¿How can my clever ripostes & dramatic dialogue be respected when you strew them 'way as credit card offers?"

Lance's eyes creased, revealing a bunch o' hyper-realistic wrinkles, & a few veins, which is gross to look @. Ugh.

"It's no matter," he said as he rummaged through his pockets.

From it he extracted a pistol, which he twirled round in his fingers with a smile so milky, it'd get you stamped with amber alert in seconds.

As he did this, he fumbled the gun out his hand. Metal clacked noisily gainst metal as it rattled in the wind gainst the train top.

"Pierre-Joseph Proudhon," he muttered as he bent o'er &

scrabbled for the pistol. “Just give me a second; this’ll be o’er with quick.”

He rose ’gain, only to take ’nother second to readjust the pistol so that ’twas no longer pointed right @ his nose.

“Ah, there we go,” he said, only to feel a sharp pain in his hand & watch the gun fly sideways, into the depths.

Chamsby tramped back with full-moon eyes. Yet ’nother flash o’ streetlamp light revealed in a millisecond Autumn holding a slingshot, rubber band pulled.

“You shouldn’t bring a gun to a slingshot battle,” she said with a tip o’ her hat. ’Course, Lance couldn’t see this ’cause o’ the aforementioned murk & precipitation; but I can, since I can just turn off layer 3 with F3.

“That’s OK,” Chamsby said surlily: “I have ’nother.”

He lifted it from his other pocket, only to have it shot from his other hand into the other side o’ the depths.

“¡Kropotkin! ¿Why did I say that out loud?”

“¿How should I know?”

Chamsby & Autumn turned to the source o’ that voice to see the floating, gray-cloaked figure Autumn had seen before; only now its hood was down, revealing a balding face with a bushy combined beard & mustache, forming a large diamond o’er his chin.

Chamsby clutched his heart—which must’ve hurt a lot, considering the thick layer o’ skin, meat, & ribs he’d have to break through—& paced backward. Forget full moons; his eyes were now a full-throttled Ganymede & Callisto.

“A spectre is haunting Boskeopolis...” he muttered.

“Don’t compare me to that bumbling hypocrite,” the ghost growled as it shook a fist in Lance’s direction.

Chamsby frantically pressed down on his left button repeatedly, looking down @ it to make sure he was pressing it, as well as to look ’way from the ghoul’s leer. ’Ventually his sputtering jetpack kicked

in, causing him to jut up into the air, & then fly 'way in wild spirals, till he faded 'way from sight into the darkness.

"Huh," Autumn said, still staring into the space from which Chamsby had 'scaped.

The ghost, seeing that no nearby governments or capitalists were in need o' haunting, pulled his hood back o'er his head & faded backward into the night once mo'.

## IX.

Autumn's ears perked when she heard a whistling whisper through the wind.

"Psst, cowgirl person: I have to warn you 'bout something..."

Autumn turned in the direction o' the voice. When 'nother beam flashed by, it revealed the dragging silk o' a dark robe.

"Madame, ¿can you hear me?"

"¿Is that you, Winters?" she asked.

"Uh... Yes. Uh, anyway, I need to warn you that the conductor might be planning to do some mean things to you..."

"He's taken care o'."

Edgar stopped. "O... Well, that's good."

"Yup."

Autumn stared up @ the sky. She noticed that the pouring was now dribbling, & that the sky was gradually brightening into blue so that she could faintly see the black silhouettes o' pines & furs in the distance.

*Almost morn. Almost time for the train to stop, & thus almost time to make footprints.*

With fewer drops pattering gainst metal, she could hear the steam whistle out o' the smoke box & the heaving & shifting o' valves & turbines from the train's chugging. She shook her head: trains should ne'er drink while driving.



“Uh, ¿aren’t you cold just standing round out here in the rain for so long?” asked Edgar. “It will surely increase your chances o’ catching pneumonia.”

“No, it’s a warm summer’s night,” said Autumn.

“O, uh, well, OK then,” said Edgar, looking in arbitrary directions out o’ pure uncertainty. “Well, I’ll leave the window open, just in case you want to come back inside. I guess I can’t truly close it, anyway, since it’s broken. Just don’t cut yourself on the glass—”

“Don’t worry; I have shard-resistant socks.”

Edgar nodded. “O, that’s smart. See, I wish I got some, ’cause I cut my foot on some glass on the way up.”

“¿You need a bandage?” asked Autumn, turning back to Edgar.

“Uh, ¿what?” Edgar’s red eyes widened, & then he declined with his head. “O, no, that’s OK. I don’t bleed, anyway, so I doubt I’ll get an infection or anything serious like that.”

An eyebrow rose on Autumn’s forehead. “¿Why don’t you bleed? ¿Are you truly a ghost?”

“Uh, oh, no...” Autumn noticed Edgar turn his face ’way. Nervous. Opaque.

“Though I did see a ghost hanging round here quite a few times last night,” continued Edgar. “Told me a lot ’bout cooperation being better for survival o’ the fittest & other stuff I didn’t quite understand.”

“¿You sure?” asked Autumn. “I have some extra bandages on me.”

Edgar raised his hands & waved them, no. “That’s all right.”

The he added, “Uh, by the way, ¿are you planning to jump off this train & go off on foot?”

“¿Why do you need to know?”

Edgar hesitated. “O, I just wanted to know if you could give me directions... uh... to someplace. Like maybe a town I could stay @.”

“There isn’t a town for kilometers.”

“O... Well, thank you,” Edgar said as he looked down.

Autumn stood silently, still watching the sky, which was now a rainless, dim blue casting gray light down on them.

*The chances o’ burden are low, but the chances o’ gain are high,* she told herself.

She glanced to her side & saw that Edgar had turned & started to go.

“¿You need help getting to town?” she she asked.

“¿What?” Edgar turned back round.

“I said, ‘¿Do you need help getting to town?’”

Edgar waited a second before answering, “Uh, if it’s no problem...”

“It isn’t—”

She stopped when she heard a pitched screech & felt the growling below her feet sleep. She turned to Edgar.

“& here’s where I sneak off before I’m seen. ¿Still want to come?”

Edgar nodded. “Sure.”

“¿Need to get anything from inside?”

“Uh, I don’t have anything on me, so no.”

Autumn nodded & then turned & walked toward the front o’ the train. She climbed down the front & then looked up, covering her eyes from the rays o’ the newborn sun. Edgar crouched o’er the edge, hesitant.

“¿You need help getting down?” she asked as she stepped forward with her arms out.

“If it’s no trouble...”

She looked up & waited as Edgar turned round & slowly slid down the side o’ the train legs-1st, inadvertently giving her a full view under his robe. Mere words could not describe the pulchritude that her eyes transmitted to her mind, throttling her heart & scorching her face as if in a vicious chase: tendril-like orifices twisted in luscious shapes no mortal could comprehend, varnished

with a sticky white substance. Some o' the tendril-like things appeared as thick & large as crustaceous claws, their front edges sawed so sharp they could likely cut an arm in seconds.

So distracted was Autumn by this delectable vision that she hardly noticed when Edgar fell into her arms, almost causing her to stumble backward. When his feet finally touched soil, & he stood back a few feet, he looked @ her sheepishly, seeing her bewildered expression.

"Sorry if I got you wet..." he said.

Autumn blinked for a few seconds & then said, "O, yeah... 'course." She turned, her fingers drumming gainst each other while she stared out in empty scrutiny, multiple ideas running through her head.

"Well then: just follow me." Then she began walking.

"¿Where you bloody bastards think you're going?" slurred a voice 'hind them.

They turned round & noticed the face o' the train glare in their direction—though its pupils were in disparate areas.

"¿Well, tossers? ¿Think you're too good to pay for a train ride, so you think you're too good to speak to the train? If you... if you don't give me a good riddle I can't solve, I'm running you wankers right into a bloody boulder wall, & I ain't letting you out."

"We're already out," said Autumn.

"Don't make me... don't make me..."

The train's eyes & mouth drooped closed, & then it began snoring.

Autumn & Edgar looked @ each other.

"Sir Chamsby didn't tell me 'bout that in the initiation," said Edgar.

"You must be new here," said Autumn: "Reading always develops a cockney accent when he gets too much into the rum."

OK, with that finished, *now* Autumn could walk on, leading

Edgar through the vast yellow plain that was the Mustard Mountains, where they would continue their adventure in a different story—hopefully narrated by someone else, 'cause I'm beat.



