

THE
RUBY CODE

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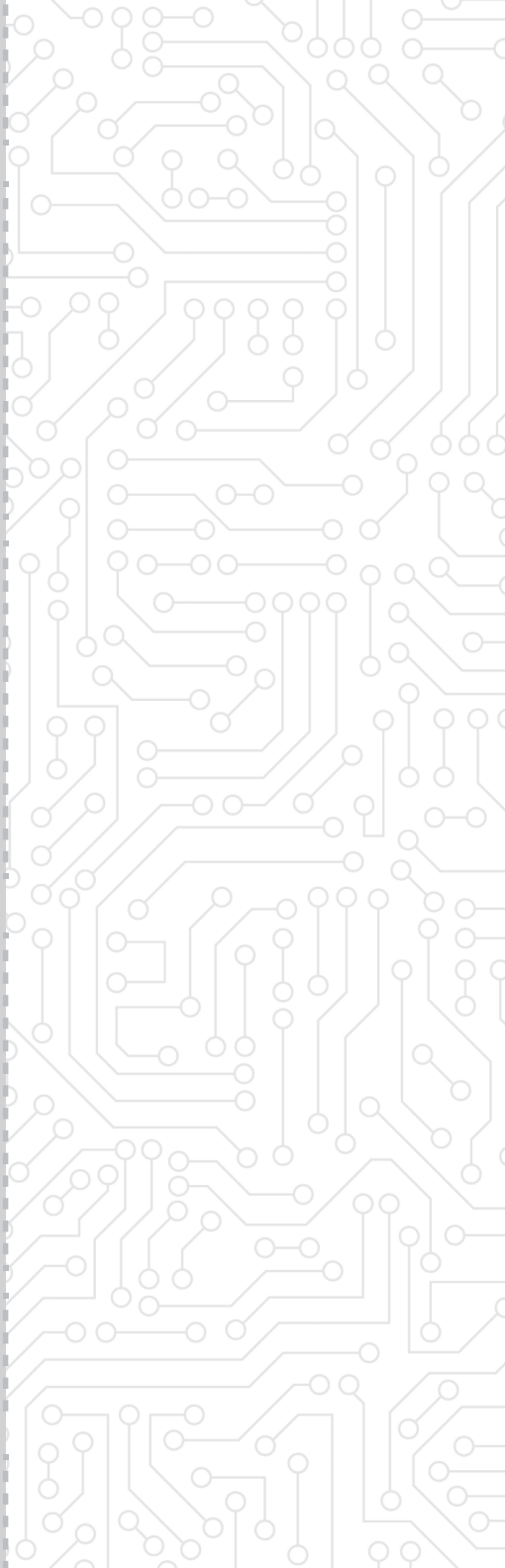
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1. ASH

Every good quest begins with a setback.

That's what I tell myself, anyway, as I shimmy out of my bedroom window.

Rain pings on the fire escape, on the tops of the metal dumpsters below, on the hoods of passing drones. The sound is almost musical. Maybe some people would find it soothing. To me, it sounds like a countdown. Like any minute, thunder could crash and I could topple off this rickety fifth-floor fire escape and fall down, down, down . . .

"Stop it, Ash," I mutter. "You can do this."

Heights aren't my thing.

But the apartment door is out of the question. My mom's boyfriend is parked on the couch, and if he sees me trying to sneak out, it will lead to a *whole* bunch of questions I don't particularly care to answer.

Like: *Where are you going at ten p.m.? What's with the huge wad of cash in your allowance account? Didn't I say I was going to start charging you for the food you eat out of my fridge, boy? Give me that phone!*

One press of a button, and Luke could drain all my precious savings in an instant.

He's done it before.

So the fire escape it is.

I go quickly, climbing down before I can chicken out. Relief hits me like a cool breeze once my sneakers finally find the pavement of the alley below. I hurry out of the dark and onto the main road.

The city at night is a blur of shadow and color and movement. Neon signs sprout along the skyscrapers like glowing fungi. Ribbons of light trail behind passing drones and autocabs. Overhead and all around me, flickering holograms light the air, distorted slightly by threads of rain.

Head bent against the drizzle, I weave my way down the busy sidewalk. My camo-coat, with its blend of plastic and pixelcloth, shimmers with shifting color and shadow, making me blend into the crowd. Most people don't even notice me slip past them.

How do you survive these streets as a lone thirteen-year-old?

The same way I survive living in Luke's apartment: by being as invisible as possible.

Just ahead of me, a glowing hologram panda leans out of a shop window, words appearing in a speech bubble over its head. *Try the new Fifth Dimension visors! Augment your reality today! Play Scavenge, the ultimate game of—*

"No, thanks," I murmur, walking through the hologram. The panda shimmers and re-forms behind me. True, I've wanted an augmented reality visor since I was five—I mean, who wouldn't want to turn the real world into a living video game?

But I don't want a slightly improved version of this world.

Tonight, I'm going to another world entirely.

My veins buzz with electric purpose, pushing me to walk faster,

leaning into the press of bodies. I imagine I'm an avatar being controlled by some gamer in the sky. *Play Sidewalk Runner!* Navigate the kid to his destination without getting robbed by crypto-muggers, run over by jetbikes, or flagged by suspicious cop drones, and you win! It's harder than it looks at first, though. This game only comes with *one* life.

The flow of the crowd stops suddenly as a streetlight changes. Autocabs roar through the intersection ahead. Someone jostles me, knocking me sideways. I nearly topple into traffic, teetering on the curb for a heart-stopping moment.

Worse, my phone tumbles from my hand, skittering across the street.

NO!

Without thinking, I dive after it. Behind me, a woman screams, and someone shouts at me to stop.

I pop up again—right in the path of a speeding autocab. The blue glow of its headlights blinds me temporarily. I snatch up my phone just as it bears down, then throw myself backward.

The autocab speeds by with a growl, the spray from its tires drenching me. The backdraft makes my hair whip.

“That was stupid,” says a little girl on the sidewalk behind me, not even looking up from her phone.

“Yeah.” I haul myself back onto the sidewalk, standing on wobbly legs. Autocabs turn people into human pancakes every day in New York. I can't believe I was dumb enough to nearly become one of them. My heart is racing, my breath coming in jagged gasps.

But I got my phone back, and with it, my funds for tonight.

The quest continues, unless . . .

I anxiously pull up my account. Half the time when you get pushed in a crowd, it's so some crypto-mugger can hack your credentials and digitally drain everything you own.

Eight hundred and forty-three dollars. It's all still there. I exhale in relief.

For the past year, I've taken every weird job on GigSnap I could find. I can't tell you how many disgusting things I scrubbed off people's floors, or how many times I got bitten by dogs no one else would walk. I've beaten countless levels of *Dark Seas* for gamers more interested in mining loot than playing the game.

Eight hundred and forty-three dollars. A fortune to most other thirteen-year-olds I know. But that's the cost of escape. Well, an hour of it anyway.

I hold my phone very tightly for the rest of my journey. It's a relief when I leave behind the busier streets and turn onto an all-but-deserted side road.

The virtual reality arcade appears as a blur of lights at first, slowly materializing as I approach. The name, Immerse, floats as a brilliant blue hologram over the sidewalk, slowly rotating in place. Its windows shine with holographic ads, each one promising fantastic journeys to different destinations: unwind on a tropical island, run with dinosaurs in the Jurassic era, pilot a starship galaxies away, experience superhuman strength and flight as a god of your own domain.

That last one is the game I'm planning to try. Is there anything more freeing than being able to fly? I've never actually been in one of the full-body immersion tanks, but from what I've heard, the experience is life-changing. It's supposed to feel as real as this street and

the rain pinging off my hood. Way, way better than my clunky old-school VR helmet back home.

I slow in front of the window, reading the words racing in neon pink over the ads.

Reality is better here, it promises. Let us take you away.

Already I can feel the tension draining from my tight muscles. I lift my hand to the door.

Then I hear the scream.

Yes, I know I should ignore it. I *know* this part of the Bronx is infamous for its murders, muggings, kidnappings, and general shadiness. I *know* it's smarter to keep your head down and not get involved with these kinds of things. I mean, even if I didn't know that, the graffiti plastered on every wall within twenty blocks screams it at me in two dozen different languages. The one by the arcade literally says *Stick around and DIE*.

I pull open the door. The air inside is cool and fresh, unlike the oily wet-asphalt smell of the street. The interior is pristine, and a woman waits behind a counter in a crisp blue dress. She looks like an airline attendant.

"Coming in, young man?" she asks, smiling.

"I, uh . . ." How many times have I walked past this arcade, dreaming of going in? I've skipped school trips and bound shoes together with tape, just to save up for this one single hour of blissful, total escape.

"Young man?" The woman tilts her head.

Glancing back, I can dimly make out scuffling shadows in the alley. Another cry of pain sounds, weaker this time.

"Sir?" The woman's voice is a little sharper this time.

"Forget it," I mumble, letting the door shut. "Another time, maybe."

Ash, you idiot!

What am I doing?

Why, oh, *why* can't I just mind my own business?

I pull out my phone and start tapping quickly, hunched in the rain. After waiting for a break in traffic, I hurry across the street and press myself against the wall by the alley. There's a sleek white jetbike propped there, fixed with an anti-theft lock but otherwise forgotten. With its electromagnetic wheels powered off, it looks a little like a regular old-fashioned bike, just missing its tires.

Unlike a regular old-fashioned bike, it's fitted with a pair of jet engines on the back.

I'm hoping its owner is one of the guys in the alley.

It takes me all of two tries to enter the right code into the lock, which falls away with a whisper.

"C'mon, c'mon," I mutter to my phone. "What's taking so long?"

A cartoon llama winks on the screen below a chat bubble. *Hold tight, AshTyler9368! We are processing your request now!*

Neon raindrops patter my transparent coat, droplets catching the pink and blue light from the arcade across the street. I cast it a longing glance.

Stupid, stupid, *stupid!* Why couldn't I have just kept walking? I could be neck-deep in an immersion pod right now, flying happily around some virtual sky, the way I've dreamed of for years.

The alley beside me is dark, choked with the stench of wet concrete, garbage, and trapped exhaust fumes. In that darkness, the muffled sounds of laughter, scuffling, and cries of pain are barely audible over the hum of the rain and static buzz of neon.

I'm not even sure how many guys are back there. Three, maybe, plus the guy they're beating on.

An autocab drones by, its electric motor barely making a sound. Its headlights flash over the graffitied bricks around me but barely touch the shadows in the alley.

Another pained shout echoes out of the dark, followed by harsh laughter.

If this digital llama doesn't get his digital butt in gear, this rescue mission could turn into a cleanup mission.

The notification finally comes through with a *ding*. The cartoon llama does a happy twirl.

Great news, AshTyler9368! Your requested pickup is inbound! ETA 20 seconds! Thank you for using LlamaPost!

Finally!

Right on time, I hear a sound over the rain: the familiar buzz of a delivery drone. It flies in from the north, gracefully navigating the tangle of wires, street lamps, and neon signs that clogs the streets of the Bronx. Its eerie red eye glares while long, articulated legs bundle waspishly beneath its belly. When it reaches me, it beeps in greeting, then hovers on twelve spinning rotors while lowering hook-ended cables.

Grabbing hold of these, I latch them onto the jetbike, working fast, trying to stay out of the shafts of light beaming down from the arcade. The hooks grip the bike's frame and tighten like robotic fingers. Once they're all in place, I enter a command on my phone, the screen slick from the rain.

Package secured comes the automated reply. *Ready to ship, friend?*

I select *Yes*, then stand back as the drone's rotors throw themselves into overdrive in their attempt to lift the heavy bike. Biting my lip, I cross my fingers that this dumb operation doesn't go

completely, magnificently to pieces. If it does, *I'll* end up in pieces. Like, literal pieces. I've heard about the kind of stuff that goes down in this neighborhood.

Finally, the drone heaves its cargo into the air.

Then, just as the bike leaves the pavement, I reach up and flick the ignition.

BrrrrrrRRRRRAUGHHHHHH!

The mini jet engines on the back roar to life, twin streams of thrust causing the bike to buck against the drone's clutches. Red lights blast on around their rims, giving it the illusion of spitting fire. The bike does manic loops in the air.

Shouts and curses erupt in the alley as the punks realize what's happening.

Ha!

My little ruse worked. I'd cackle if I weren't terrified out of my mind—and still ruing the cost of the drone. Those things are *not* cheap. That adorable llama might as well have mugged me in this alley.

I pull back quickly, pressing a button on the inner lining of my raincoat. A sensor on the back of the hood takes a silent scan of the wall behind me, then the translucent material glazes over, re-creating the image on the front of the coat. I stay very, very still, hood low, a chameleon blending in.

It's the oldest rule in gaming.

When facing bosses of a higher level than you, your only option is *stealth mode*.

Well, that or *game over*. In this case, probably with my face smashed into wet concrete.

Three men come sprinting out of the darkness, bigger and meaner

than I'd feared. They're all wearing black tactical gear, like undercover soldiers or something.

Definitely higher level than me. I've never been so glad for my camo-coat.

"What the—someone's lifting my bike!" the biggest one yells. His face and neck swirl with living tats, inks that shift constantly to reflect his mood. And right now, that mood seems to be *murder*. The cobra head on his jugular opens its mouth and hisses in silent fury.

While his buddies jump in vain, trying to grab the bike, Tats looks around. His eyes skip right over me.

I'm pretty sure my camo-coat just saved my life.

"What do we do?" cries one of the others, a dude with ice-blond hair in a Mohawk.

Well, buddy, for a start, don't make your bike lock code *1234*.

Honestly, it's like they *wanted* it to get stolen.

The LlamaPost drone is pulling away. The jetbike bucks and sputters against the cables, engines churning the air with a sound like a chain saw cutting through a metal fence.

"Follow it!" roars the leader.

"What about the job?" whines Mohawk. "We were ordered to—"

"Forget the stupid job! We'll finish it later! Go, go, go!"

They take off at a sprint, darting into traffic and setting off alarms in the autocabs speeding by. The drone buzzes over the road. There's no way they'll catch up to it before it reaches the Hudson.

Still, I don't breathe again until the sound of blaring horns, curses, and snarling thrusters finally fades into the night.

Then I run down the alley as the power cell in my camo-coat drains the last of its juice. The material turns translucent again.

"Hello?" I click a switch in the heel of my boots, and small red

lights turn on in the toes, illuminating the alley. The beams bounce off piles of garbage and the lumps of broken-down autocabs; the place looks like a dragon's lair, and I've just stumbled into the nest of eggs.

"Are you back here?" I *know* I heard shouts of pain earlier. Is it horrible to hope I didn't just blow almost eight hundred bucks on a rescue mission only to find out there's nobody *to* rescue?

Then a groan sounds somewhere in the junk around me. I kick over a pile of wet, soggy cardboard and finally find him—a middle-aged man with a dazed look, greasy beard, and blood running from his forehead. Judging by the state of his clothes and general hygiene, I'm guessing he's homeless. He throws up his hands when my boot lights strike his face.

"Sorry, sorry." I click off the lights and creep closer until I can see his face illuminated in the pale glow of my phone. "I just want to help. Do you need a medic drone or something?"

He shakes his head. "No hospital," he says hoarsely.

Well, he doesn't seem to be in mortal agony. And besides, by the look of him, he couldn't afford the emergency airlift any more than I could. Medic drones operate on a strict pay-to-play policy, and I just blew every penny to ship some neo-punk bully's jetbike to Jersey.

I sigh, waving him over. "C'mon, there's a shelter six blocks east of here. I'll take you."

He cocks his head, blood dripping from his swelling ear. Those punks did a number on him. "You coulda just called a cop drone."

"You know what those things do to . . ." I gesture vaguely at him.

"People like me?" He scratches his beard. "Point taken. But . . . kid, why stick your neck out like that? You *looking* to get a beating? How old are you? Ten?"

“Thirteen. And let’s just say I knew someone in your position once.”

“Yeah?” He laughs, sounding more than a little unhinged. “How’d they end up?”

I don’t answer.

It hadn’t been Dad’s fault. His mind was sick and he couldn’t afford to get well. I remember the last time I saw him; I was eight and he’d only been on the streets for a year. Still, he was so out of his head he hadn’t even recognized me. He’d died a week later, on a greasy bench overlooking the Hudson.

Maybe this guy is someone’s dad. Maybe if someone had stopped long enough to help *my* dad on that bench, he’d still . . .

I hold out a hand to the man. The homeless guy waves it away and tries to stumble to his feet by himself. “What’s a skinny punk like you gonna do for me, eh? I can walk on my own . . .”

But he can’t. He’s either too injured or too ill to find his own feet, so I slip an arm around him and we start trudging down the alley. He smells like old cheese fries and cardboard.

“You got some kind of savior complex?” he asks.

“Yep,” I say through my teeth. “That’s me. I love hero crap.”

At the street, I hail an autocab. Several pass us by, either occupied or too expensive for my wallet, which their sensors can remotely scan. Finally, a beat-up, rusty old model slows to a stop, the door popping open and a robotic voice asking me for an address. I tell it the name of the shelter, then help the man inside.

“Good luck, I guess,” I say, still smarting from the loss of my savings. I’m only human, after all. Maybe I’ll drain my account out of some extremely misguided sense of charity, but I don’t have to be *cheerful* about it.

“Wait,” he says, fumbling in his pocket. “You’re an idiot, you know. That big heart of yours’ll just lead you into a life of pain. You gotta toughen up, boy. Learn when to keep walking.”

I roll my eyes. “You’re *welcome*.”

“Yeah, yeah, thanks or whatever. I don’t know. Here. Have this. I can’t take it where I’m going anyway. And like you say, I owe you.”

He puts a small metal box in my hand. “You remind me of someone,” he says, his voice suddenly clear, the fog in his eyes burned away by some inner light. He catches my wrist, ignoring the impatient beep of the autocab wanting him to shut the door. “I think you’d be good for each other. Just don’t be stupid about it. And . . . don’t tell anyone you have it, okay? That’s crucially important. *Don’t. Tell. Anyone.*”

“Riiiiiiight.” Maybe I should be sending him to a psychiatric hospital instead.

He shudders and settles into the cab, letting the door close. I hear him order the cab to take him to some address in the opposite direction of the shelter I recommended. It glides back into the flow of traffic.

Well, fine. The guy’s on his own now, and whether he wants to go to the shelter or Coney-fraggin’-Island, that’s his business.

As for me, I’m now soaked to the bone, irritated, and flat broke.

Feeling drained of more than just my savings, I wander through the street and stand in front of the arcade. My forehead presses to the glass, my flop of blue-streaked hair dripping water onto the toes of my boots. The window is glazed, so I can only see vague silhouettes inside, white pods in neat rows waiting to carry their occupants out of this polluted, dying city to someplace wonderful, magical, and new.

“It would have been a stupid waste of money anyway,” I mutter.

Opening my hand, I look down at the little box Homeless Guy gave me. Glancing at a trash bin by the arcade door, I almost just toss it. Who knows what’s inside? Could be drugs, a lock of some dead person’s hair, a tooth. No, thank you!

What was it he’d said?

“I think you’ll be good for each other.”

In the end, I’m just too curious to resist.

I open the box.