

“A Man Named ‘Chuck’, An Android Named ‘L.I.N’.”

By Michael Atkins

Chapter 1: “L.I.N.”

L.I.N. was an android. She stared at her toes. She wore a pair of grey stockings, and her toenails were painted black. She looked closely. Her operating system was equipped with a zoom function. She closed her eyes and shrugged. She loaded the zoom software and zoomed in on her feet. Her nails appeared dim and waxy beneath their grey, nylon blankets. L.I.N. looked in front of her. She stood in front of a giant mirror. It covered the wall. L.I.N. was bent over. Velvety strands of blue hair draped down her cheeks. Her hair draped to her shoulders. Across her forehead, a row of tousled bangs dangled over her eyebrows. Her hair was shiny and blue. It was like a field of sapphires. L.I.N. smiled, revealing a row of shiny, white teeth. They appeared below a pair of ruby lips. L.I.N. stood, let her left knee go slack, and tossed her head to the side. Then, she slid her fingers through her hair. Her fingernails were painted black to match her toenails. She wore a black blouse and a black skirt. The skirt draped to her knees. It had two broad, white stripes across the bottom. L.I.N. had eyes like emeralds. And, across the top of her head was a black barrette. It was actually the cover of a CD drive.

L.I.N.’s toothy smile melted. It became a duo of grinning lips. She stepped away from the mirror and threw her hands on her hips. She noticed a reflection of her grey hoodie. It hung from a post at the end of her bed. She turned around and snagged a hold of her jacket. It was soft and squishy. L.I.N. just got it out of the dryer. So, it was warm and snuggly. L.I.N. buried her face in her jacket and inhaled. It had a light, floral scent. L.I.N. whirled her jacket around her shoulders, slid her arms through the sleeves, and zipped the front. She made sure the hood was nice and straight. It bugged her incessantly when the hood was lopsided. She looked around for her shoes. She had no idea where she put them. She was always losing them. She looked across the fluffy, tan carpet. Her shoes were nowhere in sight. She checked a hidden

corner beside the bed. They weren't there, either. She knelt beside the bed, flung the end of her tie dye comforter aside, and looked underneath. It was too dark to see anything. L.I.N.'s operating system provided an ultraviolet filter. She used it to check the pitch black space.

She noticed three glass chess pieces. She and Hal were looking for them two weeks prior. Hal was the mad scientist who invented L.I.N. L.I.N. cupped her hand over her lips and giggled. She found it humorous when Hal referred to himself as a "mad scientist." L.I.N. also noticed a pair of white panties with pink hearts on them. She gasped. She snagged her panties and tossed them into a wicker basket. The basket resided at the other end of the bed. L.I.N. had another peek under the bed. There was nothing else to find. She dropped the end of her comforter and looked around. She smacked her lips and pounded her fist into the floor.

"Damn it," she remarked. "Where are they?" She hopped to her feet and ruffled her hair. It got charged with static while she was peeking under the bed. She turned and looked into her closet. It had two wood doors and a wooden frame. One door was open. The other was half open. Three blouses, a striped tank top, and a heavy overcoat dangled from a rod across the top of the closet. They resided on the left. Two pairs of jeans, one pair blue, one pair black, a red skirt with white polka dots, and a pair of khaki capris hung from the right. L.I.N. rubbed the back of her head. She looked at the closet floor. She noticed a red, high heeled shoe. It was the one for her right foot. She had no idea what happened to the other one. There was a pair of blue canvas shoes. They were stacked on top of one another in the right corner of the closet. And, there were two pairs of sandals against the left wall of the closet. One pair had broad, black insteps and wooden wedges. The others were flat with tan soles and thin, yellow insteps. L.I.N.'s shoes rested atop a pile of additional clothes.

L.I.N. pushed her mouth to the side of her face. She looked at the top of the closet door

on her right. She smiled and dropped her forehead in her palm. A white, button up blouse with long sleeves was draped over the top of the door. L.I.N. had no idea how long it had been there. She couldn't even remember if she washed it the last time she wore it. She snagged one of the sleeves, dragged the blouse off the door, and tossed it across the room. It landed in the wicker basket. L.I.N. closed the closet doors and focused on her bed. Her tie dye comforter was crumpled at the foot of the bed. A wrinkled, black sheet lay below. A corner of the mattress was showing at the head of the bed. A pillow with no pillowcase lay in the middle. There was another pillow lying on the floor. It had a brown pillowcase with white polka dots.

L.I.N. snagged a hold of the comforter and tossed it aside. She found the missing pillowcase underneath. It was black. L.I.N. threw the pillow case aside and yanked off the sheet. The uncased pillow toppled to the tan carpet. L.I.N. threw her hands on her hips and stared at the mattress. It was white with blue stripes. L.I.N. picked up the end of the mattress and looked underneath. The floor below looked the same in the light as it did in the dark. L.I.N. dropped the mattress, kicked her blankets and pillows aside, and stomped out of her bedroom. Something caught her eye on the way out. It was something on the floor, something dark. She stopped, focused on the floor, and looked to her right. The floor was covered with shiny, wooden veneer. It felt frosty and slick beneath L.I.N.'s nylon stockings. On the floor next to the door were her shoes. L.I.N. smacked her lips.

"There they are." The shoes were black and had thick soles. They had leather tops and open backs with straps. L.I.N. slid her foot into her right shoe, bent over, and buttoned the strap. She mirrored the process with her left foot. Still bent over, she looked around for Hal. She was at the top of a staircase. There were two rows of narrow, wooden posts. One resided left of the top step. The other resided on the right. A slat of wood rested along the tops of each row of

posts. The entrance to L.I.N.'s bedroom was in line with the stairs. L.I.N. stood and looked around. "Hal?" She got up early that morning. Now, it was after eight. L.I.N. knew because of a clock in the lower, right corner of her vision field. It wasn't like Hal to sleep so late. Usually, he was up at the crack of dawn. Typically, he came strolling down the hall, sat gently on the edge of L.I.N.'s mattress, and give her arm a light shake. He greeted her with a warm smile and a pair of bright, blue eyes. L.I.N. usually flipped him off, rolled over, and squashed a pillow over her head. That is, if she had a pillow handy.

But on this particular morning, Hal didn't come by and wake her up. Rather, L.I.N. awoke a little after seven. It was a tad chilly. So, she opted to wash and dry her grey hoodie. That way, it would be all snuggly and fresh. It was her favorite jacket. L.I.N. stared at Hal's bedroom. It resided at the end of the wooden railing on the left. L.I.N. closed her eyes and shrugged. She glided down the stairs and made a right. The stairs were covered with shiny veneer that matched the floor upstairs. The downstairs floor was covered with black and white, checkered tiles. A long bar on the right separated a kitchen from the rest of the downstairs area. The base was covered with shiny veneer. The top was black marble. Ten stools were scattered around the bar. Each stood on four tall, chrome legs. Each had a different colored seat. Beyond the bar was a long stove. It had twelve gas burners. Three ovens rested below. A chrome refrigerator stood to the left of the stove. Two chrome sinks stood to the right. Below those was a row of cabinets. They were trimmed with shiny veneer.

The refrigerator had two vertical doors. The one on the left had water and ice dispensers. L.I.N. wandered to the refrigerator. She opened the door on the right. She grabbed a carton of eggs and a pitcher of milk from shelves in the door. She snagged a package of bacon from a clear, plastic drawer inside the refrigerator. She set the items on a section of counter to the left

of the stove. The kitchen counter matched the bar. L.I.N. got a pan from a cabinet below the sinks. She placed it on the front, left burner of the stove. She turned the burner knob to the right. However, it just clicked. It didn't ignite. L.I.N. figured the pilot had gone out. She left the knob on and held out her pointer finger. The tip of her finger separated from the rest and folded back. A shiny, black tube extended from below. Her finger made a couple of clicks. Then, a flame appeared at the end of the tube. L.I.N. lowered the flame to the burner, and the burner ignited.

She smiled. The tube retracted into her finger. And, her fingertip returned to its rightful place. L.I.N. went to work. She opened the package of bacon. She laid ten strips on the pan. She returned the bacon to the refrigerator. Then, she snagged a mixing bowl from a cabinet below the sink. She cracked six eggs into the mixing bowl. She added a dash of milk. She returned the eggs and milk to the shelves inside the refrigerator door. She snagged salt and pepper shakers. They resided in a wooden box on the middle of the bar. L.I.N. added salt and pepper to the eggs and milk. She returned the shakers to the box on the bar. There was a wooden cylinder against the wall. It was on the counter behind the mixing bowl. L.I.N. got a whisk from the wooden cylinder. She used it to scramble the eggs. She left the whisk in the bowl. It rested against the side.

Next, L.I.N. got a spatula from the cylinder. The bacon was sizzling. It was almost done. L.I.N. flipped the bacon strips and laid the spatula on the counter. She looked towards the top of the stairs. Hal was still in his room. L.I.N. exhaled through her nose. She turned and watched the bacon. It was boring. She turned on a fan above the stove. Then, she watched the bacon some more. She poked it periodically with the spatula until it was crispy. She got a plate from a cupboard above the sink. She set the plate behind the mixing bowl and laid a paper towel on top.

She got the paper towel from a dispenser next to the wooden cylinder. She scooped out the bacon and laid it on the paper towel. Then, she whisked the eggs onto the pan. She put the mixing bowl and the whisk in the sink. She stirred the eggs with the bacon spatula until they were fluffy.

L.I.N. nodded. She flipped off the stove burner. She got a hot pad from a drawer below the bacon. She set it on the bar and set the eggs on top. She set the bacon next to that. She got two more plates from the cupboard above the sink. She also got two forks. They were in the drawer that had the hot pad. L.I.N. set the plates and the forks next to one another on the bar. She grabbed two glasses from the cupboard with the plates. She filled hers with milk. She filled Hal's with orange juice. She set those at the ends of the plates and looked towards the top of the stairs. Hal was nowhere in sight. L.I.N. got two coasters from the box on the bar. She placed them below the glasses. She sighed and headed for the stairs. She had a bad feeling. It wasn't like Hal to stay in bed so late. He *never* missed breakfast.

There were wooden rails along the sides of the stairs. They matched the ones at the top. L.I.N. walked slowly up the right side of the stairs. Her fingers glided across the rail as she went. It was cool and slick. L.I.N. made it to the top and stopped. She stared at Hal's bedroom. The door was open. It always was.

"Hal?" she called. She cupped her fingers around her lips. "I'm gonna eat all your eggs!" She dropped her hand and smiled. There was no response. L.I.N. frowned. She tilted her head and narrowed her eyes. She crept across the slick, wooden floor and entered Hal's bedroom. The head of his bed rested against the opposite wall. There was a window to the left. The blinds were closed. The lights were off. L.I.N. could see Hal. He lay on his back beneath a red, plaid blanket.

L.I.N. flicked on the lights. The switch was on a wall to the left of the door. Hal didn't move. L.I.N. was confused. She felt frightened. She sighed. The floor in Hal's bedroom was covered with the same veneer as the hallway at the top of the stairs. L.I.N. slipped across the slick floor and stood beside Hal's bed. His head lay on his pillow. It was the only part of his body that wasn't under the covers. His eyes were closed. His expression was flat. L.I.N. blinked.

"Hal?" she whispered. There was a small, wooden table by the head of the bed. A shiny, light blue lamp with a white shade rested on top. L.I.N. flipped it on. The light gleamed across Hal's wrinkled face. He was bald down the middle of his head. Long strands of white hair stuck out everywhere else. A thick, grey mustache lay across his top lip. He still hadn't moved. L.I.N. sighed. She folded her fingers in front of her lips and studied his face. "Hal?" she moaned. Tears rolled down her cheeks. She reached up and wiped them aside. She sniffled. She slowly reached for Hal's shoulder. She hesitated. She closed her eyes and exhaled through her nose. She opened her eyes and nudged his shoulder. Hal's head slumped to the side. His jaw dropped, and his tongue slithered out. L.I.N. whimpered. She bowed her head and dropped her eyes in her palms. She fell to her knees and laid her forehead on the edge of Hal's mattress.

Chapter 2: “Chuck Parker”

Chuck was twenty-five. He lay in Lisa’s bed. He lay under the covers. He wore a pair of blue boxer shorts with white stripes. He lay with his arms folded behind his head. His arms lay atop a pillow. His hair was shaggy and black. His eyes were shiny and tan. Lisa sat across the room. She was on her laptop, chatting on a social networking site. She wore a red brazier and a pair of black panties. A head of thick, brown hair draped to her shoulders. She sat in a chair with wheels. The back of the chair hovered above the seat. Lisa’s legs were folded like a pretzel. She tapped away at her laptop’s keyboard. She awaited a response. She chuckled silently and resumed typing. Chuck watched her and smiled. It made him happy, lying there, watching her. She was so energetic and full of life. It filled him with vigor. Chuck and Lisa had been seeing each other for a couple of weeks. Chuck was beginning to wonder if he was in love. His eyelids fluttered closed. He began to nod off. Lisa’s head whirled around. Her eyebrows fell in the middle.

“Chuck!” she shouted. Chuck’s eyes popped open. He turned his head and looked at Lisa. “You weren’t going to stay over *here* tonight, were you?”

Chuck lifted himself with his elbows. “Uh, well...”

“Man, I gotta get up and go to work, tomorrow.”

Chuck nodded. “So, get up and go to work, tomorrow.” Lisa turned around and typed some more. She shook her head.

“Nope. You gotta go.”

Chuck exhaled through his nose. “You don’t... want me to stay over, huh?”

Lisa stopped typing and spun her chair around. “You’re not going to make a *deal* out of it, are you?” Chuck shrugged. “Look, the sex part of the night is over.” Lisa turned around and

read a response. “You’re a big boy, right? You can sleep by yourself.” She began to type.

Chuck pushed his mouth to the side of his face. He turned and looked at a table. It was a small, wooden table with a lamp and an alarm clock. It stood between the bed and Lisa’s bedroom window. Chuck’s shirt and jeans lay on top. Chuck looked at the window and smirked. The window was partially open. He looked at Lisa. She was facing her laptop, typing. She stopped and snickered. Then, she typed some more. Chuck nodded and looked away. He slipped from beneath the covers, stood next to the bed, and snagged his clothes. His floppy, black sneakers lay next to the table. He bent over and grabbed them. His socks were stuffed inside.

Chuck looked at Lisa one last time. She was typing up a storm. Chuck bobbed his head and slipped through the window. He eased to the grass and crept to the side of Lisa’s house. There, he stuffed himself into his blue jeans, threw on his socks, and laced his sneakers. He threw his shirt around his shoulders. It was a white, button up shirt with thin, blue stripes. It had long sleeves. Chuck had a peek through Lisa’s window. She hadn’t even noticed he was missing. Chuck wandered towards the end of the yard, jammed his hand into his pocket, and pulled out his keys. A line of sidewalk separated Lisa’s yard from the street. Chuck’s pickup rested on the other side of the sidewalk. It was an old, junky, piece of crap. It was a seventies model. The hood and the front, right fender were covered with faded, yellow paint. The front, left fender was cherry red. The doors were primer grey. The top had no paint. It was covered with rust. The rear fenders were white. The tailgate and the bed matched the hood and the front, right fender.

Chuck slid a key into the driver’s side door. He turned it towards the gas tank and looked up. He could see Lisa over the top of his pickup. She sat at her computer, typing. Chuck slid his fingers through a shiny, steel handle on the door. He pressed a square, plastic button next to

the handle and pulled the door back. It squealed all the way out. Chuck slid into the driver's seat and eased the door closed. It never closed unless he slammed it. But, he didn't want Lisa to hear. Lisa's street was downhill. So, Chuck slid the ignition key into the steering column, turned it, and threw the truck into neutral. It began to coast. Chuck waited until he'd coasted two blocks. Then, he stomped the brake to the floor. He threw the shifter into park, fired up the engine, and took off. As he sped away, he opened the door and slammed it. He also flipped on his headlights. Chuck thought about what Lisa said. He focused on the words.

"You're a big boy, right?" Chuck heard hummingbirds in his ears. His eyeballs quivered. His nostrils burned. A pair of tears dribbled down his cheeks. Chuck came to a stop sign. He eased his brake pedal to the floor and sat back. He let out a shaky sigh. He reached up and swatted tears away. Chuck was at a loss. He thought he understood relationships. He thought he knew the way things worked. He thought it was about companionship. He figured that's why people started relationships. He threw his hands out at his sides.

"They're seeking companionship, right?" Chuck let off the brake and inched the gas pedal towards the floor. He rolled his eyes and shook his head. "Apparently, not." Something caught Chuck's attention. He looked to his right and narrowed his eyes. It was a young girl, walking down the sidewalk. Chuck figured she was about his age. He slowed down and looked her over. She looked unusual. She had shiny, blue hair. It draped to her shoulders. She wore a grey hoodie and a black skirt with two broad, white stripes. Chuck found it unusual. That's not what caught his attention, though. The girl was crying, too. That's what Chuck figured, anyway. Her arms were crossed over her chest, and her head was bowed. She walked slow and carelessly. She wandered from side to side, like she was drunk.

Chuck slowed down a little more. The girl stopped and dropped her palms over her eyes.

Chuck could tell she was having a hard time with something. He felt sorry for her. He sighed and stopped next to her. He reached across his seat and cranked down the passenger window. The roller squeaked with every turn. Chuck heard her sobbing. He licked his lips.

“Um, hey...” He startled the girl. She whirled around and faced him. Tears were leaking down her cheeks. She was a wreck. Chuck cleared his throat. “Man, what happened? Do... Are you okay? Do you need help?” The girl sighed and looked away. She sniffled. She stared at the sidewalk and pressed her lips together. She flattened her palms against her back and faced him.

“Um, I don’t know.” Chuck was confused by her vague answer. He narrowed his eyes and nodded his head.

“What happened?”

The girl licked her lips. “My...” She looked away and sighed. She slid strands of silky, blue hair aside and looked back. “I’m not...” She looked at the ground. She threw her hands in front of her and shook them. She was having a hard time answering. Whatever she was trying to say, it was complicated. Chuck needed to know more about her. He exhaled through his nose.

“What’s your name?” he asked. He forced a smile. “Can you tell me *that*?” The blue haired girl looked up. She couldn’t help but grin. What Chuck asked was mildly humorous. It wasn’t what he said. It was how he said it. The girl played with her fingers, nervously. She dropped her arms at her sides.

“Um, it’s L.I.N.”

“L.I.N.,” Chuck repeated. He pointed towards his chest. “Well, my name’s Chuck.” L.I.N. smiled. She had a wonderful, cheery smile. It lit up the night.

“Hi, Chuck.” L.I.N. wiped her eyes and approached Chuck’s pickup. She stopped next

to the passenger door and folded her fingers. She pressed her lips together and exhaled through her nose. She appeared apprehensive. She looked around. Then, she offered Chuck her hand. She stuck it through the open window. “It-It’s nice to meet you.” Chuck smiled and shook L.I.N.’s hand.

“You, too,” he told her. He looked around. Then, he faced her. “Look, it’s kind of cold out here. You... want me to give you a ride, somewhere?” L.I.N. eased back and closed her eyes. Chuck turned his head without looking away. “L.I.N.?” L.I.N. opened her eyes. They were bright and glittery, like emeralds.

“I’d like that,” she said. She pressed her lips together. “I... don’t know where the hell I’m going, though.” Chuck looked away and chuckled. He faced her.

“Well, I tell you what. Why don’t you hop in, anyway? And, we’ll see if we can figure that out.”

L.I.N. smiled and nodded. “Um, okay.” She reached for Chuck’s passenger door handle. She stopped and looked at Chuck. Chuck narrowed his eyes and bobbed his head. L.I.N. pressed her lips together and smiled. “I’m sorry. I don’t know how to open this.” She pointed at the square shaped button. “I just press this button and pull?”

Chuck turned his head without looking away. “Yes...” He was very confused. “Look, I know it’s an old truck, but...” L.I.N. figured it out. She pressed the button and jerked the door open. She slid across from Chuck and eased the door shut. “No, you gotta slam it,” Chuck remarked. L.I.N. examined the inner part of the door. She spotted the inside handle. It was an L shaped bar of chrome. She pulled it, pushed the door away, and slammed it. She looked at Chuck.

“Like *that*?”

Chuck smiled. “Yep.” He dropped the shifter into overdrive. “Just like that.”

L.I.N. nodded. “I’m sorry. I’ve only ever been in Hal’s car.” She looked at Chuck. “His is newer. It has a long, plastic handle that pulls up.”

Chuck nodded. “Right. The newer cars are like that.” He narrowed his eyes and shook his head. He looked at L.I.N. “You’re a rather strange girl, L.I.N. Rather strange, indeed.” L.I.N. smiled and looked at her lap. She turned, found her seatbelt, and buckled it across her chest.

“I know,” she explained. “That’s what I was trying to tell you, earlier.” She looked at Chuck. “I’m not a girl.” Chuck looked her over. “I mean, I’m not... human.” Chuck stopped at another stop sign. He stared at L.I.N. and fluttered his eyelids. L.I.N. leaned back and sighed. “I’m not a person, I’m an android.” She looked into Chuck’s sandy eyes. “Do you understand? Like a robot or a cyborg?” Chuck’s eyes were like saucers. He slowly nodded. He faced forward and resumed driving.

“Oh, I understand,” Chuck told her. “I know...” He looked at her. “I *know* what an android is.”

L.I.N. faced forward and nodded. “Good. Then, I won’t have to explain it to you.”

Chuck tilted his head and raised his eyebrows. “Actually, I know quite a bit about it.” He looked at L.I.N. “I’m a programmer.” He faced forward. “I mean, that’s what I do for a living.”

L.I.N. looked at Chuck. “Really?” Chuck looked at L.I.N. He smiled and nodded.

“Yeah.” He tilted his head. “Well, not anymore.” He looked at the road. “I got fired from my last job. And, I can’t really seem to...” He stopped at another stop sign. He faced L.I.N. “It’s a long story.” L.I.N. nodded. Chuck narrowed his eyes. “So, you’re an android?”

Really?” L.I.N. looked at her lap. She pushed her mouth to the side of her face. She looked at Chuck and held up her index finger. The tip of her finger separated from the rest and folded back. A shiny, black tube extended from below. There were a couple of clicks. Then, a flame appeared at the end of the tube. Chuck’s jaw dropped. “Oh, my God.” He smiled. “That is so cool!” He reached across and took L.I.N.’s hand. He looked her finger over. He narrowed his eyes and checked out her hand. He slid his thumb across her flesh. It felt real. It was warm and squishy. Chuck looked up. “That’s neat.” He let go of L.I.N.’s hand and threw the truck into park. The flame at the end of L.I.N.’s lighter went out. She put it away and showed Chuck her thumb.

“Here, look. My thumb has a USB port.” The tip of her thumb flipped to the side. A USB port was hiding beneath. Chuck took her little hand and examined her thumb. He looked into her eyes.

“Where did you come from? Who... Who made you?” L.I.N.’s thumb flipped closed. She stared into Chuck’s eyes. Her eyebrows fell at the sides. Her lips quivered. She looked at her lap and sobbed. Chuck narrowed his eyes. He dropped his palm on L.I.N.’s shoulder. “Oh, hey... I’m sorry.” She looked up. Tears were pouring down her cheeks. “Wow... Whoever made you certainly went to a lot of trouble.” Chuck slid L.I.N.’s tears aside and patted her shoulder. “Did something happen to him? Is that it?” L.I.N. looked down and nodded. She looked into Chuck’s eyes and let out a shaky sigh.

“Yeah. He’s dead.” She crossed her arms over her chest and faced forward. “He died this morning.” She bowed her head and draped her fingers across her eyes. Chuck sighed. He looked in his rearview mirror. A pair of headlights were approaching.

“Oh, man,” Chuck remarked. He threw the shifter into overdrive and made a right. “I’m

so sorry.” He parked next to a curb. He tore off his seatbelt and slid across the seat. “I had no idea.” L.I.N. looked up and sighed. Chuck undid her seatbelt. “Um... come here,” he told her. He slipped his arms around L.I.N.’s shoulders and looked around. He was curious about her response. “You poor thing. What was his name? Hal?” Chuck looked down. “Did you say his name was Hal?” L.I.N. sobbed. Chuck felt her nodding against his chest.

“*Yeah,*” she gasped. She sniffled and cleared her throat. “Um, he was all I had.” She was unsure how to respond to Chuck’s gesture. Sometimes, Hal held her in his arms. But, it was never for that reason. The algorithms L.I.N. had for dealing with such a situation were largely untested. She moved her arm, timidly. She wasn’t sure, though. She looked up at Chuck. She awaited his instructions. He smiled and shook his head.

“You don’t know what to do,” Chuck remarked.

L.I.N. smiled and looked away. “I think I’m supposed to hug you back.” She looked up. “Is that... okay?”

Chuck shrugged. “If you want to.” He nodded. “Try it and see.” L.I.N. pressed her lips together. She moved towards Chuck. But, she stopped. She closed her eyes and nodded. Then, she threw her arms around Chuck’s waist. It was weird. It felt oddly comforting. L.I.N. had no idea why. Chuck nodded. He hugged her tightly and patted the back of her head. “It’ll be okay, L.I.N. Don’t worry.” L.I.N. took a deep breath and sighed. “Don’t worry. Maybe, we can figure something out, yeah?”

L.I.N. opened her eyes and narrowed them. “*Yeah...*” She loosened her arms and looked up. Chuck let her go. She backed away and looked into his eyes. “*Yeah,* we can figure something out.” She nodded and shook her hands. “Um, together.”

Chuck chuckled. “Of course we can.” He scooted away and took L.I.N.’s hand. He

looked into her shiny, green eyes. “We can work something out.” L.I.N. looked at her hand and smiled. She looked at Chuck.

“That feels weird.” Chuck smiled. “Why does that feel so weird?”

Chuck shrugged. “It just does.”

L.I.N. stared at her hand and nodded. “Well, I like it.” She looked into Chuck’s eyes. She noticed something undesirable. She frowned. “I’m... making you uncomfortable.” Chuck looked away. He exhaled through his nose and looked back. L.I.N. sighed. “I’m sorry. I’ll stop.” She relaxed her fingers. Chuck grabbed a hold of them again.

“No, wait,” he told her. L.I.N. looked into his eyes. “No, it’s okay.” He looked away and nodded. He looked back. “I’m not uncomfortable. I’m... uncertain?” He narrowed his eyes and nodded. “Is that it? I think that’s what it is.” He threw his free hand out at his side. “You know. I just met you. I’m not used to holding your hand.” L.I.N. parted her lips and nodded. “Do you understand?”

“Yes.”

Chuck nodded. “It’s okay, though.” He laid her hand at her side and patted it. “I like holding your hand, too.” L.I.N. smiled. She faced forward and threw on her seatbelt. Chuck returned to his seat and buckled his. Then, he threw the shifter into overdrive. He looked at L.I.N. “So, where should we go, L.I.N.?”

She faced him. “I don’t know, Chuck. Where were *you* going?”

Chuck faced forward and smiled. “Like I said, it’s a long story.”

Chapter 3: “The Basement”

Bat Shit was Jamaican. He stood six, three. He weighed 200 pounds. He had eyes like onyxes. He had a head full of fat, black dread locks. They dangled to his lower back. Bat Shit’s skin was like molasses. It was shiny and wet. It looked that way no matter how cold it was. Bat Shit wore a basketball jersey, a pair of black corduroys, and a pair of tan loafers. The basketball jersey was decorated like a Squib City Pagans jersey. It was lime green with white trim. The Squib City Pagans were Bat Shit’s favorite professional basketball team. Bat Shit was joined by two comrades, Frank and Jeff. Frank was a made guy. He was in his early thirties. He had a head of thick, black hair. It was greased up and slicked back. Frank had dark brown eyes and thick, black eyebrows. His face was solemn and passive. He wore all black clothes. They consisted of a black shirt, black tie, black slacks, and black shoes. His shoes were new and shiny.

Jeff was a geek. He was twenty-four years old. He had three doctorates from a major university. One was in computers. One was in mathematics. And, one was in physics. Jeff had soft, chin length, red hair. He was rail thin. His skin was pale and covered with freckles. His eyes were big and blue. A pair of oval, rimless glasses lay across his eyes. He wore a blue, long sleeved shirt with vertical, white stripes, dark khakis, and a pair of fifties style shoes. Jeff’s khakis were a little short. A pair of white suspenders held them above his waist. His socks were visible below the cuffs of his khakis. He wore a pair of olive, argyle socks. Bat Shit, Frank, and Jeff were in an office. It was on the thirty-second floor of a skyscraper. The skyscraper belonged to Harmony Bank. The walls of the office were draped with wood veneer. The floor was covered with vomit colored tiles. The tiles were two feet by two feet. They were decorated with splatters of white and black. They were separated with chrome grout.

There was a large window on the back wall. A curvy, glass desk with a steel frame stood in front of the window. Four LCD monitors were arranged on top. Bat Shit, Frank, and Jeff stood in front of the desk. Bat Shit stood on the left, Frank stood in the middle, and Jeff stood on the right. There was a squishy, leather chair to the left of Bat Shit. The employee running the office was tied to that. A column of ropes stretched across his chest and the back of the chair. His wrists were duct taped to a pair of armrests. His name was Mitchell. He was twenty-six. His hair was short and black. His eyes were blue. He wore a light blue, long sleeved shirt, a yellow tie, a pair of black trousers, and a pair of brown loafers. His eyes were wide and filled with terror. He looked up at Bat Shit. Bat Shit looked down. He crossed his arms over his chest.

“Man named Mitchell,” Bat Shit remarked. “Man, you know who we’re looking for.” He bent over and stared into Mitchell’s eyes. His dread locks dangled to his knees. “Are we gwan have to rough you up, mon?” Mitchell gritted his teeth. His eyes darted between Bat Shit, Frank, and Jeff. Frank rested against Mitchell’s desk. His arms were folded across his chest. He stared through Mitchell’s wiry precipice with a cold, lifeless gaze. Jeff’s eyes were buried in a paperback. The book was titled “The Elementary of Elementary.” Jeff spent ten to twenty seconds on each page. Then, he flipped to the next two. Mitchell looked into Bat Shit’s eyes. He shook his head.

“I-I don’t know where he is.” Bat Shit punched one of Mitchell’s monitors. It was the one at the left side of the desk. It toppled to the floor.

“Don’t be tellin’ me no lies, Mitchell!” Bat Shit barked. “We’re looking for Chuck Parker, mon. We know you know where to find him.”

“You two were roommates in college, Mitch,” Frank remarked. “We know yours guys

stayed in touch.” Frank narrowed his eyes. “We’re gonna do bad things to you, Mitch... you don’t tell us what we wanna know.” Mitchell looked at Jeff. Jeff stared silently at his book. He turned the page and stared the next two down. Then, he flipped to the next two. Mitchell looked into Bat Shit’s eyes.

“Look... I haven’t seen him in a couple of months. Last I heard he was taking a private jet to Fiji with his folks.” Bat Shit and Frank looked at Jeff. Jeff’s head slowly turned. His eyes were lively and colorful. The corners of his mouth pointed upwards. Jeff was almost finished with his book. He stared down a couple of pages. Then, he flipped to the last page in the book. He looked it over and closed the book. He tossed the book on the floor. It landed on four others Jeff already read. They were paperbacks and textbooks Mitchell kept in his office. Jeff slid his glasses off his face. He removed a handkerchief from a pocket on his shirt. He slid the hankie across the lenses of his glasses and returned it to his pocket. He laid his glasses over his eyes and looked at Mitchell. He narrowed his eyes.

“Did you know that a wormhole can open up anywhere at any time?” Jeff motioned towards the ceiling and looked around. “Even right here in this very room?” He looked at Mitchell. “Theoretically speaking.” Mitchell raised his eyebrows. Jeff grinned. He held up his index finger. “According to Einstein’s theory of relativity, time and space are defined by light photons.” He shrugged. “You remove an area of light photons, you remove an area of space. Thus, it stands to reason that areas without space and time...” Jeff turned his head without looking away. “‘Wormholes,’ as they’re known, are all around us. Even right here in this very room.” Jeff folded his fingers. “But, how to make a wormhole bigger?” He furrowed his brow. “How to negate an area of time and space to such an extent that one could step through and wind up at the bottom of the ocean?” Jeff crossed his wrists behind his back. He turned and began to

pace.

“One would need an area of anti-photons. Isn’t that right...” Jeff stopped and looked over his shoulder. “Mitchell?” Mitchell sat back and sighed. Jeff continued pacing. “One would need gateways. One at the entry point and one at the exit point.” Jeff stopped and smiled. “Isn’t that right, Mitchell?”

Mitchell relaxed. “Psh. Theoretical bullshit.” He shook his head. “Strictly theoretical.” He looked at Bat Shit and Frank. “Not even in the same realm as possible.” He looked at Jeff. Jeff smirked. He shoved his hand into his pocket. He revealed a yellow yo-yo. There was a loop of string sticking out of the top. Jeff slid it over his finger and put the yo-yo to sleep. He whirled the yo-yo through the air and caught it with his free hand. Mitchell narrowed his eyes. Jeff loosened the loop. He slid it over the yo-yo and pulled it tight. It made a loop out of the string. He held the loop in front of Mitchell and looked at Bat Shit. Bat Shit rolled Mitchell across the room. He backed the leather chair against the wall. Jeff and Frank wandered across the room and stood in front of Mitchell. Jeff bobbed his head.

“Do it.” Jeff held the loop between his thumbs and forefingers. His hands were even with his shoulders. Frank grabbed a hold of the string with *his* thumbs and forefingers. He grabbed the loop at the top and bottom. He pulled the top and bottom away from one another. The area inside the loop became murky. It faded until it was black. It was the darkest black Mitchell had ever seen. His eyes widened. He looked at Frank and Jeff. Jeff looked at Bat Shit. “Stick his hand in there.” Mitchell’s jaw dropped. He shook his head.

“No! What the hell?” Bat Shit took out a butterfly knife and flipped it open. He slid the blade below Mitchell’s left arm. He cut the duct tape loose and lifted his arm. Mitchell curled his fingers into a fist. He tried to jerk away. “No!” He cried. “Don’t!” Bat Shit raised

Mitchell's wrist above his head. He closed his eyes and began to chant. Mitchell jerked at his arm. "Ah!" he shouted. "What are you doing?"

Bat Shit lifted the left side of his lip. "Just a little bit Voodoo magic, mon." He looked at Mitchell. "Don't you be worryin' none about that." Bat Shit's eyes rolled back. He faced the ceiling and spoke in tongues. He let go of Mitchell's wrist. Mitchell tugged at his arm. But, it wouldn't budge. Rather, his hand drifted towards the murky hole in the loop of yo-yo string. Mitchell gritted his teeth. He growled. His fingertips touched the middle of the black spot. It was freezing and wet. The spot felt colder than ice. Mitchell looked around.

"What *is* that?!" he demanded. Bat Shit looked down. He continued to chant. He backed away and flattened against a wall. Ice cold seawater began pouring out of the loop of string. It blasted across Mitchell's arm and smashed into his ribcage. Mitchell pinched his eyes shut and shrieked. His hand felt like it was being twisted off. He looked at Frank. Frank returned a cold gaze.

"Tell us how to find him, Mitch. Or, you'll be sleeping with the fishies."

Jeff smiled. "Yeah. The ones that glow in the dark." Mitchell fought to keep his head above the torrent of water blasting his body. He tilted his head back and gasped for breath. Jeff narrowed his eyes. "Mitchell, you'll be squashed like an aluminum can." Mitchell's eyes popped open. He stared at the ceiling. It was covered with rectangular tiles of sheetrock.

"Gaaaaah!" Mitchell shrieked. He felt his elbow enter the wormhole. His forearm twisted apart and exploded. Mitchell gritted his teeth. "Arrrrrguh! Aaaaaah!"

Frank's eyebrows fell in the middle. "Where?!" he demanded. Mitchell fought to look him in the eyes. Angry torrents of ice cold seawater snapped his head back.

"Gaaaaarah..." Mitchell moaned. "He's in New Jack City. New Jack City!"

“Where?!” Frank growled.

Mitchell shook his head, frantically. “I-I don’t know...” His shoulder slipped through the wormhole. Mitchell felt his humerus twist. “Yeeeeee-ow!” he shouted. He looked into Frank’s eyes. “Some... basement or something.” He gasped for breath. “In an elementary school, somewhere.”

Jeff raised his eyebrows. “You don’t know which one?”

Mitchell shook his head, desperately. “No! I swear! I swear! I don’t know!” Jeff looked at Frank. Frank looked at Jeff. Frank tilted his head. Jeff smirked. He spun a side off the yo-yo. The yo-yo fell apart and crashed to the floor. The string crumpled on top. Bat Shit faced Mitchell and stopped chanting. Mitchell collapsed against his chair and panted like a dog. He was completely soaked with seawater. He was cold and shivering. He pried his eyes apart and looked down. His left arm was missing. His eyes popped open. “Ah! Ah! Ah! Ah!”

Mitchell’s office window was thirty feet by twenty feet. Outside the office, the window reflected a clear, starry sky. The horizon glowed with lights from the city. Rows of headlights and taillights zipped across swirls of freeways. Mitchell’s window disintegrated. It exploded into millions of sharp, jagged pieces. Some were the size of pinheads. Some were as big as closet doors. Mitchell sailed through the glass and drifted through the air. Blood sprayed from his left shoulder. Glass rolled across his face. It dotted his cheeks with tiny gashes. It swirled through his short, black hair. It blanketed his eyeballs. Mitchell shut his eyelids and gritted his teeth. He began to plummet. The chunks of glass fell slower. One was an isosceles triangle. It was the size of a guitar. It slid up the cuff of Mitchell’s right pant leg. It sliced through his britches, his calf, and his thigh.

Glass slid up his shirt. It sliced his chest and battered his ribs. Tiny pieces drifted up his

nostrils. Mitchell swirled his arms through the air. He clawed for something to grab a hold of. There was nothing but empty gusts. His yellow tie came unraveled. His light blue shirt popped open. It smacked his flesh like a leather whip. Mitchell flattened his arm against his side. It made his shirt into a semi-parachute. But, it didn't slow him down. Mitchell looked down. He had a long way to go. It seemed *too* far. He didn't feel like waiting. He wanted it to be over with. His guts felt like they were in the back of his throat. He was cut to shreds and bleeding. And, his empty shoulder was killing him. The ground below was a parking lot. Mitchell could make out a single vehicle. It was an old, brown van. Mitchell smashed through the roof. The van's windows exploded.

L.I.N. awoke on a cold, tile floor. She was shivering. She didn't have a blanket. Her grey hoodie lay across her shoulder. There was a task panel across the lower part of L.I.N.'s vision field. On the left side, there was an icon. It was a shiny, blue square with a white gear. Next to that, there was a row of shortcut icons. On the right side of the panel, there was a clock. L.I.N. looked at the clock. It was 1:14 in the morning. A tiny black arrow with a white outline swirled across L.I.N.'s vision field. It clicked the first icon next to the blue square. It was a black square with a grey border. A terminal opened. It printed "smash" followed by a greater than symbol. A white rectangle printed next to that. It was a cursor. L.I.N. didn't have to type. Rather, she gave the terminal hex values that corresponded to keys. She entered the word "temp" and issued the value for a "return" key. The terminal printed a line. It read "58 degrees Fahrenheit."

L.I.N. exhaled a shaky sigh. She closed the terminal and looked around. She was in a basement. It belonged to Herring Elementary. It was dimly lit by a stack of Category 5 routers near the entrance. L.I.N. fired up her ultraviolet filter. It colored the room's heat signatures,

making it easier to see. The room was filled with servers. There were thirty of them scattered along the walls. They were old 333 megahertz desktops. They sat below foldout tables. There were three beneath each table. There were ten tables in all. One lay next to the entrance, and three lay along each remaining wall. Each server had an old, bulky, CRT monitor, a mouse, and a keyboard. The walls were covered with crimson bricks. The floor was covered with slick, white tiles. The tiles were decorated with black and grey spots. Each was three feet by three feet. A grid of chrome grout slid between.

There was an old teacher's desk across from the entrance. It was made of shiny wood. There were four laptops scattered across the top. There were also old hard drives, CD ROMs, IDE ribbons, keyboards, mice, PC cards, RAM chips, and a couple of multi-screwdrivers. There was a refrigerator behind the desk. It was in the corner next to a server table. It was old. It had an old fashioned door handle that pulled out. A small, wooden table stood next to that. There was a coffee maker on top, a bowl filled with sweetener, a cup filled with coffee stirrers, and a stack of polystyrene cups. In the opposite corner, there was a heavy, steel door with a shiny, round handle. The door led to a full bath. L.I.N. looked over her shoulder. She lay next to a cot. Chuck Parker lay on top. A plaid blanket was draped over his shoulders. He offered the cot to L.I.N., but she wouldn't take it. It didn't feel right at the time. Now, L.I.N. was having second thoughts. The basement floor was harder than it looked. It dug into L.I.N.'s elbows, knees, and ankles. It was frigid and uncomfortable. L.I.N. sat up. She curled her legs and slid her arms through the sleeves of her hoodie. She faced the direction opposite Chuck's cot. She was lonely. She missed Hal. Her bottom lip quivered. Her eyebrows fell at the sides. She closed her eyes and sniffled.

Chuck's eyes opened a crack. He stared at the back of L.I.N.'s head. He heard her

whimper. He exhaled, quietly. His arm slithered out. He patted L.I.N.'s shoulder.

"Hey..." Chuck whispered. L.I.N.'s head whirled around. She stared into Chuck's shiny, tan eyes. She brushed her sapphire hair aside and slid her fingers across her soggy cheeks. Chuck forced a smile. He retracted his arm. *"I told you it was cold."* L.I.N. blinked her big, green eyes. She licked her lips.

"It's God damn... freezing in here!" she whispered back. Chuck nodded. He shrugged.

"Take my blanket."

L.I.N. giggled. *"No! I can't do THAT."* Chuck slid his lips to the side of his face. He held out his hand. L.I.N. looked at his fingers.

"Sleep up here," Chuck offered.

L.I.N. looked up. *"What?"*

Chuck snickered. *"Take my hand. It's okay."* He bobbed his eyeballs. *"It's an emergency."* L.I.N. sighed. She looked at Chuck's hand. Chuck smiled. *"Take it. Come on."* Chuck scooted back a little. L.I.N. slid her mouth to the side of her face. She laid her little fingers in Chuck's hand. She turned around and rolled onto her knees. Chuck slid his arms under hers and dragged her to the cot. L.I.N.'s eyes popped open.

"Whoa!" she whispered. Chuck laid her next to him and threw the covers over her. L.I.N. began to giggle. Chuck smiled. He slid his fingers across L.I.N.'s arms.

"What are YOU laughing about, silly?"

L.I.N. turned her head. *"I'm sorry. I'm not used to being... picked up like that."* Chuck patted her shoulder. *"Hal NEVER picked me up."*

Chuck shrugged. *"Well, you're very light. I don't see why not."* Chuck narrowed his eyes. *"How much do you weigh?"*

"Fifty-eight pounds," L.I.N. replied. She shivered. Chuck pressed his lips together.

"Man you're freezing, huh?" L.I.N. cuddled up and nodded. Chuck licked his lips.

"Come here..." he whispered. He slid his arms around L.I.N.'s shoulders. L.I.N. sighed and relaxed against his chest. Chuck rubbed her arms. *"Is that better?"*

L.I.N. shivered. *"A little."* Chuck rested his arms on L.I.N.'s belly. He smiled.

"You're all warm and snuggly." L.I.N. giggled. Chuck tightened his arms. *"And, squishy."* L.I.N. looked over her shoulder. She laid her arms on Chuck's and faced forward.

"Thank you... for sharing your little bed with me."

Chuck nodded. *"Yeah. If we're going to make this a regular thing, maybe we should find something bigger."*

L.I.N. snickered. *"Yes. Definitely."*

Chapter 4: “Laundry Day”

For Chuck Parker, Saturday was Laundry Day. He’d already showered. He wore a black shirt with horizontal, white stripes, blue jeans, and a red, plaid jacket. He was writing a script for one of the school’s servers. He sat at a computer terminal. It was on the left side of the table next to the entrance. He was staring at a black screen with white and grey text. The text was code for a shell. Chuck was working out the logic of a loop. He wrote a little math on a pad of yellow paper. He used an old, chewed up pencil. He stopped, looked over what he’d written, and nodded. He turned and added text to the loop. He sat back and went over his code. It was twenty-three lines. Chuck started at the beginning and thought about each line. Each line was consistent. The end result was correct. Chuck laid his fingers on a keyboard in front of the monitor. He held the right shift key and tapped the “Z” key twice.

L.I.N. had to shower just like anyone else. She hated it. It was boring and a waste of time. That’s why she always masturbated while she showered. It made no sense. It made showering take longer. And, it accomplished nothing. But, it made L.I.N. happy. That morning, she masturbated to Chuck Parker. She usually pulled up some actor from the web. She liked guys with chiseled abs, strong jaws, and kind, bright eyes. Chuck had kind, bright eyes, but nothing else. L.I.N. liked him because he was charming, noble, and caring. She didn’t care what he looked like. He wasn’t bad looking. But, he wasn’t an underwear model. L.I.N. giggled, silently. She laid her fingers over her lips and closed her eyes. She stood in front of a stainless steel sink. It was next to a stainless commode. There was a standing shower next to that. The floor of Chuck’s bathroom and the lower halves of the walls were covered with old, yellow tiles. A slick, white curtain curled around the shower.

There was a mirror above the sink. L.I.N. looked up. She stared at her reflection. Her

shiny, blue hair dangled around her face in wavy clusters. She wore a white bra and panties. They were from the day before. It sucked. L.I.N. needed to go home and get some of her things. For now, she had to make do. She slipped on a pair of red, corduroy pants. Chuck loaned them to her. They were a little small for him. They were way huge on L.I.N. She buttoned Chuck's britches and let go. They crumpled around her ankles. L.I.N.'s arms dangled at her sides. Her head tilted. She slid her hair back, bent over, and pulled up the corduroys. She backed against the door and looked over her shoulder.

"Chuck!" she called. "Do you have a belt I can borrow?"

Chuck named his new script "AddLinksTo." He moved the script to a high level directory in the path. Then, he typed "AddLinksTo Carter.html." He pressed return. The command prompt printed a blank line. Chuck smirked. He typed "ted Carter.html" and pressed return. Carter.html was displayed. Chuck looked it over. His script added seven links at the bottom of the file. They were made from names of files in the same directory. Chuck nodded. He typed "q!" and pressed return. He turned off the monitor, hopped up, and wandered around the table.

"I'll be right there, L.I.N.!" he called.

"*Okay!*" she replied. There was a white door to the right of the table. It concealed a closet. Chuck tugged the door aside and looked around. A clothes rack hovered across the closet. A leather belt hung from the left side of the clothes rack. It was too small for Chuck. He snagged it, closed the door, and hurried to the bathroom. He knocked on the door. The door opened a crack. One of L.I.N.'s bright green eyes appeared in the opening. Chuck could see her lips. He could tell she was smiling. He smiled back. He dangled the belt from his fingertips. L.I.N. slid her arm through the door and held out her hand. Chuck laid the belt across her little

fingers. L.I.N.'s arm retracted, and the door eased shut. Chuck stood next to the door. He flattened against the wall.

"Hey, maybe we should..." Chuck slid his lips to the side of his face. He rubbed the back of his neck. L.I.N. tightened the belt Chuck gave her around her waist and buckled it. She looked at the door.

"What?" she asked.

Chuck looked at the door. "We should go get some of your things. You know?" Chuck folded his arms over his chest. "That way you don't have to be wearin' *my* shit."

L.I.N. giggled. "I like wearing your clothes." She threw a t-shirt over her head. It was a black t-shirt with grey artwork and white lettering. It was a shirt for X-Team, a punk band Chuck was into. L.I.N. looked the shirt over. She traced the artwork with her fingers. There were four grey rectangles. There was a black shape inside each rectangle. The shapes were outlines of the four members of the band. L.I.N. searched the floor. Her eyebrows fell in the middle. She threw her hands on her hips and looked at the door. "Have you seen my shoes?" Chuck smiled. He exhaled through his nose.

"What?"

L.I.N. blew sloppy strands of blue hair out of her face. "My shoes," she repeated. "My shoes! My shoes!" She shook her hands. "They're black... with like... little straps on the back." L.I.N. scratched her head. "Did you see what I did with them?"

Chuck shrugged. "They're not in the bathroom with you?"

L.I.N. gritted her teeth. "Um... I don't know." She looked around. "I don't remember." Chuck grinned. He shook his head.

"Do you remember when you took them off?" L.I.N. looked at herself in the mirror. She

smiled.

“That’s what Hal always used to ask me.” She opened the door and came out. Chuck looked her over and smiled. L.I.N. looked around. She tapped her teeth. “I took them off when I came in.” She pointed towards the entrance. “I left them by the door.” She looked at Chuck. Chuck looked L.I.N. up and down.

“This is pitiful.”

L.I.N. smacked her lips. “Shut-up.” She narrowed her eyes. “They’re *your* clothes, Chuck.”

Chuck scrunched up his nose. “I know. That’s the sad thing.” He turned and wandered across the room. He knelt beside the entrance, scooped up L.I.N.’s shoes, and returned. L.I.N. held out her hands. Chuck laid her shoes in her palms.

“Thank you,” L.I.N. remarked. There was an old, cruddy chair behind the desk in the corner. It had a small seat, covered with ratty, black fabric. A thick, shiny rod was sticking out of the back. It curled and turned vertical. A back support rested on the end of the rod. The back looked similar to the seat. The chair had a base with five plastic wheels. L.I.N. turned the chair and sat down. She set her shoes on the floor. She slid her left foot in her left shoe and buttoned it. She did the same with the right. She looked up. “So, you wanna go by my...” She closed her eyes and swallowed. “Um... by me and Hal’s?” She looked into Chuck’s eyes. Chuck shrugged.

“Sure. We can get some of your stuff, if you like.” L.I.N. looked at the floor. She licked her lips.

“You said you have to do some laundry, right?” She looked up. Chuck nodded. L.I.N. narrowed her eyes. “Let’s do that, first.” L.I.N. pressed her lips together. “We’ll go by there,

later. I..." Chuck exhaled through his nose. He headed towards the desk.

"Hey..." he remarked. He stood in front of L.I.N. He laid his palm on her shoulder. L.I.N. looked up. "It's okay. We'll, uh... We'll go by there, later." Chuck squinted. "When you're feeling up to it. Okay?" L.I.N. stared into Chuck's eyes. She slowly nodded. Chuck looked over his shoulder. He sighed. "Laundry. Oh, boy."

There were two laundry baskets at the bottom of Chuck's closet. They were filled with dirty clothes. Chuck and L.I.N. each grabbed a basket and skedaddled. They carried them up a flight of stairs. The stairs led to a shiny, wooden door with a brass knob. There was a tall, skinny pane of glass on the left side of the door. The door led to the janitor's closet. Across from that, there was an identical door. It led to the Herring Elementary main hallway. The hallway was long and wide. The walls were covered with cinderblocks. One side was painted peacock blue. The other side was painted teal. The floor was covered with four by four tiles. They were white with spots of red, grey, and brown. A chrome grid lay between them. The wall across from the janitor's closet was lined with long windows. They covered the top half of the wall. It was Saturday. So, the hall was empty.

L.I.N. and Chuck wandered down the hall. They arrived at the front entrance. The front of Herring Elementary was covered with a wall of windows. There were six shiny, wooden doors. Out front, the doors had flat, curvy handles. Inside, a long, steel handle lay across the middle of each door. If the doors were locked, pushing the inner handles opened the doors. But, the flat handles on the outside did not. Chuck had a key. So, he didn't have to worry about it. He and L.I.N. wandered out front and approached the truck. It was parked in a handicapped spot in front of the doors. Chuck and L.I.N. loaded Chuck's laundry and took off. Chuck usually set a laundry basket on the passenger's floor and one on the passenger's seat. Since L.I.N. was with

him, he had to rethink things. Chuck's truck had a bench seat. So, one basket sat between them. L.I.N. set the other basket on her side of the floor. She plopped her feet on top.

Chuck stopped at a stop sign. L.I.N. laid her hand on her belly. She looked up.

"I'm hungry. Can we get something to eat?"

Chuck faced her. "You eat?" L.I.N. smiled. She nodded. Chuck narrowed his eyes.

"Like... food?"

L.I.N. turned her head without looking away. "Yes, Chuck."

Chuck faced forward. "What kind of food?"

L.I.N. pressed her lips together. "I don't care. *You* pick."

Chuck smirked. "I meant what kind of food can you eat?" He looked into L.I.N.'s eyes.

"Just... whatever?"

L.I.N. tilted her head. "Oh. Well, I can eat almost anything." She listed things on her fingers. "Pancakes, eggs, bacon, hash browns, toast..." She smiled. "Wood chips, glue, leather boots, paper, dried paint, broken glass..."

Chuck nodded. "See, that's what I was wondering." He shrugged. "So, pretty much anything?" L.I.N. nodded. Chuck squinted. "Donuts?"

L.I.N. turned her head without looking away. "What's... that?"

Chuck smirked. "Donuts it is."

Chuck took L.I.N. to Sally's Bakery. It was eleven blocks from the school. It was a small, red, brick building on the corner of Third Street. Third Street ran along the east side of Herring Elementary. Two sides of Sally's Bakery faced a road. Each side had four windows. A white shade sloped from the top of each window. There were pairs of glass doors on both sides. Two windows hovered on either side of the doors. Chrome handles lay side by side near the

middles of the doors. The floor of Sally's Bakery was covered with black and white, checkered tiles. A long counter stood in front of the walls across from each street. The tops and bottoms were slick and white. The middles were glass display cases. They were lined with confections. There were white cookies with different colored icing and sprinkles, giant cakes with intricate artwork, cinnamon rolls as big as bowling balls, large, cream filled sponge cakes, and bricks of brownies. There were others.

Ten tables were scattered across the bakery. They were made of old, dark wood. The tabletops were circles. Each table was surrounded by four, ancient chairs. They matched the tables. Three tables lay along both walls facing the road. The other four were in the middle of the bakery. Chuck and L.I.N. sat at a table overlooking Third Street. They sat across from each other. A plate of donuts lay on the middle of the table. There were two vanilla donuts, one chocolate, and one cherry. Chuck and L.I.N. had smaller plates in front of them. There was a half eaten chocolate donut on Chuck's plate. There was a whole cherry donut on L.I.N.'s. A tall glass of milk stood next to Chuck's plate. A tall glass of chocolate milk stood next to L.I.N.'s. Chuck stared out a window. He picked up his donut and took a bite. L.I.N. studied her donut intently. She narrowed her eyes. She laid her chin on the table and stared at the frosted pastry. She'd never seen anything like it. She poked it. Chuck looked up. He smacked his lips.

"L.I.N., stop playing with your food." L.I.N. looked up. She gritted her teeth.

"What the hell *is* it?"

Chuck smiled. "Just eat it." Chuck stuffed the last of his donut between his teeth. He washed it down with a swig of milk. L.I.N. stared at her donut. She licked her lips.

"What's in it?"

Chuck snagged a vanilla donut. "You've got wireless, right?" L.I.N. nodded. "Look it

up.” Chuck took a bite. L.I.N. lifted her head. She dangled her nose above the cherry donut and inhaled. The smell made her smile. She picked up the donut with both hands, tilted her head back, and took a tiny bite. She grinned at Chuck.

“Tastes like cherries!” Chuck smiled. He laid his donut on his plate.

“How old are you, L.I.N.?” L.I.N. chewed her little bite and swallowed. She put her glass to her lips and took a sip.

“I’m supposed to represent the average twenty-five year old girl.” She set her glass next to her plate. She picked up her donut and took a bite.

“Okay,” Chuck replied. “But, how *old* are you?”

L.I.N. licked her lips. “You mean, how long have I been online?” Chuck nodded. L.I.N.’s emerald irises rolled to the tops of her eye sockets. She squinted and tapped the table. She faced Chuck. “Two years, four months, and seventeen days.” She sipped her chocolate milk. “You wanna know the hours, minutes, and seconds?”

Chuck smiled. “Sure.” L.I.N. smirked. She dangled her tongue from the side of her mouth and looked away. She nodded and faced Chuck.

“It’s nine thirty-two in the morning. So, six hours, fourteen minutes, and fifty-two seconds.”

Chuck sipped his milk. “Why did Hal name you ‘L.I.N.’? Does it mean something?”

L.I.N. scrunched up her nose. “It’s nerdy.”

Chuck uttered a single laugh. “Well, that’s okay. I’m good with that.”

“It’s an abbreviation,” L.I.N. explained. She took a bite of her cherry donut. “It’s stupid.” L.I.N. held up her first, second, and third fingers. “Three letters. L-I-N.”

Chuck nodded. “What’s it stand for?”

L.I.N. rolled her eyes. “It literally stands for ‘L.I.N. Isn’t Necessary’.”

Chuck chuckled. “You’re right. That *is* pretty nerdy.”

L.I.N. threw her hands out at her sides. “You see? It’s dumb!” She shrugged. “But, that’s what stupid Hal named me.” She sipped her chocolate milk. Chuck ate the last of his vanilla donut.

“It’s cute.” L.I.N. looked at the table. She widened her eyes.

“It’s retarded.” L.I.N. finished off her cherry donut. She sucked the tips of her fingers. Then, she grabbed the last chocolate donut. Chuck snagged the last cherry donut.

“Why did Hal go to the trouble of making something...” He looked up and narrowed his eyes. “...so extraordinary?” L.I.N. looked up. Her lips parted. She looked down and shook her head. “What?” Chuck asked.

L.I.N. looked up. “Hal... had a daughter. Like, a long time ago.” She took a bite of the chocolate donut. She looked at the frosted pastry and smiled. She looked up. “She was killed by a drunk driver.” Chuck pressed his lips together and nodded. L.I.N. looked at her plate. “Hal had a... really hard time with it.” She looked up. “His daughter was all he had.”

“What was her name?” Chuck inquired.

L.I.N. smiled. “Mallory.” She took a bite of her donut. “Her name was Mallory.” L.I.N. set the chocolate donut on her plate. Her eyelids were burning. She exhaled a shaky sigh. “I don’t want to talk about Hal anymore.”

Chuck tilted his head. “Oh... I’m sorry, L.I.N.” He curled his fingers around hers. “I didn’t mean to upset you.” L.I.N. stared at their hands. She slid her thumb across Chuck’s knuckles and smiled. She looked into his glassy, tan eyes.

“Tell me more about *you*.” She narrowed her eyes. “You said you were a programmer?”

Chuck looked at the table. “I was...” He looked up. “I’m not anymore.” He rolled his eyes. “Well, not anything like I used to be.”

L.I.N. nodded. “I really don’t know much about programming.”

Chuck smiled. “Right. That figures.”

L.I.N. looked down and tilted her head. “Hal never got a chance to teach me.” She looked up. “What kind of programming did you do?”

Chuck gritted his teeth. “Well...” He let go of L.I.N.’s hand. He looked at his lap and scratched the back of his head. “It’s kind of complicated.” He looked into L.I.N.’s bright green eyes. “We did some pretty weird stuff where I used to work.”

L.I.N. nodded. “We?”

Chuck narrowed his eyes. “Me and Jeff Forrester.” He took a bite of his cherry donut. “We worked for the Department of Defense.”

L.I.N. took a bite of her donut. “Huh. What kind of work did you do?”

Chuck tilted his head. “Theoretical work, mostly. Atom smashing, particle physics, finite math...” Chuck smirked. “Time travel...”

“Time travel?” L.I.N. inquired.

Chuck shrugged. “This and that. You know.” He took a bite of his donut. L.I.N. grinned.

“Whatever!” She leaned in. “Sounds like a little more than ‘this and that’.”

Chuck pressed his lips together. “The most exciting thing we worked on was wormholes.” He squinted. “Do you know what a wormhole is?”

L.I.N. scrunched up her nose. “Not... really.”

Chuck nodded. “Most people don’t.” He stuffed the remainder of his donut between his

teeth. He washed it down with a swig of milk. L.I.N. followed suit. Chuck made rings with his thumbs and forefingers. He held them up, side by side. "Say you have two gateways, right?" L.I.N. nodded. Chuck wiggled the ring he made with his right fingers. "You wanna get from *here...*" He wiggled his left fingers. "To here." L.I.N. sucked her fingers. She grabbed the last donut. It was vanilla. Chuck tilted his head. "Now, you could just travel through this space in the middle." Chuck followed the space between his fingers with his eyes. "But, if there was a wormhole between these two gateways, you wouldn't have to. The trip would be instantaneous." He narrowed his eyes. "Do you understand?"

L.I.N. pressed her lips together. "I mean... I guess." She squinted. "But, how is that possible?"

Chuck laid his palms on the table. "Einstein's theory of relativity proves that it is." He scratched the back of his head. "Actually doing it, though..."

L.I.N. chuckled. "Sounds complicated."

"It is," Chuck assured her. "Theoretically, it can be done. But, me and Jeff... We only ever made tiny, little wormholes. They were so small, you couldn't even see them." L.I.N. was chewing. She nodded.

"How did you *do* that, though?"

Chuck tilted his head. "Well, you have to eliminate an area of light photons." Chuck squinted. "Which is just as difficult as it sounds. Believe me." L.I.N. smiled. She sipped her chocolate milk. "I had to write a bunch of T++ code." He bobbed his head. "That's the source language Jeff and I always used. The code was mostly define statements." Chuck showed L.I.N. his palms. "I'm sure you have *no* idea what the hell I'm talking about." L.I.N. shrugged. "Anyway... Then, Jeff used those define calls to spray some type of... anti-photon particle into

these tiny, little tubes.” Chuck pressed his lips together. “They were microscopic, as I said.”

L.I.N. tilted her head. “Right.” She took a bite of her donut.

“Then, Jeff put some amoebas in there and let them swim around.” Chuck tilted his head. “When they swam through the little tubes, they were coming out as they were going in.” Chuck nodded. “Seriously. It was really weird to watch.”

L.I.N. narrowed her eyes. “But, it was microscopic.”

Chuck tilted his head. “Well, yeah. See, Jeff couldn’t produce enough particles to try it on a large scale.” Chuck shrugged. “Anyway, that’s the kind of work we did. Mostly, Jeff took care of the science. And, I usually did the programming.” Chuck grinned. “You see, Jeff wasn’t a very good programmer. He was smart as hell.” Chuck laid his palm over his heart. “Way smarter than me. He could read a book in like... half an hour.” L.I.N. nodded. “But, he couldn’t program worth a crap. His code was always filled with bugs. It took him days to work out all the kinks. So, he usually left the coding to me.” Chuck shrugged. “You see, programming is much more than just writing code.”

L.I.N. licked her lips. “You have to do a planning phase.”

Chuck smiled. “Yes!” He snapped his fingers and pointed at her. “That’s exactly right. You have to make a list of all the elements you’re going to write code for.”

L.I.N. nodded. “That’s about the extent of *my* programming skills. Hal taught me that a long time ago.”

Chuck nodded. “Well, you’re already a better programmer than Jeff. You see, the planning phase is the most important part of any program.” Chuck folded his arms across his chest. “If you can’t do that planning part, you can’t program. You’re just hacking and trimming.” Chuck licked his lips. “It’s like working on a car. You don’t just sit down and start

pulling parts off the car and rearranging them until the car works. You'll never finish."

L.I.N. nodded. "Right. You have to get out your tools. Then, you have to figure out what's wrong..."

"Yeah," Chuck remarked. "Only, when you're programming, you have to make your *own* tools a lot of the time. You have to make your own wrenches and screwdrivers. Then, you use them to solve the problem." Chuck shrugged. "When you do it that way, you'll run into way less problems later on. I used to debug *my* code in a matter of minutes." Chuck narrowed his eyes. "One time, Jeff took two weeks to debug a program." Chuck held up his palms and curled his fingers. "It drove me nuts! I could've rewritten his code from scratch *and* debugged it in less time than it took him to debug his crappy, shit code." Chuck sipped his milk. L.I.N. finished off the last donut.

"But, he was so smart," she remarked. "You said he could read a whole book in half an hour. Why did he have such a hard time programming?"

Chuck held up his palm. "It's just the way his mind worked. He could spit out that math and physics all day." Chuck shrugged. "He could even explain how he was going to write a program and how it would work. But, he wouldn't do a planning phase. He refused. He felt like planning was a waste of time. He always said that if you understand a program well enough, you shouldn't *have* to plan anything." Chuck picked up his glass. "He was just an ass like that." Chuck finished off his milk. He set his glass down. L.I.N. smiled. She finished off her chocolate milk and laid her glass on the table. Chuck bobbed his head. "How were those donuts?"

L.I.N. nodded. "I like donuts. They're yummy." She burped. Her eyes widened. She laid her fingers over her lips. "Whoops! Excuse me." Chuck chuckled.

Chuck took L.I.N. to the laundry mat. They finished Chuck's laundry a little after ten. The walls of the laundry mat were mostly panes of glass. A plastic curtain bordered the roof. It was red with bold, white lettering. It read "Laundry Lounge." Chuck's truck was parked out front. Chuck and L.I.N. were loading Chuck's laundry. Chuck set a laundry basket beside the front, passenger tire of his pickup. He grabbed a hold of the passenger door handle, pressed the button, and pulled. The door bobbed open with a tired groan. L.I.N. set a basket on top of the one Chuck set down. There was a row of sidewalk in front of the laundry mat. L.I.N. sat on the edge and sighed. She was exhausted. She and Chuck had been doing laundry all morning. Chuck peeked around the edge of his passenger door. He smiled.

"You gonna make it?"

L.I.N. looked up. "Man, I'm worn out. I need a break."

Chuck nodded. "Okay. Let's load this up, and then we'll go drive around for a bit."

L.I.N. exhaled through her nose. She looked over Chuck's shoulder. Chuck narrowed his eyes. He looked over his shoulder. Bat Shit stood behind him. He was fifteen feet away. Frank stood to Bat Shit's left. Jeff stood next to Frank. Bat Shit wore a black undershirt, blue jeans, and white sneakers. Frank wore a grey suit, a blue shirt, a red tie, and his shiny, black shoes. Jeff wore a tan and turquoise, argyle sweater, blue corduroys, and his saddle shoes. As usual, the corners of his mouth were upturned. Chuck recognized Jeff, immediately. He hadn't changed a bit. Bat Shit and Frank were strangers. Chuck heard L.I.N.'s clodhoppers beside him. He looked to his right. L.I.N. was standing next to him. She trembled with terror. Her eyes were big and filled with fear.

"*Chuck?*" she whispered. "*What's going on?*" Chuck looked over his shoulder. He bobbed his head at Jeff. Jeff smirked.

“Hey, Jeff,” Chuck remarked. “Long time, no see.”

Jeff nodded. “Hi, Chuck.” He turned his head without looking away. His face was littered with a smile. “Miss me?”

Chuck squinted. “Not particularly.” Bat Shit crossed his arms over his chest. His flesh was dark and glittery.

“We be needin’ your special skills, mon.”

Chuck faced Bat Shit. “I don’t have any special skills.”

Frank pointed at Chuck. “Now look here, pal. Either you give us what we want, or I start diggin’ two holes. Understand?” Chuck glared at Frank. Jeff patted Frank’s shoulder.

“*Frank...*” he whispered. “*Relax.*” He looked at L.I.N. L.I.N. exhaled a shaky breath. Jeff pointed at her. “Who’s your little friend, Chuck?” Chuck kicked his door. It slammed shut and wobbled in the frame. Chuck grabbed L.I.N.’s hand and dragged her behind him. L.I.N. rested her fingertips on Chuck’s back and peeked over his shoulder. Chuck’s eyebrows fell in the middle. He pointed at Jeff.

“Jeff, I will kill you...”

Jeff lowered his hand. “She’s dressed like a retard.”

Chuck lowered *his* hand. “No, *you’re* dressed like a retard.” He smirked. “Nice sweater.”

Frank narrowed his eyes. “What’s with her hair? It’s blue.”

Chuck faced Frank. “What’s with *your* hair? It’s all greasy.” L.I.N. cackled. Frank raised the left side of his lip. Jeff faced Frank and Bat Shit. He motioned towards Chuck and L.I.N. with his head.

“Grab her.”

Chuck pressed his lips together. “Jeff!” Bat Shit and Frank grinned. They started towards L.I.N. and Chuck. Chuck looked over his shoulder. “L.I.N., run!” L.I.N. gritted her teeth. She whirled around and darted towards the laundry mat. Bat Shit held out his hands and spread his fingers. He whispered something in Jamaican. There was a pair of glass doors at the front of the laundry mat. They flew open. The one on the left knocked L.I.N. to the ground. She crumbled on the sidewalk with a painful shout. She faced the others. Chuck grumbled. He dashed across the parking lot and sat next to L.I.N. She lay on her stomach, groaning. Chuck curled his fingers around L.I.N.’s shoulders and laid her on her back. She looked into Chuck’s eyes. Tears dribbled down her cheeks. Chuck sighed.

“You okay?” L.I.N. whimpered. She looked towards the parking lot. Chuck did the same. Bat Shit, Frank, and Jeff were standing in front of them. Bat Shit folded his arms over his chest. Frank furrowed his brow. Jeff tilted his head and stroked his chin. Chuck looked into Jeff’s eyes. He sighed. “Let me guess... You need me to write some code.”

Jeff shrugged. “Well, if you insist...” Chuck slid his fingers through L.I.N.’s. He laid her tiny hand over his heart.

“Guys, leave her out of this. Please.” He looked around. “She has nothing to do with this.” Jeff looked at Frank and Bat Shit. He motioned towards L.I.N. with his head. Frank grabbed a hold of L.I.N.’s arm. He yanked her fingers away from Chuck’s. Bat Shit snagged her around the waist. He and Frank lifted her and backed away.

“Chuck!” L.I.N. shrieked. “Chuck, don’t let them take me! Please!” Frank clamped his fingers over L.I.N.’s lips. He set her on her feet and held her against his chest. L.I.N. pinched her eyes shut and bowed her head. Chuck hopped up. He sighed.

“It-It’s okay, L.I.N.” He swallowed. “It’s gonna be okay.” He looked into Jeff’s big,

blue eyes. Jeff stared back. He grinned, slightly.

“Don’t worry,” he remarked. “We won’t hurt your little girlfriend.”

Chuck narrowed his eyes. “She’s not my girlfriend, you moron.” Jeff smiled. He slid his hand into his pocket.

“I need you to fix a small problem, Chuck.” He held up a flash drive. “I wrote some source code a while back.” Jeff shrugged. “It works okay. But, there are limitations. *You* understand.”

Chuck pressed his lips together. “What’s it do?”

Jeff narrowed his eyes. “Oh, didn’t I mention that?” Chuck glared at him. “I’m sorry. How silly of me.” Jeff grinned. “It uses a... certain device. The device has two openings.” He shrugged. “You know, like gateways? A couple of doors?”

Chuck scrunched up his nose. “You mean, like a wormhole?”

Jeff chuckled. “Man, you’re good! Now, I remember why I used to like working with you so much.” He sighed. “Yes, the device is like a wormhole.” He shrugged. “It’s not much different than the ones we developed for the Department of Defense. Only...” Jeff held up his index finger. “This one has a length which is perpetual.” He narrowed his eyes. “Do you understand?”

Chuck threw his arms out at his sides. “God damn it, Jeff! You’re doing all this for a stupid science experiment?”

Jeff tilted his head. “Chuck... That hurts my feelings. This is my passion.” He laid his hand over his heart. “My heart and soul.”

Chuck sighed. “Whatever. Let me guess... You’re trying to stick the exit door someplace really far away, right?” Jeff grinned. He nodded. “But, your half-ass, janky code

can't push it. Too unstable?" Jeff frowned. He shrugged. Chuck rolled his eyes. "Well, I'm sure you've got a bunch of extra loops in there you don't need." He narrowed his eyes. "As usual. The further you push it, the longer the software's going to take." Chuck held out his hand. Jeff laid the flash drive in his palm. Chuck exhaled through his nostrils. "How far are you trying to go?"

Jeff shrugged. "Oh... not very far."

Chuck squinted. "How far?"

The corners of Jeff's mouth pointed upwards. "Proxima Centauri."

Chuck scrunched up his nose. "Jesus, Jeff! What the hell is wrong with you?" L.I.N. began to breathe hard through her nose. Chuck faced her. "Can you *not* hold your hand over her mouth, please?"

Frank glared into Chuck's shiny, tan eyes. "Bite me."

Chuck held his hands out at his sides. "Look, I have no idea how she breathes. Alright? Maybe she breathes just like you and me. Maybe she doesn't."

Frank smiled and narrowed his eyes. "Uh... What?" L.I.N. wheezed through her nose. Chuck motioned towards her.

"Man, look at her! You're going to damage something in there. And, there's no telling if I can repair it or not. Take your hand off her mouth." Frank uncurled his fingers. L.I.N. exhaled a heavy breath. She lowered her head and gasped for air. She looked at Chuck.

"*No, it's fine...*" she wheezed. "*It's fine, Chuck.*" She swallowed. "I just got scared. That's all."

Frank looked up. "What's going on? What is this?"

Jeff looked into Chuck's eyes. "She's not human... is she?" Chuck pressed his lips

together. Jeff folded his arms over his chest. He squinted. “She’s... like an android or something.” He motioned towards L.I.N. with his thumb. “Did *you* build this?”

Chuck exhaled through his nose. “No.” He showed Jeff his palms. “But, look. She’s very important to me. And, if anything happens to her...”

Jeff nodded. “I see.” He looked L.I.N. over. He reached for her and stopped. “So, you mean these aren’t real?” He laid his fingers on L.I.N.’s breasts. Frank and Bat Shit cackled.

“Jeff!” Chuck shouted. “Stop it!” Jeff giggled. He looked up.

“Just kidding.” He laid his hand at his side. L.I.N. shuddered. She didn’t like Jeff touching her breasts. It didn’t feel right. She looked at Chuck. Chuck stared back. He sighed. He looked at Jeff.

“Look, take *me*. Alright?” He looked at L.I.N. “Leave her alone.” He looked into Jeff’s eyes. “You and me, we can code this thing together.”

Jeff pressed his lips together. “Nah. I like it better this way.” He smiled at L.I.N. She looked up. “What’s your name, darling?” Frank and Bat Shit chuckled. L.I.N.’s lower lip quivered. Her eyes filled with tears. Frank tightened his arms around L.I.N.’s waist. He rested his chin on her shoulder.

“*Don’t worry, sweetheart,*” he whispered. L.I.N.’s head slowly turned. She watched Frank out of the corner of her eye. “*I’ll go easy on you.*” Frank laid his tongue on L.I.N.’s cheek. He slid it up her temple. A tuft of L.I.N.’s blue hair flopped out of the way. L.I.N. faced forward. She closed her eyes and shuddered. Frank chuckled. He looked at Chuck. Chuck’s heart sank. He folded his arms over his chest. Jeff glared at Frank. He slid up his left sleeve. A shiny, metal watch was wrapped around his wrist. There were three buttons along the bottom of the watch face. Jeff pressed one of the buttons. The watch beeped. When it did, Frank tensed

up. His right eye nearly closed. His left eye popped open. He shrugged up his shoulders and stiffened up. He began convulsing. His arms wriggled. His hands jiggled. His legs wobbled. His head bobbed. He looked like he was having a seizure.

Jeff pressed another button on his watch. There was a beep. Frank relaxed and blinked his eyes. He shook his head and looked at Jeff. He dropped his arms. L.I.N. stepped aside and looked him over. Jeff laid his finger on one of his watch buttons.

“That’ll do,” he remarked. He looked at Chuck. “Jeez. A joke’s a joke, but come on.” He looked at Frank. “Just... get her to the van. Okay?” Frank exhaled an angry breath. Jeff tilted his head. He held up his watch and pointed at one of the buttons. “Would you like another zap?” Frank showed Jeff his palms. He snagged L.I.N. around the waist and tossed her over his shoulder. L.I.N. whimpered. She looked over her shoulder.

“*Chuck... please...*” she whimpered. Chuck looked into her big, green eyes. He dropped his hands and sighed.

“Don’t worry, L.I.N. This’ll be over in no time.” He looked at Jeff. “I promise.”

Jeff nodded. “You have until seven.”

Chuck blew a breath through his lips. “What’re you... kidding me? I can’t fix all your stupid, shitty code in eight hours. Come on!”

Jeff pointed at him. “I’ll kill her.” He narrowed his eyes. “Then, I’ll start picking off your family and friends... one by one.” Chuck shook his head. He looked at the ground and rubbed the back of his neck.

“Where?”

Jeff smirked. “You *know* where.” Chuck rolled his eyes. He looked up.

“Don’t you hurt her. You understand?”

Jeff shrugged. “Of course not. Never.” Chuck heard L.I.N. shriek. Two big, heavy doors shut and muffled the sound. An engine started. Chuck looked to his left. There was a light blue work pickup next to him. There was a cruddy, white van next to that. The paint was faded and peeling. Rust poked out in places. The only windows were the windshield, the driver’s window, and the front, passenger window. Jeff turned and walked away. Bat Shit hopped in the van. He sat in the driver’s seat. Frank sat in the passenger’s seat. Jeff slid open a door on the side. He climbed in and shut it. Then, the van sped away. Chuck sat on the sidewalk. He rested his elbows on his knees and folded his fingers. He laid his forehead on his thumbs. He pinched his eyes shut and exhaled through his nostrils.

Chapter 5: “The Mournful”

L.I.N. sat on a pew. She, Jeff, Frank, and Bat Shit were in a funeral parlor. The walls were covered with stained glass. L.I.N. looked around. The panels of glass were filled with intricate artwork. It was brilliant and breathtaking. L.I.N. sat on the front row. She sat on the left edge of a pew, next to a wall. She slid her fingers across the seat. It was covered with a row of squishy padding. The padding was covered with red velvet. L.I.N. faced forward. Frank stood in front of her. He was watching her like a hawk. He stood with his arms folded over his chest. His eyebrows drooped in the middle. His face was solemn and fierce. L.I.N. sighed and looked at her lap. She plopped her right foot on the edge of the pew, unbuttoned her shoe, and set it beside her. She did the same with her left. Then, she folded her legs like a pretzel, laid her palms on her knees, and bowed her head.

There were two sections of pews. A shiny, wooden podium stood between. Jeff and Bat Shit were beyond that. They were arguing about something. Bat Shit’s voice was hateful and intense. It made L.I.N. sick. Jeff was calm and fiery. The things he said were rhetorical and argumentative. Everything that came out of his mouth seemed that way.

“Man, this is crazy!” Bat Shit yelled. “We can’t wait on this fool to do this for you.” He pointed at Jeff’s chest. “You’re gwan have to step up, mon. Rise to the challenge!” Jeff stared into Bat Shit’s dark eyes. He smiled a little and tilted his head.

“Sure. Why waste another second? Let’s finish this right *now*.” He narrowed his eyes. “Thanks for the insight.”

Bat Shit crossed his arms over his chest. “Jeff, mon I always knew you were a little cuckoo.” Bat Shit tapped his temple. His dreadlocks bounced at the sides of his face. “But, I know you can make this work. Just sit down and rewrite that code, mon.” He looked at L.I.N.

“Then, we can just leave these two behind and move on to more important things.” Jeff lifted his left arm, rolled back his sleeve, and pushed a button on his watch. Bat Shit tilted his head back and pinched his eyes shut. He gritted his teeth and fell to his knees. He began to convulse. Jeff smirked. He let go of the button on his watch and folded his fingers.

“Nope. I think we’ll stay.” Jeff looked at L.I.N. “Wait for Chuck.” Bat Shit shook his head and looked up. He exhaled an exhausted breath.

“Man, it’s past six. I don’t think he’s gwan to make it.” L.I.N. looked up. Jeff was staring right through her. He grinned.

“I hope he does.” L.I.N. took a deep breath. She exhaled a shaky sigh. Jeff wandered around the podium. The floor at the front of the chapel was one foot higher than the rest. It matched the podium. The rest of the floor was covered with stones. Jeff dropped to the stony floor and wandered to his right. L.I.N. followed him with her eyes. She began to shiver. Jeff stood in front of her. L.I.N. looked at him from the tops of her eyes. Jeff tilted his head. “So, you’re just a bot, huh?” A tear dribbled down L.I.N.’s cheek. She swatted it aside.

“Y-Yes.”

Jeff smiled. “Hmm...” He bent over and got right in L.I.N.’s face. He stared into her big, green eyes. L.I.N. swallowed. She tried to stare back. But, her eyeballs bobbed around.

“So, I’m curious,” Jeff continued. “Do *all* the parts work?”

L.I.N. licked her lips. “W-What do you mean?”

Jeff squinted. “What do you mean ‘what do I mean’?”

L.I.N. took a breath. “Um... what?” Jeff pressed his forehead against hers. His eyebrows fell in the middle. His face lit up with a grin.

“I mean what you think. I mean what you *don’t* think.” He scrunched up his nose.

“What do you *think* I mean? Do you think I mean what I’m thinking? Or, do you mean I think what I’m meaning?” L.I.N. laid her eyes in her palms. She let out a whimper.

“*P-Please don’t hurt me...*” she sobbed. “*L-Leave me alone...*”

Jeff narrowed his eyes. “Look at me.” L.I.N. began to cry. Jeff frowned. He rested his palms on his knees. “L.I.N., *look* at me,” he demanded. L.I.N. dropped her hands and turned away. She filled the room with whimpers. Jeff’s face became twisted and sadistic. He curled the fingers of his left hand around L.I.N.’s throat and leaned in. “LOOK at me!” he shouted. L.I.N. looked up. Her eyes were wide and attentive. Tears poured down her cheeks. She began to pant like a dog. Jeff gritted his teeth and forced a smile. He looked like a hideous freak. He relaxed and tilted his head. “You ever had sex before?” L.I.N. scrunched up her nose. She turned her head without looking away.

“*Please... don’t,*” she squeaked. She swallowed. “I-I like Chuck. Okay?”

Jeff wrinkled his nose and smirked. “No!” he shouted. He let go of L.I.N.’s throat. “You don’t like *him*! You don’t even *know* him!” L.I.N. sighed. She wiped her cheeks, sat back, and folded her arms over her chest.

“Yes, I do,” she told Jeff. “I like Chuck. He’s so... charming and noble and caring.”

“Bah,” Jeff replied. He flicked his wrist. “No, he’s not. Chuck’s a piece of shit.”

L.I.N. pinched her eyes shut and shook her head. “*No, he’s not...*” she sobbed. She laid her eyes in her palms. “*Stop it...*”

Jeff smiled. “He’s not even a man! He’s just a little boy.” Frank chuckled.

“*No...*” L.I.N. cried.

Jeff shrugged. “He’s impressionable and lazy and pathetic...”

L.I.N. uncovered her eyes and looked up. “*Stop!*” she shouted. Her face was desperate

and furious. Jeff narrowed his eyes. He smacked L.I.N.'s soggy cheek. She bounced off the back of the pew and crumbled to the floor. Jeff stared at her. He tilted his head.

"Sure, I'll stop." L.I.N. laid her little fingers on her cheek. Her jaw was throbbing. Her skin burned. It was painful and humiliating. She looked into Jeff's eyes. She fought to catch her breath. A woman appeared. She stood in a doorway near the front of the chapel. A head of thick, brown hair draped to her shoulders. Her eyes were fiery and blue. She wore a dark, denim jacket, a white shirt, light blue bell bottoms, and cherry red flats. She looked at Jeff, impatiently. She crossed her arms over her chest.

"This had better be important, Jeff," she grumbled. Jeff looked over his shoulder. He smiled a little.

"Hi, Lisa." L.I.N. looked up. Lisa stared back. She furrowed her brow.

"Man..." she remarked. "Someone got beat with the ugly stick." L.I.N. sighed. She sat up and folded her legs like a pretzel. She looked at Jeff.

"Who's *she*?" She looked at Lisa. "Lisa?" Lisa narrowed her eyes. Her eyebrows fell in the middle. She stomped across the chapel and stood in front of L.I.N. L.I.N. looked at her from the tops of her eyes.

"Who am *I*?" she repeated. "Who the hell are *you*?" She looked at Jeff. "*This* is my replacement?"

L.I.N. pressed her lips together. "Um, I don't understand. Your... replacement?" Lisa glared at her. She scrunched up her nose balled her fists at her sides.

"Bitch, you know *exactly* what I mean!" she shouted. She pointed between L.I.N.'s eyes. "Don't fuck with me, you little blue haired skank!"

L.I.N. showed Lisa her palms. "Whoa! What are you talking about? I don't even know

who you *are!*” Lisa smashed her heel into L.I.N.’s nose. L.I.N. tilted her head back and pinched her eyes shut.

“How about now, slut?!” Lisa shrieked. “Do you know who I am, now?” Jeff chuckled. He slid his arms through Lisa’s and dragged her away.

“Um, Lisa...” he remarked. “Why don’t you stand over here?” L.I.N. exhaled a shaky breath. She laid her fingers across the bridge of her nose. Her eyes filled with tears. Blood dribbled out of her nostrils. Frank narrowed his eyes. He pointed at L.I.N.

“Whoa, Jeff. What the hell’s that?” Jeff looked at L.I.N. He tilted his head.

“Hmm.”

Frank looked at Jeff. “Is that blood?”

Jeff nodded. “Looks like it.” He knelt in front of L.I.N. Lisa threw her hands out at her sides.

“So? What difference does it make? The little cunt got what she deserved.” L.I.N. shuddered. She laid her hand in her lap and looked into Jeff’s eyes. Jeff laid the tip of his finger in her blood. He touched it to his tongue. He looked away, tilted his head, and nodded. He looked at Frank.

“Maybe. It’s hard to say.” He looked at L.I.N. She sniffled. She slid the sleeve of her grey hoodie across her lips. Blood from her nostrils quickly rewet them. It dribbled down her lips and dripped from her chin. She tilted her head back and sighed.

“Can I have a tissue, please?” she begged. Jeff slid his hand into his pocket and retrieved a hankie. He laid it across L.I.N.’s nostrils and lips. L.I.N. snagged a hold of the handkerchief and pinched her nostrils shut. “*Thank you...*” she whispered.

Lisa shrugged. “Well, I’m confused.” She folded her arms over her chest and looked at

the floor. Jeff looked over his shoulder.

“She’s an android, Lisa. She’s not human.” Lisa looked up. She threw her hands out at her sides.

“You mean she’s like a... sex bot?” L.I.N. looked at Lisa. She shook her head.

“What do you mean? I’m not a ‘sex bot’.” She looked at Jeff. “What’s a sex bot?” Jeff and Frank chuckled. Bat Shit wandered up behind them. His face was solemn and stern. He crossed his dark, shiny arms over his chest. L.I.N. looked into Lisa’s eyes. They were angry and fierce. L.I.N. sighed. “Are you talking about Chuck Parker?” She wiped her nostrils, lips, and chin. She laid Jeff’s hankie in her lap and sniffled. “Is *that* what you mean? Is he your... boyfriend?” Lisa gritted her teeth and snarled. L.I.N. showed Lisa her palms. “Oh, God! I’m sorry!” She shook her head. “I didn’t know, okay?” Lisa pressed her lips together and narrowed her eyes. L.I.N. threw her hands out at her sides. “Look, w-we didn’t do anything. Okay? We didn’t...” She looked at her lap. “We didn’t have sex.” Frank and Jeff chuckled. Lisa rolled her eyes.

“Yeah. Well, *that’s* a big surprise.” L.I.N. exhaled through her nostrils and looked up. Her eyebrows fell in the middle.

“Hey, look...” She licked her lips. “He picked me up last night. Okay?” Lisa turned her head without looking away. “I was... I was *really* upset. And, he picked me up.” L.I.N. eased back and folded her arms over her chest. “And, you know something? *He* seemed kind of upset, too. He looked like he’d been crying.”

Lisa stretched her chin. “Well, *that* wouldn’t surprise me. Big baby.”

L.I.N. pointed at her. “What did you *do* to him, huh? Did you do something mean to him?” Lisa blew a breath through her lips. L.I.N. gritted her teeth. “I’ll *kill* you, if you did

something to him. I'll fucking kill you!" Lisa stepped back. She motioned for L.I.N. with her fingers.

"Bring it," she replied. "Come... get some." L.I.N. looked at Jeff. Jeff stared back. L.I.N. shoved herself to her feet. Jeff's hankie wafted to the stony floor. L.I.N. showed Lisa her left index finger. The tip folded back, and a shiny, black tube extended from below. There were three clicks. The end of the tube ignited. At first, the flame was like a flame on a candle. Then, it began to grow. It erupted into a torch and turned bright blue. It roared like a Bunsen burner on high heat. L.I.N. glared into Lisa's big, blue eyes. Lisa's eyes popped open. She gasped and backed away. She shook her pointer finger. "Whoa!" she shouted. "Wait a minute. I don't think so." L.I.N.'s eyebrows sagged in the middle. She exhaled through her nostrils.

"I'm gonna burn off all your pretty, brown hair." She smirked. "You know, *my* hair was supposed to be brown. Hal never did figure out why it always comes in blue." Lisa looked at Jeff. She exhaled a panicked breath.

"Jeff, what the hell? Do something!" Jeff shrugged. L.I.N. narrowed her eyes.

"Now, yours is going to be orange." She tilted her head. "Then, it will be black and grey."

Lisa showed L.I.N. her palms. "Okay, hold on a second! Just wait right there." She looked at Jeff and Frank. She looked over her shoulder. Bat Shit stared back. Jeff looked at Frank. Frank looked back.

"Get her," Jeff ordered. Frank pressed his lips together. He looked at Bat Shit. Bat Shit faced Frank. Frank shrugged. Bat Shit shrugged. The two of them dashed towards L.I.N. L.I.N.'s eyes darted between them. She slowly backed away.

"Hey!" she shouted. "I'm warning you!" The backs of L.I.N.'s knees smashed into the

pew she was sitting on earlier. Her legs folded, and she plopped down in the seat. Her lighter stopped working. L.I.N. looked it over. It began clicking, incessantly. But, it didn't relight. L.I.N. gritted her teeth and looked up. "Uh-oh." Frank slid his arms through L.I.N.'s left arm. Bat Shit grabbed her right. They dragged her to her feet and looked at Jeff.

"She's dangerous," Frank remarked. "She's like a little, robotic psycho!" Jeff cackled. Frank grinned. He looked at L.I.N. "What do you think we should do?"

Jeff showed Frank his palm. "Well, don't hit her again. Okay?" Frank faced Jeff and nodded. "Chuck's already gonna be pissed about the nose." Jeff looked at Lisa. Lisa glared at him.

"Man, what should we do?" Bat Shit asked. Frank faced Bat Shit. He shrugged.

"Tickle her." L.I.N.'s emerald eyes popped open. She faced Frank.

"What?" she demanded. "No! No, don't!"

Bat Shit grinned. "Frank, you gwan tickle her? You're out of your mind, mon!" L.I.N. looked into Bat Shit's eyes. She shook her head and tried to jerk away.

"Guys..." she begged. "Please, don't!" Frank dug his fingers into L.I.N.'s sides. She squashed her arms against her body and squirmed. She tried to fight the urge to laugh. Instead, she filled the chapel with giggles. Bat Shit dug his fingers into L.I.N.'s armpits. She looked up and exhaled a pair of breathless shouts. Bat Shit looked at Jeff. A smile covered his face.

"You know, this is actually not a bad idea, mon. Seems to be working." Jeff smiled and shook his head. He looked at Frank.

"You know, Frank, sometimes I remember why I keep you around." Jeff wandered up to them. Frank and Bat Shit stopped tickling L.I.N. She was lying on the first row pew, curled in a ball. She looked up. Jeff stood in front of her. L.I.N. fought to catch her breath. She tore a

painful grin from her face. She was shivering all over. She threw her legs over the edge of the pew and sat up. Tears were pouring down her cheeks. Jeff looked at L.I.N.'s feet. Her toenails were painted black. Jeff smiled a little. He bent over, grabbed a hold of L.I.N.'s ankle, and tickled her foot. L.I.N. tilted her head back and cackled. She tugged at her leg, but she couldn't tear her ankle from Jeff's fingers. She jerked from side to side. Frank and Bat Shit held her in place. Jeff looked over his shoulder. Lisa smiled back. She shook her head. Jeff motioned towards L.I.N. with his head.

“Wanna go next?”

Chuck faced the wall behind his desk. He was standing in front of his coffee maker. Chopin was playing through a set of speakers on a server. He plopped a clear, plastic lid on top of a coffee can. Then, he knelt in front of the table. There was a small storage space below. It was concealed by a pair of wooden doors. Chuck yanked the doors aside. The storage space was filled with unopened coffee cans. They were all cans of regular, instant. Chuck drank the cheapest brand on the market, Foster House Coffee. It was freeze dried putridity, a programmer's best friend. There was a single shelf below the table. Coffee cans were arranged in rows on the shelf and below. The first row was empty. Chuck set the can of coffee he'd put the lid on in the empty slot. He closed the doors and looked up. A fresh pot of coffee awaited him. He smirked. He snagged a polystyrene cup from a stack on the table and set it down. Chuck bought the biggest, disposable coffee cups on the market. They had a twenty-four fluid ounce capacity. That was four servings of coffee.

Chuck didn't feel like messing around. He needed to finish the program Jeff wanted, and he needed to do it quickly. He'd already gone through two pots of coffee. He was on his third. He prepared each cup the same way. Aside from pills, it was the most efficient way he knew to

acquire caffeine. He grabbed the carafe and filled his cup two thirds of the way. Then, he wandered to the refrigerator. He pulled back the handle and swung the door aside. The fridge was mostly empty. There were two shelves. Near the middle of the top shelf, there were two cartons of milk. Chuck snagged the one on the left. It was already open. Chuck added milk to his coffee until the cup was nearly full. He returned the milk to the refrigerator and closed the door.

He put the rim of the polystyrene cup to his lips and tilted his head back. The beverage was lukewarm. So, he was able to drink it quickly. Chuck drank half his coffee and turned around. He looked towards the eastern wall. Four chalkboards on wheels were arranged along the wall. They stood in front of a row of servers. The chalkboards were covered with chalky chicken scratch. Chuck had rewritten most of Jeff's crummy code and recompiled it. There was only one element missing. Chuck pored over his handwriting. He nodded and approached the closest chalkboard. It was covered with pseudo loops. There was a rail along the bottom of the chalkboard. A long eraser rested on top. Chuck picked it up and slid it across the chalkboard. He brushed his writing away, set the eraser down, and picked up a stick of white chalk. He gulped down more milky coffee. He set his cup next to the eraser.

He drew two short, horizontal lines near the center of the chalkboard. He connected the left edges of the lines with a greater than symbol. It made the Greek letter "Sigma." In mathematics, Sigma denoted a series of summations. A summation series would be necessary to make Jeff's program work more efficiently. It was the key to everything. Chuck cleaned hundreds of unnecessary loops out of his former coworker's code. But without a series of summations, the code wouldn't work. Chuck already tested the other elements he added to Jeff's code. They worked perfectly. Chuck just needed to tie them together. He looked above the

refrigerator. A giant clock with bold, black numbers hung on the wall. It had a black, plastic frame, a white background, fat, black hands for hours and minutes, and a long, red second hand. The hour hand was close to six. The minute hand was between ten and eleven. The second hand was ticking near five.

Chuck nodded. It took thirteen minutes to get from Herring Elementary to Gillian Memorial Cemetery. The remaining code would take twenty to thirty minutes to write. There was plenty of time. Chuck sighed. He was worried sick. Jeff was a highly intelligent psychopath. He had a way of imposing his will on others. Chuck knew that fact all too well. He hoped L.I.N. was okay. He figured Jeff and his buddies were doing all kinds of terrible things to her. He pressed his lips together, narrowed his eyes, and shook his head. He faced the chalkboard. He wrote a lowercase “x” next to the Sigma. Below the Sigma, he wrote “ $i = 1$.” Above, he wrote a lowercase “n.” That was it. As summation series go, it was one of the simplest. But, that was only the beginning. Chuck finished off his coffee. There was a beige, plastic trashcan below the chalkboard he was writing on. It was filled with polystyrene cups. Chuck dropped his empty cup on top.

He added modifiers to the summation series. They were names of functions he’d coded earlier. In front of the series, he wrote “Distance(.” He put a dot to the right of the formula. It signified multiplication. Next to the dot, Chuck added a fraction. He wrote “AntiPhotons(” for the quotient. He wrote “Displacement(” for the divisor. He stood back, folded his arms, and looked his formula over. He knew it was correct. He figured it out on the way back from the laundry mat. But, he wanted to double check. Variables had a tendency to look different when they were written down. Chuck’s formula was correct. It did exactly what it was supposed to do. Chuck wrote an equals sign next to the fraction. He wrote “ExitLocation(” next to that.

Chuck blew a breath through his lips. He smiled and shook his head. It seemed too simple. He was bending the laws of physics with a simple summation series. It made sense, though.

Chuck needed to convert his formula into something a T++ compiler would understand. After all, a compiler would have no idea what a summation series was. Chuck could write code for that as well. But, he didn't have time. And, he didn't need it. He could substitute a simple formula for the summation series. It was just the Gauss formula. It was Chuck's favorite mathematical formula. He circled the Sigma sum part of his equation and drew an arrow leading below. There, he wrote Gauss's formula, $n(n + 1) / 2$. Chuck laid the stick of chalk next to the eraser and faced the closet. He stared at the white door. A lump floated up his throat. He swallowed and wandered across the room. Chuck peeled back the closet door. A rod stretched across the narrow space. Chuck's clothes hung from the rod. There was a white shelf above that. Chuck reached above the shelf and grabbed a tin box. Some time ago, the box housed a plastic tray of chocolate covered pretzels. Chuck laid the box on the floor and removed the lid. There was a shiny, snub nosed revolver inside. It was a double action, 44 Special with a wooden grip.

L.I.N.'s lighter was sticking out of her left index finger. She sat on the same pew as earlier, staring at it. Her legs were folded like a pretzel. She tried igniting her lighter. The flint clicked. Nothing happened. L.I.N. tried it again. The flint clicked. Nothing happened. L.I.N. felt someone looming over her. She looked up. Jeff was standing in front of her. He was bent over, staring at her. He slipped his hand into the pocket of his black corduroys and retrieved a knife.

"If you light that thing again..." Jeff warned. He held the knife in front of L.I.N.'s face. He pressed a button on the side. A long, thin blade popped out. L.I.N. flinched. "I'll cut your

little fingers off.” L.I.N. stared at Jeff’s knife. She shivered. Jeff smirked. He closed his knife and put it away. Frank sat behind Jeff. He sat on a steel chair. It was facing backwards. Frank sat, straddling the back of the chair. His arms were folded on top. He reached inside his grey jacket.

“I say we do her now,” he remarked. He took out a black, 9MM. It had a wooden grip. L.I.N. laid eyes on Frank’s pistol. It made her very nervous. Frank shrugged. “I mean, he’s obviously not coming.” Frank slipped his hand into a pocket on the outside of his jacket. He took out a silencer. It was as big around as a can of soda. “It’s after six forty-five.”

“He’ll be here,” Jeff assured him. “Just... be patient.”

Frank threaded the silencer onto the end of his pistol. “I’m tired of being patient.” Jeff looked over his shoulder. His eyebrows fell in the middle.

“I don’t give a shit!” he shouted. Frank narrowed his eyes. Jeff raised his eyebrows. He held up his arm, tugged back his sleeve, and showed Frank his watch. “Hey... wise guy...” Frank stared at Jeff’s watch. “You do anything stupid, I’ll fry you. There’ll be nothing left of you but a pile of ashes.” Frank shook his head. He aimed his pistol between L.I.N.’s eyes. L.I.N. whimpered. Her eyebrows fell at the sides. She blinked her big, green eyes.

“Let’s just kill her and get out of here,” Frank remarked. A tall, heavy door closed across the chapel. Jeff, Frank, Bat Shit, and Lisa looked towards the back of the room. L.I.N. exhaled a shaky breath. She looked over her shoulder. Chuck was standing on the other side of the room. He threw his hands out at his sides.

“Hey, I’ve still got a few minutes,” he remarked. He dropped his hands and sighed. “Let’s not do anything rash.” He cleared his throat. He looked at L.I.N. She forced a smile. “You okay, L.I.N.?” Chuck asked.

L.I.N. exhaled through her nostrils. “Chuck, get me out of here. Please!” Chuck looked at Lisa. He narrowed his eyes.

“Hi, Lisa.” Lisa folded her arms over her chest. Her eyebrows fell in the middle.

“Chuck.”

Chuck pressed his lips together. “Wasn’t expecting to see *you* here. I must say.”

Jeff smiled a little. “Yeah. She’s decided she likes me better.”

“Good,” Chuck replied. “At least she likes someone. She certainly has no feelings for *me*.”

Lisa bobbed her head. “*That’s* a funny thing to say.” She sighed. “After the way you walked out on me last night.”

Chuck shrugged. “Hey, the sex part of the night was over, right?” Lisa scoffed. Chuck grinned. “What? That’s the way *you* put it. So, I left.”

L.I.N. faced Lisa. “That’s what you said to him?” she demanded. “Seriously?”

Lisa glared at Chuck. “Oh, grow up.” She threw her hands on her hips. “You feel lonely? Get a cat.”

L.I.N. scrunched up her nose. “My, God. You’re a bitch!”

Lisa looked at L.I.N. “Shut-up, you little blue haired skank!”

Jeff shook his fists. “Will everybody please shut the hell up!” Everyone stared at Jeff. He stared at Chuck. “Did you get it or what?”

Chuck slid his hand into his pocket. “Oh, I *got* it alright.” He held up the flash drive Jeff gave him earlier. Jeff smiled. He held out his hand.

“Toss it here.”

Chuck pressed his lips together. “Sure. Let her go.” Frank hopped up. His chair toppled

to the floor. He dashed by Jeff and held up his pistol. He pressed the tip of his gun against L.I.N.'s temple. L.I.N. turned her head and pinched her eyes shut.

"Listen, ass-hole!" Frank shouted. "Give us the source code, or I'll blow her fuckin' brains out!" Jeff shook his head. He yanked back his sleeve and pressed a button on his watch. Frank gritted his teeth and shrieked. The pistol dropped from his fingers. He fell to his knees and jiggled. L.I.N. glanced at the floor. She spotted Frank's gun. Jeff stared at Frank. He shook his head.

"I told you." Frank's eyes were like saucers. Smoke wafted from his ears. "And, she's an android, stupid. She doesn't have brains." Frank fell on his face. Tufts of white smoke followed him to the floor. Jeff looked at L.I.N. He smirked. "Don't even think about it." He bent over, picked up Frank's pistol, and aimed it at Chuck. He motioned with his fingers. "Give me the disk, Chuck." Chuck narrowed his eyes. He stared through Jeff's rimless lenses. Jeff exhaled through his nose. "Chuck..." he warned. He grabbed a hold of L.I.N.'s fingers. He raised her hand and pressed the tip of Frank's pistol against her palm. L.I.N. gasped. She looked over her shoulder. "Give me the disk, Chuck. Or, I'll start blowing off body parts." Chuck sighed. He looked at Lisa.

"Have *her* do it." Lisa blew a breath through her lips. She motioned towards her chest.

"Me?" She looked at Jeff. Jeff looked back. He motioned towards Chuck with his head. Lisa exhaled an impatient sigh. She stomped across the chapel and stopped next to Chuck. She held out her hand. She glared into Chuck's eyes. "You're an idiot," she remarked. "Going through all this for a stupid robot. Sounds about right." Chuck slid his lips to the side of his face. He reached inside his red, plaid jacket and curled his fingers around his revolver. He yanked it out and pressed it against Lisa's left breast. Her eyes popped open. She looked over

her shoulder and gasped. Jeff narrowed his eyes. Chuck snagged a hold of Lisa's wrist, flipped her around, and snaked his arm around her shoulders. He kept the tip of his 44 Special aimed at her heart. L.I.N. tilted her head back and cackled. She couldn't help it. She turned around and looked at Jeff. She cleared her throat.

"Let her go," Chuck demanded. Jeff grinned. He shook his head.

"Chuck, you twisted, conniving bastard." He smacked his forehead with his palm. "I never even saw that *coming!*" Lisa's eyebrows drooped in the middle. She glared at her ex-boyfriend.

"Chuck!" she shouted. "Seriously? You're going to kill a human being to save a machine?"

Chuck took a breath. "That machine... is more human than *you* are." L.I.N. smiled. She looked into Chuck's eyes.

"Thanks, Chuck."

Chuck shrugged. "Welcome." Jeff licked his lips. He looked at Lisa.

"Lisa," he instructed. "Take the disk." Lisa looked at Bat Shit. She exhaled through her nostrils.

"Can't this guy like... do his wicked Voodoo shit or something?"

Chuck's eyebrows fell in the middle. "If he so much as moves his lips, I pull the trigger." Jeff nodded. He looked at L.I.N. L.I.N. looked at Jeff.

"Stand up," Jeff instructed. L.I.N. exhaled a shaky sigh. She hobbled to her feet. Jeff looked at Lisa. He motioned towards Chuck with his head. "Take the disk." Lisa held out her hand. Chuck laid the disk in her palm. Jeff dragged L.I.N. to the aisle between the rows of pews. He grabbed a fistful of her sapphire hair. He pressed the tip of Frank's pistol against her

temple. L.I.N. scrunched up her face and whimpered. Chuck sighed.

“Okay, Jeff,” he remarked. “You let L.I.N. go, and I’ll let Lisa go.” Jeff looked into Chuck’s eyes. He looked over his shoulder.

“Just relax, Bat Shit.” Bat Shit folded his arms over his chest. “Don’t do anything, alright?” Bat Shit narrowed his eyes. He looked away and shrugged. Jeff faced Chuck. He uncoiled L.I.N.’s blue locks from his fingers. Then, he kicked her in the butt. L.I.N. jumped away with a gasp. She looked over her shoulder. “Move your ass,” Jeff instructed. L.I.N. faced Chuck. Her eyes were sad and fearful. Her arms and legs were all wobbly. Chuck licked his lips.

“Come on, L.I.N.,” he instructed. “It’s okay.” L.I.N. started towards Chuck. Chuck slid his arm away from Lisa’s neck. He pointed his revolver at the floor. Lisa’s eyebrows fell in the middle. She looked at the floor and started towards Jeff. L.I.N. felt like she was going to fall over. Her wobbly legs barely supported her. Her stomach was tied in knots. Her mouth was dry. She swallowed and exhaled a shaky breath. She looked into Chuck’s eyes. Chuck smiled. He motioned for her with his fingers. L.I.N. choked back a smile. She didn’t want to do something stupid and get shot. L.I.N. and Lisa were within a yard of each other. L.I.N. breathed heavily. She chanced a glance at Chuck’s ex-girlfriend. Lisa glared at her. She looked like an angry psycho. L.I.N. quickly looked at the floor.

“Don’t do anything stupid, Lisa,” Chuck warned. “I’ll drop you like stone.” Lisa looked at Bat Shit. She motioned towards Chuck with her head. She did it as discreetly as possible. Bat Shit smirked. He stared at Chuck. Chuck stared back. Lisa and L.I.N. were side by side. Lisa shoved L.I.N. to the floor.

“Now!” she shouted. Bat Shit began mumbling something under his breath. Chuck

looked at L.I.N. She was curled in a ball on the floor. She pinched her eyes shut and threw her arms over her head. Chuck growled. He aimed his pistol at the back of Lisa's head and fired. A lead slug spiraled out of the end of the barrel. When it hit the air, it shattered. Tiny pieces of lead spattered Chuck's hand, arm, and face. He grunted and backed away. He glared at Jeff.

"Jeff!" he shouted. "You piece of shit!" Jeff's eyebrows fell in the middle. He penetrated Lisa's big, blue eyes with a hideous stare. Lisa stopped in her tracks. She shivered. Jeff looked over his shoulder. He watched Bat Shit's lips. They spattered whispers of Jamaican spells. Jeff shook his head. He turned around, aimed Frank's pistol at Bat Shit's head, and pulled the trigger. The pistol whispered. The back of Bat Shit's skull exploded. His brains painted a sheet of stained glass. Bat Shit crumbled in a heap below bloody chunks of cerebral cortex. His head dangled from his shoulders. His dreadlocks dangled from his head. Blood leaked from his mouth and nostrils. "L.I.N., run!" Chuck shouted. L.I.N. looked up. Chuck looked frantic. He aimed his pistol at Jeff. Jeff turned around. He grinned. He aimed Frank's pistol at Chuck.

"Chuck," Jeff warned. "Be careful, now. Think it through." L.I.N. looked at Lisa. Lisa stared back. She narrowed her eyes and shook her head. L.I.N. looked at Lisa's hand. Jeff's flash drive dangled from her fingers. L.I.N. hopped up, snatched the disk, and dashed towards the end of the chapel. "Ah!" Jeff snarled. "You little bitch!" He aimed Frank's pistol at L.I.N.'s heels and began firing. L.I.N. gasped for breath. She ducked behind the last pew on her left. Chuck started towards her. Jeff began firing at him. Chuck hopped away and hid behind the pew across from L.I.N. He looked her over.

"You okay?" he asked. L.I.N. was panting like a dog. She turned her head and swallowed. Her eyebrows pointed towards the outer corners of her eyes. Tears poured down her

cheeks. She responded to Chuck's inquiry with a quick nod. Chuck looked over the top of his pew. Jeff and Lisa were looking around, frantically. Chuck fired at them. *His* pistol didn't have a silencer. It made everyone's ears ring. Jeff and Lisa ducked behind a pew near the middle of the chapel. Chuck laid his back against the pew that concealed him. He looked across the aisle. L.I.N. stared back. Her face was blanketed with fear. She pressed her lips together.

"What are we gonna do?" she asked. "We gotta get out of here!" Chuck nodded. He turned around and peeked over his pew. Jeff's head hovered above a pew ten rows away. He fired two silenced rounds. They bounced off the top of Chuck's pew. Tiny splinters of wood brushed Chuck's cheek. He gasped and dropped to the floor. He rested his back against his pew and looked at L.I.N. L.I.N. gritted her teeth and shook her head. "*Chuck...*" she gasped. Chuck looked towards the end of his pew. He moved his mouth to the side of his face. He slid across the floor and stopped next to the aisle. He rested the back of his head against the back of the pew. He held his revolver in both hands. He laid the top of the barrel across the bridge of his nose and closed his eyes. He inhaled through his nostrils and exhaled through his lips. He opened his eyes.

Chuck swirled his arms around the end of his pew and prepared to aim. Jeff was standing right in front of him. He kicked the revolver out of Chuck's hands. Chuck's 44 Special whirled across the aisle and landed below L.I.N.'s pew. Chuck watched it all the way to the floor. His shiny, tan eyes popped open. Jeff grabbed fistfuls of Chuck's red, plaid jacket. He lifted Chuck off the floor and charged. They crashed through a stained glass window at the back of the chapel. They crumbled in a heap on a blanket of crunchy, yellow grass. Tiny pieces of colored glass tumbled to the ground. They bounced around and rolled to a stop. They littered Chuck's cheeks and hair. Jeff straddled Chuck's waist. He sat up and smiled. Chuck looked into his

eyes. He exhaled an anxious breath between his teeth. Jeff aimed Frank's pistol between Chuck's eyes. Chuck traced the silencer with his eyes. His eyes followed the silencer to the slide. They followed the slide to Jeff's fist. They followed Jeff's fist to the sleeve of his tan, argyle sweater. They followed Jeff's sleeve to his wild, blue eyes.

"You can't kill me," Chuck remarked. "You haven't copied me, yet." Jeff continued to smile. He tilted his head. Chuck sighed. He showed Jeff his palms and laid them at the sides of his head. "Look, just get the disk back from L.I.N.," he begged. "Then, let us go." Jeff narrowed his eyes. He stood and backed away. He kept Frank's pistol aimed between Chuck's eyes.

"I would," he replied. He pulled the trigger. The hammer fell and clicked. "But, I'm running on empty." He turned, dashed around the side of the building, and disappeared. Chuck tilted his head back and closed his eyes. He felt shards of glass digging into his back. He swallowed and opened his eyes. Lisa was standing over him. She glared into his eyes.

"You piece of shit!" she remarked. She threw her hands out at her sides. "How... could you just walk out on me like that?" She threw her hands on her hips. "Huh? You didn't have to be a jerk about it. I had to get up and go to work, today!" She folded her arms over her chest. "Why do you have to be such a baby? All I ask for is *one* night off, and you..." She looked towards the chapel and stomped her foot. She looked into Chuck's eyes. "You replaced me with some... cyborg chick? What the hell is *wrong* with you?"

Chuck smirked. "The sex part of our relationship is over." Lisa scoffed. There was a loud pop. It sounded like a 44 Special. Chuck lifted his head and faced the chapel. Lisa looked as well. L.I.N. aimed Chuck's pistol right between her eyes. L.I.N.'s big, emerald eyes were angry. Her breathing was quick and heavy. Her little hands were trembling. Lisa threw her

hands over her head and backed away.

“Whoa!” she shouted. “Jesus...” She pointed at L.I.N. “Don’t... Don’t you shoot me, you little android freak.” She snapped her fingers. “S-Stop right there!” L.I.N. fired into the air. Lisa stopped and raised her hands. She panted like a dog. L.I.N. stared right through her. She aimed Chuck’s revolver at her face and gritted her teeth. Lisa looked at her ex-boyfriend. “Chuck!” she shrieked. “Are you gonna let that friggin’ thing shoot me? Seriously? Do something!” She gasped for breath. She looked between L.I.N. and Chuck. “Chuck!” she shouted. “That damn thing’ll kill us *both*! It’ll tear us limb from limb!” Chuck smiled. He shook his head and faced L.I.N. L.I.N. caught her breath. She slid her hand into her pocket and retrieved Jeff’s flash drive. She tossed it through the air. It smacked Lisa’s forehead and tumbled to the ground. L.I.N. aimed the revolver at the grass. She motioned towards the side of the building with her head.

“*Get the hell out of here...*” she grumbled. Lisa exhaled a shaky breath. She slowly knelt next to Chuck and lowered her hands. She snatched the disk off the ground and dashed out of sight. Chuck sighed. He laid his head on the ground and stared at the sky. It was filled with stars. He’d never seen anything so beautiful in his life. He heard shuffling. He tilted his head towards the chapel. L.I.N. was standing over him. He’d never seen anyone so beautiful in his life. Slowly, she knelt on the grass. Then, she straddled Chuck’s waist. She laid Chuck’s pistol on the ground and looked into his eyes. Chuck smiled.

“Hi, L.I.N.,” he remarked.

L.I.N. smiled. “Hi,” she replied. She pressed her lips together. She had a look of uncertainty. Chuck exhaled through his nostrils.

“It’s okay,” he told her. “Just do it.” L.I.N. fought back a laugh. She laid her palms on

Chuck's cheeks. Her hands were soft and warm. It made Chuck's heart race. She brushed shards of colored glass off his cheeks. They tumbled to the crunchy grass.

"Last night," L.I.N. said, "when you picked me up... you were leaving *her* place?"

Chuck swallowed. He slowly nodded. L.I.N.'s eyebrows fell at the sides. "She kicked you out?"

"Yeah," Chuck replied. "She uh..." His nostrils burned. His eyes filled with tears. He shrugged. "She was finished with me, I guess." L.I.N. tilted her head. She swirled her thumbs across Chuck's cheeks. Her face was sad and strained.

"Are you finished with *her*?"

Chuck nodded. "Definitely." L.I.N. sighed. She leaned forward and kissed him. She wasn't sure what to do, exactly. She just laid her lips on Chuck's and hoped for the best. Chuck followed her lead. He sucked at her lips and touched his tongue to hers. L.I.N. returned the favor. Then, she lifted her head and opened her eyes. She hadn't even noticed they were closed. She laid her forehead on Chuck's and stared into his eyes. They both smiled.

"*I love you*," L.I.N. whispered. She pinched her eyes shut and scrunched up her nose. She felt silly. She wasn't even sure why she said that. It just kind of... came out. Chuck laid his hands on hers. L.I.N. opened her eyes.

"*I love you, too*," Chuck whispered back. L.I.N. smiled. She breathed out through her nostrils. She swirled her thumbs around Chuck's cheeks and took a breath.

"Take me back to Hal's," she remarked.

"Yeah?" Chuck inquired. "You sure?"

L.I.N. nodded. "Yes. I'm ready to go home, now." She licked her lips. "Take me home, Chuck."

Chuck nodded. “Okay.” They kissed again. When they finished, L.I.N. looked at her feet. They didn’t feel right. She looked at Chuck and smiled.

“Um... I don’t suppose you saw my shoes when you came in.” She gritted her teeth. “I have *no* idea what I did with them.” Chuck chuckled.

Chapter 6: “Home”

It was getting cold. It was getting late. Chuck and L.I.N. were getting close. They putted down a curvy, two lane road in Chuck’s pickup. They were surrounded by hills of yellow grass and leafless trees. The ground was dotted with gold and auburn leaves. An old, wooden fence ran down the sides of the road. Chuck ducked and looked around as he drove. The colorful landscape made him smile. L.I.N. stared out the window.

“You walked all this way?” Chuck inquired. L.I.N. turned her head and nodded. Chuck faced forward. He exhaled through his nostrils. “Must’ve been like... twenty miles or more.”

“Seventeen and a half,” L.I.N. corrected. She looked at Chuck. “That sucks about those guys.”

Chuck faced her. “Hmm?” L.I.N. rested her elbow on her window sill. She laid her cheek in her palm.

“Frank and Bat Shit,” she explained. Chuck faced forward. He pressed his lips together.

“Um... don’t worry about them so much.”

L.I.N. squinted. “Huh?” She looked out her window. “What... just because they were bad guys or what?”

“They were clones.”

L.I.N. faced Chuck. “Uh...”

Chuck tapped his throat. “They had these... chips in their neck.” He looked at L.I.N. “Right? Like, when Jeff pressed a button on his watch, it was like they had shock collars on.” L.I.N. was confused. She slowly nodded. Chuck faced the road. “Jeff always keeps a couple of clones around. Frank and...” He faced L.I.N. “Bat Shit, you said?”

“Yeah,” L.I.N. replied. Chuck nodded. He faced forward.

“Those two must be his latest.” He smiled. “He always puts chips in their necks. That’s the only way he can get them to do what he wants.” He looked at L.I.N. “That, and kidnapping their...” He pressed his lips together. “Girlfriends.”

L.I.N. smiled. “That guy’s a freak.”

Chuck faced the road. “Believe me. You don’t know the half of it.”

L.I.N. pointed at a section of fence. “This is it,” she remarked. “Pull over, here.” Chuck stopped next to the fence. He slid his lips to the side of his face.

“Um... What are you talking about?”

L.I.N. pointed next to them. “Right there. That’s it.” Chuck looked around. He saw nothing but a bunch of trees and a fence. He looked at L.I.N.

“L.I.N., you’ve had a rough day. I mean, really rough. But...” He motioned towards the fence. “Honey, there’s nothing there.”

L.I.N. giggled. “It’s there. I’m telling you.” She looked into Chuck’s eyes. “It’s hidden.”

Chuck smiled. “What? What do you mean?” He looked at the fence. “Where *is* it?” L.I.N. sighed. She pointed at a tree.

“Look,” she explained. “You see this tree?” Chuck nodded. L.I.N. tapped her window. “You see? There’s like a symbol on it?” She faced Chuck. Chuck studied the trunk of the tree. Near the middle, the letter Sigma was carved into the trunk. Chuck took a breath.

“Oh, *I* see. Yeah.” He looked at L.I.N. “So, now what?”

L.I.N. pointed towards the fence. “Just turn right, here.” She looked at Chuck. “Like that fence wasn’t even there.” She looked at the fence. “It’s a hologram. Hal put it there a long time ago.” She faced Chuck. “There’s actually a road right there. You just can’t see it, yet.”

Chuck pointed at the fence. “You want me to drive through this fence? Seriously?”

L.I.N. chuckled. She shoved Chuck’s shoulder.

“Yes, silly!” She motioned next to the tree. “Right *there!*” She smiled at Chuck. “It’s the only way to get to Hal’s.”

Chuck stared at the fence. “I don’t know, L.I.N. That just... doesn’t seem right to me.”

L.I.N. grabbed a hold of Chuck’s arm. She faced him and flashed a bright eyed smile.

“Will you *trust* me?! Please?” She laid her cheek on Chuck’s shoulder and looked out the window. “Just *do* it.” Chuck sighed. He eased off the brake and touched the accelerator.

“Alright. But, if we go crashing through a fence...”

L.I.N. looked up and grinned. “There’s no fence right there! I’m telling you!” She looked out the window. “It’s a hologram.” Chuck nodded. He drove through the fence. Sure enough, his tires touched pavement. He drove through the fence and some scenery. He stopped on the other side and looked over his shoulder. He saw the image from before. But, it was flat and reversed. Rows of colored lights dotted a pair of trees that weren’t visible from the road. The lights projected the image in front of the road.

“Wow...” Chuck remarked. “That... is awesome.” He faced L.I.N. L.I.N. smiled and exhaled through her nose. She rolled her eyes.

“Told you.”

Chuck nodded. “So, where are we going?” L.I.N. pointed towards Chuck’s windshield. Chuck faced forward. The hidden road was half a mile long. It was covered with colorful leaves. It swerved in and out of trees. At the end of the road, there was a white, two story house with a shiny, black roof. It was surrounded by a fence of thin, black bars. Two giant gates stood across the front. Chuck faced L.I.N. He pointed towards the house. “So, he’s still in there?”

L.I.N. sighed. “Yeah.” She faced forward. “In his bedroom.” Chuck laid his palm on her shoulder. He eased the accelerator towards the floor.

“We need to get a hearse out here.”

L.I.N. nodded. “We’ll have to switch off the hologram, so they can find the place.” She looked at Chuck. “We can do that from the house.”

Chuck nodded. “Okay. Sounds like a plan.” Chuck stopped in front of the gates. He sat back and looked up. Hal’s place was huge. Chuck was blown away. He shook his head and exhaled through his lips. “Wow.” He looked at L.I.N. “Do you have your key?”

L.I.N. faced Chuck. “Always.” The gates eased out of the way. Chuck drove through. The road turned into a giant, paved driveway in front of the house. Chuck parked his pickup and killed it. He looked up. The house was made of white bricks. A long porch loomed across the front. It was supported by six Roman style columns. There were two front doors. They were red with curvy, golden handles. Chuck heard the gates creaking. He looked behind him. The gates eased shut. L.I.N. unbuckled her seatbelt and hopped out. Chuck followed. L.I.N. held up her right, index finger. The tip folded back. Two lock picks extended from below. L.I.N. slid them into a lock on the right door handle. She twisted her wrist, turned the handle, and pushed the door aside. Chuck followed her in.

They entered the living room. L.I.N. flicked a switch next to the front doors. A golden chandelier illuminated the room. It dangled from the ceiling, two stories up. Chuck looked around. He felt tiny.

“My God...” he remarked. He smiled at L.I.N. She tilted her head. “L.I.N.!” Chuck exclaimed.

L.I.N. grinned. “What?”

Chuck threw his hands out at his sides. “This place is amazing! You act like you’re leaving it behind.” He looked towards the stairs. They were shiny and immaculate. He shook his head. L.I.N. puffed up her cheeks.

“Well, what do *you* wanna do?”

Chuck looked at her over his shoulder. “Is the house in Hal’s name?”

L.I.N. shrugged. “I have no idea. I don’t know anything about it.” Chuck faced forward. He folded his arms over his chest.

“Well, we need to find out.”

Jeff sat at Lisa’s laptop, typing. He was in her bedroom at her desk. Beethoven was playing on a stereo next to the laptop. Jeff was staring at a terminal. He’d started a secure shell session on a distant server. It was... very distant. He was editing a text file. He added a line and pressed return.

The line read, “Greetings from Earth.” Jeff’s terminal was black with grey text. It was running a script. Every time Jeff pressed the return key, the script saved the text file. Anytime the file was saved, the script reopened it. After ten seconds, a line appeared below Jeff’s.

It read, “*Cliché, that is.*”

Jeff smirked. “Although, genre appropriate,” he typed. “We’re one step closer.” He waited, patiently.

“*The source code,*” appeared below that. “*Fixed it, you have?*”

“In due time,” Jeff typed. “But, we’re not quite there, yet.” Jeff looked at Lisa’s desk. His flash drive lay on top. “Chuck simplified things. So, now the code can get you here. However, I need more Batch Particles.” Jeff sighed. “A lot more. I’m not able to produce enough to reach you.” Jeff folded his fingers and rested them against his lips.

“A problem, that presents.”

Jeff nodded. “No kidding,” he typed. “I know I can make more, somehow. I’m just not seeing it. You’ll have to give me some time.” Jeff sat back. He folded his arms over his chest.

“Time is not a state. It is a consequence.”

Jeff smiled. “To you, maybe. That’s why I’m trying to bring you here. Remember?”

“Of all things, this is true,” appeared below that. *“Occurring in space, we are.*

Occurring in time, we are choosing. Essence is not of photons. Photons are not essential.”

Jeff nodded. “Did you look over my math? Am I missing something?” He waited, patiently.

“You’ve missed everything.” Jeff sighed. He folded his arms on Lisa’s desk and laid his forehead on top. He thought a moment. Then, he sat up and laid his fingers on Lisa’s keyboard.

“Should I scrap it and start from scratch?”

A line appeared below that. *“On the contrary.”* Thirty seconds passed. Then, a new line appeared. It read, *“ $E = mc^2$.”* Jeff rolled his eyes. He plopped his forehead in his palm and shook his head.

“Stupid...” he whispered. *“Damn.”* He added a line to the text file. “It’s all about energy. Of course!”

“An end is a beginning,” appeared below that. *“Forget where your ideas came from no longer. It opposes progress.”*

“That’s a lot of energy,” Jeff typed. “It’s not readily available. I’ll have to tap into some power grids.” Jeff stared at Lisa’s screen. He sat on the edge of Lisa’s chair, fidgeting.

“Await the completion of this final task, I do. I do appreciate the suspense.”

Jeff nodded. “Me, too,” he replied. The lights came on. Jeff looked to his right. Lisa

was standing in the doorway. She crossed her arms over her chest and tilted her head.

“What are you typing?” she inquired. Jeff pressed the escape key. He typed “*!q:*” and pressed enter. The text file closed. Next, Jeff typed “*exit*” and pressed enter. The terminal closed.

“Oh, just... playing around with the source code Chuck wrote.” Lisa nodded. She looked down the hall. Jeff tilted his head. “What?” He looked around and smiled. “Is the... sex part of the night over?” Lisa smiled. She wandered into the bedroom and sat in Jeff’s lap. She slid her arms around his neck and looked into his eyes.

“I’m not seeing you for the sex.” She slid Jeff’s glasses off his face and set them on her desk. “I’m interested in your mind.”

Jeff smiled a little. “I’m interested in *yours*.” Lisa snickered. She and Jeff kissed.