

In the middle of the universe, which was flat and black and smooth everywhere, there was a section of sidewalk. There was a street lamp above the sidewalk, and a payphone, with a blue box.

"Hello?" the lady standing under the streetlamp said into the pay phone. She tucked herself in against the payphone box to keep the phone from getting wet.

"Alion," came a voice. "Thank God. Did you make it to the bus stop?"

"What?" The lady looked up at the sign next to the telephone pole that said 'BUS STOP.'  
"Uh. I guess," she said.

"O.K.," said the voice. "Ally, listen carefully: Check your right pocket for a vial of yellow aether and if there's nothing there check your left pocket for a black scorpion. If you find the aether vial, go to the clifftop and head straight for the adamant gong on the other side of the ghostly pool. When you get to the reflecting door... Alion? Are you still there?"

"Hey, hold on, Marcy, I have no idea what you're talking about and I've got another call coming in."

"Al, this is really important, don't hang up, I'm going to walk you through it—"

The young woman hung up and picked up the phone again.

"Hello?" she said flatly.

"Amber, I've been looking all over for you," said a male voice.

"Hey, Adrian. Uh. I've come out of the woods I think."

"What?" said the man.

"You might not be able to find me anymore, is what I'm... Um. There's some sort of electric haze. Look, hey, I'll have to get back to you, I've got someone on the other line."

"Amber, listen to me—"

The young woman hung up and shook the rain off the umbrella.

"Hey again Macy, sorry about that. I'm getting sort of a spores situation. Like a. Jungle. Like a, uh. Like a situ—ah. Look, I don't see any of that stuff. It's all dark here. That's way too complicated. I checked my pockets. I've got three quarters."

"No, Ally, your right pocket." Marcy said.

Ally grunted without checking her pocket

"Do you see the machine at least?" Marcy asked.

"Oh yeah." Ally looked. "I see the machine."

"Ally, you're in a transitory state right now between death and rebirth, you've got to stay focused. Avoid the paths back to the world. You've practiced many many times for this. Look for the archway."

Aria cast her gaze around the landscape. The machine, a long piece of freestanding gears and tubes, was spitting out pink, flowering trees, round dots of pink in the dark. Off to the right, the land dropped into a long valley and a huge flowering mountain could be seen peeking out of the cloudlayer miles and miles away in the blue, where water pooled on the flat tables of rock and hovering islands quivered. "Look, Marquette—we're friends, right?" Aria said. "I don't see any of

that stuff. I only have one pocket, not a right pocket—it's an asymmetrical jacket—and it's three quarters and a dead birch...leaf. I don't...have an amber crab or anything even like that, and honestly there's a weird-looking guy at the top of the mountain and I don't want to go up there. It—That wasn't there before, the whole thing was just a road, like a parking lot. A flat road."

"What *do* you see?" asked Macy.

"I see a dead squirrel. Oh." Alion looked over to where the street was dry and a dead squirrel lay, white belly facing the powerlines. "A little spot of blood on his upper lip. What about you?"

"This isn't about me, Ally. You're at the edge of the world—at the edge of death in a place no one sees—remembers seeing. Don't worry about me right now. Focus up. Check your pocket."

Cory reached into her left jacket pocket and felt the 75 cents clacking together.

"No, not your coins; your *right* pocket."

She felt the rounded lumpy edges of a stone baby lamb statuette kneeling on its front legs. She tucked the payphone between her head and shoulder so she could hold the awkward artifact in both hands.

The soapstone baby lamb's perfectly round, pressingly blue sapphire eyes gazed lidlessly into hers. Her own brow furrowed up in a lumpy approximation of the shape of the sculpture.

"What? What in the world am I supposed to do with this?"

"Put it in the automat," said Macy. "In the machine. It'll give you something. A doorknob, a—a brass acorn or a yellow candle—depending on your answers. Make sure to memorize the prayer if you get the candle before you build the raft. If you get the doorknob, climb the mountain, not the flowering mountain, but the scary-looking one with the crystals. It's hollow, and there's a silver gate inside and a closet with a red onyx altar. Smash the altar with the hammer that you got from the old man at the service station and ring the bell—"

"Hey, Margs, I'll call you back, I can't stay on the line while I walk to the machine."

"Brev—hold on, let me finish!"

Brevity put the phone back on the hook and walked over to the automat. On the other side of the street, the air had a fresh Spring smell that reminded her of leaving a hospital. There was a parade passing loudly from east to west on the street behind her now, and the whole area was blooming, swinging banners and pennants, houses, confetti and a children's choir singing a disjointed monophonic chant.

The only thing that remained the same on the other side of the street was the round, blue sign for the bus stop, the square red sign for the payphone box, and the ethereal archway that seemed to be filled with a solid sky, like a wall in a Looney Tunes picture, that everyone said led "outside," but that very few people, or perhaps no one, had ever been able to pass.

On a whim, Cory doubled back and ran headfirst towards the archway, but only slammed against the sky wall in much the same way a real person might slam against a real wall.

Connie crossed the street again, ducking through the floats and trombonists. She walked up to the automat, and stepped into its narrow shelter. She glanced up and down at it (the teller's booth was empty), and then dropped the lamb in the collection box.

A little window slid open at Carrie's eye level, and a massive skeleton peered out at him. The skeleton made a quick examination, then leaned back into its chair, creaking and stirring the dust.

"The following test," said the skeleton, "will involve the ability to accurately assess the risk of certain situations. For each section, you will be asked to identify the scenario with the highest level of risk."

"Okay...?" Caroline said. "Risk of what?"

"The risk of a negative outcome."

"What do you mean by a negative outcome?"

"Scenario 1. I am holding a set of keys, which will unlock a series of gates containing an unstoppable, malevolent devil. I have no way of knowing where the gates are, but people often say that they are underground. What is the greatest risk in this scenario?"

"Developing the intent to search for the gate," Brevity answered.

The skeleton continued, offering no indication whether she had gotten it right. "There is a woman wearing new high heeled shoes at the top of a steep flight of stairs in a lighthouse. She is in a hurry to attend the birth of the prince, and she is not a cautious person. What is the greatest risk?"

"That the prince will grow up to be a tyrant," said Brevity.

"4," said the skeleton. "A carnival trolley full of wolves is on a path that will lead it to kill one of two onlookers. The wolves were displaced by the logging practices of a nearby village ironworks and bare a personal grudge toward one of the onlookers, but are unable to affect the direction of the trolley. Either one of the onlookers may be spared by switching the trolley track, but one will surely die."

"Is it possible for both of the onlookers to be killed by the same trolley?" Ally asked.

"The onlookers will live forever unless struck by the trolley."

"Then just disassemble the trolley."

"You were not asked to provide a solution."

"Did you smell honeysuckle?" Aster leaned back out of the metal grotto to look back at the parade, which was now sloshing through a wide creek with wide white and yellow honeysuckle flowers and new bluebells blooming on the ground.

"Of the four scenarios, which poses the greatest risk?"

"Hey, I'll be right back, okay?" he said.

With a heavy sway of the head and arm, the skeleton closed the shutter and turned out the light on the automat's red "open" sign, leaving only the second "open" sign reading "open."

Everson turned back to the payphone and street lamp, which were becoming increasingly tree-like, and waded across the river through the parade again. He put a quarter in the machine.

"Mars, you there?" he said.

“Ally! Did you send the goat statue?”

“Sure, sure. Just wanted to check in,” he said.

“Okay, keep me on the line this time, I’ll coach you through the next part.”

“Sounds good,” Axel said, hanging up. He trudged back across the river again, looking both ways at the traffic, mostly hula-hoopers now.

“Hey.” He knocked on the automat’s metal shutter.

It opened, the skeleton peered out again, nearly nose to nose with Allion, as if smelling them.

“The following test will involve the accurate assessment—”

“Yes, yes yes yes, yes yes, yes. Yes yes,” said Ally. “Come on.”

“Of the four scenarios, which poses the greatest risk?”

“If you assume,” they said, “that the least favorable outcome in any of these situations—eh—is death and dying, then the scenario with the greatest likelihood of the most death and dying would be the worst one. But you didn’t say ‘worst’ did you? You said ‘highest risk.’ So we can rule out Scenario 4, because there’s no risk at all; one person will die from trolley related injuries and the other will live. In 2, well, I suppose the woman could trip down the stairs and hurt herself. What kind of damage occurred to so impact the forest ecology?”

“The forest was logged for its timber by the nearby village.”

“It sounds like they should have been practicing more sustainable logging.”

“You are not being asked to pass moral judgment.”

“What do you mean by ‘malevolent?’”

The skeleton lowered its head again, showing a row of menacing spines on its vertebrae, and flipped the second ‘open’ sign to ‘closed,’ leaning in further. “For the sake of the question, assume that ‘malevolent’ means that the entity will do its best to maximize the suffering of all sentient life.”

“Is it capable of doing that?”

“The demon is omnipotent.”

“What is the intent of the person holding the keys?”

“Assume that I will do everything in my power to prevent the demon from escaping.”

“Is it possible that the demon could escape without the key being applied to the lock?”

“No.”

“Can the key be destroyed?”

“Yes, but many people have blueprints that would allow them to make perfect replicas of the key.”

“What is the likelihood of another person replicating the key?”

“That is up to you to determine.”

“Is there any actor who would benefit from the demon being released?”

“No.”

“Is there anyone who would make a replica key regardless?”

“That is for you to determine.”

“Then I would have to say #2—the woman in the lighthouse—because, again, you didn’t ask which situation could lead to the worst outcome, you asked what had the highest risk of a bad outcome.”

“You and your friends are gathered around a campfire when you hear a loud crash from deep in the forest. What are some potential risks in this scenario?”

“We could start a forest fire,” June said. “I could get a splinter breaking one of the sticks. The crash could have been a tree falling on a night-hiker who would need urgent medical aid that we are unequipped to provide.”

“How does your assessment change if the source of the crash was an extraterrestrial vessel?”

“The aliens could be hurt and in need of urgent medical aid that we are unequipped to provide.”

“Does this assessment—”

“Look, buddy,” Kirako shrugged. “I don’t have all day.”

“Please state your name.”

“What, do you want one? I have plenty. How about Mnemosyne? I think it suits you.”

“Please state *your* name.”

“Blueberry Shortcake. That one’s yours if you want it. My friends call me Kelvin. Or Brevity. Mace calls me Allion. Right now, I’m. Someone else: I’d have to think about it. Kiwi, maybe. Right now: Kiwi. Do you find it difficult without eyelashes?”

The demon stared, eyelessly, at Kiwi, and then hunched over and rested its skull on a curled fist, as if terribly bored.

“To see, I mean.”

After a few minutes where neither of the two of them said a single word, the demon pressed a button on an old panel to its right. A small, yellow door knob made of solid wax clunked into the collection box. Delicately faceted. Cold to the touch. There was no visible wick, but a rolled piece of prayer paper was stuck inside the hole where it could attach to a keyway. *Whole rolled oats*, thought Kiwi, loudly. *Whole rolled oats*.

“I don’t want this,” she said.

The skeleton nodded slowly and did exactly nothing.

A cherry pie fell into the collection box on top of the doorknob.

“A yellow cherries?” she said. “Yuck? Did you know that ‘cherries’ is from French for ‘cherry’: ‘cerise?’ ‘Cherry’ is a backwards singular-form that English speakers mistook for ‘cherries’ when really ‘cerise’ is not many cherries. One cherries. Because it sounds plural in English.”

Kilo swiveled and looked around to the shallow creek. A second children’s chorus was passing by the first, which had gone north into the deep and inaccessible mysterious regions of the creek, up in the brambles and up the hill. The first chorus, now out of sight, had launched into an

abridged version of Palestrina's *Missa Brevis*, but were outmatched and outpaced by the second group's *Hymn to the Virgin*.

Krysh felt a tug on her pants, baggy green overalls now, tucked into knee-high black wading boots, like someone prepared for a fishing trip. This tug was a non-parade child, with brown hair and green eyes very far apart from one another.

"Hey," he said.

"Hi, what's your name?"

The child looked around the creekbed, as if searching for where his name might be. Eventually he spotted a glittering, layered piece of rock, and pulled it out of the stream, sucking the mud off it with his mouth before spitting it back out and presenting it to Amaryllis. "Sturgeon," he said.

"Nice to meet you, Sturgeon," Amaryllis said. "I'm..." she paused, as if searching for her own name. "I'm... happy to have met you!"

"Can I have a quarter?" said the child.

"Oh, I actually need these to make phone calls—" she then glanced back at the south bank, where only the sky-arch remained, the other components of the street having been eaten up by the thicket and subsumed into river rocks and shrubs. "Sure. Actually. Sure, take two." She handed the remaining quarters to the boy, who stuffed them in his mouth, rolled up his pants to his knees, and ran over to join the children's choir. "Pass it forward!" she called.

At this point a line had formed in front of Amaranta, about five individuals, human and otherwise, but with more joining from the crowd.

"Can I have your umbrella?" said a frog in a black top hat.

"All yours," said Fernanda.

"Can I have your hair?" asked a barefoot woman in a white dress that was stained up to the waist in mud.

"Please do," she said, pulling out her hair and handing it off.

From the shelter of the automat, the skeleton watched her contemptuously, half in shadow, in that jealous, self-assured way that skeletons do.

When Anther had given away all of her physical possessions—her jacket, boots, bag, clothes, statuettes—she started in on her non-physical ones: her names, her secrets, her emotions, her favorite words, her least favorite words, her cognitive defaults, her schemas, and her grammar. One of the choir-masters asked for her nose, and she struggled for it a bit, but plucked it off and gave it to him. A child pointed at their mouth, opening and closing it, like chewing, a lot of tongue movement, and Ambergris struggled to understand what they were asking for for a long time, before saying, "Oh! Hungry!" And she unrolled the skin, fat, muscle, and nerves from her arm, leaving only the innocent, blood-stained bones.

The skeleton from the automat watched her, hostilely, openly angry now, as she gave away her religion, her political views, memories of her childhood, her gender, and her five senses.

“Still. Too. Heavy,” said the demon skeleton, pounding its fist. The crowd dispersed.

The young woman, now a small, nameless, bloody skeleton said, “What? Huh?”

“You’re still too heavy to leave that way.” It pointed at the arch.

“Oh,” it said. “Oh, to leave! Got it.”

“Why... did you give everything away... if not in order to leave?”

“Didn’t need it.” Shrugged.

“They’re just going to get hungry again. It’s pitiful. Helpless. Hopeless.”

“Yeah, I guess. Didn’t need that stuff though.”

They were both silent as the brook babbled and the parade sloshed off into deep woods west.

“Hey, uh, do you want this?” the small skeleton said, holding out its hyoid bone, a loose bone, which had fallen out from its neck when Amaryllis had stripped away her throat and hyolaryngeal complex.

The demon skeleton took it, wordlessly, and put it on the shelf in the automat, took a black, flat-tipped marker and wrote “Hyoid. 5 cents.” in one of the empty cells on the menu.

“You’ve got a lot of empty spaces,” said the smaller skeleton. “How long have you been running this place?”

“They will empty again.”

“Here,” the smaller skeleton said, handing over its tarsals and metatarsals—which tallied almost 45 cents. “Did you know there’s a lake in Mongolia or something that’s so clear you’ll get vertigo and drown if you look straight down in it?”

The demon said nothing, and the smaller skeleton removed and passed off the remainder of its bones: humorous, ulna, skull, petelas, scapulas, etc., until it tumbled apart into a loose collection of pieces and was unable to move.

The large skeleton gathered all the remaining bones, cleaned them in bleach, scrubbed off the blood, and tallied them—returning a sum of about \$4.75.

Nothing more was seen from Alion, Kiwi, Brevity, etc. but there was a little blip as the sky barrier changed from solid to liquid, and stayed liquid, for about five minutes.