

“E”

By Michael Atkins

Chapter 1: “Batch Particles”

New Jack City received its electricity from a gigantic, natural gas power plant. It was located in Prospect. Prospect was a suburb thirty miles outside New Jack City. It was a tiny, little town. It was home to less than five hundred occupants. Mainly, it served surrounding metropolitan areas with electricity and natural gas. Pretty much, the residents of prospect were wealthy business owners who operated in the area. So, every home in the county was a high priced, high class piece of real estate. There were only a few restaurants. They were lavish and luxurious. There were no bars or pubs. Prospect was a dry county. There was one five star hotel. There was one, gigantic, red brick church everyone attended on Sunday. There was a tiny water tower in the middle of town. There were three schools, Prospect Elementary, Prospect Middle School, and Prospect High School. Students attended college elsewhere.

Jeff Forrester took up residence in Prospect after forcing Chuck Parker to repair his source code. He'd been socking away cash since he received his first doctorate. He had enough Benjamins to burn a little fart like Prospect to the ground. Jeff being Jeff, he would likely piss on the ashes. For him, taking up residence in an upper class neighborhood was child's play. He bought a half acre of land on Third Street. It was a corner lot. It overlooked Hollow Drive, the main road in prospect. Jeff hired a construction crew and had them build a house. Actually, he cloned a few of the local residents and forced *them* to do it for free. He held them hostage

in a makeshift basement surrounded by thick, concrete walls while they worked. Afterwards, he killed them all, stacked their bodies in a barren field between Prospect and New Jack City, and burned them to a crisp.

Jeff had a way of fitting in. Everywhere he went, he greeted people with a kind smile and warm, blue eyes. He helped his neighbors carry their trash. And, he helped their kids with their homework. He made friends with everyone on his block. He hung out with the guys in the evening and helped them work on their cars. In the daytime, he helped himself to their wives. They were always eager to please him. The wives on Third Street were very caring and accommodating. They knew how to keep a man happy. And, Jeff knew how to keep another man's wife happy. He could rattle off a load of sensitive, thoughtful remarks when they were needed. And, he was always eager to help around the house. But sometimes, a girl just needed some nookie. Jeff had that covered as well.

Jeff was still seeing Lisa, Chuck's old girlfriend. But, Jeff didn't see any harm in porking everyone else's wives when she wasn't looking. After all, if Lisa wasn't aware of the affairs, there was no logical reason she would leave him. She loved Jeff. And, Jeff knew it. That's why he did his best to accommodate her. He put her up in Prospect's five star hotel while he and his construction crew put up their new home. Lisa was blown away by the finished product. It was a two story mansion with all the bells and whistles. It was a fair trade. In exchange, Jeff got plenty of sex and mindless compliments from Chuck's ex. And, it added an element of sincerity to his

grand illusion. Jeff had a good thing going.

As in years past, he wore his fiery, red hair long. It was thick and cut even with his chin. A pair of oval, rimless glasses lay across his bright, poppy, blue eyes. Typically, he wore a kind, inviting smile below that. He had fair skin. It was covered with freckles. He wore a red, argyle vest over a white, dress shirt. He wore tan khakis and a pair of shiny, brown shoes. He intentionally wore britches that were a little short. It fooled people into believing he was a nerdy basket case. He wore a pair of red, argyle socks that matched his vest. They showed below the cuffs of his pants. Jeff stood on a balcony overlooking Hollow Drive. He had a bird's eye view of the power station. His right arm rested on a wooden railing. His left arm dangled beside him. His left hand was holding a glass of scotch. Prospect was a dry county. But, that didn't stop Jeff from driving to New Jack City and picking up a bottle of scotch from time to time. The sun was setting. It was hovering above the roof of the power station. The sky was dotted with tall, puffy, cumulus clouds. Rays of sunshine broke space behind the clouds into scalene triangles of indigo. Venus and the moon hovered above that.

The power station was the reason Jeff moved to Prospect. He needed to generate a shit load of Batch Particles. The more the merrier. As his buddy near Proxima Centauri pointed out, $E = mc^2$. Einstein's famous equation contained c , the velocity of light. The velocity of light was used in the creation of Batch Particles. It appeared in the math again and again. Thus, it stood to reason that adding E would increase the output of Batch

Particles. The “E” in Einstein’s theory of relativity stood for energy. Hence, Jeff was going to need a shit load of energy. It was the only way to generate enough anti-photons to connect Proxima Centauri and the earth. It was the only way Jeff knew how, anyway. Tonight was the night. It all came down to this. Jeff hoped everything would go off without a hitch. He needed help. It was time to bring out Bat Shit and Frank.

Jeff looked over his shoulder. Lisa was standing behind him. She stood between a pair of open, glass doors, staring. Her arms were folded over her chest. She had glittery, blue eyes. She had thick, brown hair that draped to her shoulders. She wore a white blouse and violet trousers. Her trousers were blanketed with white lines. They looked like they were wrapped in faded fishnets. Lisa tilted her head and smiled a little.

“Come inside. I haven’t seen you all day.”

Jeff faced the sunset. “I’ve been busy.” Lisa nodded. She slipped outside. The balcony floor was covered with slick slats of wood. Lisa wasn’t wearing shoes. The floor felt frosty and slick. She scampered across the balcony, stood next to Jeff, folded her arms on the railing, and stood on her tip-toes. She stared at Jeff’s temple.

“What’ve you been doing all day?”

Jeff smirked. “I needed some supplies.” He faced Lisa. “Some milk, some peanut butter, some paper towels...” He tilted his head. “Some firearms.” Lisa stared into his icy, blue eyes. She exhaled a shaky breath.

“You’re not gonna...” She motioned towards the power plant with her

head. "Already?"

"It's all worked out," Jeff replied. He faced the power plant. "Everything's arranged." He offered Lisa the glass in his left hand. "Want some scotch?"

Lisa looked the glass over. "You don't want it?"

Jeff handed the glass to Lisa. "I don't drink, remember?" He smiled a little. "I just like sticking it to the man. There's nothing more satisfying than holding a nice, tall glass of scotch in a dry county." Jeff laid his palm on Lisa's cheek. He leaned forward and kissed her forehead. He backed away and looked into her eyes. "Stay here for a little while, okay?" Lisa exhaled through her nostrils. She slowly nodded. "I'm going to go round up the boys." Jeff headed inside. He stopped and looked over his shoulder. "I'll come up and say good-bye before we leave." Lisa licked her lips. They were soaked with crimson lipstick.

"Okay." Jeff entered his and Lisa's bedroom. He turned around and closed the doors. He looked at Lisa through the glass and smiled. Then, he squashed across a blanket of sapphire carpet and wandered downstairs. Jeff and Lisa's home had a spiral staircase. The steps and the railing were made of shiny pine. The stairs led to a living area. The floor was covered with slats of pine. There was a wall of glass to Jeff's right. It overlooked a patio. The other walls were trimmed with smooth, round stones. They were different sizes, colors, and shapes. A massive television hung on the wall opposite the stairs. It was surrounded by soft, brown, leather furniture.

Below the television, a fireplace was built into the wall. There was a giant, round throw rug in the middle of the furniture. It was speckled with brown, tan, and white.

Jeff wandered towards the rug and stopped. He lifted the rug and rolled it towards the fireplace. There were additional slats of pine underneath. Jeff stood where the middle of the rug had been. He bent over and slipped his fingers between some of the slats. He lifted a group of slats out of the floor and set them aside. A thick, steel door was hiding below. It had a combination knob and a long, bronze lever. Jeff knelt beside the door. The knob was numbered zero through nine. Jeff grasped the knob between his thumb and forefinger. He entered a long sequence of numbers. It was part of the Fibonacci sequence. He changed directions with each rotation, starting with a clockwise turn. He entered zero, one, one, two, three, five, and eight. Then, he twisted the lever towards the fireplace and yanked the door out of the way.

Jeff and Lisa's basement was immense. It was a twelve foot tall room. The shape was the same as the perimeter of the house. The walls were covered with alternating crimson and cream bricks. The ceiling was covered with white squares of sheetrock. There was two feet of lead between that and the floor of the house. Eight square shaped shafts of sheet metal hung from the ceiling. Shiny, white panels with long, thick louvers covered the ends. The shafts were tied to the house's heating and air conditioning. The floor was covered with two foot by two foot by two

foot, glass cubes. The sides of the cubes were lined with slick ridges. There were four different colors of glass. They were blue, yellow, green, and red. The floor was made of arrangements of the four colors. An arrangement had four cubes in two rows. From left to right, the top row consisted of a blue cube followed by a green one. The bottom row was a yellow cube followed by a red one. A grid of white filler lay between the cubes.

The ceiling of the basement hovered on a grid of pine cylinders. There were twenty-five of them. They were arranged five by five. A series of diamond plated stairs led from the living room to the basement floor. They dropped halfway to the floor, turned, and dropped the other half. They were surrounded by rows of black, square shaped bars and long, flat rails. Jeff descended the stairs and stopped. He stared at a wall directly below the living room fireplace. Two, gigantic eggs rested against the wall. They were seven feet tall and seven feet wide. They were basically ostrich eggs. But, they didn't have ostriches inside them. The eggs' shells were pitted and cracking. They were a pale shade of yellow. They were dotted with green and blue blotches and swirls. There was a row of ultraviolet light tubes above the eggs. They were arranged along the bottom of a shiny, black lamp sticking out of the wall. There was a thermometer on the side of the lamp. It had a digital readout. It read "98.6, F."

There was a black milk crate beside each egg. There were clothes in both milk crates. The one on the left had a black, polo shirt, a pair of black

jeans, a pair of shiny, black shoes, a pair of black socks, a pair of blue boxer shorts with white stripes, a white undershirt, and a black, leather jacket. The milk crate on the right contained a beanie lined with green, yellow, black, and red stripes. It also contained a black undershirt, a pair of dark blue jeans, a pair of black, leather boots, white socks, a pair of red boxer shorts with white stripes, and a black windbreaker. The windbreaker had two white stripes down each sleeve. The stripes started at the neck, traveled down the shoulder, and ended at the wrists. A firearm was laid in front of each egg. The one on the left was a twelve gauge, pump action shotgun. It was made of black steel with a matte finish. The stock and the pump were made of slick wood. The shotgun held fourteen rounds. A chrome silencer stood beside the end of the barrel. It was as big around as a roll of paper towels.

An AK-47 lay in front of the egg on the right. It was also made of matted, black steel and slick wood. A chrome silencer stood beside the AK's barrel. It was the same size as the one beside the shotgun. The rifle had a shiny, black, banana clip. It held thirty rounds. There were two additional magazines beside the trigger. There was also a brown, leather strap. There were ten boxes of twenty rounds beside the magazines. There were four boxes of fifty rounds beside the shotgun. A plastic, rainbow colored hula hoop lay beside the firearms. It seemed oddly out of place. A tiny C-clamp lay beside that. A group of shiny, black poles lay next to that. They were actually a tripod that was folded up. A small, thin, steel briefcase lay next

to the tripod.

Jeff stood at the bottom of the basement stairs. He wandered across the room and stopped in front of the egg on the left. He laid his palm on the shell. It was warm and cozy. It felt brittle and unstable. Jeff nodded. He curled his fingers into a fist, reached back, and smashed his knuckles against the shell. It splintered like... a giant eggshell. Jeff's fist punched through like a pinball through a sheet of wet paper. He retrieved his hand and stared at his fingers. They were painted with sticky, yellow and red goo. Jeff slung crud off his fingers and reached inside the hole he made. He curled his fingers around the edges and tore off a chunk of eggshell. It was the size of a couch cushion. Jeff dropped it beside his feet. It crumpled into a pile of jagged shards. Jeff peeled off additional pieces and discarded them in a similar fashion. Before long, a waste high mountain of tooth colored dust stood beside him.

Jeff stared through a door sized opening in the eggshell on the left. Frank was on the other side. The hole stopped above his bellybutton. Frank was immersed in goop below that. He wore his birthday suit. His eyes were closed. He wasn't breathing. His hair was shiny and black. It was soaked with fatty fluid. So was his flesh. Jeff reached inside the egg and swiped a little goo off Frank's eyelids. Then, he smacked his cheek with the back of his hand. Frank's eyes popped open. They were dark brown. His eyebrows were thick and twitching. He inhaled through his nostrils. He began coughing. Yellow and red goop spewed from his lips and dribbled

to the floor. Jeff slopped Frank's hair aside and patted his shoulder.

"Breathe," he instructed. "Like I taught you." Frank gasped for breath. He eased back and tried to calm down. Jeff tilted his head and smiled a little. "Do you know who you are?" Frank took a deep breath through his nose. He exhaled through his lips and nodded. Jeff nodded back. "Do you know who *I* am?" Frank smirked. He rolled his eyes and shook his head.

"Jeff, why do yous always ask me that?"

Jeff narrowed his eyes. "In case I screwed something up." Frank looked away and coughed. He hacked up a wad of goo and spit it on the floor. Jeff motioned towards the adjacent wall. There were four standup showers surrounded by frosty glass. "Get washed up and get dressed," he ordered. "You know the routine." Frank nodded. He reached over the edge of the egg shell and bashed it with his fists. The shell crumbled and piled up. A little fluid leaked out and pooled on the colorful, glass floor. Frank climbed out of his eggshell and grabbed the nearest milk crate. He sloshed across the basement, stumbled into the nearest shower, and closed the door. Jeff kicked a hole in the other egg. Yellow and red goop began gushing out and pooling on the floor. A crack slipped up the side and stopped near the top. Jeff smacked the crack with his fist. The front of the shell shattered and piled on top of the goo on the floor.

Bat Shit was in the second egg. He was a rather large fellow. He was six foot, three and weighed 200 pounds. He was Jamaican. He had skin the

color of coffee. Thick coils of sloppy hair swirled down his back and stopped near his waist. He usually wore it in dread locks. His head tilted back. His eyes fluttered open. Bat Shit's eyes were shiny and black. Looking him in the eyes was like staring at a pair of black, glass checkers. Jeff patted his cheek. Bat Shit coughed up a bucketful of fatty fluid. Jeff exhaled through his nostrils. He cupped his thumb and forefinger around Bat Shit's chin and lifted his head.

"Easy, big guy," Jeff mused. "Relax." He motioned towards his chest. "In through the nose, out through the mouth..." Bat Shit gasped for breath. He looked into Jeff's inviting, blue eyes.

"Man, you're crazy," Bat Shit remarked. "How many times you gwan keep doing this?"

Jeff shrugged. "Just this one, last time."

Bat Shit rolled his eyes. "I be hearin' all this before, mon."

Jeff nodded. "Good. So, you remember who you are?" Bat Shit smacked Jeff's fingers away. He turned his head and spit on the floor.

"I'm Adolf Hitler." He blew a breath between his teeth. "I *know* who I am, mon! How many times you gwan keep askin' me that?" The corners of Jeff's lips pointed towards his forehead. He turned, grabbed the other milk crate, and showed it to Bat Shit.

"I've got another job for you," he remarked. "Some guns, some killing, some Voodoo... You interested?"

"Psh!" Bat Shit replied. "Like I've got a choice, mon." He laid his

fingers on the back of his neck. "After you gwan put this thing in my neck." He dropped his arm. It plopped into the egg goop and made a splash. "Man, give me my clothes!" Jeff held the milk crate in front of the egg. Bat Shit curled his fingers around a pair of handles on the sides of the crate, kicked his way out of the egg, and stomped towards the showers. He wandered into the one next to Frank and shut the door.

Prospect's power station defied belief. It had a little of everything. Out front, there was a fair sized parking lot. It was more than ample for employees. There were three shifts of them. Each had ten to fifteen employees. There were extra parking spaces for visitors. The building was immense. It consisted of several facilities mixed together. Each was trimmed and colored differently. Two exhaust pipes and two air inlet pipes poked out of the middle. The exhaust pipes were painted with alternating bands of red and white. The inlet pipes were the color of vomit. All four pipes reached into the sky. Out back, there was a labyrinth of gigantic transformer towers. There were forty-eight towers in all. They were arranged in six rows of eight. A corridor of twisting steel wound them together, forming a grid. At a distance, the transformers appeared simple and serene. Up close, they were a mangled, tangled mess. The transformer towers were surrounded by a chain link fence. A row of barbed wire swirled along the top.

Beyond the transformers, a line of sunlight hovered above the horizon. Jeff, Frank, and Bat Shit pulled onto the parking lot. They were in a cruddy,

white van. It had only three windows. There was a windshield and a pair of windows on the sides. As usual, Bat Shit was driving. Frank sat beside him. Jeff rode in the back. There was no back seat. Jeff sat on a giant spool of ridiculously thick wire. His feet rested on his steel briefcase. There was something behind him, sitting on the floor. An old, dirty, white sheet was draped over the top. The structure below was the size of a motorcycle. But, it wasn't shaped like one. It looked like a giant gatling gun. Two tin, five gallon gas cans lay next to that. There was a milk crate beside those. It was filled with little brackets. They were made of iron rods, and they were shaped like squares. On each bracket, two sides had threaded ends. One side slipped over those. A pair of nuts held it in place. There was also a bunch of spring loaded, copper clips. They were coated with sheathing. Some sheaths were black. Some were red. The hula hoop surrounded the milk crate. The shotgun, the AK, and the ammo were scattered beside that.

Bat Shit parked near the entrance. The wall of the main building was covered with old, rusty tin. The entrance was covered by a pair of steel doors with flat, curvy, steel handles. Bat Shit and Frank hopped out and headed towards the rear of the van. A pair of doors along the back popped open. Jeff handed Frank the shotgun and Bat Shit the AK-47. He handed them each a silencer as well. Frank screwed his augments onto the end of the shotgun's barrel. Bat Shit found three banana clips near the door on the right. They were filled with ammo. Bat Shit slipped the silencer onto his rifle, popped in a clip, and yanked back the bolt. Frank's shotgun was

loaded. He pumped it and looked at Jeff. Jeff lifted the milk crate filled with iron brackets and electrical clips. He dropped to the parking lot, looked into Frank's eyes, and tilted his head.

"How many guys are in there?" Frank inquired.

The corners of Jeff's lips curled towards his spectacles. "Eleven," he replied. "Two of them are specialists. They're the guys keeping the place running." Jeff faced Bat Shit. "The other nine are just gofers."

Bat Shit nodded. "You gwan need me ta do some Voodoo magic, mon?" Jeff grinned. He tucked the milk crate under his arm and patted Bat Shit's shoulder.

"I don't think so, Batty." He looked at Frank. "Not just yet."

"You don't want to keep the specialists around?" Frank inquired. He shrugged. "They might come in handy."

Jeff shook his head. "We won't need them." He turned to Bat Shit. "Jack and William are running the place, right now. They've got the night shift." Jeff returned his attention to Frank. "We were talking about the power station a couple of nights ago. It's mainly maintenance free. They told me they haven't had a serious incident in almost three years, now. Said they wouldn't need to change out the generators or anything any time soon. Not for a couple of weeks." Jeff grabbed the milk crate with both hands.

"Man, where you meet these guys at anyway?" Bat Shit inquired.

"You just happened upon them, mon?"

Jeff smiled a little. "They live on my block. I hang out with them on

the weekends, sometimes.” He shrugged. “They’re both married.” He looked at Frank and grinned. “They’re wives are *really* nice. Very hospitable.” He stretched his chin and winked. Frank lifted the left side of his upper lip.

“Listen at you...” He shook his head. “We’re about to fit these guys with the ol’ trash bag hoodie. And, you’re giving us this talk about doing their old ladies.”

Jeff pressed his lips together and nodded. “Looking forward to it, too.” He looked at Bat Shit. “You know, I’ll have to console them afterwards. Make sure they’re... getting along okay.”

Bat Shit shook his head. “You’re one sick cuckoo, mon! What you gotta be chatting up this nonsense for? Man, I could’ve lived the rest of my *life* not knowing all dat.”

Jeff shrugged. “Hey, I’ve *gotta* keep ‘em all sexed up.” Bat Shit looked at the ground and shook his head. Jeff faced Frank. “I might need them later. You never know.” He narrowed his big, blue eyes. “I want to keep them good and loose.” He tilted his head. “Especially Delores... William’s better half?” He nodded with disclosed sincerity and polished confidence. “She’s my little bitch, Frank. I’m telling you.” He motioned towards the power plant with his head. “With William out of the picture, I bet she’d do anything I asked.” Jeff’s forehead wrinkled and his pupils dilated. He looked into Frank’s eyes and stared intensely. “I’d make her my fucking slave, Frank.” Jeff’s lips twisted into a hideous smirk. He

shrugged up his shoulders, stared at the ground, and shivered. He inhaled through his nostrils and exhaled through his lips. He looked up and smiled a little. “You guys ready?”

Frank gritted his teeth. “Yeah. You bet.”

Bat Shit shook his head. “Jeff, do me a favor. Don’t be tellin’ me about your sexual escapades no more.” Jeff tilted his head. “Man, you be giving me the cold shivers. You know what I’m saying?” He pointed at his temple. “You’re not right upstairs, mon. Do you even know that?” Jeff stared through Bat Shit’s precipice. His eyelids folded back. His pupils expanded. It made the hair on Bat Shit’s neck stand up.

“Anything... I asked,” Jeff repeated. He leaned forward. “Anything.”

Bat Shit puffed up his cheeks. “Jeff, mon... I’m sorry. I don’t understand all dat.”

Jeff shook his head. “No, you don’t. You don’t understand at all.” He looked at Frank. “She loves giving me the things I want. It brings her pleasure.” He faced Bat Shit. “I don’t have to pay her. And, I don’t have to win her over or beg. She just *gives* it to me. She actually enjoys it.” Jeff smashed his teeth together and slid them from side to side. “That’s power you can’t buy.” He closed his eyes and swallowed. He looked at Frank and smiled a little. “No time like the present, boys. Let’s do this.” Jeff stepped forward. Frank and Bat Shit closed the van doors.

The front office of the power plant was pretty big. The floor was covered with slick concrete. The walls were trimmed with tan tin. The

ceiling hovered twenty feet above the floor. It was dotted with three rows of incandescent lights. There were two rows of foldout tables. The rows were separated down the middle. There were five sets of computer monitors, keyboards, and mice along each section of tables. Varying colors of plastic, bucket seats faced each monitor. A window hovered along a wall behind the seats. It overlooked a room filled with natural gas generators. A hallway ended where the back wall and the wall to its left intersected. Jack, William, Brandon, and Troy wandered out. They all wore hard hats. As Jeff mentioned, Jack and William were running the place. They supervised the facility at night. Brandon and Troy were a couple of maintenance workers. They'd worked the night shift at the power plant for a couple of years. The quartet was returning from a repair job. There was a slight malfunction in one of the generators. Everything was fine. There was just a minor gas leak. It was an easy fix.

Jack was in his early thirties. His face was scruffy, and he was very thin. He wore a plaid, button up shirt, khakis, and tan, suede work boots. William was nearly the same age. Tufts of short, curly, brown hair poked out below his hard hat. He had pale, honest eyes and a crinkly smile. He wore a denim, button up shirt, dark jeans, and brown boots. The sleeves of his shirt were rolled to his elbows. Troy was twenty-five. He was skinny and very smart. He had short, black hair and square shaped glasses with thick, black frames. He wore a red shirt with thin, white stripes, dark khakis, and black boots. He also sported a set of tan suspenders, of all

things. Brandon was nineteen. He had dark eyes and a friendly smirk. He wore a black shirt, black corduroys, and black boots. He was looking forward to getting off work in the morning to be with his new girlfriend. They'd met ten days earlier. William carried a clipboard. He scratched something on a sheet of paper on top and looked up.

"Alright, Troy," he remarked. "What the hell?"

Troy threw his hands out at his sides. "What?!" Brandon smirked. William stared Troy down with his wise, bright eyes. Troy smacked his lips. He crossed his arms over his suspenders. "Man every time something goes wrong around here, you guys blame me." Brandon cackled. Troy laid his hands on his chest. "The lights go out on a couple of blocks, you blame me." He motioned towards the generators. "Couple of gas leaks... *Had* to be Troy." Brandon giggled and smacked his knee. Troy motioned towards the parking lot. "Someone's tire goes flat... you blame me." William rolled his eyes and fought back a smile. Jack folded his arms across his chest. He stared Brandon down.

"Brandon?" he requisitioned.

Brandon shrugged. "Wasn't *me*." Jack narrowed his eyes. Brandon smiled a little. "Hey, we checked for leaks before we left last night. We looked at everything." He tapped his chin. "I'm telling you."

Jack blinked. "Uh-huh." The front doors flew open. William, Jack, Brandon, and Troy looked towards the front of the office. Bat Shit wandered in carrying his AK-47. Frank appeared with his shotgun. Jeff

wandered in and stood between them. He held the milk crate in front of his belly and looked around. William squinted. He threw his hands out at his sides.

“Jeff?”

Jeff tilted his head. “Smoke ‘em.” Bat Shit laid the butt of the AK against his shoulder. He laid his cheek on top and squeezed the trigger. He scattered seven metallic whistles. Hefty, brass casings bounced on the concrete. Brandon stood on Bat Shit’s right. His left lung popped, and his heart exploded. He collapsed on his back and laid his hand across his ticker. Thick fountains of crimson squirted through his fingers. Troy took two in the neck. The back of his skull exploded. Brain matter splashed across rows of monitors behind him. William was next in line. A round pierced his belly and slid to the side. His entrails flopped out. Blood gushed out and soaked the front of his jeans. He crumpled to his knees and shrieked. Jack’s eyeballs burst. Brains and teeth dribbled down his chin and painted his plaid shirt. William sat on his heels and gasped for breath. He curled his fingers around his bowels and squealed. Frank shouldered his shotgun and squeezed the trigger. There was a windy squeak. Frank pumped the shotgun and fired again. William’s head jerked back. Little holes scattered across his face. Chunks of brain and skull dropped from the rim of his hard hat. His head rolled to the side and with limp.

“Seven to go,” Jeff remarked. Frank raised the shotgun beside him and pumped it with one hand. Two more maintenance workers entered.

They also wore hard hats. Frank fired at the one on the left. His neck snapped like a twig. His head fell off his shoulders and toppled to the floor. Blood sprayed from his neck and painted the ceiling. Bat Shit killed the one on the right. He sank four silenced slugs into his ribs then looked towards the hallway. Three more workers wandered out. They were joking and laughing. Then, they were broken and bleeding. Their bodies and body parts crumpled on top of the others. A pool of warm claret gushed across the concrete floor. It looked like a tiny, red pond. Instead of little fish, schools of fingers, teeth, and hair were swimming around. Jeff smiled a little. He inhaled through his nostrils and exhaled a satisfied sigh. "Come on," he remarked. "We'll get the last two on the way to the back."

Frank, Bat Shit, and Jeff headed towards the transformers. The hallway turned to the right and opened up to a generator room. There, Jeff and the boys ran into the last two maintenance workers. They were a couple of girls. They stopped and gave Jeff, Bat Shit, and Frank a good, long stare. The one on the left was a blonde. She was short and timid. She had crimson lips, big blue eyes, and dimples. She wore a white sweater, khaki bell bottoms, and brown boots. The girl on the right had short, dark hair. She was tall and lanky. She wore a shirt with black and red checks, blue jeans, and black boots. Both girls wore shiny, white hard hats like the other workers. Jeff smirked.

"Ooooo..." he groaned. "Ladies." Frank hooted and hollered. Bat Shit looked him over and shook his head. Jeff brushed past the girls and

wandered towards the back of the facility. “Don’t stay too long, boys,” he remarked. Frank stared at the blonde. His face twisted into a hideous grin. The blonde girl shuddered and slithered away. Frank lurched at her. He curled his fingers around her wrist and reeled her in. She whimpered. Her little boots slid across the floor. Bat Shit’s heavy, thick fingers dropped on Frank’s shoulder. Frank looked up.

“Frank, mon...” Bat Shit remarked. “Just kill her. Don’t be messing ‘round... doing those weird, creepy things you do.” Frank narrowed his eyes and tilted his head. He wrapped his arms around the blonde girl’s shoulders, leaned her back, and laid his lips on her neck. She moaned in protest.

“No!” the dark haired girl shouted. Bat Shit laid his fingers over her lips, grabbed her arm, and dragged her away. Her big, dark eyes popped open. She shrugged up her shoulders and looked up. Bat Shit lowered his head so his lips were beside her ear.

“Don’t be making a sound, woman,” he whispered. “Maybe you’ll not wind up like your friend, there.”

There was a conference room at the back of the facility. It was the size of an average living room. It consisted of a floor covered with large tiles and walls covered with cinderblocks. The tiles were white with red and grey splotches. They were connected with thin, chrome lines. A sheet metal shaft and a pair of pipes were laid along the ceiling. The shaft was part of the facility’s air conditioning system. It carried cool air into the

conference room. There were two vents along the bottom of the shaft. The tunnels carried exhaust to the smoke stacks sticking out of the middle of the power plant. A long, oak table stood in the center of the room. It was surrounded by brown, leather chairs. The chairs had armrests and thick, tall backs. Each stood on a base of five wheels. There were twenty chairs in all. There were four windows along the back wall. They overlooked the transformer towers.

Jeff stood in front of an exit. It was near a corner beside the windows. It consisted of a pair of thick, steel doors with square windows. There was a giant warning sign on the door on the right. It was white with fat, red letters. It read, "WARNING! Risk of electric shock. Authorized personnel only. Protective gear must be worn at all times! SAFETY FIRST!" Jeff held the milk crate in front of his belly. He stood, staring out the windows. The congregation of transformers was just beyond the exit. It was massive and surreal. The sheer size of the transformers was difficult to comprehend. They seemed to go on forever. It was like staring down a well filled with twisting steel. There were six rows of transformers. Each row contained eight towers. There might as well have been infinity. Jeff looked to his left. A row of gloves dangled from hooks below the windows. They were elbow length welding gloves made of suede. Two rows of wooden shelves hovered above those. They contained hard hats and safety glasses. Bat Shit wandered up. He stood next to Jeff and stared out the windows. He rested the butt of his rifle against a wall next to the door on the right.

“Big, busty breasts of Sheba, mon!” he exclaimed. Jeff turned to him with a smirk. “Man, how in God’s name are we gwan to connect all those cores?”

“*We* aren’t,” Jeff explained. “You guys are.” Bat Shit looked at Jeff. He pointed out the window on the right and shook his head.

“Excuse my language, Jeff,” Bat Shit remarked. “But, there’s no fuckin’ way I’m climbing up there, mon!” He leaned forward, looked up, and pointed. “Man, look at how high up those wires are!” He looked into Jeff’s big, blue eyes. “You’ve got to be kidding me!” Frank stood behind them. He laid his shotgun on the floor, folded his arms over his chest, and shook his head.

“I just know I’m gonna get electrocuted.” Jeff peeked over his shoulder. He snagged a pair of welding gloves and tossed them at Frank. They smacked into his chest, flopped over his shoulder, and dangled there. Frank snatched them up and glared at Jeff.

“No, you’re not,” Jeff replied. He reached into the milk crate and grabbed one of the brackets. He held it up so Frank could see. “You’re gonna get your ass up there, and your gonna wrap a wire around each one of these cores.” Jeff unscrewed two nuts at the top of the bracket and removed the side. He twirled his finger around one of the threaded ends. “Just wrap the wire around one side like that...” he explained. “Then, wrap a strand of wire from the roll *we* brought around the other side.” Frank narrowed his eyes. “Just once...” Jeff remarked. He looked at Bat Shit.

“One coil per side. That’s very important. It’s supposed to be a magnetic flux.”

Bat Shit’s eyebrows fell in the middle. “Good God, Jeff!” he shouted. “Man, you already explained this once!”

“Good,” Jeff replied. “Then, you guys won’t screw it up, right?” He shoved the milk crate into Bat Shit’s chest and stared into his deep, dark eyes. Bat Shit snatched the milk crate out of Jeff’s hands and set it on the floor. Jeff looked at Frank. He pointed out the window on the left. “You see those, Frank?” He began pointing out transformers. Frank looked at each place Jeff pointed. The transformers each had two, gigantic arms. At the ends of the arms facing the building, there were shafts wrapped with steel helixes. Wires ran out of the building. They connected to the bottoms of each helix. “Those coils?” Jeff inquired. Frank nodded. “Those are the primary windings.” Jeff held up the bracket in his hand. “You need to wrap a core next to each one of those. Okay?”

Frank glared at Jeff. “I got it,” he remarked. He held up his index finger. “One time, Jeff. That’s all you gotta tell me.”

Jeff smiled a little. “Better be.” He dropped the bracket in the milk crate and pointed out the window on the right. He looked at Bat Shit. “You see those trucks, Bat Shit?” Bat Shit looked where Jeff was pointing. There was a row of white trucks with boom lifts. Bat Shit cupped his chin in his thumb and forefinger and sighed. He looked over his shoulder. Frank looked at Jeff and furrowed his brow.

“In one of those?” he inquired. Jeff stared back. “You’re kidding.”

Jeff tilted his head. “You’re not afraid of heights, are you Frank?”

Frank held up his hand and wobbled it. “Eh... Little bit.”

Jeff nodded. “Well, Frank...” He grinned and patted Frank’s shoulder. “There’s no better test of a man than facing his own fears.” Bat Shit smirked. Jeff headed towards the parking lot. “I’ll get the wire. You guys get started.” Bat Shit looked at Frank. Frank shrugged. Frank, Bat Shit, and Jeff attached iron cores to each power line. Rather, Bat Shit drove and Frank attached the cores. Pretty much, Jeff stood and watched. They dropped wires from each core and gathered the ends near the exit. It was tedious, terrifying work. They worked for three straight hours before laying the last end by the exit. Jeff looked the wires over and nodded. He, Frank, and Bat Shit spent the next hour connecting electrical clips to the ends of the wires. They had to do every bit of it with suede welding gloves. Otherwise, they’d get cooked.

Once the ends were connected, it was time to bring out Jeff’s latest invention... a giant anti-photon generator. Supposedly, it was going to generate a vortex. “Vortex” was the term Jeff used to refer to a space between gateways in his wormhole model. His model consisted of two gateways, the actual gateway and the potential gateway. The actual gateway was a physical doorway constructed on sight. This time, Jeff opted to use a rainbow colored hula hoop. The structure of the actual gateway served no special purpose. Anything with a hole in it would do. Jeff always

chose something that amused him. He'd installed a switch on the outside of the hula hoop. Once the vortex and the potential gateway were generated, the switch would open the gateways and close them. The potential gateway was a metaphysical door constructed by the anti-photon generator. It was the same size and shape as the actual gateway. It served the simple purpose of providing a door at the other end. If there was no potential gateway, there would be no way of stepping through the wormhole.

Jeff's generator was going to generate a special type of anti-photon. He and Chuck Parker discovered it while working for the Department of Defense. Chuck nicknamed them "Batch Particles." It was an arbitrary name. In programming, scripts were sometimes referred to as "batch jobs." Since Chuck generated the particles with a script the first time around, he always referred to them as Batch Particles. Jeff's generator would create a beam of them. Only, it was going to require a lot of energy. Otherwise, it would take centuries to generate enough to build a vortex like Jeff had in mind. Jeff needed to reach Proxima Centauri. That was about one thousand light years away. Jeff opened the tripod and set it in front of the exit. He attached the hula hoop to the top with the C-clamp. He looked towards the exit doors. Frank and Bat Shit rolled the anti-photon generator between the hula hoop and the doors. An old, ratty, white sheet was draped over the top. The generator had an axle with two wheels. The rear of the machine rested on a pair of giant coil springs behind the wheels. Frank and Bat Shit held the springs off the floor with a long, steel handle sticking out of the

rear. They positioned the generator so the front end was facing the hula hoop. Then, they lowered the springs to the floor.

“Take off the sheet,” Jeff instructed.

Bat Shit folded his arms over his chest. “Man, you know what it looks like.”

Jeff narrowed his eyes. “Do it.” Frank and Bat Shit grabbed the end of the sheet. They slipped it over the front of the generator and dropped it on the floor. The generator looked like something out of a science fiction series from the 1950s. It was mostly iron. A thick, rock hard body stood on the wheels and springs. It was littered with contacts. The contacts were two inch thick iron rods shaped into three sided handles. The ends of the handles disappeared into the body. There were forty-eight contacts in all. A chunk of twelve inch, iron round stock was sticking out of the end of the body. It was three feet long. A thick, iron helix coiled from the end of the round stock to the body of the generator. A giant, iron sphere was threaded onto the end of the round stock. It had a diameter of two feet. It was aimed at the hula hoop.

There was a box welded to the top of the generator’s body. It was made of thick, iron plates. It was covered with copper pipes, steel bladed cooling fans, and copper heat sinks. The placement was intricate and elaborate. A tiny, steel box was welded to the top. A labyrinth of thick, red wires twisted out of the heat sinks and connected to that. They were screwed into the sides all the way around. There were forty-eight in all.

There was a type B USB port on top of the steel box. Jeff stood next to the conference table. He was holding the steel briefcase. He laid the briefcase on the table and opened it. He removed a long USB cable and wandered across the room. He plugged the cable into the steel box on top of the generator and returned to the table. He removed a laptop from the briefcase and closed it. He had a seat in one of the rolling, leather chairs, flipped open the laptop, and tapped the power button.

An operating system booted. It had a command based interface. It filled a black screen with colorful text and prompted for a username. Jeff entered a username and password. Then, he connected the USB cable to the laptop. He looked over his shoulder and nodded. Frank and Bat Shit slipped on a pair of welding gloves. Then, they began connecting clips to the generator. There were little, copper teeth on the ends of the clips. They spattered sparks along the tile floor when they came into contact with the generator's iron handles. It was a tedious, nerve racking process. Frank got to the twelfth wire. He connected it to the generator and looked at Jeff. Jeff stared back. He tilted his head in anticipation. Frank held his gloved hand above the body of the generator and shook his head.

“Jeff, this thing's gettin' pretty hot.”

Jeff nodded. “It's supposed to.” Bat shit looked towards the horizon. He sighed and looked over his shoulder.

“Jeff, mon,” he remarked. “Won't the lights be going off in the city?”

Jeff shook his head. “Not yet. Not until I fire up the software. So far,

all we've done is created a short. But, it's not drawing any power yet." Bat Shit nodded. He and Frank continued connecting wires. Once they got to number forty, the machine became so hot they were reluctant to go near it. It burned their hands through their welding gloves. Frank inched the next clip towards a contact near the rear of the machine. He jerked his hand away and sucked air through his teeth. He ripped off his gloves, rubbed his knuckles, and glared at Jeff.

"Jeff," he remarked. "Seriously?" Jeff rolled his left sleeve back. A shiny, metal watch was wrapped around his wrist. There were three buttons along the bottom of the watch face. Jeff extended his index finger and dangled it above one of the buttons.

"Do it," he commanded. "Or, I'll fry you." Frank sighed. He and Bat Shit connected the remainder of the wires to the generator. Then, they wandered across the room and sat next to Jeff. Bat Shit sat on Jeff's left. Frank sat on his right. They leaned forward and stared at the laptop screen. Jeff executed a script. He typed "BatchGen up" and pressed return. The script issued a long list of commands. The commands initialized a bunch of components inside the generator. The script finished. The word "smash" printed followed by a greater than symbol. Jeff looked to his left. "Now, Bat Shit," he explained. "Now, the power goes out." Bat Shit nodded. Jeff invoked the software Chuck Parker repaired for him. He typed the name of the program followed by a series of hexadecimal values. The values were encrypted codes that corresponded to coordinates near

Proxima Centauri. Jeff got the coordinates from his contact that lived there. He typed "BuildVortex 29a b63 7c7 ef9 256" and tapped the return key. A blank line appeared. It was replaced with a message. It read, "Time Remaining: 666 years, 5 months, 0 weeks, 14 days, 04:53:34." The thirty-four on the end began ticking down, one second at a time. Jeff narrowed his eyes.

"Hmm..." he mumbled. "That's going to be a problem."

Frank shrugged. "What's the problem? Is it working or what?" He looked at the generator. He stared at the space between the sphere on the end and the hula hoop. "I never can tell. I don't *see* anything."

"Oh, it's working," Jeff assured him. There was a coaster on the table. Jeff picked it up and tossed it across the room. It passed between the generator and the hula hoop. It disappeared into thin air. Frank nodded. He stared at the computer screen.

"Well, what then?" Bat Shit inquired.

Jeff pressed his lips together. "In order to add energy to the equation, I had to add some code to the vortex software."

Frank's eyebrows fell in the middle. "How *much* code?"

Jeff looked him over. "Quite a bit." Frank rolled his eyes.

"That's great, mon!" Bat Shit exclaimed. "You've added a bunch of garbage back in there. And, now the damn thing won't work again." He pounded his fist against the table. "Is that what you're telling me?"

Jeff licked his lips. "I'm going to have to have someone look over my

work and double check it.” He sat back and pressed his fingertips together. “See if maybe there’s some extra loops in there or something.” Frank dropped his forehead in his palm and shook his head. The corners of Jeff’s lips pointed towards his ears. “I wonder who we can get...”

Chapter 2: "Captured Queens"

L.I.N. was very pretty. Well, Chuck thought so anyway. She had shiny, shoulder length hair. A row of bangs dangled above her eyebrows. Her hair was supposed to be chocolate brown. But, it always came in sapphire blue. A black barrette hovered above her bangs. It was actually the cover of a CD-ROM. L.I.N.'s eyes were poppy and green. They were like a pair of emeralds. She was messy, careless, and restless... even when she was sitting still. She was spontaneous and silly. She was also caring and brave. She was sitting on the coffee table in her living room. It drove Chuck crazy. He sat on a black, leather love seat. He looked her over from the tops of his eyes. L.I.N. wore a long sleeve shirt. It was wrapped with thin, black and white bands. She wore a light blue, denim skirt that draped to her knees. The bottom was shredded and frayed. Her skin was radiant and soft. Her lips were glossy and pink. All her little nails were painted red. She wore nothing on her feet. It seemed like she never did. She sat with her legs folded like a pretzel.

A glass chess board was sitting on the corner of the coffee table. It lay between L.I.N. and Chuck. L.I.N. moved one of her pawns two minutes earlier. She slid her lips to the side of her face and looked the board up and down. She looked at Chuck and smiled.

"Your turn!" she squealed. Chuck grinned. He looked the chess board over and thought carefully. Chuck had shaggy, jet black hair that drooped past his cheeks. His eyes were tan and shiny. L.I.N. liked him

because he was smart, charming, and funny. He was also rough and rugged when he needed to be. Today, he was draped in black. He wore a black, collared shirt with thin, white lines, black jeans, and a pair of black sneakers. He always wore his sneakers. They were old and worn out. L.I.N. looked him over. She looked up and stared at his eyes. She couldn't look into his eyes. Chuck was focused on the chess board. His forehead was crinkly. His eyebrows sagged in the middle. He laid his fingertips against his left temple and sifted through thoughts. L.I.N. enjoyed watching Chuck think. She wondered exactly what was going on inside his mind when he sat and stared like that. It drove her nuts... especially when they played chess.

L.I.N. hated playing chess. Everyone always beat her. She had no idea why she played. But, she usually gave in when someone asked. The game she and Chuck were working on was fairly young. They were only a few moves in. L.I.N. was angling for some kind of strategy. She scoured the board for weak points. She assumed Chuck was doing the same. From the way he scanned the board, she figured he was seeing dozens of moves ahead. Little did she know, Chuck didn't play that way. Pretty much, he just moved pieces around and played defense. He waited for an opening to attack the other player's king. The way he saw it, that's how the game was played. The object was to checkmate the other player's king. What else was there to do, really?

Chuck was playing black. He'd brought out his queen's knight and

moved a pawn one space. He decided to move his knight up a little further. He didn't mean anything by it. He just wanted to leave it there for later. But, he knew it would drive L.I.N. nuts. It always did. He figured she'd start moving out every pawn she could lay her fingers on to attack his knight. That's usually the way their games went. Meanwhile, Chuck could casually move one knight around the board. Before long, all of L.I.N.'s high powered pieces were uncovered. And, Chuck had his way with her. Chuck figured she'd catch on after a while. But, she never did. Chuck moved his knight up. It was one space from L.I.N.'s queen's knight, diagonally. L.I.N. had an opening in her pawns. Her bishop was free. But, its path was one row down from Chuck's knight. There were no attacks. L.I.N. pounded her fists against the coffee table. She looked up with an irritated face.

"Damn it, Chuck!" she barked. "What the hell are you doing?" Chuck stared into her big, green eyes and smiled a little. He shrugged.

"Nothing." He turned his head without looking away. "Whatever do you mean?" L.I.N. growled. She pointed between Chuck's eyes.

"Don't give me that! You know *exactly* what I'm talking about." She narrowed her eyes. "What are you up to?" Brandy giggled. Chuck looked to his left. L.I.N. looked to her right. Brandy and Hal were sitting on the couch. It was adjacent to the love seat. For a moment, Chuck and L.I.N. forgot there were other people in the room. Brandy was little and cute. She just didn't know it. She had long, brown hair and dark brown eyes. As usual, the lower half of her hair was all coiled up and bouncy. She hated it.

A pair of rimless spectacles lay across her eyes. Her lips were crimson and smooth. She wore a blouse that buttoned up the front. It was a floral. It was slathered with magenta, olive, canary, and plum roses. She also wore a pair of olive Capris, long, white socks, and white tennis shoes.

Hal wasn't Hal. Well... he *was* Hal. But, he wasn't Hal. He was H.A.L. Basically, he made a duplicate of his brain using binary digits. But rather than storing the digits in a binary file, he stored them as text. That way, software could manipulate the file like a person. That made it easier for Hal to write software that could emulate his brain. In source programming, it's easier to retrieve data from a text file than going across a bridge and retrieving data again and again. That's the explanation Hal gave the night prior. Chuck understood immediately. He replied with a pair of closed eyes and a simple nod. L.I.N. and Brandy had no idea what the hell Hal was talking about. Chuck called Icarus and Detective Phillips the next morning and explained it to them. Icarus pretty well got it. Phillips was a bit puzzled. Hal's binary brain was stored on a little, red flash drive. It was sticking out of the side of H.A.L.'s head. H.A.L. Always Lies was Hal's first attempt at robotics. It was a simple, man shaped body made out of brass plated steel. It couldn't move exactly like a person. But, it was pretty close.

H.A.L. had tiny, intricate parts and intuitive software. Like L.I.N.'s body, H.A.L.'s was tied together by a network of piano wire. It slipped through tiny wheels and rotator cups. That's how all the parts moved. H.A.L.'s face was pretty simple. A pair of webcams served as eyeballs.

They were capable of rotating and changing focus. A speaker from a telephone receiver served as a mouth. It was a brass colored square with five tiny holes. Hal looked into L.I.N.'s eyes. He tried to smile. But then, he remembered he couldn't. He tried to frown. But then, he remembered he couldn't. It was frustrating. He looked at Brandy and shook his head.

"She never *could* play a game of chess," his speaker barked. He looked at Chuck. "I tried to teach her so many times." He shrugged. "But, she just never got it."

L.I.N. stared at her lap and licked her lips. "Shut-up, Hal."

Brandy threw her hands out at her sides. "You *built* her," she remarked. She stared between Hal's webcams. "You must have made her a bad chess player on purpose." L.I.N. looked up. Her eyebrows fell in the middle.

"Yeah!" Hal tried to smile. But, he couldn't. He motioned towards his chest.

"Oh, so now it's *my* fault you can't play the game of chess." He folded his arms across his lap and shook his head. "Well, how convenient for you." Chuck chuckled. L.I.N. pointed between Hal's big, plastic eyeballs.

"You're a bastard," she remarked. Hal cackled. "And... you look like a saxophone man!" Brandy giggled. L.I.N. threw her arms out at her sides. "What the hell, Hal?! Why didn't you *tell* me you copied yourself?" Hal looked away. L.I.N. pointed towards her chest. "You know how hard that was for me when I went in your bedroom and you had died?" Hal looked at

L.I.N. He leaned forward and laid his knuckles on her cheek.

“Was it that bad?”

L.I.N. swallowed. “Yeah... it was.” Hal tried to press his lips together. He remembered he had no lips. He looked at Chuck.

“I see *you* took good care of her, Chuck.” Chuck shrugged. Hal tried to smile. His speaker remained frustratingly still. He looked at L.I.N. “You two have had sex several times. I can tell.”

L.I.N.’s eyes popped open. “Hal!” she shrieked. “That’s none of your business!”

Chuck scrunched up his face. “You can tell that, huh?”

Hal’s webcams focused on Chuck. “Body language,” he explained. “Body language tells more than words ever will.” L.I.N.’s face felt flush. She laid her forehead in her palm and shook her head. Chuck shrugged.

“You’re right about that.” Chuck leaned forward. He curled his fingers around L.I.N.’s. He dragged them away from her forehead. L.I.N. sat up and sighed. Hal sat back. He rested his right ankle on his left thigh and folded his fingers.

“I think it’s wonderful,” he remarked. L.I.N. fought back a smile. She rolled her eyes and shook her head. Hal looked at Chuck. “I always hoped that L.I.N. would find someone who made her happy.” He tried to squint. But, he had no eyelids. “I never imagined she would do it so quickly.” Brandy looked around. She licked her lips.

“Well, I think you two are *so* cute together,” she remarked. L.I.N.

fought back another smile. She smacked her lips and stared at the ceiling. Brandy held up her left palm. "L.I.N., the android..." She held up her right palm. "And Chuck, the programmer. It's perfect." Chuck looked at Brandy and smiled.

"Why thank you, Brandy." Chuck was still holding L.I.N.'s little hand. He wobbled it. "That's very kind of you to say." L.I.N. was concentrating on the chess board. She moved a pawn. Chuck looked at the board. His knight was threatened. L.I.N. leaned forward, stared into Chuck's eyes, and narrowed *her* eyes.

"I'm gonna get your knight," she remarked. Chuck stared back. He narrowed his eyes. He let go of L.I.N.'s hand and reached for his knight.

"You think so, huh?" He moved his knight two spaces towards the center of the board then one space back. It came to rest between his pawn and one of L.I.N.'s. "Well, uh... come and get it." Hal and Brandy leaned forward and folded their arms over their laps.

"I'm coming after you!" L.I.N. assured him. She moved another pawn up one space. It threatened Chuck's knight. Chuck smirked and shook his head.

"L.I.N.," he remarked. He made the same move as before to avoid her attack. "Leave my poor knight alone."

L.I.N. smacked the coffee table with her palm. "Your dead, knight!" She moved the same pawn forward one space. Chuck licked his lips. He returned his knight to its previous space. He looked up and fought back a

smile. L.I.N. glared at him. She pointed between his eyes.

“You know what?” she requisitioned. “Forget these little pawns.” She grabbed a hold of her queen. “It’s queen time, baby!” She dragged her queen three spaces diagonally. She plopped it on the board and looked up. “What do you think about *that*?” Chuck stared at the board. The outer edges of his eyebrows sagged. The corners of his lips curled towards his chin. He looked into L.I.N.’s eyes and fluttered his eyelashes. L.I.N. looked disgusted. She threw her arms out at her sides. “What?” Chuck had one pawn out. It was one of two blocking his queen’s bishop. He dragged his bishop across the board, laid it next to L.I.N.’s queen, and slid her queen aside. L.I.N. stared at Chuck’s bishop. Her eyes popped open. Her lips parted, and she inhaled a sharp breath. Chuck slid his lips to the side of his face. He looked up.

“Whoopsie...” He yanked L.I.N.’s queen off the board and laid it beside the board. L.I.N. smashed her fists into the coffee table.

“Chuck!” Brandy cackled. She lowered her head and pinched the bridge of her nose. Chuck looked the board over. He looked up and exhaled a satisfied sigh.

“Your turn.” L.I.N. laid her fingertips against her right temple. She stared at her queen and sighed. Chuck grinned and exhaled through his nostrils. “It’s okay, L.I.N. It’s just a game.” L.I.N. looked up. She reached across the board, grabbed her queen, and stuffed it between her teeth. Chuck threw his hands out at his sides. “Geh-buh!” L.I.N. hopped off the

coffee table, sprinted across cold, checkered tiles, and dashed upstairs. Chuck's shoulders slid back. His head tilted to the side. "Real mature, L.I.N.!" he called. L.I.N. dashed across a slick, wooden floor upstairs, ran into her bedroom, and slammed the door. Brandy folded her fingers in front of her chest. She laid her chin on her knuckles and stared at L.I.N.'s bedroom door. She glanced at Chuck.

"You want me to go talk to her?" Chuck stared at the chess board. He slowly shook his head.

"Nope." He stood and headed towards the kitchen. "You guys want something to drink?"

"Sure," Brandy replied. "Can I get some water?" A long bar separated the kitchen from the rest of the downstairs area. The base of the bar was covered with shiny veneer. The top was black marble. Ten stools were scattered about. Each had a different colored seat. Chuck wandered around the bar and stood in front of a chrome sink. There were two of them. He stood in front of the one on the left.

"Sure, Brandy," Chuck replied. He looked over his shoulder. "Hal?" Hal leaned forward. Then, he stopped and thought for a moment. Chuck rolled his eyes. "Oh!" He faced the sink and shook his head. "Look who I'm talking to!" Brandy giggled. There was a cupboard above the sink. Chuck snagged a couple of glasses and wandered across the kitchen. There was a stainless steel refrigerator with two, vertical doors beside the sink. There was a water and ice dispenser on the left hand door. Chuck filled a

glass with ice. Then, he dribbled water on top. The ice began crackling. Chuck looked towards the top of the stairs. He figured L.I.N. was upset. He decided to enjoy a glass of ice cold water with Brandy and Hal. Then, he could wander upstairs and check on her. He figured L.I.N. would calm down in a little while.

L.I.N. *was* upset. She laid her back against her bedroom door, tilted her head back, and sighed. She slipped her fingers between her lips, snagged a hold of her queen, and pulled it out. She cupped the glass figurine between her palms and laid her lips on top. She stared at the floor. It was covered with fluffy, tan carpet. L.I.N. looked across the room. She spotted her bed. It had a steel frame, painted white. A wooden post stuck out of each corner. A brass colored ball hovered on the end of each post. For once, L.I.N.'s bed was neat and tidy. Actually, since she'd met Chuck her bed was always neat and tidy. Her bedroom stayed pretty clean as well. A tie dye blanket lay across the mattress. A pair of pillows was tucked underneath. It was near the head of the mattress.

L.I.N. stared at a gap between the bottom of her mattress and the floor. She spotted glints of light. The bedroom lights were off. L.I.N. just barely spotted the glints. She scurried across the room, fell to her knees, and ducked below the bottom of her bed frame. The glints of light came from three glass chess pieces. L.I.N. stole them from three other chess sets. She laid the queen from her and Chuck's game beside the other pieces. She dragged her head out, sat on her heels, and sighed. Her

eyebrows squished towards the outer edges of her eyes. Her lips quivered. A pair of tears wandered to the ends of her eyelashes and dribbled down her cheeks. L.I.N. was all alone. But, she worried someone would see her crying. She buried her face in her palms and sobbed. She wasn't mad at Chuck. She wasn't upset that he took her queen. She felt stupid. She always felt stupid when she played chess. She didn't understand why she played. She felt like she couldn't play. She was too dumb.

L.I.N. sniffled. She dragged herself onto her bed, slid across her tie dye comforter, and stuffed her face between her pillows. There was a window on the wall behind her. It had a frame made of thin rolls of copper. The copper formed a plus sign surrounded by a square border. Four panes of glass were tucked inside each corner of the plus sign. One was red. One was blue. One was yellow. One was green. Jeff Forester's face appeared in the lower, right pane. That was the green one. Frank and Bat Shit's faces appeared in the pane next to that. That was the yellow pane. Jeff, Frank, and Bat Shit gave L.I.N.'s little bedroom a good, long stare. The walls and ceiling were navy blue. They were splatter painted with white, teal, and canary yellow. The ceiling was decorated with squishy, stick on stars that glowed in the dark. The wall opposite L.I.N.'s bed was covered with mirrors from floor to the ceiling. Frank and Bat Shit looked at Jeff. Jeff stared back. He shrugged.

They stood inside a bucket. It dangled from the end of a boom arm. The boom arm was sticking out of one of the trucks from the power station

in Prospect. Jeff studied L.I.N.'s multi colored window. He tilted his head. He laid his fingertips against the base of the window and eased it out of the way. It tilted towards the bedroom ceiling. Jeff opened the window as far as it would go. Then, he slipped his legs over the edge of the hole in the wall and slithered to the floor. He bent over and crept across L.I.N.'s squishy, tan carpet. L.I.N.'s head was down. Her face was buried in a pair of pillows. It was perfect. Jeff stopped near the head of L.I.N.'s bed. He stared at the back of her head. Her hair was shiny and blue. L.I.N. gasped and sniffled. Jeff figured she was crying. He looked away, closed his eyes, and inhaled through his nostrils. The corners of his lips curled towards his forehead.

Jeff returned his attention to L.I.N. His eyes crawled across her body. Her shoulders were tiny and frail. Her back was curvy and smooth. It was wrapped in thin, black and white stripes decorating her blouse. Jeff slipped towards the center of L.I.N.'s bedside. He knelt beside the bed and laid his chin on the mattress. He stared at L.I.N.'s butt. It was the most beautiful, perfectly round butt he'd ever laid eyes on. It was wonderful and mesmerizing. Jeff felt like smacking it. But, he wouldn't do that... not to L.I.N. He knew it would piss Chuck off. He stared at the bottom of L.I.N.'s denim skirt. It was jagged and frayed. Most of the frays were one inch long. They slithered and twisted around the backs of L.I.N.'s knees. Jeff's eyeballs rolled along L.I.N.'s calves. Her skin was fluorescent and soft. It glowed in rays of morning sunlight. Jeff's eyes followed L.I.N.'s Achilles

tendons. They stopped at the tips of her heels. Jeff lifted his head, hopped up, and turned around. Then, he plopped down on L.I.N.'s mattress. L.I.N.'s head whirled around. She stared over her shoulder and met Jeff's big, blue eyes. Her eyelids flipped back. Her pupils dilated. Jeff stared into L.I.N.'s shiny, green eyes. He smiled a little.

L.I.N. rolled onto her butt and lifted herself with her elbows. She began to pant like a dog. She heard a noise by the window. She twisted her head around and had a look. She spotted Frank and Bat Shit. They wandered in and stood up. Jeff tilted his head. He curled his fingers over L.I.N.'s lips. L.I.N. returned her attention to him. Jeff slipped his hand into his pocket. He took out a pocket knife and flipped it open. L.I.N. whimpered. Jeff dropped the tip of the blade on top of L.I.N.'s collar bone. L.I.N. felt the blade lying against her flesh. It was cold and pointy. She looked the knife over and exhaled a pair of heavy breaths through her nostrils. She looked up and found Jeff's eyes. Jeff leaned forward.

"Don't scream," he whispered. *"Or, I'll slice you to ribbons."* Jeff tilted his head. *"Do you understand?"* L.I.N. shut her eyes. Tears dribbled out. She blinked and looked away. She nodded quietly. Jeff smirked. He eased his fingers away from L.I.N.'s lips. He held up the end of a USB cable. L.I.N. stared at it. She sighed and looked up.

"Jeff... don't," she whispered. *"Please."*

Jeff stared right through her. *"Plug me in,"* he ordered. He slid his fingers through L.I.N.'s sapphire locks. He curled his fingers into a fist and

tilted L.I.N.'s head back. L.I.N. gasped. She pinched her eyes shut and whimpered. Jeff laid the sharp side of his pocket knife blade against her neck. L.I.N. stared into Jeff's eyes and swallowed hard. She held up her left hand. It was shaky and apprehensive. The tip of her thumb flipped back. A USB port was hiding underneath. Jeff let go of L.I.N.'s hair and grabbed a hold of her wrist. He closed his knife and returned it to his pocket. Then, he jerked L.I.N.'s hand in front of his chest and jabbed the USB plug into her thumb. L.I.N. tensed up and looked away.

The USB plug was connected to a pocket sized keyboard. It was black and shiny. Jeff laid it in his lap and laid his fingers on top. He held down the Ctrl and Alt keys. Then, he tapped the F2 key. L.I.N.'s vision field was a desktop environment. There was a taskbar at the bottom. The background image was a video feed gathered by tiny cameras inside her eyes. The desktop disappeared. It was replaced by a command prompt. It consisted of colorful text and a black background. L.I.N. realized what Jeff was doing immediately. She could no longer see. Her video feed required a graphical desktop. She looked where she thought Jeff was sitting. She was staring at a wall beside her bed.

"Jeff!" she gasped. *"Stop..."* Jeff typed "down" and pressed the return key. L.I.N. whimpered. She shut her eyes and sobbed. Tears dribbled down her cheeks. Return statements began pouring across L.I.N.'s vision. They were messages generated by scripts terminating programs. After a few seconds, L.I.N. went limp. She slumped to the left and collapsed

on top of her pillows. A semi circle of steel connected two posts at the head of L.I.N.'s bed. Her left temple crashed on top. L.I.N.'s right pinkie popped open. There was an RJ45 port underneath. Jeff looked across the room. Frank and Bat Shit stood in front of the wall of mirrors. Jeff motioned towards L.I.N. with his head.

"Get her out of here," he whispered. *"Take her down to the truck."*

Bat Shit nodded. He wandered across the room, scooped L.I.N. off her bed and wandered towards the window. He stopped and looked over his shoulder. He narrowed his eyes.

"Man, something's wrong here," he whispered. *"She weighs next to nothing."*

Jeff puffed up his cheeks. *"What do you mean?"*

Bat Shit wobbled L.I.N.'s body. *"She can't weigh no more dan... fifty pounds or so. That's weird."*

Jeff shrugged. *"It is what it is."* Lisa appeared in the window. She threw her hands out at her sides.

"Are we going or what?" she rasped. Jeff hopped up and dashed across the room. Bat Shit and Frank slipped out the window and dropped into the bucket. Jeff stopped beside the window and stared into Lisa's eyes. He folded his arms on L.I.N.'s window seal.

"You were supposed to stay in the truck," he whispered. He stuck his head out the window. He studied the boom arm. It ascended two stories of space between the truck and L.I.N.'s bedroom window. Jeff looked at Lisa.

“What did you do, CLIMB up here?” Lisa smiled. She wore poppy, red lipstick, light brown eye shadow, and a hint of blush. She also wore a navy blue, ruffly, short sleeved shirt, white jeans, and navy blue tennis shoes with white laces. The boys wore their clothes from the night before. Lisa’s eyes popped open.

“No... I used a wormhole.”

Jeff bobbed his head. “Ha.”

Lisa pressed her lips together. *“Jeff, let’s get out of here!”* She turned, looked down, and slid strands of hair out of her face. *“Come on!”* Jeff looked over his shoulder. No one appeared the wiser. He slipped through the hole in L.I.N.’s bedroom wall and dropped into the bucket. The truck began to coast towards the end of the house. Jeff and Lisa crouched and looked around. Lisa wrapped her arms around one of Jeff’s. She looked up with a pair of wild eyes. Jeff peeked over the edge of the bucket. Bat Shit was in the driver’s seat. He’d shifted the transmission into neutral. The ground behind L.I.N. and Hal’s place was sloped. So, the truck rolled under its own weight. Bat Shit let it coast the length of a city block. Then, he stepped on the brakes and lowered the boom arm and bucket. Jeff and Lisa hopped out of the bucket and got in the truck. Lisa sat in the back seat. Frank laid L.I.N.’s head in her lap. Lisa leaned forward and smacked Bat Shit’s arm.

“Little warning next time?!”

Bat Shit smacked his lips. “Man, we don’t have time for all dat! We

need to get out of here!” Bat Shit fired up the engine and drove away.

Chuck knocked on L.I.N.’s bedroom door. “L.I.N.?” he inquired. There was no answer. Chuck slid his lips to the side of his face. He slipped his fingers around L.I.N.’s doorknob and turned it. Brandy and Hal sprinted upstairs and stood behind him. Chuck wandered into L.I.N.’s bedroom and looked around. He noticed the window on the southern wall was open. He stared at it and threw his hands on his hips. “Huh,” he remarked. “She took *that* hard.”

Brandy folded her arms over her chest. “Really.” She looked at Chuck. “What the hell? Where did she go?” Chuck wandered across the room. He poked his head out the window and looked around. He didn’t see L.I.N. anywhere.

“I don’t know,” he remarked. He stood, closed the window, and turned around. Hal and Brandy stared at him. “She wouldn’t just take off.” He looked at Hal. “Would she?”

Hal curled his index finger in front of his speaker mouth. “Hmm...” he mused. “I don’t know.”

Brandy took a breath. “I’ll check the other bedroom,” she remarked. She left L.I.N.’s room and wandered down the hall. Chuck stared at L.I.N.’s closet. Both doors were closed. He looked at Hal.

“Check the closet.” Hal turned around. He began hobbling towards the closet. He stopped and looked his legs over. He looked over his shoulder. “I need a charge.”

Chuck pressed his lips together. “Bummer.” Chuck pointed at an outlet beside L.I.N.’s closet. Hal hobbled towards it. He began to grunt. He dragged his right leg across the squishy, tan carpet. His speaker made a sound like he was sucking air.

“*Come on...*” he groaned. “*Just a little farther...*” Chuck watched Hal, curiously. He wondered if he should give him a hand. Hal dragged his left leg in front of the outlet. There was a tiny panel on his left thigh. He pried it open and dragged out an AC plug. His arm got all wobbly. He bent over and slipped the plug into the wall. It was like a breath of fresh air. Hal stood and faced Chuck. He folded his arms over his chest and laid his back against the wall. “Ah...” he sighed. “There we go.” Chuck smiled and shook his head. Brandy returned. She wandered in and stood in front of the doorway. She stared into Chuck’s eyes and tilted her head. Chuck threw his hands out at his sides.

“You didn’t find her?” Brandy slowly shook her head. Chuck licked his lips. He looked at Hal. “Well, she didn’t run off. Not over a game of chess.”

“Most certainly not,” Hal replied. He knocked on L.I.N.’s closet doors. There was no response. Chuck faced Brandy.

“You two stay here for a while.” He nodded. “In case... she comes back.” Chuck headed for the door. Brandy watched him pass.

“Well, what do you mean?” she inquired. Chuck stopped in the doorway and looked over his shoulder. “Where are you going?”

“I’m going to find my girlfriend,” Chuck replied.

Brandy threw her hands on her hips. “Um... she has Wi-Fi, right? Can’t you track her or something?”

“That’s a great idea,” Chuck remarked. “Why don’t you and Hal get started on that.” Brandy looked over her shoulder. Hal stared back. He would’ve blinked and smiled. But, he couldn’t. Brandy looked into Chuck’s eyes. She exhaled through her nostrils. “Do you have a cell phone?” Chuck shook his head. Brandy slipped her hand into a pocket on the side of her capris. She took out a slim, white cell phone and tossed it to Chuck. “Take mine,” she offered. Chuck looked Brandy’s cell phone over. The top was covered with a touch screen. Chuck slid it aside. There was a tiny keyboard underneath. Chuck looked up and nodded.

“Thanks.” He turned around and wandered down the stairs. Brandy looked at Hal. She sighed and forced a smile.

Chapter 3: “44 Special”

Chuck didn't need to search for L.I.N. He *knew* what happened to her. Jerk Forrester kidnapped her again. Chuck was pissed. Searching for her wireless signal was a waste of time. If she was connected to the internet, she would send a message to one of H.A.L.'s servers. Otherwise, she didn't want to be found, or she was unable to connect. The first alternative was ridiculous. She loved Chuck, Brandy, Laura, Icky, and especially Hal. She would never abandon them. The second alternative implied someone took her and disabled her wireless card. The only person in the world that could do that and might have a reason was Jeff Forrester. Chuck saw red. He felt like squashing Jeff's skull in his fingers. He imagined ripping Jeff's sparkly, little glasses off his freckle covered face and gouging out his big, blue eyes. He felt like bathing in his blood.

Chuck drove onto the Herring Elementary parking lot. It was Saturday. So, the school was deserted. It was just as well, too. Chuck figured he'd spend the next few hours fixing a bunch of shitty, Jeff Forrester code. He needed a nice, quiet place to work with lots of computers. He also didn't want people hearing him swear while he worked. He had a bad habit of doing that. That was especially true when he spent three to four hours straight, hopped up on caffeine, straightening out Jeff's crappy T++ garbage. Chuck parked in a handicapped space out front. He was driving his old pickup. It was a dingy, multi colored rust bucket from the seventies. Chuck dug his fingernails into his steering wheel, gritted his teeth, and

exhaled an angry breath. He yanked back his door handle, kicked the door out of the way, and stomped across a grid of cement squares.

The front of Herring Elementary was covered with windows. There were six shiny, wooden doors. Out front, the doors had flat, curvy handles with locks. Chuck dangled his keys in front of his shiny, brown eyes. He flung keys out of the way and found the one for the school. He jammed it into the nearest lock and twisted it to the side. Then, he jerked the door out of his way and stomped inside. He looked like a lunatic on a homicidal rampage. The tiles in the main hallway were four foot by four foot. They were white with red, grey, and brown spots. A grid of chrome lay between them. The walls were covered with cinderblocks. One side was painted peacock. The other side was painted teal. Chuck dashed down the hall and stopped in front of a shiny, wooden door with a brass knob. There was a tall, thin pane of glass beside the knob. Chuck used a different key to open that door. Then, he wandered inside. A similar door stood at the other side of the janitor's closet. Chuck used a third key to open that one. Then, he entered the server room.

The server room was filled with foldout tables and old, cruddy computer towers with slow processors. The school was going to throw them away. Chuck thought that was the stupidest thing he'd ever heard. He set them up and used them to host a website for the school. It was the most efficient computer lab on campus. At least, that's how Chuck felt about it. He wandered down a flight of stairs and dashed by a row of tables topped

with computer monitors. There was a thin door, painted white. It was on the opposite end of the wall. Chuck stopped in front of the door and opened it. A rod stretched across the narrow space. Some of Chuck's clothes were hanging from the rod. A white shelf hovered above that. Chuck grabbed a tin box off the top. It was once a box filled with chocolate covered pretzels. Chuck finished those off long ago. He closed the closet, laid the box on the end of a foldout table, and popped the top. Inside, there was a double action revolver with a wooden grip. It was a shiny, snub nosed, 44 Special. There was also a box of ammunition. Chuck grabbed the revolver and stuffed it into the right, front pocket of his black jeans. He slipped the box of ammo into his left pocket and left.

Chuck had a pretty good idea where to find Jeff Forrester. There was one thing he never stopped doing... reading. Jeff used to drive Chuck crazy. When they worked for the Department of Defense, Jeff read thirty to forty books a day. It was mind boggling. Chuck couldn't name thirty books he'd read in his life. Every time he turned around, Jeff had a book in his hand. He read extremely fast. He spent twenty to thirty seconds on a pair of pages. Then, he flipped to the next two. Chuck had no idea how he did it. He tried to get Jeff to explain. Jeff shrugged.

"Don't you know how to read?" Chuck narrowed his eyes. "Just do that... only faster."

Chuck shook his head. "You can read all those books. But, you can't write a simple program?"

Jeff smiled a little. "I get the concept. That's all that's important. The rest is just grunt work."

Chuck pounded his fist against his steering wheel. He was back in his pickup, headed downtown. New Jack City's downtown area got pretty busy on Saturdays. There were people everywhere. The streets were filled with traffic from one end of the grid to the other. As is typical for a downtown area, the roads were mostly narrow, one way streets. There was a traffic light at every intersection. It was like living in the 1920s. Except, there was a shit-load of people. It was nauseating. It was also pouring down rain. Chuck noticed the sky was getting cloudy when he got to the elementary. Now, the sky was filled with black. It glittered with lightning and thunder. Rain erupted from a somber canopy and gushed down the streets. None of that disturbed anyone downtown. Everyone just carried umbrellas. Chuck found a nice, quiet parking lot with very few people. It was the parking lot in front of the library.

Chuck pulled in and parked near the front of the building. New Jack City's downtown library was a two story, red brick building. It was over one hundred years old. The bricks were cracked, crooked, and fading. The front of the library was dotted with eight tall, skinny windows. The windows were trimmed with wood, painted white. The trim formed a plus sign across the glass. The paint was faded and peeling. The wood was rotted and warped. Chuck's driver's side door opened a crack. A black umbrella with a curved, wooden handle poked out and popped open. Chuck

hopped out of his truck, held the umbrella above his head, and looked around. There was only one car besides his. It was a light blue compact with tall windows and a short, stumpy body. Chuck figured it belonged to the librarian. He turned and wandered inside the building. A pair of tall, oak doors closed behind him.

The library was solemn and silent. It was like a tomb. The floor was covered with flat, jagged rocks. A grid of red carpet lay on top of that. There was an ancient, oak desk beside the door. The desktop was surrounded by a border that was carved into the wood. It looked like a rectangle of rope. A big, heavy, CRT monitor lay on top. No one was sitting at the desk. Rows of oak tables with old, warped, oak chairs were scattered beyond the desk. The remainder of the room was filled with rows of bookshelves. Chuck slipped his hand into his pocket. He curled his fingers around his revolver. Something didn't feel right. Chuck visited a Holocaust museum when he was a teenager. The library gave him a similar vibe. He treaded lightly. He skidded by tables and stopped beside the nearest bookshelf. He crouched and peeked around the edge. He looked above rows of books. He spotted Jeff thirteen rows away. Chuck could see the back of his head. It was covered with soft, shiny, red hair.

The shelves in the library were fifteen rows tall. There was a ladder used by personnel to get books off higher shelves. The ladder stood straight up. It had a flat base, wheels, and handrails from top to bottom. Jeff stood on the ladder, halfway up. He faced the steps. His arms were curled

around the rails. He held a book in front of his face. It was a thick, medium sized paperback. It had a maroon spine with white lettering and turquoise covers with blue lettering. The book was titled "Earning Friends and Changing Minds." Jeff was near the end. He scanned a pair of pages. It took him ten seconds. He flipped to the next two and gobbled them up. Then, he visited the next two. A mountain of books buried the base of the ladder. Jeff had already finished them. He spotted Chuck out of the corner of his eye. He smiled a little and continued reading. Chuck stood at the end of the aisle Jeff was on. He aimed his pistol at Jeff's ear and thumbed back the hammer.

"Hi, Jeff," he remarked.

Jeff calmly cleared his throat. "Why, Chuck... What a pleasant surprise." He flipped to the next two pages in the paperback and stared them down. Chuck spotted the librarian. Rather, he spotted her body. It was lying on the floor between Chuck and Jeff. The librarian was in her early thirties. She wore nothing but a pair of sandals with thin, beaded straps. She had short, curly, brown hair and soft, glowing skin. Eight kitchen knives with wooden handles were buried in her breasts. Two knives were sticking out of her eyes. Her entrails were piled beside her right hip. Straight pins with colored, plastic balls were sticking out of the tips of her fingers and toes. Her body lay in a pool of ice cold crimson. Blood was slathered across her flesh from top to bottom. Her arms and legs were twisted and contorted. Her face was painted with arched eyebrows and

strained, twisted lips. A pair of eyeglasses with thick, plastic frames lay beside her face. The lenses were cracked and spattered with blood. Chuck looked at Jeff. Jeff flipped to the next two pages in the paperback.

“Jeff, what’s wrong with you?” Chuck demanded.

Jeff tilted his head. “Kind of busy, here.”

Chuck’s eyebrows drooped in the middle. “Jeff! I’ve got a forty-four caliber slug pointed at your face!”

“Yes, Chuck,” Jeff replied. “I noticed.” Jeff polished off a couple more pages. Then, he flipped to the next two. Chuck exhaled a shaky breath. He squeezed the trigger on his pistol.

“I’m going to kill you, Jeff,” he remarked.

Jeff’s eyebrows slid up his forehead. “No, you won’t.” He finished the paperback and shut it. He dropped it on top of the books on the floor and stared between Chuck’s eyes. The corners of his mouth curled towards his forehead. “Do you know why?”

Chuck licked his lips. “It’s not in your best interest to make me question that right now.”

Jeff grinned. “Chuck...” he explained. “If you so much as *look* at me wrong, I’ll have my boys slit L.I.N.’s throat, chop her into pieces, and burn her corpse.” He looked at the tops of his eyes and shrugged. “Or... whatever you’d call it.” He faced Chuck. “If you kill me, they’ll receive a signal. Then, they’ll kill her, dissect her, and incinerate her.” Jeff started down the ladder. Chuck’s hands started shaking. He kept his pistol aimed

between Jeff's eyes. Jeff reached the bottom of the ladder, faced Chuck, and smiled a little. "After that, we'll go after the other one." Jeff narrowed his eyes. "You know... that fine, little thing you've got running around over there." He tilted his head. "What's her name?" He tapped one of his lenses. "She wears those little glasses?" Chuck pinched his eyes shut. He swallowed and exhaled a shaky breath.

"Brandy..." he remarked. He lowered his pistol and dropped it in his pocket. "Her name is Brandy." He stared into Jeff's warm, blue eyes. Jeff slipped his glasses off his face. He took a handkerchief out of his pocket and swabbed the lenses.

"That's it," he remarked. "Brandy Scott, right?" Jeff looked his glasses over. He lowered them and continued rubbing the lenses. "So, *what?* She's like... your little piece of ass on the side or something?"

Chuck folded his arms over his chest. "Not everyone's a creep like you, Jeff. Some people actually have respect for the people they know."

Jeff laid his glasses over his eyes. "I don't understand what you mean."

Chuck nodded. "That's because you're a psychopath."

Jeff shrugged. "So, it's all about respect? That's why you're not getting some from Brandy?"

Chuck forced a smile. "You think?"

Jeff pressed his lips together. "It has nothing to do with the fact that you're... just a coward?"

Chuck rolled his eyes. “Aw... You figured out my secret. I don’t actually have *respect* for L.I.N. or Brandy. I’m just hiding how big a coward I am.” Jeff didn’t look amused. Chuck closed his eyes and swallowed. He stared into Jeff’s face. “What the hell do you want from me, Jeff?”

Jeff took a breath. “Simple problem, really.” He dug a shiny, black flash drive out of the pocket of his khakis. “I’m building a wormhole to Proxima Centauri.” He narrowed his eyes. “I told you, right?”

Chuck threw his hands out at his sides. “Not this, again! Seriously?” Jeff tossed the flash drive across the aisle. Chuck curled the hook of his umbrella around his forearm. The flash drive landed in his hands. Chuck stared at it and looked up. “Didn’t I already recode this for you?”

Jeff shrugged. “Well... I had to modify the source code a little bit. You understand.”

Chuck widened his eyes and shook his head. “No I don’t, actually. It was working just fine.”

Jeff stuffed his hands in his pockets. “I had to... add a few things.”

Chuck dangled the flash drive in front of his eyes. “Like what?”

Jeff tilted his head. “This and that.” Chuck looked up. He licked his lips.

“You didn’t hurt her, did you?” Jeff smirked. He slowly shook his head. Chuck exhaled through his nose. “Can I talk to her, please?”

Jeff squinted. “That’s definitely not possible.”

Chuck blew a breath through his lips. “You’re an ass. You want me to

fix a bunch of code for you... and waste my time... And, you're not even going to let me talk to her?"

"She's in a Faraday cage," Jeff explained.

Chuck bobbed his head. "Really?"

Jeff nodded. "You'll not be communicating with her. Not while I've got her." Chuck plopped his forehead in his palm. He looked up and shook his head.

"Just tell me where she is, Jeff. What do you think I'm gonna do? Go steal her back?"

Jeff held up his index finger. "You cannot... know where she is. Not yet." Chuck looked away. He crossed his arms over his chest.

"Jeff, I have to talk to her." He looked up. "I *need* to talk to her."

Jeff smiled a little. "You can talk to her all you want." He pointed at the flash drive. "After you finish." Chuck's eyeballs felt like they had pins in them. He stared at the floor and swallowed.

"How long do I have?"

Jeff stroked his chin. "Not long. Couple of hours at the most."

Chuck rolled his eyes without looking up. "Where... can I find you?" He stared between Jeff's eyes. Jeff stared back.

"Don't worry. I'll find *you*." Chuck shook his head. He turned and disappeared. Jeff glanced at his watch. It was just after ten. He wandered up the ladder and looked around. There was one book left on the fifth shelf. The others were on the floor. The remaining book was titled "Help Yourself

by Helping Others.” Jeff tilted his head. “Hmm...” he mused. He flipped back the cover and found the first page.

Chuck was still carrying his umbrella. He wandered outside, popped it open, and threw it over his head. He took out Brandy’s cell phone and studied it. There were two buttons at the bottom. Chuck tapped the one on the left. The screen filled with graphics. Chuck spotted an icon in the lower, left corner. It was a blue square with a tiny, white telephone on it. Chuck touched it. The screen filled with a grid of digits. There was also a pound sign and an asterisk. Chuck dialed L.I.N. and Hal’s number and put Brandy’s cell phone to his ear. He stared into space. He was surrounded by torrents of rain. It poured from the sky and splashed the parking lot. Brandy picked up after the first ring.

“*Hello?*” she spat. She sounded frustrated and frantic. She paused and took a breath. “*Chuck?*”

“Yes, Brandy,” Chuck replied. “It’s me.”

Brandy sighed. “*What the hell? Where are you?*”

Chuck shrugged. “I’m at the library... obviously.”

Brandy and Hal were in the server room. White tiles covered the floor. Slats of oak slathered the walls. A long, oak desk rested in front of the southern wall. Seven junky monitors sat on top. Hal called them the seven dinosaurs. There were three keyboards in front of those. Two rolling chairs rested in front of the desk. One was trimmed with brown leather. The other was trimmed with grey fabric. The brown, leather chair had a

high back and arm rests. The fabric covered chair had no arm rests. It had a tiny, cushioned back that hovered on a chrome rod. Hal sat in the leather chair. A white keyboard with white and grey buttons lay in his lap. He stared at one of the seven dinosaurs and typed furiously. His brass fingers were tiny and precise. Hal found he could type faster with those than his real fingers. Brandy plopped down on the other chair and sighed. She crossed her thighs and laid her right arm on top. She held a red, transparent, cordless phone to her ear.

“Did you find L.I.N.?” Brandy inquired.

Chuck fumbled through his keys. He shoved one into a lock on his driver’s side door and twisted it. “Kind of,” he replied. He ripped the door open, hopped into his truck, and slammed the door. It smashed against the door frame and rattled. But, it didn’t close. Rather, it squealed, rolled open, and flopped on its hinges. Chuck stared at it and tilted his head.

Brandy squinted. She threw her hands out at her sides. “What do you mean ‘kind of’?”

Chuck reached for his door. It felt like his arm stretched across half the parking lot. He grabbed a hold of a squishy handle and yanked the door closed. “She’s been kidnapped,” he explained. He rammed a key into his ignition and started the engine.

“Kidnapped?” Brandy requisitioned. “By who?” Hal stopped typing. His head twisted to the left. He folded his arms over his chest and stared at Brandy’s temple.

Chuck licked his lips. "That's not important."

Brandy scrunched up her face. "Chuck... What's the person's name?"

Chuck shrugged. "Jeff Forrester."

Brandy nodded. "Who's Jeff Forrester?" Hal stared at the floor. He felt like licking his lips. Unfortunately, he couldn't. He faced the monitor and continued typing.

"Some guy I used to work with," Chuck replied. He threw his truck into reverse, backed up, and drove to the edge of the parking lot. "We worked for the Department of Defense."

Brandy bobbed her head. She sat back and laid her arm across her belly. "I didn't know you worked for the D.O.D." Hal stopped typing and glanced at Brandy. He returned his attention to the monitor and resumed typing. Brandy narrowed her eyes. "Doing what?"

Chuck made a left. He wafted across two lanes of traffic and stopped behind a line of cars waiting for a light to change. "Weird shit," Chuck replied. "I'm guessing you guys didn't have any luck?"

Brandy looked at Hal and shook her head. "No. Hal says he's watching for..." She scrunched up her face. "Ping requests? Or, something. He's also searching wireless networks in the area for L.I.N.'s..." She laid the telephone receiver over her shoulder. "What did you call it?"

Hal typed and studied the monitor. "Her MAC address."

Brandy put the receiver to her ear. "L.I.N.'s MAC address."

Chuck nodded. "Tell him he won't find her."

Brandy laid her elbow on her knee. She rested her chin in her palm.
“Well, how do *you* know?”

“Tell him she’s in a Faraday cage,” Chuck remarked. “He’ll understand.”

“Hang on,” Brandy replied. She curled her fingers over the receiver’s mouth piece and looked at Hal. “Chuck says she’s in a... fair day cage?”
Hal looked up. He folded his fingers in front of his speaker mouth and thought. He shook his head and returned his attention to the monitor.

“Doesn’t matter,” he remarked. “I’m going to keep looking for her.”
Brandy sat up and cleared her throat. She put the telephone receiver to her ear.

“Hal says he going to keep looking for her.”

“No,” Chuck replied. “I need you guys to...”

“Help me with something...” Hal whispered. He sat back, folded his arms over his chest, and stared at Brandy.

“Help you with what?” Brandy inquired. Hal held out his hand. His shiny, brass fingers hovered in front of Brandy’s rimless spectacles. Brandy looked at Hal and blinked.

“Give me the phone, Brandy,” Hal instructed.

“Hold on, Chuck,” Brandy remarked. She laid the receiver in Hal’s palm. Hal laid the upper part of the receiver against a microphone on the left side of his head. The phone’s mouthpiece hovered in front of the speaker above Hal’s chin.

“Chuck,” he remarked. “Let me ask you something.”

The light changed. People lined up in front of Chuck began crawling down the street. Chuck shook his head. “What?”

Hal laid his keyboard on his desk. He slouched in his chair and laid his free arm on an arm rest. “Have you made it back to the school, yet?” Brandy scrunched up her nose. She looked at Hal and threw her hands out at her sides.

Chuck thought a moment. He tilted his head and stared into space. “No,” he finally replied. The car in front of him began moving. Chuck let off his brake. The driver in front of him slammed on his brakes. Chuck rolled his eyes. He eased his brake pedal to the floor. He checked his rearview mirror to make sure the person behind him didn’t rear end him. The person behind him stopped just in time. Chuck faced forward. “I’m waiting for the punch line, Hal.”

Hal tried to slide his lips to the side of his face. His speaker didn’t budge. He leaned forward, laid his arm on the desk, and tapped his fingers. “Send the vortex source code to BlackBetty, HalsStuff, Backups. Just scopy it.”

Chuck slid his thumbnail across his teeth. He dropped his arm in his lap and faced forward. “Hal, what are you talking about? What... How do you know about vortexes?”

“Just send me the vortex part,” Hal instructed. “You can take care of the easy stuff.”

“Like the gateways?” Chuck inquired. He smirked. “Since when is Jeff’s gateway code easy?” He threw his free hand out at his side. “And, how do *you* know about it?”

“The gateway parts haven’t changed much,” Hal explained. “Mainly, the vortex code is what has changed. I’ll take care of that. You take care of the gateways and the generator.”

Chuck smacked his steering wheel. “Hal, how do you *know* about this stuff?!” The car in front of him took off. Chuck stomped his gas pedal to the floor. “What... is going on?!”

“Don’t worry, Chuck,” Hal remarked. “We’re going to get her back.” He held the telephone receiver in front of his face and tapped the talk button. The phone beeped and hung up.

Chuck shook his head. The driver in front of him slammed on his brakes. Chuck scrunched up his face and threw his arms out at his sides. He stomped his brake pedal to the floor and skidded to a stop. He hung up Brandy’s phone and dropped it on his seat.

Brandy looked at Hal. She narrowed her eyes. “The... vortex code?” Hal stared through the lenses of Brandy’s glasses. He tried to smile. But, nothing happened. He motioned towards an oak bookshelf next to his desk with his head.

“Why don’t you gather us some books, Brandy?” he suggested. He tugged a cord dangling from his left thigh. It was plugged into a power strip below the desk. “I’m still charging.” Brandy nodded. She hopped up

and headed for the bookshelf.

“Which books?” Brandy inquired. She stared at Hal’s textbooks, plopped her hands on her kidneys, and looked around. “What are we looking for, exactly?”

“We’re going to do some programming,” Hal explained.

Chapter 4: "Faraday Cage"

A Faraday cage is a protective mesh. It prevents electrical charges from passing through. When used as an enclosure, items inside are unaffected by electrical current outside. The converse is also true. The power plant in Prospect had a Faraday cage. It was eight feet long, twelve feet wide, and seven feet tall. It was used for experimental purposes. It consisted of a box shaped frame made of chain link fence railing. The railing was skinned with thick, steel mesh. The cage looked like it was tiled with barbecue grills. The front of the cage was fitted with a door. A red, leather couch rested along the back wall. Four rolling office chairs were scattered in front of that. They had high backs and plastic arm rests. They were slathered with black, imitation leather. Frank and Bat Shit each sat in a chair. Frank sat near the door. He slouched in his seat and folded his arms over his chest. Bat Shit sat with his back facing the sofa.

Lisa stood in a corner beside the door. Her face was painted with a cold gaze. She watched Frank and Bat Shit like a hawk. She held a wrist watch that was similar to Jeff's. It curled around the knuckles of her left hand. L.I.N. was sprawled across the sofa. She was still switched off. Her head was plopped on one of the arm rests. Her arms were folded over her belly. Her legs were crossed at the ankles. Frank had wandering eyes. He studied L.I.N. from top to bottom. L.I.N. was still breathing. Frank stared at her chest. It drifted towards the ceiling then flattened against red, leather couch cushions. Frank thought L.I.N.'s breasts were kind of small.

They were the size of two navel oranges split down the middle. Frank liked that, though. They were cute and cuddly. He stared at L.I.N.'s skin. It was shiny and bright. A single fluorescent light hovered above the Faraday cage. So, L.I.N.'s soft, glowing flesh was wrapped with shadowy fishnets. Frank studied her legs. L.I.N. wore a denim skirt that covered her thighs. A row of frays dangled from the bottom. A pair of slick, lens shaped kneecaps poked out below that. L.I.N.'s calves were smooth and taught. Crescents below her shins were feathered with soft shadows.

"Frank!" Lisa snapped. Frank's head twisted like top. It nearly fell off his shoulders. Lisa scowled at him. She showed him the watch around her fingers. "I see you over there, you perv. Stop staring!"

Frank shrugged. "Sorry. Can't help it."

The Faraday cage was in the middle of a large room. The ceiling was two stories high. It was covered with plastic bricks. So were the walls and the floor. The bricks along the ceiling were red. The ones across the walls were white. The bricks on the floor were frosty blue. A long, thick pole was sticking out of the floor. It was two thirds the height of the room. It had a diameter of three feet. It was made of a wall of thick, charcoal colored glass. At the top of the pole, there was a gigantic, steel ball. It filled the height between the top of the pole and the ceiling. The sphere had a diameter of five feet. The steel sphere and glass shaft were part of a giant Van de Graaff generator. Workers sometimes used it for experiments. It stood beyond the door of the Faraday cage, next to rows of plastic bricks

covering the wall. An identical generator stood at the opposite end of the room.

A thick, orange bolt of electricity fired from the sphere overlooking the door. It twisted across the room and smashed into the Faraday cage. Lisa shrieked. Bat Shit and Frank hopped out of their seats. Everyone faced the Van de Graaff generator. There was a pair of thick, wooden doors behind the generator's glass base. The one on the left receded. Jeff stepped through and stomped around the Van de Graaff generator. He looked at everyone and smiled a little. Lisa glared at him. She scrunched up her face, balled her fists at her sides, and stomped her foot.

"Jeff, you ass!" Frank cackled. Bat Shit folded his arms over his chest and shook his head. Long, thick dread locks battered his chest, arms, and back. Jeff dangled a thin, plastic remote control from his fingertips. It had a white face plate and a shiny, black case. The face was dotted with six tiny, red buttons.

"Sorry, Lisa," Jeff remarked. "I had to try out my new toy."

Lisa crossed her arms. "Try it out, *now*."

Jeff narrowed his eyes. "Ha." There were chrome, lever shaped knobs on both sides of the Faraday cage door. Jeff twisted the one on his side, opened the door, and wandered inside. He closed the door behind him. Then, he held up the remote and tapped the top, left button. A curly, violet lightning bolt cracked the air in two. It spiraled out of the Van de Graaff generator and zapped the roof of the Faraday cage. Lisa shouted.

She fell to her knees and folded her arms over the back of her head. Frank and Bat Shit chuckled. Jeff stared at his girlfriend. He rolled his eyes and shook his head.

“Man, how did you get here so fast?” Bat Shit inquired.

Jeff smirked. “The librarian was kind enough to lend me her car.” He looked at Lisa. “Did the boys behave themselves?” Lisa’s head popped up. She stared at Jeff through a pair of fiery, blue eyes. She parted her lips and exhaled an angry breath.

“Bat Shit didn’t do anything stupid.” She stared at Frank. “I had to zap Frank a couple of times.”

Frank’s eyebrows fell in the middle. “Hey!”

Lisa hopped off the floor and motioned towards Frank. “He’s a God damned pervert!” she shouted. “I caught him trying to lift up L.I.N.’s shirt on the way over here. Twice!”

Jeff stared at Frank. “Frank!” He threw his hands out at his sides and tilted his head. “What did I tell you?”

Frank shrugged. “I’m sorry, Jeff. Yous guys know... they used to call me ‘Freaky Frank’, right?” He looked around. Bat Shit’s eyebrows drooped in the middle. He stared at Frank and crossed his arms.

“Yes, mon,” he replied. “You’ve told us a thousand times!”

Jeff slipped the remote into the pocket of his khakis. He wandered across the Faraday cage and knelt in front of the sofa. His laptop was hiding underneath. He slipped it out, flipped it open, and tapped the power

button. He sat in front of the sofa and folded his legs like a pretzel. He reached across L.I.N.'s belly and curled his fingers around hers. He dragged her little hand over the edge of the couch and straightened her pinkie. The tip was folded back. An RJ45 port was exposed. Jeff noticed it appear when he powered L.I.N. off, earlier. He dug a USB device out of his pocket and looked it over. It had a USB type A, male connector on one end and an RJ45, male connector on the other. There was a plastic case in between. Jeff plugged the USB connector into his laptop. He connected the RJ45 end to L.I.N.'s pinkie. Lisa knelt next to Jeff. She stared at L.I.N.'s pinkie and tilted her head.

“What *is* that?” she inquired.

Jeff looked up. “It’s a LAN port.”

Lisa shrugged. “What’s it do?”

Jeff returned his attention to L.I.N.'s hand. “I assume you have to send it a signal to turn her back on.” He glanced at his computer screen. It prompted for a username. Jeff entered a username followed by a password. “It’s called ‘Wake on LAN’.” Jeff typed “SendWOL” and pressed return. A script began sending Wake on LAN signals to the USB connector he attached to L.I.N.'s pinkie. After thirty seconds, her eyelids fluttered open. Her lips parted, and she took a breath. She closed her eyes and rubbed them. She sat up, tilted her head back, and yawned. Jeff stared at her blankly. “L.I.N.,” he remarked. L.I.N. jumped. She dropped her fingers in her lap and looked around. She stared through Jeff’s shiny, round lenses.

Her breathing became heavy and shaky.

A black mouse cursor with a white border bobbed across L.I.N.'s video feed. It hovered above an icon on her taskbar. It was a black square with a grey border. A terminal opened. A tiny, white rectangle printed the word "smash" followed by a greater than symbol. L.I.N. typed Wi-FiNet and issued a return value. A window opened. There was a menu bar at the top, an empty, white box in the middle, and a pair of buttons at the bottom. After ten seconds, a row of black text appeared in the white box. It read "No wireless networks detected." The mouse cursor dashed across the desktop. It clicked one of the buttons on the window. It read "Cancel." The window closed. L.I.N. closed the terminal as well. She looked at Jeff. She inhaled through her nose and exhaled through her lips.

"You've got me inside a Faraday cage," L.I.N. remarked. She stared at a wall of steel mesh several feet away. Then, she looked beyond the wall. She focused on an object across the room. To L.I.N.'s surprise, it was a gigantic Van de Graaff generator. L.I.N. stared at its glass base. Her eyeballs crawled up the thick, glass cylinder and stopped near the top. L.I.N. folded her legs like a pretzel. She flattened her palms against a red, leather cushion underneath her butt. She turned herself and looked around. Her head tilted all the way back. She stared at a big, shiny ball at the top of the Van de Graaff generator.

"Hey!" Jeff barked. He held his fingers in front of L.I.N.'s chin, pressed his thumb and middle finger together, and rattled off a pair of

snaps. L.I.N. faced him. She rested her palms on her knees and blinked her shiny, green eyes.

“Where are we? Like a... power plant?”

Jeff smirked. “You’re a very smart girl, L.I.N.,” Jeff remarked. He squeezed a little, plastic tab on the end of the adapter sticking out of L.I.N.’s pinkie. He tugged the RJ45 connector out of her finger and laid the adapter in his lap. L.I.N. stared at her pinkie. The tip closed and sealed shut. “I can see why Chuck likes you so much.” L.I.N. looked up. She turned her head and stared into Lisa’s eyes. She swallowed nervously.

“Um... h-hi, Lisa,” she remarked. Lisa stared between L.I.N.’s eyes. She exhaled slowly through her nostrils.

“Don’t worry. I’m not going to kick you in the face, again.” L.I.N. jerked her eyes away and focused on the floor. She dared another glance at Jeff’s face. The corners of Jeff’s lips curled towards his forehead a little.

“You don’t want me getting on the Wi-Fi?” L.I.N. inquired.

Jeff grinned. “There’s that wit, again.” He pressed his lips together and nodded. “That’s right, L.I.N. I’ve got to keep you off the internet.”

L.I.N. exhaled a shaky sigh. “Why?” Jeff tilted his head. He looked to his right. L.I.N. stared at the side of his head. She turned her head and looked across the room. There were bodies stacked along the wall. The first eleven workers Jeff, Frank, and Bat Shit killed were piled on the floor. Thirteen workers that came in at one and twelve that came in at nine were stacked on top. Fountains of blood trickled across their flesh. It pooled

around them on the floor. L.I.N. shook like a leaf. Her eyebrows squashed at the outer edges of her eyes. She shrugged up her shoulders and faced forward. She looked at Jeff's face from the tops of her eyes. Jeff stared back. He was smiling a little.

"That's why..." he whispered. He flipped up his index finger and laid it across his lips. L.I.N. cupped her sleeves around her palms. She draped her fingers over her lips, pinched her eyes shut, and bowed her head. She lifted her thighs, stuffed her wrists and face between her knees, and sobbed. Jeff stood up. He stared at the top of L.I.N.'s head. He slid his lips to the side of his face. *"Now, L.I.N..."* L.I.N. weaved her fingers over the back of her head. She filled the room with breathy cries. Jeff's eyes and mouth relaxed. His face went dull. He snatched L.I.N.'s wrist off the top of her head. *"Hey!"* he shrieked. He whirled her arm through the air like a wet towel. *"Look at me!"* L.I.N.'s head popped up. She looked between Jeff's eyes and whimpered. Tears poured down her cheeks. Jeff bent over. He laid his forehead against L.I.N.'s and stared into her eyes.

"I don't wanna hurt you," Jeff remarked. *"But I will, if I have to."* He motioned towards the pile of bodies across the room with his head. *"Then, I'll stack your lifeless, plastic, demagnetized carcass over there with the rest of those dead mother fuckers."* He curled his fingers through L.I.N.'s sapphire locks. He made a fist and jerked her head to the side. His face wrinkled and twisted like an old, oak tree. His eyelids disappeared into his face. His lips curled away from his teeth. The bridge of his nose folded up

and crinkled. He looked like a hideous freak. “UNDERSTAND?!” he shouted. L.I.N.’s eyelids fluttered. She scrunched up her face and looked away. She responded with a quick, shaky, terrified nod. Jeff spit on the side of L.I.N.’s face. He smacked her cheek and stepped away. Jeff’s hideous slap made L.I.N.’s head ring. She exhaled a nervous breath and stared at rows of blue, plastic bricks covering the floor. Jeff bowed his head and sighed. Then, he looked up and smiled a little.

“Well, then,” he remarked. He looked around. “Let’s get rid of some these bodies.” He looked at Frank. “Frank?” Frank was standing behind him. He folded his arms over his chest, looked into Jeff’s eyes, and bobbed his head. “Let’s go get the gasoline.”

Frank nodded. “Yeah, sure.” He turned and opened the door on the side of the Faraday cage. He stepped to the side and waited for Jeff. Jeff wandered through first. Frank was right behind him. They slipped across the room, wandered around the Van de Graaff generator, and exited through the double doors. Lisa stood up. She glanced at the bodies across the room. Then, she stared at L.I.N. L.I.N. was shivering. She plopped her elbow beside her thigh, laid her eyes in her palm, and sobbed. Lisa slipped her fingers inside a pocket on her white jeans. She curled her fingers around a hankie. She yanked it out and flapped it through the air. She leaned forward and laid the handkerchief on L.I.N.’s cheek. She dabbed at her boyfriend’s spit. L.I.N. smacked Lisa’s hand. Her head popped up, and she stared between Lisa’s eyes.

“Get the *fuck* away from me!” she shrieked. Lisa slid her lips to the side of her face. She stuffed her hankie in her pocket and folded her fingers in front of her waist. L.I.N. gritted her teeth. “Now!” She looked at Bat Shit. “Go!” Lisa looked at L.I.N. from the tops of her eyes. She blinked condescendingly.

“*I* see why Chuck likes you,” she remarked. She smirked. “You’re a big baby just like he is.” L.I.N. pinched her eyes shut. She bowed her head and sighed.

“*Get out of here...*” she rasped. She cleared her throat and looked up. “Please?”

Bat Shit folded his arms over his chest. “Man, one of us has to stay here at all times.” He shrugged. “I’m sorry. But no, mon. Not happening.” L.I.N. stared into Bat Shit’s deep, dark eyes. Her eyes slid away and focused on Lisa. Lisa grinned. She laid her fingers across her lips and giggled. She looked at Bat Shit.

“Man, keep an eye on that crazy bitch. Would you?” Lisa turned the lever on the cage door and stepped through. She looked over her shoulder. “There’s something *wrong* with that girl.”

L.I.N. pressed her lips together. “Who stacked all those bodies up over there, Lisa? Was it you?” Lisa continued to smile. Her eyebrows fell in the middle.

“Shut-up, sex bot,” she warned. “Or, I’ll cut you into little pieces and sprinkle you on top.” Lisa slammed the door. She wandered around the

Van de Graaff generator and shoved the double doors out of her way. L.I.N. licked her lips. She looked at Bat Shit. Bat Shit stared back. He pulled up a chair, sat down, and crossed his arms. L.I.N. laid her palms against tufts of leather beside her thighs. She exhaled a nervous breath. Bat Shit swallowed.

“Don’t worry, cyborg girl. I’m not gwan to hurt you.” He turned his head without looking away. “Not unless I have to.” L.I.N. wiped tears off her cheeks. She slipped her ankles onto the sofa and sat Indian style. She sat back and relaxed.

“I wanna talk to Chuck.”

Bat Shit shook his head. “No, I’m sorry. I cannot let you do that. Jeff was very specific, mon.” L.I.N. folded her arms. She narrowed her eyes and tilted her head.

“Why *do* you do what he says, anyway?”

Bat Shit forced a smile. “Man, you do not want to know. Trust me.”

L.I.N. nodded. “I’ve seen him do that thing... with his watch.” Bat Shit nodded. “He like... electrocutes you?” Bat Shit stared into L.I.N.’s poppy, green eyes. He looked away and squinted.

“He can torture me for years to come. All day, every day, if he so chooses.” Bat Shit returned his gaze to L.I.N. “And, he has already. He has broken me. I am what he needs me to be.” He turned his head without looking away. “I am his slave, mon. Nothing more.”

L.I.N. went limp and sighed. “You’re a human being.” She threw her

hands out at her sides. “You can do whatever you want.”

Bat Shit shook his head. “No, mon. I am just a copy. It’s as simple as dat.”

L.I.N. narrowed her eyes. “*Kill him...*” she whispered. She glanced at the double doors. “*Kill them both... You and Frank can take them.*” Bat Shit stared into L.I.N.’s eyes. He blinked. L.I.N. motioned towards his chest. “What about your powers?” She twitched her index finger in front of her eyes. “You did that... thing with the door that one time.” L.I.N. cleared her throat. “At the laundry mat. Remember?”

“It’s called Voodoo,” Bat Shit explained. “It’s the Voodoo magic, mon.”

L.I.N. raised her palms. “Right. So, why can’t you use that on Jeff and Lisa?”

Bat Shit shook his head. “It’s not that easy.” He laid his ankle on his knee.

“Why not?” L.I.N. inquired.

Bat Shit grinned. “*I* know the real reason why Chuck Parker is all hot on you, mon.” L.I.N. smiled. She rolled her eyes and shook her head. “You are very innocent and kind. Not manipulative and mysterious.” Bat Shit looked at the floor. He slid his lips to the side of his face and looked up. “It’s called Voodoo *magic*, woman name ‘L.I.N.’.” He turned his head without looking away. “Think about that a little while. See if you can understand how dat be figuring out.” He bobbed his head and winked.

L.I.N. blinked. She looked at her lap and nodded. She lifted her knees and scooted back. Bat Shit noticed her toenails. They were shiny and red. “Oh, I’m sorry,” he remarked. “We should have grabbed a pair of shoes for you when we left.”

L.I.N. looked up. “Huh?” She lifted her left knee and looked at her foot. “Aw, bummer...” She dangled her feet over the edge of the red, leather sofa and studied them. She curled her toes and thought a moment. She narrowed her eyes. “I thought I was wearing some.”

Chuck typed in a fury. He switched between two monitors and two keyboards. He slammed keys against circuit boards below. His desktops could barely keep up. He was back at the school. He was experimenting with a handful of tools he’d written. They were designed to perform a series of tasks. Basically, they did the same thing over and over. But, there were thousands of possibilities to test. Chuck liked to be thorough. And, he was in a rush. He had no idea how much time he had. He was a bit flustered. He stood in front of a table near the stairs. It was the only one along that wall. The other walls had three tables each. Three desktops lay below each table. Three monitors and three keyboards lay on top. The table near the stairs was plastered with polystyrene cups. There were seventeen in all. They were all empty. They were scattered about.

One of Chuck’s keyboards stopped working. He bobbed his head, scrunched up his face, and narrowed his eyes. He pounded the keyboard with his fists. He smashed every key he could lay his flesh on. He raked his

fingers across all four rows of characters. His command prompt didn't budge. Chuck's head slumped to the side. He gritted his teeth. He grabbed a hold of the keyboard, yanked it off the table, and slammed it against the wall. The walls were painted with rough, crimson bricks. The keyboard's case was comprised of two long, thin slabs of white plastic. They were screwed together. They split and tumbled through the air. Three chunks of green circuit boards wobbled away and crashed to the floor. Thick, plastic keys showered the room like confetti. Some were white. Some were grey. Chuck smiled. He plopped his hands on his hips and exhaled a satisfied sigh.

There was a third keyboard beside the two Chuck was working with. It was plugged into a desktop Chuck wasn't using. He dashed around the table, yanked the keyboard out, and slipped it into the desktop that had the broken keyboard. Then, he returned. He studied piles of cups. Most of them were lying on their sides. The insides were spattered with droplets of cold, milky coffee. Chuck looked them over quickly. He frowned. He laid his forearm on the table and swatted the cups off the table. They tumbled to the floor. They clattered on rows of slick, white tiles. Chuck stomped across the server room. An old teacher's desk stood at the other end. It lay in front of an old, shiny, white refrigerator in one of the back corners. Chuck marched towards the desk. He grabbed a hold of the nearest corner, lifted the desk off the floor, and shoved it out of the way. The desk was ancient, thick, and heavy. It slid across the floor and crashed into the

nearest wall.

“Get the fuck out of my way, you piece of shit!” Chuck barked. The refrigerator had a long, steel handle that lifted and opened the door. Chuck curled his fingers around the handle and yanked the door out of his way. “Don’t you know better than to stand between a programmer and his coffee?” Chuck was a little hopped up of caffeine. He spoke quickly, efficiently, and concisely. He sounded like a maniacal lunatic on a killing spree. His forehead was wrinkled. His eyelids were flipped back and sunken. His movements were frantic and fierce. His mind was filled with random, raging thoughts. He plopped a fresh carton of milk on top of the refrigerator and slammed the door. There was a wooden table beside the refrigerator. There was a coffee maker, a bowl of sweetener, a cup filled with coffee stirrers, and a stack of polystyrene cups on top. There was a storage space below. It was concealed by a duo of wooden doors. The coffee pot was full. Chuck made seventeen cups to start. He left an additional pot to brew. That way, he didn’t have to mess with it later.

He plopped three cups beside the coffee maker. Chuck always bought the biggest coffee cups he could get his hands on. Each held twenty-four fluid ounces. Chuck grabbed a carafe off a hot plate on the coffee maker. It was completely full. He filled each cup two-thirds of the way. That finished off the pot. Chuck sat the empty carafe on the hot plate. There was a red switch on the side of the machine. It was glowing. Chuck flipped it, and it went dim. He added milk to each coffee cup until they were full. Then, he

returned the carton of milk to the refrigerator, snaked his fingers around polystyrene cylinders, and dashed across the room. He arranged the cups in a row between the monitors he was working with. He stared at the screen on the left. It was filled with grey and white text. Chuck grabbed the nearest cup of coffee and put it to his lips. It was semi bitter, semi sweet. Chuck called it a “crappuccino.” Brandy’s little, white phone lay next to the keyboard on the left. It began vibrating. It played a song by some light hearted, alternative band she was into. Chuck stared at Brandy’s phone. He rolled his eyes and snatched it off the table. He tapped a button at the bottom and plopped the phone against his ear.

“What?!” he snapped.

“*Um... Chuck?*” Brandy replied. She sounded squeaky and timid. Chuck sighed impatiently. “*Is uh... Is everything going alright?*”

Chuck could barely hear her. The server room roared with trembling bass from a pipe organ. It was eerie and irritating. It was coming from a set of speakers on a server across the room. It was a piece written by Bach. Chuck’s eyebrows flattened. He stomped across the room, grabbed a hold of a tiny knob on one of the speakers, and turned it to the right. He stood, cupped his elbow in his palm, and pressed Brandy’s phone against his ear as hard as he could.

“What do you want, Brandy?”

Brandy sat next to Hal in Hal’s server room. She was surfing the internet for something called “inheritance.” She had no idea what the hell

that was. But, Hal asked her to look it up for him. She was tearing through chat rooms, trying to find a piece of sample code. That way, Hal could finish what *he* was working on. Brandy held a red, transparent, cordless phone to her ear. She turned her head and exhaled a shaky sigh. She detected a hint of frustration in Chuck's voice. She hesitated calling him. Hal put her up to it. She figured Chuck didn't want to be disturbed. Now, she felt kind of stupid. She closed her eyes and swallowed hard.

"Um, Hal asked me to call and find out..." She licked her lips. "And, find out how you were..."

Chuck's head fell on his shoulder. Then, it rolled to the back of his neck. He stared at the ceiling and shook his head. "Kind of busy, Brandy. Can we get to the talking part of this conversation?" He looked over his shoulder. Tasks needing to be completed flooded his thoughts. "Let me guess, Hal has *no* idea how to fix the vortex code. And, you two are just sitting there, scratching your heads." He nodded, impatiently. "Yeah?"

Brandy scrunched up her face. "Um... Chuck?"

"Got things going on," Chuck continued. "You know what I mean? Wheels are in motion. Jobs are stacked. Scripts are running. Tests are being run. Hypotheses are flying around. Code's compiling."

Brandy tilted her head to the side. She shut her eyes and exhaled a panicked breath.

"I've got books to tear through," Chuck remarked. "I need to understand Jeff's new 'energy' angle. I've gotta spend some time

researching that. I've gotta take a look at all the components we're connecting and how *those* all work together. I've gotta write define statements and shed a few thousand for loops."

Brandy smashed her thigh with her fist. She pressed her lips together and exhaled through her nostrils. "Chuck?"

Chuck narrowed his eyes. "What planet are all you people living on?" he inquired. "See, *I'm* living on the planet where there's only twenty-four hours in a day. Yes... only twenty-four of them, Brandy. Eight of them spent sleeping. Two or three spent eating." Chuck flicked his wrist. "Thirty minutes showering. Three or four hours driving. Gotta go shopping. Gotta run around and pay bills two or three times a week..."

"Chuck!" Brandy shouted.

Chuck slid his lips to the side of his face. "I'm sorry, is this boring you? Just a little bit?"

Brandy smacked her lips. "Forget it. I don't *need* to tell you anything." She tugged the phone away from her ear and laid her thumb on the talk button.

Chuck dropped his forehead in his palm. He felt frustrated and confused. He figured he'd overdone it on the caffeine a little. "I'm sorry, Brandy. What is it?"

Brandy stared at the receiver. She didn't know if she should hang up or not. She plopped Hal and L.I.N.'s little, red phone against her ear and took a breath. "What? Did you say something, butt-face?"

Chuck smacked his lips. He turned his head and forced a smile. "I'm sorry, Brandy. Go ahead."

Brandy raised her index finger and squinted. "Are you sure? I could always call back, later."

Chuck stared at the floor. He laid his arm across his belly. "Brandy, please tell me." He rolled his eyes. "Pretty, pretty please?"

Brandy smiled. "Hal's almost finished with the vortex. He told me to call and tell you." She threw her hand out at her side. "Okay?"

Chuck narrowed his eyes. "Wow, really? *That's* good to hear." He slid his lips to the side of his face. "Well, if the vortex is finished..." Chuck looked over his shoulder. He stared at the computer monitors across the room. Suddenly, the code *he* was working on seemed mundane and simple. It was like... no big deal. Chuck faced forward and smiled. "Wow, that's great!" He nodded. "Okay, then. I'm gotta..." He pointed over his shoulder with his thumb. "Just a little... something, something..." He scrunched up his face and exhaled through his nose. "I mean, I'm almost finished myself. You know... No biggie, I don't think. I'll bet I can finish this up in about half an hour."

Brandy smiled. "Okay. Well, that's all I wanted to tell you. I'll let you get back to work, now."

Chuck nodded. "Alright."

"And, Chuck," Brandy remarked. "Piece of advice?"

Chuck sighed. "What?"

Brandy looked at Hal. “Lay off the damn coffee. Jeez.” She tapped the talk button and laid the phone next to a black keyboard.

Chapter 5: “Wi-Fi”

The entire city of Prospect lay beneath a giant waterfall. Rain swirled from the sky by the bucketful. It drenched shiny rooftops. It spilled out of gutters. It flooded lawns. And, it dribbled across pricey, shiny SUVs. Rain pummeled the power plant. It was incessant and irritating. It poured down the exhaust pipes and the inlet pipes. It drizzled down tin, bricks, and glass covering the buildings. Jeff Forrester and Frank were in the exhaust room. There were two generator rooms in the Prospect power plant. A series of gigantic, shiny pipes carried exhaust from the plant’s natural gas generators to a central hub in the exhaust room. The central hub had a useful feature. It was perfectly suited to Jeff and Frank’s needs. A long shaft dropped from the bottom of the hub. That way if the power station crew needed to vent extra exhaust, they could use the existing exhaust pipes. Rows of turbines arranged inside the pipes ensured the exhaust drifted up not down.

Jeff and Frank had ten burning bodies stacked below the central hub. The floor was concrete. So, there was little concern about catching the building on fire. The bodies were charcoal black. Stacks of flames rolled out of smoldering flesh and swirled towards the exhaust pipes. Black smoke poured off the tips of the flames. It was a hideous sight. Jeff and Frank wandered in with three more bodies slumped over their shoulders. They marched to the center of the room and stopped near the hub. They dropped the bodies on the concrete. Jeff and Frank treated them like slabs of meat

in a butcher shop. They bent over, grabbed a body, and tossed it on top of the others. They repeated the process with the other two.

“Just like sardines, eh Jeff?” Frank remarked. Jeff stared at the stack of burning flesh. He smiled a little and tilted his head.

“That’s what *I’m* talking about. Work smarter, not harder.” He looked at Frank. “Drown ‘em.” A pair of tin, five gallon gas cans were fifteen feet away. Jeff was insistent about that. After all, he didn’t want the gas cans to catch fire. Frank wandered across the room, grabbed a can of gasoline, and returned. A long flat handle lay across the top. There was a threaded cap beside that. Frank unscrewed the cap, tilted the gas can, and dribbled gasoline on top of the bodies he and Jeff added to the pile. Vivid, roaring flames painted the fresh corpses. Their flesh faded and singed. Their clothes rippled, turned black, and disintegrated. Plumes of thick, black smoke tumbled out and swirled up the exhaust pipes.

“Wooh!” Frank howled. He looked at Jeff. Jeff nodded approvingly.

“Let’s go check on Bat Shit and Lisa. Make sure nothing funny’s going on.”

“Yeah, sure,” Frank replied. He returned the cap to the gas can. Then, he wandered across the room and laid the flat, tin can beside the other.

L.I.N. was tired of being trapped in a cage. She was going stir crazy. Also, she was suffering was terminal internet withdrawal. Living in a house with Wi-Fi, she’d grown accustomed to opening a web browser any time she

felt the need. It was infuriating any time she was unable to connect. L.I.N. kept thinking of things to research on Intercyclopedia. Out of habit, she'd pull up her web browser. Then, she'd frown. She looked at Bat Shit. He sat next to the left side of the steel mesh door. He sat in one of the rolling chairs with his arms folded over his chest. L.I.N. glanced a little to the right. Lisa sat on the other side of the door. She slouched in her chair and stared into space. Her eyes blinked closed. Her head tilted forward. A few seconds later, her head popped up with a jolt. She looked around to see if anyone noticed.

L.I.N. looked at the door. She wanted out so badly. She decided to write a script. That way, if she managed to get out somehow, she could connect to the power station's wireless immediately. Then, she could scopy a message to one of Hal's servers. She decided to write the message first. She opened a terminal. She typed "ted sos" and issued a return command. She figured everyone would get it if she named the text file "S.O.S." The terminal turned black. A tiny, white rectangle appeared near the upper, left corner of the window. The rectangle dashed across the top. L.I.N.'s message appeared. It read, "Chuck - HELP ME! I'm in a power plant." L.I.N. looked at her lap and thought a moment. She had no idea where the power plant was. Outside New Jack City, she didn't know her way around too well. Actually, she didn't really know her way around New Jack City that well.

Her eyes lit up. She decided to research it. Her mouse cursor dashed

across the screen. It clicked an icon next to the terminal icon on her taskbar. It was a picture of the earth wrapped in flames. The flames were shaped like a kitty cat. As soon as the browser window opened, L.I.N. sighed and rolled her eyes. She remembered... she was inside a Faraday Cage. She couldn't connect to the internet. She closed the browser window and returned her attention to the terminal window. She re-read her message. "Chuck - HELP ME! I'm in a power plant." It was pitiful. L.I.N. had no idea where she was. She was going to have to go with that and hope for the best. She sent a keyboard signal corresponding to holding down a right shift key. Then, she typed "ZZ." That saved a file named "sos" in her home directory. Now, L.I.N. could write a simple script.

She typed "ted connect." The terminal filled with black, and a cursor appeared at the upper, left corner. This time, L.I.N. typed "dhcp wifi0." She issued a return command. On the second line, she typed "scopy sos hal@55.598.12.143:BlackBetty/~ -p p455w0rd." L.I.N. re-read everything. The first line would connect her to the power station's Wi-Fi. The second line would copy L.I.N.'s message to Hal's home folder on BlackBetty. BlackBetty was Hal's regular server. It's the one he and Chuck used most frequently. L.I.N. figured they'd be checking it for a message from her. The second line used the -p option to enter Hal's password automatically. It was perfect. The only problem was... L.I.N. was inside a Faraday cage. It was maddening.

L.I.N. typed "ZZ" to save the script. She needed to make it

executable. She entered “admin chp 777 connect.” That way, the script would be readable, writeable, and executable for all users. The terminal prompted for L.I.N.’s administrator password. L.I.N. typed “4dmini57r470r” and entered a return command. The terminal printed a fresh line. L.I.N. decided to get ready... just in case. She typed “./connect.” Now, if she *did* manage to get out for a second, all she had to do was press return. Then, her script would run. Her little mouse cursor wobbled across her desktop. In the terminal, L.I.N. opened a menu named “Settings” and chose “Appearance.” She changed the window’s transparency to fifty percent. That way, she could leave the terminal open and see simultaneously.

She looked around. Bat Shit stared at the floor. Lisa was nodding off again. L.I.N. exhaled through her nostrils. She looked at the door. It was wrapped in steel mesh. A chrome handle was sticking out on both sides. It was near the right side of the door. There was no lock. All L.I.N. had to do was twist the handle, slip out, and hold the door shut for a few seconds. That would give dhcp plenty of time to issue an IP address to her wireless card. scp would take even less time than that. It was totally doable. L.I.N. felt her chest thumping. Her breathing sped up. Tiny hairs on the back of her neck stood on end. She sat with her legs folded. She laid her palms against soft, red leather beside her thighs. She took a deep breath and exhaled slowly. She shoved herself to her feet and charged across the Faraday cage. The floor was freezing. The blue, plastic cubes felt like

giant, frosty ice cubes against the soles of her feet. L.I.N. was outside before Bat Shit and Lisa even noticed she'd gotten up. Bat Shit hopped up and faced the door.

“Oh!” he shouted. “Where do you think you’re going, mon?!” L.I.N. folded her fingers around the handle and flattened against the door. She sent a keyboard value corresponding to a return key. Her script began running. Lisa hopped up and whirled around. She looked infuriated. The inner points of her eyebrows twisted down the bridge of her nose. She gritted her teeth.

“Hey!” she shouted. She smashed her palms against the door. “L.I.N.! Get your ass back in here, *now!*” L.I.N. stared at the terminal window in the upper, left corner of her vision field. dhcp assigned an internal IP to her wireless card. It used the address “10.0.0.27.” L.I.N.’s wireless card was now connected to the power station’s Wi-Fi. scopy began copying the file “sos” to hal@55.598.12.143:BlackBetty/~. A progress bar printed. It was just a series of asterisks followed by a percentage. Once ten asterisks appeared and the percentage was 100, the copy was complete. It finished in two seconds. Afterwards, the terminal printed “smash” followed by a greater than symbol. That meant L.I.N.’s message was in Hal’s home folder. She relaxed and blew a breath through her lips. She felt the cage door shaking. She looked up. She focused right between Bat Shit’s deep, murky eyes. Bat Shit shook his head.

“Man, you’re too late...” he whispered. He pointed towards the other

side of the room. L.I.N. had a look. Jeff and Frank were standing beside the Van de Graaff generator. The double doors swung shut. Frank and Jeff stared at L.I.N. and folded their arms over their chests. L.I.N. shivered. Bat Shit aimed his lips at L.I.N.'s right ear. "*Let me out,*" he instructed. "*I'll hold them off.*" L.I.N.'s eyes popped open. She looked over her shoulder.

"No!" she whispered back. "*He'll zap you!*" L.I.N. looked at Lisa. Lisa smirked and shook her head.

"*Man, you screwed up...*" she rasped. L.I.N. faced Jeff and Frank. Jeff tilted his head.

"What are you doing, L.I.N.?" he inquired. "What did I tell you?" L.I.N. scrunched up her face and gritted her teeth. Bat Shit pounded his fist against the cage.

"Man, she did nothing wrong, Jeff!" he shouted. "She just wanted to use the bathroom! That's all!" Jeff rolled back the left sleeve of his white, dress shirt. He laid his fingers on a shiny, metal watch wrapped around his wrist. He stared into Bat Shit's face and smiled, ever so slightly.

"Liar," he remarked. He pressed one of three buttons on his watch. The watch beeped. Bat Shit gasped. But, nothing happened. He looked around, suspiciously. Jeff pressed his lips together. He looked at Lisa. "Lisa," he ordered. He motioned towards Bat Shit with his head. "Zap him." Lisa stared at Jeff. She narrowed her eyes. Jeff sighed. "Because of the..." He fluttered his fingers and pointed them at the Faraday cage. Lisa

looked around. Her eyes popped open.

“Oh!” she shouted. She stuffed her fingers into the pocket of her white jeans. “Right. You can’t zap him from out *there!*” Lisa dug a watch similar to Jeff’s out of her pocket. She pressed one of the buttons. Bat Shit stiffened and squeezed his neck with his shoulders. His arms and legs began flapping uncontrollably. He stumbled, collapsed on his right side, and convulsed. It looked like he was having a seizure. Lisa let go of the button on her watch, and Bat Shit stopped jiggling. He tilted his head back and exhaled a shaky sigh. L.I.N.’s fingers jumped off the cage door lever. L.I.N. dropped to her knees. She curled her fingers through steel mesh and stared at Bat Shit’s eyelids. Bat Shit opened his eyes as crack. L.I.N. narrowed her eyes and pressed her lips together.

“*Thank you...*” she whispered. Bat Shit closed his eyes. He nodded slowly. Lisa kicked the cage door out of her way. She stumbled around the rectangle of barbecue grill and stood beside L.I.N. L.I.N. pinched her eyes shut. She slowly turned her head and looked up. Lisa stared straight through her. She balled her fists at her sides. She narrowed her eyes and shook her head. L.I.N. sighed.

“I’m sorry, Lisa...” Lisa snagged a hold of L.I.N.’s icy, blue locks. L.I.N. winced. Lisa bent over and stared at the side of L.I.N.’s face.

“Well, I don’t give a shit!” she shouted. She smashed L.I.N.’s forehead against the side of the cage. The mesh shrieked like a gong being struck with a baseball bat. L.I.N. pinched her eyes shut and bared her

teeth. Lisa hung her lips beside L.I.N.'s ear. "When we tell you to do something, you *do* it!" She kicked L.I.N. in the ribs. "Understand?!" L.I.N. collapsed on the floor. She lay on her right side and gasped for breath. She looked over her shoulder. She stared between Lisa's fiery eyes. "Hey!" Lisa yelled. She bent over, grabbed a hold of L.I.N.'s ankles, and dragged her between her legs. "Do you understand me or not, you stupid, little bitch?!" She flipped L.I.N. onto her back, plopped down on her stomach, and glared into her face. "Answer me, idiot!" L.I.N. folded her arms over her face. Frank walked up and stood beside them. He plopped his palms on his hips.

"Let me try," he remarked. Lisa looked up. She turned and smacked L.I.N. over the back of the head. Then, she slid to the side and hopped up. L.I.N.'s head pounded. She slipped her arms away from her face and laid her fingers on the back of her scalp. She faced Frank, timidly. She wore a long sleeved shirt with horizontal, black and white bands. The collar was round. It dipped from her neck and stopped above her breasts. Frank grabbed the bottom of L.I.N.'s collar. He wadded it in his fist and lifted her off rows of blue bricks covering the floor. L.I.N. exhaled a pair of panicked shouts. Frank reeled back with his free hand and smashed his fist into L.I.N.'s left cheek. L.I.N.'s head bobbed like a rag doll's. Frank wound up and popped her again. He raised his fist a third time.

Jeff sighed. He raised his left wrist, laid his finger on his watch, and tapped a button. Frank's head jerked back. His arms and fingers went

limp. L.I.N. crumpled on the floor. Frank gnashed his teeth. His arms stiffened and began wobbling. His legs wiggled like towers of gelatin dessert. Jeff lifted his finger. Frank stopped jiggling and stumbled towards the Faraday cage. He grabbed a hold of the mesh and steadied himself. Jeff stared at the back of Frank's head.

"That'll do, Frank. Thanks." Frank blew a breath through his lips. He lifted his head and shook it. L.I.N. groaned. She slopped sapphire strands out of her face and laid her fingers on her cheek. Her soft, squishy flesh felt like it was roasting over a stove. Her teeth and gums felt like someone was shoving nails into them. She tasted blood. She wiggled her jaw and looked up. Jeff was hovering over her. He tilted his head and smiled a little. He bent over, twisted his fingers through L.I.N.'s ocean blue locks, and dragged her across the floor. L.I.N. gritted her teeth and shrieked. Jeff tugged her inside the Faraday cage, lifted her off the floor, and tossed her onto the red, leather sofa. L.I.N. collapsed on tufts of slick, squishy cowhide. She sucked in frantic gasps and faced Jeff. Jeff stared back. He looked at Bat Shit. Bat Shit was sitting up. He sat with his back against the side of the cage. He looked into Jeff's big, blue eyes.

"Next time, give her a cup," Jeff remarked. He lifted his arm. He pointed between L.I.N.'s shiny, emerald eyes. "And, don't let her out again." He motioned towards the door with his head. "You and Lisa grab a chair and sit outside the door." Jeff looked at his girlfriend. She stood on the other side of the cage, looking in. "Okay?" Jeff requisitioned. Lisa

nodded. She wandered inside, grabbed a couple of chairs, and rolled them through the door. Jeff left the Faraday cage. Frank was bent over, catching his breath. Jeff smacked him over the back of the head. “Move your ass, Frank,” he remarked. “Start getting rid of bodies.” He looked towards the door. “I’m gonna go pick up my source code.”

Frank stood and looked over his shoulder. “You think she talked to them? Told them where we are?”

Jeff shrugged. “It doesn’t matter. It’s only a matter of time, now.” He looked at Frank and smirked. “Nothing like a little E to pass the time.” He turned and headed towards the double doors.

Hal typed on a white keyboard with white and grey buttons. It lay on his old desk in front of a twenty-six inch monitor. The monitor was a beige, CRT monitor. It was big and bulky. The back was long, sloped, and covered with holes. The screen had a black background slathered with grey and white text. Hal typed “t++ Vortex.tpp” and pressed return. A blank line appeared. The line remained blank for some time. Brandy sat next to Hal in a rolling, student’s chair. She folded her arms next to Hal’s keyboard, leaned forward, and studied the screen. Rows of backwards text dotted the lenses of her glasses. Her murky, chocolate eyes popped open.

“What’s it doing?” she inquired. She looked at Hal. “No error messages this time?”

Hal tilted his head. “I think I got them all.” The command prompt printed a new line. It read “smash > ” followed by a tiny, white rectangle.

Hal looked at Brandy. “Success.” Brandy stared at the screen. She slowly nodded.

“Do we... test it, now?” She looked at Hal. “How do we do that?” Hal tried to lick his lips. Nothing happened.

“We don’t,” his speaker mouth barked. “We don’t have Jeff’s generator.” He shrugged. “We must assume it works as intended. Otherwise, Jeff might have to make a few corrections on the fly.”

Brandy squinted. “Good.” The door to the server room opened. Brandy and Hal’s heads twisted to the left. Chuck walked in and closed the door. He held up a shiny, black flash drive. He stared at Hal and Brandy from the tops of his eyes.

“I’ve finish...” He closed his eyes and swallowed. He took a breath and looked around. “Mine’s done.” He stared between a pair of webcams sticking out of Hal’s face. He narrowed his eyes. “You?” Hal turned his chair, faced Chuck, and folded his fingers in his lap. He nodded slowly.

“Let’s say ‘yes’.”

Chuck rolled his eyes. “Well... I mean, we can’t be exactly sure. Now, can we?”

“Unless...” Hal began. “You happen to have an anti-photon generator in your pocket.”

Chuck patted his pockets. “Aw, snap. Left my batch particle producer in my other pants.” Brandy giggled. She bent over and folded her fingers over her lips. Rolls of shiny, brown hair bounced along her knuckles

and wrists. Chuck stared at her and smirked. He shook his head.

“Somebody’s been coding a little too long,” he remarked. He looked at Hal. “I want my girlfriend back.” Hal leaned forward and held out his hand. A cluster of shiny, brass fingers blasted apart.

“Give me the disk,” Hal instructed. Chuck stared at Hal’s glittery digits. He laid Jeff’s flash drive on his slick, golden palm. Hal closed his fingers. He slipped the flash drive into a USB port on BlackBetty and stared at the screen. He typed “`mnt /dvc/sda1 /flash`” and pressed return. The terminal printed a fresh line. Hal typed “`list /flash.`” The list command printed thirty-two filenames. One of them was “Vortex.tpp.” Hal typed “`copy Vortex.tpp /flash`” and pressed return. That replaced the vortex source code on Jeff’s flash with the source file Hal came up with. The terminal printed a blank line. Then, it printed “smash” followed by a greater than symbol. Hal looked at Chuck. Chuck tapped his teeth with his thumbnail.

“Moment of truth,” he remarked. Hal typed “`t++ /flash/BuildVortex.tpp.`” The terminal printed a blank line. There was a long, awkward pause. Brandy stared at the screen, anxiously. She curled her fingers around her chair’s squishy seat and bounced like a rubber ball.

“Hurry!” she shouted.

Chuck knelt beside her and patted her shoulder. “Relax, Brandy. It has to compile all those files. It’ll take a minute.”

“Why don’t you make us some coffee, dear?” Hal suggested. Brandy

looked at him. She narrowed her eyes.

“You can’t drink coffee.”

Hal stared at his lap. “Oh, yeah.” The terminal printed a fresh line. Hal looked at Chuck. He tried to smile. His shiny, metal face didn’t budge. He nodded instead. “Yes, sir.”

Chuck nodded back. “Good job, Hal.” He narrowed his eyes. “Care to explain how you did that?” He glanced at Hal’s monitor. “Seeing as how you’ve never even *heard* of a Jeff vortex before.” Hal faced his monitor. He typed “copy /flash/* .” and pressed return. The contents of Jeff’s flash drive began copying to Hal’s home folder. Chuck threw his hands out at his sides. “Whoa... what are you doing?”

“Copying this,” Hal replied. There was a pause. After a moment, the terminal printed “smash” followed by a greater than symbol. Hal slouched in his chair and pressed his fingertips together. Chuck stared at the back of Hal’s slick, saxophone head.

“Hal,” he remarked. “You can’t.”

Hal tilted his head. “Oh, I beg to differ.”

Chuck laid his palm on Hal’s armrest. “Hal... he’ll kill her.”

Hal looked over his shoulder. “No, he won’t.” He stared at his screen. “He’ll never even look.” Hal entered “unmt /flash.” The terminal printed a fresh line. Hal yanked Jeff’s flash drive out of BlackBetty and dangled it over his shoulder. Chuck sighed. He snatched the flash stick from Hal’s slick, chilly fingers. Brandy turned her head. She watched

Chuck out of the corner of her eye. Chuck stared at the shiny, little disk and shook his head.

“He’ll look,” he remarked. He looked up. “He’ll come by here in a second, grab your keyboard, and type ‘list’.” Hal continued staring at his monitor. He slowly shook his head.

“No, Chuck,” he replied.

Chuck tilted his head. “You can’t possibly know that.” Hal squeezed his fingers together. His webcam eyeballs focused on a row of shadows below the desk.

“There can be... only one way.” Chuck squinted. He was confused by Hal’s vague answer. Brandy looked at Hal. Her eyeballs bobbed behind the lenses of her glasses and focused on Chuck.

“You mean... Jeff’s coming *here*?”

Chuck stared into space. “Apparently...” He stared at the back of Hal’s skull. His eyebrows fell in the middle. “Isn’t that right, Hal?”

Hal shrugged. “There’s no way I could possibly know that.” Chuck looked away. He scrunched up his face and shook his head. He looked up. He found Brandy’s dim, sparkly eyes. They were wild and wiry. Brandy looked terrified. She glanced at the floor and swallowed. Chuck pressed his lips together. Brandy’s arm dangled beside her seat. Chuck curled his fingers around her knuckles.

“It’s okay, Brandy,” he assured her. “He’s not going to hurt you. Don’t worry.” Brandy looked up. She stared at the floor and nodded.

“I’m sorry about earlier,” she remarked. She squeezed Chuck’s fingers and looked into his eyes. Chuck stared back. His lips parted.

“What do you mean?” He patted Brandy’s fingers with his free hand. Then, he let go. “About what?”

Brandy’s eyes wandered away. “Um, when I called...” She looked up. “Earlier.”

“Oh.” Chuck smiled. “Yeah, that.” He looked away and thought a moment. He shook his head and stared through the lenses of Brandy’s spectacles. “You didn’t do anything wrong!” He grinned. “You’re kidding, right?” Brandy’s lips opened. She mashed them together and looked away. “Oh...” Chuck groaned. “I’m sorry, Brandy.” He patted her arm. “*I’m* the one who’s sorry.” Brandy faced Chuck. Chuck narrowed his eyes. “I was being a grouch.” Brandy stared a moment. She raised her pointer finger.

“Why... yes, you were.”

Chuck shrugged. “I do that, sometimes. You’ll just have to forgive me.”

“Unforgivable,” Jeff remarked. Brandy, Hal, and Chuck looked to their left. Jeff was standing in the doorway. His palms rested against the sides of the door frame. His head hung from his shoulders and tilted to the side. Fiery, red strands of long, soft hair dangled down his cheeks. He looked at Brandy and smirked. “Well, well...” he grumbled. “And, what is *your* name, sweet thing?” Brandy’s eyes popped open. She glanced at Chuck. Chuck’s eyebrows dropped in the middle.

“Her name is Brandy, you dick!” he replied. He narrowed his eyes. “I figured you’d remember that. You know... since I just told you a couple of hours ago.”

“Mm...” Jeff moaned. “I seem to remember a couple of other things you said about her.” He smiled. “Remember?”

Chuck stood and faced Jeff. “No.” He folded his arms over his chest. “Why don’t you refresh my memory?”

Jeff tilted his head. “Oh... something about her being your little piece of ass on the side, someday.” He squinted. “Something to that effect? Yeah?”

Chuck narrowed his eyes. “Leave her alone, Jeff.” Chuck glanced at Brandy. “Brandy, don’t listen to this freak. He’s just jealous. He knows a lively, caring, respectful person like you would never give a jerk like him the time of day.” Brandy pressed her lips together and stared at the floor.

“Oh, Chuck,” Jeff replied. He flicked his wrist. “Come on. You don’t have to hide it from her. Just tell her... like you told me, earlier.”

“Jeff...” Chuck interjected.

“You know... about how you get all choked up every time Brandy walks into the room. Then, you have to sit there and hide it from L.I.N. That way you don’t hurt her feelings.”

Chuck looked at Brandy and shook his head. “Didn’t say anything like that, Brandy. Don’t listen to him.” Brandy scrunched up her nose. She looked Jeff up and down.

“I’m *not* listening to this crock of shit!” she remarked. “I think you’re a creepy, red headed sociopath!”

Jeff’s eyebrows slipped up his forehead. “Oh. Well, *I* think you’re a ditsy, wavy haired, little bitch. What do you think about that?”

Brandy smashed her fist against Hal’s desk. “You ass-hole!” She eased back and folded her arms over her chest. “Stop making fun of my hair. There’s nothing wrong with it.” Opera music was playing through a set of speakers on Hal’s desk. Hal turned the knob to the left. The volume lowered. He stared between Jeff’s eyes.

“What do you want, Jeff?” Jeff looked away and thought. He smiled and faced Hal.

“I think I’d like to run for mayor.” He tilted his head. “What do you think my chances are?” Hal tried to blink. Nothing happened.

“What do you want, Jeff?” he repeated. He folded his fingers in front of his speaker mouth. “What can we help you with?”

Jeff smiled. “I just told you.” He pointed at Hal. “I want *you* to tell *me* what you think my chances are.” He pinched the base of his argyle vest and fluttered it. “I could be the next mayor of New Jack City.” He looked around and grinned. Hal stared through a pair of holes near the tips of his webcams.

“What do you want, Jeff?” he reiterated.

Jeff squinted. “How many times are you going to ask me that, trombone man?”

Hal threw his hands out at his sides. “Well, all you have do is answer, freckle face. Then, I’ll stop asking.”

“Why don’t you stop asking, anyway?” Jeff requisitioned.

“Why don’t you start answering, regardless?” Hal inquired.

“Why don’t you stop asking why I’m not answering and answer why you keep questioning?” Jeff continued.

Hal rolled his plastic eyeballs. “Why question my answer when you can answer my question?”

Jeff pressed his lips together. “Answers are for questions. But, questions are for answers.” He looked at Brandy. Brandy was very confused. She stared back, timidly. “If questions require answers, do answers require questions? Or, do answerers question requirements of questions requiring answers?” He tilted his head. “What is the answer to the question? Or, is the answer to question the answer rather than answer the question?” Jeff faced Hal. Hal nodded slowly.

“What do you want, Jeff?” Jeff stared into Hal’s big, fat, wobbly eyeballs. He thought for a moment.

“I want my source code.” He looked at Chuck. “Did you fix my source code?” Chuck showed Jeff his flash drive. He held it between his pointer finger and thumb.

“I want my girlfriend back,” Chuck remarked.

Jeff smiled a little. “Chuck, it’s okay.” He motioned towards Brandy. “The secret’s out, now. The love of your life is sitting right there, next to

you. Just sit in her lap and start making out with her.” Chuck glanced at Brandy. Brandy glanced at Chuck.

“Don’t listen to him,” Chuck repeated.

Brandy shook her head. “You know what? I stopped listening the moment that butt-hole walked in the door.” She and Chuck stared Jeff down.

“Can I talk to her?” Chuck inquired.

Jeff shook his head. “Not yet.” He held out his palm. “Give me the disk.”

“Do it,” Hal instructed. Chuck looked over his shoulder. Hal stared back. He nodded. Chuck faced Jeff. He laid the disk on Jeff’s palm. Jeff curled his fingers around the flash drive. He stared into Chuck’s vivid, sandy eyes and smiled a little.

“You’ll have her back within the hour,” he explained. He stepped back and looked at Brandy. He winked. Brandy shuddered. She turned her head and looked at Chuck. Chuck glanced at her. He faced Jeff and pointed between his eyes.

“Get out of here.”

Jeff scoffed. “How rude. I’m a guest in your lovely home. I can’t *believe* you’d talk to me that way.” Brandy’s eyebrows sagged in the middle. She smashed her fists against her thighs.

“Get lost, freak!”

Jeff growled like a tiger. “Grddddd!” He turned and wandered

through a pair of red doors leading out front. Brandy exhaled a shaky sigh. She looked at Chuck.

“I’m gonna go watch through the window. Make sure he leaves.” She shuffled to the end of her seat. Chuck laid his palm on her shoulder.

“Stay here,” he instructed. “Don’t go *anywhere*.” Brandy stared at Chuck’s fingers. She flattened her lips and looked up.

“That guy’s a jerk.” She eased to the back of her seat and folded her fingers in her lap. Chuck patted her back. He faced the monitor Hal was using.

“Well,” he remarked. “I guess you were right, Hal. He didn’t seem too concerned about you copying his code.”

“Mm-hmm,” Hal replied. “He wouldn’t give it to us if he was.” Hal typed “list.” “Let’s see what we got.” He pressed return. The contents of Hal’s home directory printed. One file in particular caught Hal and Chuck’s eye. Hal folded his arms on his desk and leaned forward. Chuck stared and tilted his head. There was a file in Hal’s home folder that wasn’t part of Jeff’s source code. It was called “sos.”

“What the hell is *that*?” Chuck inquired.

“You’re kidding me...” Hal remarked. He typed “ted sos.” The terminal filled with black. A row of white text printed across the top line. It read, “Chuck - HELP ME! I’m in a power plant.”

“Huh,” Chuck added. He stood beside Hal, laid his palms on the desk, and stared at the screen. “You think she means the power plant in

Prospect?” Hal felt like licking his lips. He bowed his head and stared at his keyboard. Chuck stood up. He smacked his forehead with his palm. “Oh, of *course* she’s at a power plant!” He smacked Hal’s shiny, brass shoulder. “Hal!” Hal looked up. “She’s in a Faraday cage. Remember?”

Hal nodded. “Ah. Yes, that makes sense.” Chuck grinned. He looked to his left. He was staring at the back of Brandy’s head. Brandy faced the other direction, staring at the floor. Chuck furrowed his brow.

“Brandy?” he inquired. “Prospect? Faraday cage?”

Brandy didn’t budge. “You think I’m a ditz?” she asked. Chuck chuckled. He patted Brandy’s shoulders.

“You’re not a ditz, Brandy.” He grabbed a hold of the back rest hovering above Brandy’s chair. He slid her chair around, so Brandy was facing Hal’s desk. Brandy exhaled through her nostrils and looked up.

“You don’t think so?” Chuck smiled. He shook his head. Brandy stared at the floor. “Sometimes I think I am. You know?” She looked up. “Maybe that piece of crap is right.”

Chuck bowed his head and pinched the bridge of his nose. “Brandy, I *told* you. Don’t listen to him!” Brandy smiled. Chuck patted the top of her back rest. “He’s screwing with you. Don’t let him do that. *You’re* not ditsy.” Brandy giggled. “Actually, I happen to think you’re very intelligent. Don’t worry.” Chuck pressed his lips together. “And you’re not a bitch, either. I don’t care what Jeff Forrester says.”

Brandy nodded. “Thanks, Chuck.” Chuck smirked. He laid his

knuckles against the top of Brandy's head. He slid his fingers down her hair. He stopped near the bottom and ruffled it.

"And... your hair's not wavy! It's cuddly and cute."

Brandy looked at her lap. "Shut-up."

Chuck looked at Hal. "So... Prospect? You think?" Hal turned his chair, so it faced Chuck. He leaned back, rested his ankle on his knee, and laid his slick, shiny fingertips together.

"The power plant in Prospect is half an hour away." He shrugged. "The next closest power station is in Carville. That's nearly three times as far." He shook his head. "There's no way Jeff's driving there and back." Chuck looked away. He tilted his head.

"He doesn't have to," he remarked. He dug Brandy's cell phone out of his pocket. He dangled it in front of Brandy's eyes. "Will you do me a favor, Brandy?" Brandy snatched her phone from Chuck's fingertips and looked up.

"What?"

"Call Laura and Icky. Tell them to meet us over here. Let them know what's going on."

Brandy nodded. "Okay." She tapped a button near the base of her phone's screen. She opened a list of contacts and scrambled through. Chuck faced Hal's monitor. Hal closed it. So, the results list printed were on the screen. Chuck reached across Hal's desk. He tapped the entry labeled "sos."

“Can’t you find out what I-P that came from?” He looked at Hal. Hal swiveled his chair and stared at the screen. He folded his fingers in front of his mouth.

“Hmm...” he groaned. “There should be a way.” He looked at Chuck. “What difference does it make?”

Chuck rubbed the back of his head. “If I know Jeff, he’s got the computer running the generator connected to the internet. I’ll bet he’s also got it forwarded on port 22 for secure shell.”

Hal’s speaker mouth made a raspberry noise. “That’s just stupid!” He leaned forward and began typing. “Apparently, he doesn’t know who he’s messing with.”

Chuck nodded. “Yeah, let’s see what we can find out. Might come in handy.”

Chapter 666: "Vortex"

Icarus looked like something from a nightmare. He had a thin, bony face. It was dotted with skinny scars. His left eye was royal blue. It was always half closed. His right eye was golden brown. His right eyelids were usually stretched to their limits. Icarus' hair was long and black. It stood straight up. His lips were long and thin. The left side of his upper lip typically pointed towards his left nostril. Icarus was tall and skinny. A white, wool jacket with a hood was zipped across his chest. The hood was drawn around his head. Icarus's jacket was slathered with quarter sized cameras. The cameras were fitted with irises resembling human eyes. Some were blue. Some were green. Some were brown. And, some were hazel. They were covered with clear, plastic domes. Beneath his jacket, Icarus wore a black t-shirt. It was painted with a big, yellow smiley face. A pair of rainbow colored suspenders was strapped over that. A pair of peacock colored corduroys dangled from those. Brown, suede hiking boots covered his feet.

Detective Phillips was beautiful and blonde. She had fair skin, rosy cheeks, and shiny, crimson lips. Tiny fragments of light glistened across a pair of frosty, blue eyes popping out of her face. Her hair was a blend of gold, canary, ginger, and cream. It draped to her shoulders and curled at the ends. The New Jack City Police Department had a track and a giant, indoor pool. Phillips visited them twice a week. So, she was slender and trim. She wore a soft, turtleneck sweater. It was navy blue with thin, white

bands. She wore white bell bottoms with navy blue polka dots. A pair of shiny, white saddle shoes was strapped around her feet. The necks of navy blue socks were sandwiched between the cuffs of her slacks and the rims of her footwear. Her feet were plopped on top of a cassette deck. A black cassette tape lay next to that. Knots of shiny, wadded tape connected the base of the cassette to the mouth of the deck.

Icarus and Phillips were racing across town. They were in a faded, grey car. It was an eighties model. The body was flat with straight edges. Icarus stole the car a while back. Phillips found out he'd taken it from a member of the New Jack City mob. She hesitated asking for details. The paint was chipped and scratched. The body was littered with dents. The driver's side door was caved in. It looked like it was beaten with a sledge hammer. Long, thin scrapes squiggled from the dents in the door to the tail light. The interior was in shambles. It was draped with dingy, maroon rags. Hunks of squishy, golden stuffing stuck out in places. The carpet was speckled with cigarette burns. Fabric lining the roof sagged and obstructed the rear window.

Icarus was driving like a maniac. He always did. He and Phillips were racing through a labyrinth of freeways, headed towards L.I.N. and Hal's place. It was after eight. The sun was down. The sky was filled with black. At the moment, Icarus and Phillips were on Jackson 171. It was a road built on top of Jackson Parkway. At certain points, it was fifty feet off the ground. Thick, concrete walls spanned the sides of the road. Orbs of

violet lights hovered above those. Rain sprinkled across seven lanes of traffic. Icarus swerved in and out of clusters vehicles. Phillips spotted a speed limit sign along a section of wall on the right. They were racing through a sixty mile an hour zone.

Phillips glanced at the car's speedometer. It consisted of a row of tall, white numbers and a thin, orange pointer. The pointer was below eighty-five. Unfortunately, that's as high as the speedometer went. Phillips returned her eyes to the wall of concrete on the right. She spotted a cluster of red, yellow, and blue scrapes. It was slathered with thick, faded skid marks. Phillips' head was sucked against her window. Her cheek flattened against a pane of ice cold glass. Phillips twisted her head around and focused on the road. Icarus dashed across all seven lanes of traffic. He cut off two SUVs, two trucks, and a tiny, compact car along the way. Icarus dashed in front of a Bug. Then, he cut across three lanes to the right. Phillips scrunched up her face. She looked at Icarus and exhaled an angry breath.

"Icky, would you slow down?!" she barked. Icarus faced Phillips. A pair of wires dangled from his lips. They connected eyeballs on his coat to his tongue. His left eye twitched and nearly shut. His right eye bobbed around and stared into Phillips' face. He tilted his head.

"It's okay, Laura. Don't worry." He narrowed his brown eye. His blue eye was always narrow. "And, stop calling me 'Icky'." He pointed between Phillips' eyes. "What did I tell you about that?" Phillips' eyes

popped open. She turned and motioned towards the road.

“Icky, watch the road!”

Icarus puffed up his cheeks. “Um...” He shrugged and faced forward. “I mean... if it makes you feel better.” Phillips flattened against her seat. She cuddled her stomach with her arms and breathed out a shaky sigh.

“You’re such a freak.”

“I’m sorry, Laura,” Icarus replied. “You know, L.I.N.’s been kidnapped. Brandy sounded pretty upset on the phone.” He looked at Phillips. “I’m worried.” Phillips gritted her teeth. She flipped her arm across the dash and pointed through the windshield.

“Icky! The road!”

Icarus’ long, thin lips twisted into a hideous grin. “Laura, I can see the road just fine.” He looked his girlfriend over. “Will you relax?” He yanked the steering wheel to the right. The car cut across two lanes of traffic. Icarus floored it. He sped in front of five cars then dashed to the left. He stared at the side of Phillips’ face. Her breathing was quick and shallow. She looked into Icarus’ eyes. Icarus flattened his lips. “We’ve got enough to worry about, you know?” Icarus came barreling up behind a semi trailer truck. There was just enough room between the semi’s trailer and a tiny car in the next lane to squeeze through. Icarus dashed to the left and whizzed by the semi. He never even faced forward. He reached across the front seat and patted Phillips’ shoulder. “Just relax. Let yourself go.” Phillips could hardly tear her eyes from the windshield. She glanced at

Icarus and exhaled a sharp breath.

“Can I please drive?”

Chuck sat on a rug sprawled across rows of checkered tiles covering the living room floor. He sat between a couch beside the front doors and a coffee table in the middle of the room. There was a glass chess set near the corner of the coffee table. The pieces were just as Chuck and L.I.N. left them. That is, except for L.I.N.’s queen. *It* was hidden under L.I.N.’s bed. Chuck sat Indian style. He stared at his and L.I.N.’s pieces. He closed his eyes and sighed. Brandy plopped down on the couch. She sat on Chuck’s left. Chuck looked up. Brandy rested her foot on the edge of the coffee table. She leaned forward and unraveled a big, fat, white shoe lace. It kept a slick, white tennis shoe strapped to her foot. She stopped, bowed her head, and cupped her fingers in front of her lips. Her eyes pinched shut. Her jaw stretched open. Chuck smirked. Brandy exhaled an exhausted yawn and looked to her right. She stared at Chuck in a daze.

“I’m *so* sleepy,” she sighed. She flapped her eyelids. “How do you guys do this all the time?”

Chuck squinted. “Coffee,” he replied. Brandy looked across the room. Hal was sitting on a loveseat. It was adjacent to the sofa. His shiny, golden head bobbed up and down in agreement.

“I wish *I* could have some,” he remarked. Brandy returned her attention to her shoe. She grabbed it by the heel and slipped it off her foot. A fluffy, white sock was hiding underneath. Brandy set her shoe beside

Chuck and replaced her right foot with her left. She plucked a big, fat bow loose near the top of her left shoe. Chuck stared at his lap.

“Maybe you should just get some sleep.”

Brandy shook her head. “No way!” She yanked her left shoe off and set it beside her right. She folded her legs like a pretzel and looked at Chuck. “I can’t sleep. I’ve gotta help you guys!” Chuck smiled. Brandy leaned forward and patted his shoulder. “I wanna find L.I.N. and bring her home.” Her eyebrows tilted near the outer edges. “I wanna watch you guys finish your game.” Chuck looked over his shoulder. He stared into Brandy’s dark, cryptic eyes.

“If you go to Prospect with us, there’s a good chance you’ll never *see* the end of that game.” He squinted. “Or any others, for that matter.” Brandy’s rosy lips parted. She looked at Hal. Hal tried to slide his mouth to the side of his face. Instead, he stared blankly.

“It’s dangerous, Brandy,” his speaker mouth barked. “Jeff Forrester is a very dangerous psychopath.” Hal leaned forward. “He’s probably killed a handful of people just today.”

Chuck looked Hal over. “How do you know all that, Hal? How do you know about Jeff Forrester?”

A pair of webcams on his face followed a fractal design on the rug sprawled across the floor. “There aren’t many things I don’t know, Chuck,” Hal replied. He looked up. “It’s been rather auspicious for me. I must say.”

Chuck nodded. "Yes... so I've noticed."

Brandy shook her head. "Well, I'm going with you guys. I don't care *what* happens."

"Even if you get shot?" Chuck inquired. He faced Brandy. Brandy laid the first and second fingers of her left hand across her lips.

"You think he'll... shoot me?" She looked at Hal. "Really?"

Hal shrugged. "It's possible. Jeff Forrester is a highly intelligent, charismatic, sociopath." Brandy scrunched up her face. She looked away and thought for a moment.

"He *did* seem kind of..." She looked at Chuck. Chuck stared, blankly. Brandy took a breath. "That guy's a freak." She looked at Hal. "You guys got a gun?"

Chuck shrugged. "I might."

Brandy smacked her lips. "Nuh-uh!" She plopped her little hands on her hips. "Let me see." Chuck slid his lips to the side of his face. He stood up, slipped his hand into his right pocket, and took out his revolver. He held it by the barrel and dangled it in front of Brandy's face. Brandy's eyeballs bobbed around and focused on it. She looked at Chuck. "Um..."

Chuck smirked. "Hold out your hand." Brandy held out her palm. Her fingers were shaking. Chuck laid his revolver in her hand. "Be careful," he warned. "It's loaded." He plopped down on the sofa and watched Brandy like a hawk. Brandy held the pistol in front of her. She wadded both her hands around the grip. She winked her left eye and lined

up a stainless steel refrigerator in the kitchen behind the sights. Her arms wobbled like two long chunks of rubber. Chuck curled his fingers around Brandy's wrist. Brandy faced him. "Take your finger off the trigger," Chuck remarked.

"Oh!" Brandy yelped. She lowered the revolver and looked it over. "Sorry." She slipped her finger off the trigger and wiggled it. Chuck snagged the tip of her finger and laid it against the side of the pistol.

"There you go. Just leave it there until you're ready to fire."

Brandy looked up. "What... size is it or whatever?"

"Forty-Four Special," Chuck replied. He sat back and folded his arms over his chest. Brandy aimed at a window above the kitchen sink.

"Is that one of the big ones?"

Chuck raised his eyebrows. "*That* one's painful to shoot."

Brandy looked at him and smiled. "Really?"

Chuck nodded. "It feels like someone's smacking your hand with a hammer."

Brandy lowered the pistol and handed it to Chuck. "Well, why don't you get one that's a little smaller?"

Chuck laid his revolver in his palms and studied it. "I'll tell you one thing. You won't waste any rounds using a gun like *this*." Brandy chuckled. "I'm serious." Chuck returned the pistol to his right, front pocket. "You feel it when you shoot something with *that* thing." Brandy grinned. The sound of tires squalling filled the air. Chuck, Hal, and Brandy looked

towards the front of the house. The squalling was replaced by a hideous, thundering roar. It was the growl of a V8 engine running wide open. It started as a distant rumble. But, it quickly increased in volume. Pretty soon, the sound filled the living room. The roar exploded through a gate out front. Then, it transformed into a gentle idle. The sound of tires squalling on pavement rattled the wall behind the sofa. Brandy and Chuck faced each other.

“Gee...” Chuck remarked. “I wonder who *that* could be.” Two old, rusty car doors opened and slammed shut. Detective Phillips could be heard stomping around the front of Icarus’ car.

“Damn it, Icky!” she shrieked. *“You almost ran into the side of the house!”*

“Sorry, Laura,” Icarus replied.

Phillips smacked her lips. *“Don’t roll your eyes at me!”* There was a long window above the sofa. Chuck and Brandy turned around and sat on their knees. They folded their arms on the window seal and watched. It was sprinkling outside. But, the rain had slowed considerably. Icarus plucked a pair of wires from his tongue. He tucked them inside the hood of his jacket. Then, he tapped a couple of power buttons inside the cuffs of his sleeves. Detective Phillips curled her fingers around the rim of Icarus’ hood. She rolled his hood back and wadded it neatly around his neck. Little droplets of rain spattered his exposed flesh. Icarus tilted his head.

“Thank you,” he remarked.

Phillips nodded. "You're welcome." She stood on her tip-toes and kissed Icarus' long, narrow lips. Icarus lowered his head so she could reach. Phillips stepped back and looked Icarus in the eyes.

"I'm driving us to Prospect." Icarus grinned. He dangled a set of keys in front of Phillips' face and jiggled them.

"No, you're not," he replied.

Phillips gritted her teeth. "Give me those damn keys!" Icarus raised his keys above his head. He was a foot taller than Phillips. Keeping a set of keys from her was child's play. Phillips hopped around and swatted at Icarus' wrist. "Icky!" she shrieked. "*Give* them to me!"

Icarus jiggled the keys. "Climb up there and get them, Laura! Go ahead!" Chuck stepped outside. Tiny, frosty sprinkles dotted his face, arms, and neck. He folded his arms over his chest and shook his head. Icarus bobbed his head at him. "Here, Chuck!" he shouted. He tossed his keys over Phillips' head. They landed in Chuck's palms. Phillips whirled around. She stared into Chuck's eyes and squinted. She forced a smile.

"Give me the keys, Chuck," she remarked. She held out her palms and inched towards him. Chuck looked at Icarus and shook his head.

"Guys, we really don't have time for this." He tossed Icarus' keys over Phillips' head. Icarus snatched them out of the air and hid them behind his back. Phillips scoffed. She pointed her eyebrows at the bridge of her nose, balled her fists at her sides, and stomped her foot. Chuck pointed between her glittery, blue eyes. "Icky's driving," he informed her. "You drive like a

little, old lady.”

Phillips pointed between her breasts. “Me?!” She turned around and pointed down the bridge of Icarus’ nose. “He drove on the *sidewalk* on the way over here!” She looked at Chuck over her shoulder. She held up her left hand and extended her first and second fingers. “Twice!” Icarus rolled his eyes and shook his head. Chuck shrugged.

“That’s my point,” he remarked. “I wanna *get* there. You know what I mean?” He looked over his shoulder. Brandy was standing in the doorway. She poked her head out and looked around. She narrowed her eyes.

“Couldn’t you get an escort, Detective Phillips?”

Detective Phillips shook her head. “Nope. Captain’s orders.” Chuck faced her. He threw his hands out at his sides. Phillips licked her lips. “He doesn’t think anything funny’s going on at the Prospect power plant.”

Chuck nodded. “Did he call the power plant?”

“Yeah,” Icarus replied. “The captain claims a man answered. He told him everything’s fine out there.”

“What kind of man?” Chuck demanded. “What did he sound like?”

Phillips squinted. “The captain said he sounded... Jamaican.” She shrugged. “Does that mean anything to you?”

Chuck laid his fingers across his lips. “Hmm... Bat Shit.”

Phillips turned her head without looking away. “What?”

Chuck flicked his wrist and looked away. “Nah, nothing.” He looked up. “So, you didn’t bring any other officers with you? No backup?”

Phillips shook her head. "Just me and Icky."

"Icarus," Icarus corrected.

Phillips glanced over her shoulder. "Shut-up, Icky." She faced Chuck. "Do you have a gun, Chuck?"

Chuck patted his right, front pocket. "You bet." Phillips nodded. She looked over Chuck's shoulder.

"Brandy?" Brandy slowly shook her head. Chuck looked over Phillips' shoulder.

"Icky? You got a gun?"

"Never carry one," Icarus replied. He crossed his arms. "I don't like guns."

Phillips looked over her shoulder. "Of *course* you don't carry a gun," she remarked. "You don't need one. All you have to do is get somebody to ride around in the car with you while you drive across town!" Icarus' long, thin lips twisted into a hideous smile. Phillips faced Brandy. "You shouldn't come, Brandy. You should stay here where it's safe."

Brandy swallowed nervously. "I, uh..." She looked around. Everyone was staring at her. She shook her head. "No. I wanna go with you guys." She hugged her chest. "I want to help."

Phillips stared Brandy down. "You know how to use a gun?" Brandy shook her head. Phillips slipped her fingers into a pair of pockets on the back of her bell bottoms. She motioned towards Icarus with her head. "You'll need to stay with me and Icarus at all times." She shrugged. "I

don't think you oughta go. But, we could use all the help we can get."

Brandy pressed her lips together. "Okay." She returned to the living room to get her shoes. Hal wandered out. His big, round, plastic eyes met Icarus' frustrated, different colored eyes. He tried to smile. Nothing happened.

"Dr. Ulrich," Hal remarked.

Icarus blinked. "Dr. Damon."

Phillips looked over her shoulder. "Doctor?"

Icarus glanced at her. "Inside joke." Hal stepped outside and approached Icarus. He was walking across damp gravel. Each of his steps sounded like a brick smashing against a chunk of concrete. Icarus smirked. "Wow, is that really *you* in there?"

Hal nodded. "I *think* so." He stopped in front of Detective Phillips and Icarus. Phillips looked Hal over. She smiled.

"Hi, Hal."

"Hi, Laura," Hal replied. He extended his shiny, brass arm. Phillips stared at Hal's thin, metallic fingers. She had mixed feelings about shaking his hand. She imagined it would be like laying her hand in a vise and squeezing it shut. Hal looked into her eyes and nodded. "It's okay." He retracted his arm. "I probably wouldn't want to shake my hand, either." Phillips slid her lips to the side of her face. She reached across, curled her little fingers around Hal's, and wobbled his arm.

"It's nice to meet you, Hal," she remarked. She relaxed her fingers,

and Hal let go. Hal faced Icarus. He tried to drop his eyebrows at the outer edges. He remembered he had none. He laid his fingers on Icarus' cheek.

"Oh, my," he remarked. He slid the tips of his first two fingers along a pair of scars on the apple of Icarus' cheek. "Is that from that *one* thing?"

"Yeah," Icarus replied. He glanced at Hal's fingers. "Get your hand off my face, Hal." A handful of chuckles belched out of the speaker at the bottom of Hal's face. He turned away, bent over, and held his midsection. He made a noise like he was clearing his throat and looked up.

"I'm sorry, Icarus. I realize this body must be ghastly. But, it's harmless. I assure you." Icarus folded his arms over his chest. He looked at the pavement and shook his head.

"Oh, no. It's not that." He looked up. "I'm just not a fudge-packer." Hal's head tilted back. He filled the air with laughter. He bent over and smacked his knee. It sounded like someone smacking a baseball with a metal bat. "So, keep your damn hands off my face!" Icarus shouted. Hal stood and faced Icarus. He shook his head.

"You always *did* have such a dirty mind, Dr. Ulrich. My, my."

Icarus pointed between Hal's slick, bobbly eyeballs. "Hey, *you're* the one who built the sex bot. Let's not forget." Hal looked over his shoulder. He stared into Chuck's eyes.

"Don't listen to him, Chuck. L.I.N. is not a sex bot. She's a wonderful, caring, kind, special, young girl with a warm heart and lots of love to give." He faced Icarus. "Icky's just jealous." Icarus looked at

Chuck. Chuck squinted.

“Hey, I think Hal did a really good job on this...” He raised his hands at the sides his face. He curled his first and second fingers on both hands. “Sex bot.” Hal chuckled. Chuck smiled. “I really like L.I.N. She’s emotional and sweet and full of life. She’s ambitious and brave... She’s also very pretty.” Chuck shrugged. “She’s everything I ever wanted in a girlfriend.” He pressed his lips together. “She’s not like an android at all. In fact, I forget she *is* most of the time.” Icarus focused on the ground. He smiled a little.

“*Hmm...*” Brandy wandered out. She handed Chuck a black umbrella with a wooden hook and looked around.

“Are we going, or what?”

Hal glanced at her over his shoulder. “*I’m* staying here.” He looked at Chuck. “I’ll work on finding that I-P. See if I can get inside Jeff’s computer.”

Chuck nodded. “Okay.” He faced Icarus. “Let’s go, Icky. You’re driving, right?” Icarus twirled his keys around his index finger. He faced Phillips and smirked. Phillips glared at him.

L.I.N. sat Indian style on a red sofa. She was still trapped inside a Faraday cage at the Prospect power plant. She rested her elbow on her knee and plopped her forehead in her palm. She squeezed her temples with her thumb and pinkie. Her head was throbbing. It hurt from Lisa smashing her forehead into the side of the cage, earlier. It felt like a handful of

thumbtacks were sticking out of the space between her eyes. L.I.N. laid her fingertips above the bridge of her nose. A tiny chunk of flesh on her forehead was swollen. It was the size of a quarter. L.I.N. tapped it with her index finger. It felt like she was poking her forehead with the tip of a steak knife. L.I.N. pinched her eyes shut and scrunched up her face. Her teeth and the apple of her cheek were killing her, too. *That* was Frank's fault. He'd battered her after Lisa smashed her face into the side of the cage. The left side of L.I.N.'s face felt like it had been smacked with a croquet mallet. Lisa, Bat Shit, and Frank sat outside the cage door. They sat on rolling office chairs with plastic armrests and high backs. The chairs were coated with black, imitation leather.

Frank found L.I.N. fascinating. He fixated on her with obsessive diligence. He studied every move she made. He memorized every curve on her body. His eyes crawled from side to side. They followed bands of black and white wrapping L.I.N.'s arms, breasts, and belly. Frank stared at patches of frayed, faded denim swirling across her thighs. Tiny, blue and white puffs lay along her calves and framed her knees. Her skin was soft, silky, and serene. It was smooth and flawless. It was glowing and colorful. L.I.N.'s right knee was sticking out below the end of her blue jean skirt. Frank focused on it. His eyes crawled to the right. He traced curves along the sides of L.I.N.'s calf. Her ankle disappeared below her other calf. Frank looked up and met L.I.N.'s shiny, olive eyes. She was watching him... watching *her*. She had been for some time. Terror and uncertainty poured

across her face. She inhaled a sharp breath and looked at the floor. She shut her eyes and swallowed. Bat Shit smacked Frank over the back of the head.

“Frank, mon!” he shouted. “Leave dat poor girl alone!” Frank bowed his head and clutched the back of his skull. He turned his head and scowled. Bat Shit pointed between his eyes. “You so much as make a move for her, and I’ll kill you myself. Understand, mon?” Frank sighed. The right door on the other side of the room opened. Lisa, Frank, and Bat Shit looked over their shoulders. Jeff marched across the room and stopped behind them. He held up the flash drive Chuck handed him earlier.

“Well,” he remarked. “The source code’s fixed.” He looked across the room. There were no bodies. There was only a giant puddle of blood. “I see you finished burning all those bodies.” Jeff faced Frank. Frank nodded. Jeff faced Bat Shit. He lifted his left wrist and rolled back his sleeve. “Alright, then.” He pressed a button on his watch. There was a beep. Bat Shit’s head snapped to the side. He went stiff and began convulsing. His chair wobbled and hopped. Jeff let go of the button on his watch. Bat Shit went limp. His arms dangled over his armrests. His butt slid down his chair seat. His head slumped to the side. His eyelids were open all the way. They froze. White smoke trickled out of his ears and nostrils.

Frank whirled around in his chair. Jeff looked him over. He smiled a little. He pressed another button on his watch. His watch beeped. Frank’s eyes rolled back. He flattened against his seat and began jiggling. He

flopped off his chair like he was shot out of a cannon. He collapsed on his face and wriggled across the floor. Jeff studied him carefully. When he noticed puffs of smoke, he let go of his watch button. Lisa was facing Jeff. Jeff turned and looked into her eyes. She stared back, timidly. She slid her palms along her thighs, nervously. Jeff tilted his head.

“Next,” he mused. He pressed a third button on his watch. There was a beep. Lisa winced. Jeff’s lips twisted into a grin. “Oh, *that’s* right,” he remarked. “I haven’t copied you yet.” Lisa exhaled a shaky sigh. She swallowed and threw her arms out at her sides.

“Jeff, why did you *do* that?” she demanded. “You didn’t have to kill them.”

Jeff shrugged. “They’re clones, sweetheart. Don’t worry about it.” Lisa tapped her teeth with her thumb. She folded her fingers in her lap and crossed her legs.

“Right,” she sighed. “Yeah... of course.” She looked at the floor and nodded. Jeff glanced at L.I.N. L.I.N. gasped. She laid her fingers over her nose and mouth and sobbed. Jeff rolled his eyes.

“Oh, for God’s sake...” He kicked Frank’s chair. It rolled across the floor and slammed into the Faraday cage. “Hey!” Jeff shouted. L.I.N. jumped. She dropped her hands in her lap and looked up. Jeff pointed at her. “Don’t start bawling.” He bent over and grabbed fistfuls of Frank’s shiny, greasy hair. “Or, I’ll come in there and kill you next.” He lifted Frank’s carcass off the cold, slick floor by his hair. He dropped his body in

Bat Shit's lap. He faced L.I.N. "Got it?" L.I.N. sniffled. She looked into Jeff's big, bright eyes as best she could. She swatted tears off her cheeks and nodded. Jeff stared back, coldly. He nudged Bat Shit's chair towards the double doors across the room. He stood behind the chair, grabbed a hold of the backrest, and rolled it across the floor. L.I.N. pressed her lips together. She smashed her fists against wads of red leather beside her knees.

"Jeff!" she shouted. Jeff stopped in his tracks. He glanced over his shoulder. L.I.N. exhaled a nervous sigh. "You've got what you need, right? Can I... go now?"

Jeff smirked. "Not yet." L.I.N. smacked her lips. She bowed her head and plopped her eyes in her palms. Jeff rolled his eyes. He turned, wheeled Bat Shit and Frank's bodies around the Van de Graaff generator, and left the room. Lisa exhaled through her nostrils. She swiveled her chair and faced L.I.N. L.I.N. buried her face between her left forearm and bicep. She breathed out a shaky wail. Lisa licked her lips. She stood and reached for the door. She hesitated. She looked L.I.N. over. L.I.N. dropped her arm and stared at her lap. She shuddered with cold, terrified tears. Lisa exhaled a quiet breath. She slipped inside the cage and eased the door shut. She crept across the tiny area inside and stopped beside the sofa. L.I.N. glanced at her. Then, she returned her eyes to her lap. Lisa lifted her fingers, timidly. She laid them on L.I.N.'s shoulder. L.I.N. sighed.

"What are you doing, Lisa?" She unfolded her legs, laid her feet on

the floor, and scooted away. “Don’t touch me.” Lisa slid her lips to the side of her face. She sat next to L.I.N. and laid her hands in her lap.

“You miss Chuck, huh?” L.I.N. stared into space. She wiped her eyes and faced Lisa.

“Let me explain how the world works, Lisa.” She swallowed and wiped her palms on her denim skirt. “You don’t get to smash people’s faces against the side of a cage and then chit chat with them about their boyfriend!” Lisa narrowed her eyes and tilted her head. L.I.N. swatted strands of sapphire away from her face. “Especially when you’re talking about the boyfriend you *dumped* in the first place!”

Lisa sighed impatiently. “L.I.N., I didn’t *dump* him.” L.I.N. gritted her teeth and growled. She hopped up and hurried across the Faraday cage. She plopped down in a corner and folded her legs like a pretzel.

“Go away, Lisa.” She stared into space and folded her fingers below her chin. “Go away.”

Lisa exhaled through her nostrils. “I’m not leaving until Jeff says it’s alright.”

L.I.N. pinched her eyes shut. “Stop talking!” Lisa licked her lips. She looked away and folded her arms across her lap. L.I.N. exhaled nervously. She looked up. “That freak is going to *kill* you.” Lisa faced L.I.N. She smirked.

“Who, Jeff?” L.I.N. nodded. Lisa shook her head. “You don’t know what you’re talking about.” She faced a wall of steel mesh beside her. “He

loves me.”

L.I.N. threw her hands out at her sides. “What are you talking about? He doesn’t love *anybody!*”

Lisa faced L.I.N. “He loves *me.*” Lisa looked away. “Only man who ever did.” L.I.N. rolled her eyes. She stared at the floor and shook her head.

“You’re an idiot.”

Jeff wheeled Bat Shit and Frank’s bodies into the exhaust room. Thirty-six charred, crispy corpses were stacked below the main exhaust hub. Splashes of white and grey smoke wafted towards the hub. Tiny, orange embers dotted the mountain of bodies. The pile of scorched cadavers reminded Jeff of lying on the grass, staring at the stars. It made him smile a little. He rolled Bat Shit’s chair beside the bodies and stopped. He laid the sole of his foot against the back of the chair and shoved it towards the tower of bodies. Frank and Bat Shit’s corpses toppled onto the others. Their clothes began crackling. Jeff wandered across the room and snagged the rest of the gas. One tin can was completely empty. The other had less than half a gallon. Jeff returned to his spot beside the stack of stiffs. He doused Frank and Bat Shit’s remains with the leftover gasoline. Slices of tangerine swirls toppled across their flesh. Vivid, orange flames smothered their clothes. They made Bat Shit’s dread locks glow.

Jeff dropped the gas cans in Bat Shit’s chair. Then, he dragged it to the other end of the exhaust room and left. He wandered down a hallway

and entered the conference room. His laptop was still sitting on a long, oak table in the middle of the room. Jeff plopped down in an exquisite, leather chair with a cushy, extra high back. He scooted towards the table and laid his fingers on his laptop's keyboard. He entered a username and a password. His laptop's screen was filled with black and covered with colorful text. The word "smash" printed, followed by a greater than symbol and a tiny, rectangular cursor. Jeff took out his flash drive. He popped a cap off the end and slid the flash drive into a USB port on the side of his laptop. Then, he typed "mnt /dvc/sda1 /flash" and tapped the return key. His terminal printed a blank line. After a few seconds, the blank line became "smash > " followed by a cursor.

Jeff entered "list -l /flash/BuildVortex*." The list command listed every file in the /flash directory starting with "BuildVortex." There were two, BuildVortex and BuildVortex.tpp. BuildVortex was the file Jeff was interested in. It was the binary file Hal built earlier. It had a timestamp that was thirty-seven minutes old. Jeff knew that meant Chuck and Hal made it using the new, improved source code. He nodded. He typed "copy /flash/BuildVortex /Binary." That replaced Jeff's existing BuildVortex file with the new one. Jeff slid his lips to the side of his face. He typed "BatchGen up" and pressed return. The BatchGen script began filling Jeff's screen with gibberish. That was normal. The script ran a bunch of smaller scripts that fired up components inside the generator. The script completed. "smash > " appeared. Jeff typed "BuildVortex 29a b63 7c7 ef9

256” and pressed return. A message appeared. It read, “Time Remaining: 0 years, 0 months, 0 weeks, 0 days, 00:02:56.” The fifty-six on the end began ticking down, one number each second.

Jeff collapsed in his chair. He stared at his computer screen and tilted his head. He couldn’t believe what he was reading. He looked away, closed his eyes, and shook his head. He leaned forward and stared at the message. It was now, “Time Remaining: 0 years, 0 months, 0 weeks, 0 days, 00:02:47.” There was just a little more than two minutes to go. Then, Jeff would have a wormhole to Proxima Centauri. He looked to his left. His gigantic batch particle generator was standing a few feet from the conference table. There was a two foot wide, chrome sphere sticking out of the end. It was aimed at a rainbow colored hula hoop C-clamped to the top of a tripod. The generator didn’t appear to be doing anything. It didn’t make any noise. Nothing visible was coming out of the end of the sphere. But, the generator was doing plenty. It was replacing light years of time and space with a narrow tube of tiny, invisible particles. Also, the power was likely off in several major cities. Jeff folded his arms in front of his laptop. He stared into space and smiled a little.

It was raining much harder in Prospect than it was in New Jack City. After Chuck and the gang drove across the county line, it became difficult to see. Icarus was driving. He and Detective Phillips rode up front. Brandy and Chuck sat in the back seat. Brandy sat behind Icarus. She laid her little fingers beside Icarus’ head and leaned forward.

“How much farther?” she requisitioned. Icarus turned his head around and looked into Brandy’s eyes. A pair of wires dangled from the corners of his lips.

“Few minutes,” he replied. He looked at Chuck. “Some weather, huh?”

Chuck nodded. “No kidding.” Phillips’ eyeballs popped out of her head. She waved her arms in front of her chest.

“Icarus! The road!” She turned and battered his shoulder. “Watch the road!”

Icarus looked away from Chuck. “Oh!” He looked into his girlfriend’s eyes. “I mean, I guess.” He shrugged and faced forward. “Um... if it makes you feel better.”

Phillips dropped her face in her palms. “*Somehow, it does...*” she groaned. A song by some half witted, totally lame alternative band filled the cabin. Brandy bobbed her head around and blinked.

“Oh!” she shrieked. She stuffed her fingers into the pocket of her olive capris. “It’s my cell phone.” She slipped out her cell phone and looked at the screen. The phone jiggled her fingers. Brandy looked at Chuck. “It’s Hal.” She tapped a button at the lower, right corner of the screen and put the phone to her ear. “Hello?” she inquired.

Hal sat in front of his desk in the server room. He was staring at the old, junky computer monitor he’d been using all afternoon. It was filled with black topped with grey and white text. The rest of the room was pitch

black. Hal held a shiny, black telephone receiver to his ear. A curly, black cord dangled from the end. “Brandy!” he replied. “I wasn’t sure if I’d be able to call you or not. The power’s out.”

Brandy squinted. “What?”

“Yeah, the whole house is dark,” Hal explained. “Luckily, I’ve got an old rotary telephone. And, my servers are on battery backup.” He leaned back and laid his free arm over his lap. “Let me talk to Chuck.”

“Sure,” Brandy replied. “Hang on...” She faced Chuck and offered her phone. Chuck lifted it from her fingers and plopped it against his ear.

“Did you get in?” he demanded.

Hal stared at his computer monitor. “Yes, I found the power plant’s I-P. It was in a log file the scopy binary writes to.”

“You tried connecting to port 22?” Chuck inquired.

Hal tried to lick his lips. It didn’t work out. “I’m connected right now.” He looked at the bottom line on his computer monitor. It read, “jeff@26.552.112.92’s password: .” “I use ‘jeff’ as the username, right?”

Chuck nodded. “Probably.”

“And, the password?” Hal inquired.

“Jailbait,” Chuck replied. “j-4-i-1-8-4-i-7.” He glanced at Brandy. “That’s the password he *always* uses.”

Hal typed “j4i184i7” and pressed return. A new line printed. It read “jeff@26.552.112.92” followed by a greater than symbol and a cursor. Hal tilted his head. “You’re right. That worked.”

“Use the ‘p-r-c’ command,” Chuck suggested. “See what’s running.”

Hal typed “prc” and pressed return. A long list of running programs filled his screen. The big, fat, plastic webcams sticking out of Hal’s shiny, brass face focused on one process in particular. It was called “BuildVortex.” Hal assumed that was the binary he and Chuck generated earlier. He patted his thigh. It sounded like a hammer striking an anvil. “Oh, dear,” he remarked.

“Is he running the vortex software?” Chuck asked.

Hal nodded. “It looks like it.”

Chuck licked his lips. “Use the ‘kill’ command,” he instructed. “See if you can stop it.”

Hal typed “kill BuildVortex.” A message printed. It read, “No process killed: BuildVortex.” Hal shook his head. “No can do, Chuck. It’s not working.”

“Try running it as administrator,” Chuck suggested. “I’ll bet that works.”

Hal typed “admin kill BuildVortex.” He bobbed his head. “Same password?”

“Probably,” Chuck replied.

Hal tapped the return key. “Password: ” appeared on the next line. Hal typed “j4i184i7” and pressed return. A message appeared. It read, “No process found: BuildVortex.” Hal tried to squint. Nothing happened. “No process found,” he repeated. “I don’t understand.”

“Use the ‘p-r-c’ command,” Chuck instructed.

Hal typed “prc” and pressed return. BuildVortex was no longer in the list. Hal’s speaker mouth made a sound like someone exhaling a sharp breath. “What happened? It’s not there, anymore.”

Chuck exhaled through his nostrils. He looked at his lap and pressed his lips together. “It’s finished,” he replied. “The vortex is built.” He stared out the window. Rain gushed down the glass. “Jeff did it. He built a wormhole to Proxima Centauri.”

Hal stared at his computer screen. The lights came back on. Hal’s head tilted back. He stared at the ceiling. There was a row of fluorescent lights along the ceiling above the desk. They flickered and glowed white. Hal lowered his head and stared into space. He positioned the telephone receiver’s microphone in front of the speaker at the bottom of his face. “I believe you’re right,” he remarked.

Chuck stared at the back of Icarus’ head. His hood was drawn. It was covered with eyeballs. Shutters adjusted and focused on Chuck. Chuck stared back and shook his head. He yanked Brandy’s phone away from his ear and tapped a button at the lower, right hand corner of the screen.

Hal dragged the body of his telephone across his old, oak desk. He slammed the receiver on the cradle. “Blast!” he shrieked. He yanked a cord out of the back of the telephone. Then, he hopped up, raised the phone above his head, and slammed it into the floor. It smashed into a cluster of slick, white tiles and disintegrated. Chunks of shiny, black plastic

toppled through the air and bounced around the room. A pair of circuit boards whirled towards the ceiling like a couple of boomerangs. Wires and capacitors toppled across rows of tiles. The rotary dial rolled across the room and crashed into the door. Hal threw his hands on his hips, stared at the floor, and shook his head.

Chuck handed Brandy her slick, white cell phone. Brandy stuffed it in her pocket. Chuck looked at Icarus. Icarus' hoodie stared back.

"We'd better hurry," Chuck remarked. "If we're going to stop him."

Icarus looked over his shoulder. "We're almost there."

"The road!" Phillips shouted. "Watch the road, Icky!"

Oceans of rain battered the power station. Sheets of ice cold water dribbled down slanted roofs. Rain poured down the sides of the inlet and exhaust pipes. It filled crevasses between bricks. It collided with windows and threatened to shatter them. Icarus peeled across the parking lot. His car skidded to the front of the building, spun two hundred seventy degrees, and stopped beside Jeff's white van. Icarus stomped the brake pedal to the floor and raised a shifter behind the steering wheel. Phillips was dragged to the front of her seat. She slammed into her seatbelt. Then, she was thrown against the back of her seat. She glared at Icarus.

"God damn, you suck!" she growled.

"Oh, lighten up," Icarus calmly replied. He turned the ignition backwards and pocketed the keys. Chuck kicked his door out of the way. He poked his umbrella out, dropped to the parking lot, and opened the

umbrella above his head. Brandy slid across the back seat and joined him. She closed the door. Phillips got out and stood below Chuck's umbrella. She, Brandy, and Chuck were surrounded by an octagonal waterfall. Icarus hopped out and dashed across the parking lot. He hopped below an awning above the entrance, yanked open the door on the right, and dashed inside.

Phillips grinned and shook her head. "He's a dork," she remarked. Chuck took off. Brandy and Phillips flattened their arms against their bodies and fought to stay under Chuck's umbrella. Phillips had a 9MM holstered against her right kidney. She yanked it out and pointed it at the ground. "You're sure she's in there?" Phillips inquired.

Chuck pointed at Jeff's van. "That's Jeff's van over there."

Phillips sighed. "Jesus." She glanced at Chuck. "I tried to tell my captain we needed backup." Everyone paused in front of the entrance. "He's a real dick." Chuck grabbed a flat, curvy handle near the middle of the door on the right. He pulled the door back, stood aside, and held it open. Phillips and Brandy hurried inside. Chuck closed his umbrella and followed. The front office was painted with blood and body parts. Chuck stopped beside the others and looked around. Dried blood was slathered across cold concrete covering the floor. Tin walls surrounding the room were splattered with brown, crusty, bodily fluids. Williams' entrails were piled beside a couple of foldout tables near the back of the room. Computer monitors along the tops of the tables were spattered with Troy's brains. A trail of fingers, hair, and teeth led down a hall beside the rear, left corner of

the room. Phillips aimed her pistol at the opening to the hallway. Her hands were shivering. Her arms were like rubber bands. Her gun wobbled and rattled in her hands.

“G-Good God, Chuck...” she gasped. Her teeth chattered. She swallowed and looked around. *“W-What the hell happened in here?”*

Brandy folded her fingers over her lips. *“Oh, my gosh...”* She bowed her head and pinched her eyes shut. Icarus crouched and spread his arms.

“There’s no one around.” He looked towards the hallway, suspiciously. *“But, keep your eyes peeled.”* Chuck rested his umbrella against the door he’d just closed. He took out his revolver. He gripped it between his palms, aimed it at the ceiling, and laid the top of the barrel against his right shoulder. He looked at Phillips.

“You’re not gonna wuss out on me, are you?” Phillips looked at him out of the corner of her eye. She exhaled a shaky breath.

“I might...” She looked over her shoulder. Brandy stood behind her, staring at the floor. She folded her fingers and swallowed. *“Brandy, stay behind me,”* Phillips instructed. Brandy looked up. Phillips offered her hand. Brandy stared at it. She laid her fingers on Phillips’ palm and looked around. Phillips tugged Brandy towards her and faced forward. Brandy laid her palms on the back of Phillips’ navy blue sweater and peeked over her shoulder.

“Lead the way,” Icarus instructed. Chuck stood to Phillips’ left. They headed towards the hallway, cautiously. Icarus followed. That way, the

back of his jacket was watching their backs. A trail of dried blood led down the floor of the hallway. Phillips held her gun in front of her chest and aimed it forward. Chuck's rested against his right shoulder. Brandy stayed cuddled against Phillips' back. She tried not to look around too much. Icarus followed them calmly. He focused on as much visual data as his brain could take in. He became highly aware and enlightened. He tapped into levels of consciousness he'd never reached before. The hallway led to a generator room. Chuck and Phillips stopped and looked around. Frank and Bat Shit's bloody footprints were scattered along the floor. There were pools of dried blood tucked behind corners of machines. Phillips glanced over her shoulder.

"Icky?" she inquired.

"Icarus," Icarus corrected. He brushed past Chuck and Phillips and wandered in. He hurried to the center of the room and froze. He stood perfectly still and faced forward. "It's clear," he remarked. "But, I found the bodies."

Phillips wandered in. "What?!" she demanded. Brandy scurried in behind her. She and Phillips stopped beside Icarus. "Where?"

Icarus pointed across the room. "There," he replied. Phillips stared at a door across the room. It was a wooden door with a glass window. The glass was white and decorated with indentations. Phillips couldn't see through. She looked at her boyfriend. "It's through that door," Icarus explained. "It looks like... an exhaust room or something." Chuck

wandered in and stopped beside Brandy. He stared across the room and tilted his head.

"I don't see anything."

Icarus nodded. "It's there." He dashed across the room. Phillips, Brandy, and Chuck scurried behind him. They could barely keep up. Icarus yanked the door out of the way and hurried through. He was standing in a long hallway. The walls were covered with white tin. The floor was covered with giant, tan tiles splattered with red and black specks. Across the hallway was the exhaust room. Thirty-eight charred carcasses were stacked in the middle of the room. They were still smoldering. Icarus hurried across the exhaust room and stared at the mountain of corpses. Phillips stared across the hallway in disbelief. Her eyelids stretched to their limits. Her heart thumped in her ears.

"Oh, God..." she rasped. She scurried across the hallway and stood beside Icarus. Brandy wandered into the middle of the hallway. She folded her arms over her chest and stared at the pile of carnage in the exhaust room. Chuck stood next to her and looked. He turned left and hurried down the hallway. Brandy's head snapped to the left. She lowered her eyebrows in the middle and clenched her fists at her sides.

"Chuck!" she whispered. Chuck scurried down the hallway and disappeared around a corner. Brandy glanced at Phillips and Icarus. They stood, staring at the tower of burning bodies. They looked at each other and shook their heads. Brandy looked to her left and swallowed. She

slipped away and began jogging. She hurried to the closest intersection and turned left. She spotted Chuck. He yanked a thick, wooden door out of the way and wandered through. Brandy froze and tilted her head back. She plopped her hands on her hips and exhaled a panicked sigh.

Chuck stood behind a three foot wide pole made of thick, charcoal colored glass. His eyes followed the pole to the top. There, Chuck spotted a gigantic, steel sphere. The sphere had a diameter of five feet. Chuck glanced across the room. He spotted an eight foot by twelve foot by seven foot box in the middle of the room. It was skinned with thick, steel mesh. Chuck spotted two rolling chairs with high backs. They were beside a door near the middle of the cage across the room. The backs of the chairs were facing Chuck. Chuck looked beyond the cage's door. He spotted a red, leather sofa inside. Lisa was sitting on top. Chuck flattened his lips and narrowed his eyes. He stared at the front, right corner of the cage. He spotted L.I.N. She was sitting on the floor, staring at Lisa. Lisa looked across the room. L.I.N. looked over her shoulder. Chuck aimed his revolver between Lisa's eyes.

"Hi, Lisa," he remarked. He wandered around the Van de Graaff generator and slithered across the room. "Long time, no see."

Brandy stared down the hallway. She pressed her lips together and exhaled through her nostrils.

"Hell with it," she whispered. She headed for the door she'd seen Chuck go through.

Chuck stopped beside the Faraday cage. He pointed his 44 Special at Lisa's heart. L.I.N. hopped up and faced her boyfriend.

"*Chuck!*" she squealed. She curled her fingers through a row of steel mesh and stared into Chuck's eyes. Chuck looked at her and smiled.

"Hi, L.I.N."

L.I.N. smiled back. "Hi, Chuck." Brandy wandered in. She looked around. She was surrounded by a floor filled with blue, plastic bricks, walls filled with white, plastic bricks, and a ceiling filled with red, plastic bricks. Her eyeballs bobbed behind the lenses of her glasses. She looked beside her. She spotted the giant Van de Graaff generator. Lisa stood, slowly. Chuck thumbed back the hammer on his pistol.

"Freeze," he ordered. Lisa's eyes popped open. She bowed her head and raised her hands.

"Chuck!" she shrieked. "D-Don't! Stop!"

"Shut the hell up!" Chuck barked. "Or, I'll blow your fuckin' head off!" Lisa sobbed. She stared at the floor and nodded, slowly. L.I.N. patted the side of the cage.

"Chuck, let me out of here!" she demanded. "Please?" Chuck grabbed a hold of the lever on the left side of the door. He turned it and yanked the door out of the way. L.I.N. hurried out and stood beside him. She threw her arms around Chuck's waist and kissed the side of his neck. Brandy hurried across the room.

"L.I.N.!" she called out. L.I.N. looked over her shoulder. She looked

at Chuck.

“You brought Brandy?”

Chuck looked into L.I.N.’s glittery, emerald eyes and nodded. “Laura and Icky are here, too.” He looked across the room. “Somewhere...” Lisa stepped towards the door. Chuck aimed his revolver down the bridge of her nose. “Lisa!” he shouted. “Stop!” Lisa froze and stared at the floor.

Brandy stopped beside L.I.N. She threw her arms around her neck and kissed the side of her head.

“*L.I.N.! L.I.N.! L.I.N.!*” she gasped. She laid her cheek against L.I.N.’s. “*I’m so happy you’re alright!*” Lisa looked up and smirked. She stepped towards the door.

“Lisa, I will *kill* you!” Chuck shouted. He peeled L.I.N.’s arms off his waist and stepped inside the Faraday cage. Lisa narrowed her eyes.

“No, you won’t,” she replied. “You don’t want to kill me, Chuck. You know it.”

Chuck’s eyes widened. “Oh-ho-ho... Yes, I do!” The frame of the cage was made of chain link fence railing. That’s what the doorway was framed with. Chuck grabbed a hold of the door frame with his left hand, reached across the cage with his right hand, and pressed the tip of his revolver against Lisa’s forehead. “You have no idea how bad I wanna kill you, Lisa. No idea!” He reached across his chest with his pistol. Then, he battered the bridge of Lisa’s nose with the handle of his 44 Special. Lisa shrieked. She fell on her butt and pinched her nostrils. Her eyes filled with tears.

She felt blood gushing through her fingers. She stared between Chuck's eyes. Her eyebrows fell in the middle.

"God dabbit, Chuck!" she yelped. "God dab you!" Brandy and L.I.N. stood beside the doorway. Their arms were wrapped around each other's shoulders. They pointed at Lisa and giggled. Lisa pointed back. "You two bitches shut your bouths!" A crackle ripped through the air. A bolt of crimson electricity fired out of the Van de Graaff generator near the door. It was three inches thick. It collided with the top of the Faraday cage. Chuck was still gripping the door frame. His eyes rolled into his head. The revolver dropped from his fingertips. His legs wobbled like tubes of rubber. He toppled to the right and crashed to the floor. L.I.N. gasped. Her eyes popped open. She folded her fingers over her nose and lips.

"No," she groaned. "No! No! No! No! No!" Lisa stared at Chuck's pistol. Her eyes popped open. She scurried across the floor and grabbed it. It singed her skin. It felt like it was roasting over a fire.

"Ah! Ah!" Lisa cried. The revolver tumbled from her fingertips and landed beside Chuck's head. She curled her fingers in front of her lips and blew on them. Her hot breath made her skin feel like it was rolling over a lake of molten lava. She laid her wrists across her belly and tilted her head back. "Gyah!" she shouted. She pinched her eyes shut and gasped for breath. L.I.N. slipped inside the Faraday cage, stood beside her boyfriend, and dropped to her knees. She grabbed a hold of his biceps and wiggled them.

“*Chuck!*” she rasped. “*Chuck! Chuck! Chuck!*” She looked over her shoulder. She spotted Jeff standing beside the Van de Graaff generator. He held a thin remote control in his left hand. His right hand was holding a shiny, rainbow colored hula hoop. He tilted his head and smiled a little. L.I.N. smashed her fist into the Faraday cage. “Jeff, you bastard! I’m gonna kill you!” Jeff looked at L.I.N. He rolled his eyes. He stared at Lisa.

“Hurry up, Lisa,” he remarked. “We’ve gotta get out of here.” Lisa exhaled a painful breath through her lips. She laid her fists against the cold, plastic floor. She shoved herself to her feet and looked across the room.

“*Yeah, sure...*” she groaned. “*I’ll be right there.*” Brandy knelt beside Chuck’s head. She and L.I.N. rolled him onto his back. Brandy laid her fingers below Chuck’s nostrils. She looked at L.I.N.

“He’s not breathing.” She laid her fingertips on Chuck’s wrist. “His heart stopped.” Lisa scampered across the room. Her navy blue tennis shoes didn’t have very good traction. They began swerving and sliding around. Lisa gasped. She slipped and fell on her face ten feet from the Van de Graaff generator. She collapsed on her breasts and slid the rest of the way. She stopped beside Jeff’s feet and looked up. Jeff looked down at her, shamefully. He sighed and shook his head. Blood oozed out of Lisa’s nostrils and dribbled to the floor. Her fingers felt like they were covered with sulfuric acid. And, her butt and breasts felt like they’d been battered by a baseball bat. Lisa lowered her head and began bawling. Jeff rolled his

eyes.

“Lisa, get up!” he shouted. He pocketed the remote control and dangled the hula hoop from his neck. He bent over, slid his arms through Lisa’s, and yanked her off the floor. Then, he turned and dragged her through the door. L.I.N. looked at Brandy, helplessly.

“Do you know CPR?” she asked.

Brandy nodded. “Of course. I’m a pharmacist, remember?” She laid her palms on Chuck’s chest, folded her fingers, and began compressing his ribcage. She counted out fifteen compressions. Then, she laid her lips on Chuck’s and pinched his nostrils. She inhaled through her nose and exhaled into Chuck’s mouth, twice. She sat up and began compressing his chest again. She looked at L.I.N. “You know,” she gasped between breaths. “I always hoped you’d never catch me making out with your boyfriend.” She counted out the remaining chest compressions. “But, I guess now I have no choice.” L.I.N. blew a raspberry with her lips. She shoved Brandy’s shoulder.

“Shut-up.” Brandy squeezed out a panicked laugh. She pinched Chuck’s nose, laid her lips on his, and breathed into his mouth. L.I.N. grabbed a hold of Chuck’s black jeans. She shook his legs. “Don’t *do* this to me, Chuck!” she shouted. “Don’t *do* this to me!” Brandy sat up. She laid her palms on Chuck’s chest and wove her fingers.

“*Oh, God...*” she grumbled. She began compressing his chest. “Come on, Chuck! Wake up!” L.I.N. stared at her boyfriend’s legs. She sat on her

calves and sighed. She stared into space and pressed her lips together.

“We need a defibrillator,” she remarked.

Lisa raised her eyebrows. “That would be great,” she replied. “I don’t suppose you’ve got one of *those* hiding in there, somewhere.” She glanced at L.I.N. “Do you?” L.I.N. looked up. She stared at the side of Brandy’s head. Brandy laid her lips on Chuck’s and exhaled. L.I.N. raised her left arm. She turned it over and stared at her wrist. She laid her fingertips on top. She tilted her head back, pinched her eyes shut, and sighed.

“Actually... I think I do,” she replied.

Brandy began battering Chuck’s chest in a panic. “Well, break it out!” she shouted. “Because, he’s not waking up, L.I.N.!” L.I.N. rolled the end of her sleeve to her elbow. Then, she spread a small area of flesh on her wrist. A 110 outlet was hiding underneath. L.I.N. exhaled through her nose. She stared at the fingers of her right hand. The tip of her index finger flipped back. A set of lock picks was hiding underneath. They were sharp and pointy. They’d have to do. L.I.N. swallowed, nervously. She jabbed her lock picks into her forearm and dragged them towards her elbow. Her face twisted up with pain. She tilted her head back and shrieked.

“Bah! Gyad!” she wailed. Blood pooled inside the gash on L.I.N.’s arm and dribbled out. It drizzled down her arm and dripped onto the floor. Brandy glanced over her shoulder.

“Oh my God, L.I.N.!” she shouted. “What are you doing?!”

L.I.N. gritted her teeth. “Keep pumping his heart!” she yelled back. “Keep the blood flowing to his brain.” L.I.N.’s lock picks retracted, and her finger closed. She dug into her arm and fumbled through wires. She scrunched up her face and growled. She pulled out a pair of big, fat wires that were connected to her 110 outlet. One was red. One was black. L.I.N. bowed her head and groaned. *“Oh, my God. Oh, my God. Oh, my God.”*

Brandy looked at her. “L.I.N., we don’t have a lot of time, here!”

“Brandy, you’re not helping!” L.I.N. shouted. She gripped the red wire in her teeth. She slid her teeth back and forth like a saw. Brandy looked away.

“Oh my God, L.I.N.! You’re gonna kill yourself!” L.I.N. managed to cut the wire in half with her teeth. She moved on to the black one. Brandy exhaled a couple more breaths into Chuck’s lungs. He didn’t move. Brandy sat on her heels and sighed. She looked at L.I.N. and shook her head. “I can’t get his heart to start,” she remarked. “I don’t know what to do.” L.I.N. finished chopping the black wire. She gripped the end between her teeth, yanked her head back, and stripped the end. She did the same with the red wire. She sighed and looked up. Brandy tilted her head. “Wow, that might actually work.” L.I.N. shuffled across the floor. Brandy slid out of the way. L.I.N. grabbed a hold of Chuck’s collar and ripped open his shirt. She glanced at Brandy.

“I hope so.” She twisted the black and red wires together. Then, she laid them against Chuck’s chest. Chuck gasped. His eyes popped open. He

lifted his head off the floor and began coughing. L.I.N. jerked her arm away from his chest. It was throbbing. She untwisted the wires and yanked them apart. Chuck laid his head down. He exhaled and looked at Brandy.

“W-What the hell happened? Why am I on the floor?” He looked at L.I.N. L.I.N. laid her fingers on Chuck’s breastbone. She leaned forward and kissed his chest. She looked into his eyes and smiled.

“*Chuck...*” she whimpered. She kissed his lips. “*You’re okay...*” Chuck lifted his head. He laid his palm on L.I.N.’s cheek. Then, he leaned forward and kissed her. He sucked at her lips and tilted his head. He cradled L.I.N.’s neck between his forearm and bicep. Then, he touched his tongue to hers. Brandy looked away. She puffed up her cheeks and widened her eyes.

“Guys, I’m sitting right *here*,” she remarked. Chuck pulled his lips away from L.I.N.’s. He sat up and brushed her hair out of her face.

“Did I get electrocuted?” L.I.N.’s eyebrows tilted towards the outer edges of her eyes. She sniffled and nodded. Chuck felt something warm dripping onto his wrist. He backed away and looked. He noticed a long, jagged gash along L.I.N.’s forearm. Her blood dribbled out and pooled on his fingers. Chuck gasped. “*Oh, honey...*” he groaned. He curled his fingers around L.I.N.’s. He slid his other fingers along the gash below her wrist. He looked into her eyes. “You hurt yourself.”

L.I.N. looked away and pinched her eyes shut. “*I had to!*” she sobbed. She laid her cheek against Chuck’s chest. “*I had to save you...*” Chuck

threw his arms around her. He kept his fingers elevated to avoid getting blood on her shirt. His palms burned. He laid his chin on L.I.N.'s shoulder and looked them over. They were blistered and red. Chuck scrunched up his face.

"Ew..." He looked to his right. Brandy slid her glasses off her face. She wiped her eyes and sniffled. Chuck held out his arm. "It's okay, Brandy. Come here." Brandy looked up and licked her lips. She slid across the floor. Then, she slipped her arms around Chuck and L.I.N.'s waists. Chuck snaked his arm around Brandy's shoulders.

"I-I gave you CPR," Brandy whispered. Chuck chuckled. He kissed the top of Brandy's head.

"Thank you," he replied. Detective Phillips wandered in, waving her 9MM. She looked across the room.

"Oh, wow." She lowered her pistol. "You found her." Icarus scrambled in behind her and looked around. He looked towards the Faraday cage.

"Did you see Jeff?" he inquired.

Chuck shook his head. "Nope. Never *saw* him."

L.I.N. lifted her head. "He was here, Icky!" she shouted. She laid her head on Chuck's chest. "He got away..." Chuck looked at Brandy's scalp. Brandy looked at Chuck from the tops of her eyes.

"Hmm..." Chuck groaned. *"I never saw him."*

Chapter 7: “The Alpha and the Omega”

In the northwest corner of Hal’s server room, there was a hospital bed. It had a steel frame and four, tall legs. Three inch, composite wheels that swiveled were screwed into the base of each leg. A memory foam mattress lay on the bed’s platform. It was wrapped with a white sheet. There was a pillow near the western wall. L.I.N. lay on the mattress. She was turned off. She lay on her back, and her head lay on the pillow. Her nose pointed at the northern wall. L.I.N.’s left arm lay on a mountain of white towels. Her sleeve was rolled to her elbow. Her wrist was mangled and bleeding. However, her nanotechnology managed to seal the wound a great deal. The tip of L.I.N.’s right pinkie was folded back. An RJ45 connector was sticking out. A small, rolling table with an LCD monitor rested between the bed and the northern wall. There was an identical table on the other side. It held a wire basket with three Phillips screwdrivers, two scalpels, a pair of needle nose pliers, a roll of gauze, a roll of surgical tape, a bottle of iodine, and a baggie filled with cotton balls. A stack of white towels lay beside that.

Chuck, Hal, and Brandy stood beside the bed. Icarus and Phillips opted to rest in the living area. Phillips was chatting on Hal’s red, cordless phone with her captain. He was pissed. Phillips left the stack of bodies Jeff and Frank burned at the Prospect power plant. That way, she could help get L.I.N. home. And, Hal and Chuck could repair her arm. Phillips’ captain was a little confused by that. For one thing, he didn’t understand

why Phillips had to go. More importantly, he didn't understand why L.I.N. couldn't be taken to a hospital. Phillips told him she'd explain later. Chuck looked at his palms. They were red, scorched, and blistered. They looked awful. His skin felt like someone was grinding it with a cheese grader. Brandy stared at Chuck's charred flesh. She patted his shoulder.

"I'll get you a wet towel," she remarked.

Chuck rolled his eyes. "Yeah. That'll make it better."

"It'll help," Brandy explained. She grabbed a towel off the table with the wire basket and wandered across the room. "I'll be right back." She entered the living area and closed the door. Hal's speaker mouth made a sound like someone sighing.

"No time like the present," he remarked. He lifted L.I.N.'s wrist off the stack of towels below her arm. He glanced at Chuck's palms. "I suppose you're not going to be able to help."

Chuck raised his eyebrows. "Doubtful." Hal raised L.I.N.'s wrist and held it in front of his face. The two wires poking out of her flesh slid inside her arm. Hal tilted his head.

"Oops." He looked at Chuck. Chuck widened his eyes and scrunched up his face.

"Oops? Really?" Hal tried to lick his lips. He had no tongue. He had no lips. It didn't work out.

"I've always hated those wires. They always come up short." Hal laid L.I.N.'s wrist on the towels. Chuck shrugged.

“So, make them longer.”

Hal nodded. “I believe I will.” He snagged a scalpel from the wire basket. Then, he grabbed the bottom of L.I.N.’s shirt. Chuck watched in horror. He tilted his head.

“Uh... Hal?” Hal lifted L.I.N.’s shirt to the bottoms of her breasts. He laid the sharp edge of the scalpel below the bottom of her shirt, pressed it into her pale flesh, and dragged it to her bellybutton. Blood began oozing out. Chuck wrinkled his nose. He threw his arms out at his sides. “Hal, what the hell?”

“She’s turned off, Chuck,” Hal explained. “She can’t feel any pain. Don’t worry. And, When I’m done, I’ll cover her with fresh nano-goo. You’ll never be able to tell the difference.” Hal made a capital “I” out of the first cut. He made a perpendicular incision across the top and across the bottom. Then, he flopped both sides of L.I.N.’s belly out of the way. Brandy returned. She stood beside Chuck and watched.

“Oh, my,” she remarked. L.I.N.’s abdomen was filled with segments of black, flexible tubing. Those were the main components of her bowels. Each segment was six inches in length. Each was tied to the next with a narrow, white, plastic ring. Six tiny, transparent, rubber hoses were connected to each ring. They were filled with L.I.N.’s blood. The small hoses sticking out of L.I.N.’s bowels connected to larger hoses. They were glued together with rubber cement. It was difficult to tell what went where just from looking into the small wound Hal made. Hal slipped his fingers

inside L.I.N.'s bowels. He dug near her right hip. He found a switch and flipped it back. The inside of L.I.N.'s body was lined with LED ropes. When Hal flipped the switch by L.I.N.'s hip, her abdomen filled with frosty, white light. It made things much easier to see. Brandy sighed, quietly. Chuck faced her. She held a dripping, wet towel in her palms.

"Hold out your hands," she instructed.

Chuck tilted his head. "Brandy, there's no way that's going to..." Brandy grabbed Chuck's right hand. She laid his scorched fingers on the towel. Chuck pinched his eyes shut and gritted his teeth. "Gyah!" he shouted. Brandy laid her fingers across Chuck's knuckles and squashed his palm into the towel. Chuck blew a breath through his lips. Brandy looked up.

"I know it hurts, Chuck," she remarked. "I'm sorry." She grabbed his other hand. Chuck watched in horror.

"No, no, no, no..." he protested. Brandy turned Chuck's first hand over. She left his fingers curled around the towel. That way, the towel was balled in his palm, and his palm faced the ceiling. Brandy laid Chuck's other palm on top and squashed it down. Chuck mashed his lips together and groaned. Brandy looked into Chuck's eyes. Her eyebrows fell at the sides.

"It'll feel better in a couple of days, Chuck." She sandwiched the towel and Chuck's fingers between hers. She swirled her fingertips along his knuckles. Chuck stared into the lenses of Brandy's eyeglasses and

sighed.

“Thanks, Brandy.” Brandy patted his fingers. She and Chuck turned and watched Hal. Hal slid L.I.N.’s bowels aside. The red and black wires connected to her 110 outlet were hiding underneath. They were soldered to a tiny circuit board sticking out of her spine. At least, that’s the way it appeared. Hal looked at Chuck and Brandy.

“I’ll get my soldering gun.” There was an ancient wooden desk along the northern wall, east of the hospital bed. It was covered with circuit boards. There was also an electric soldering gun and a magnifying glass sticking out of a series of telescoping rods. Hal headed that direction. Chuck looked at Brandy. Brandy stared back. She tilted her head. Chuck stepped towards the bed L.I.N. was lying on. He stopped beside his girlfriend, bent over, and looked inside her abdomen. He spotted something odd. Actually, there were two of them. Chuck narrowed his eyes and looked from one to the other.

“Hal?” he requisitioned. “What are these?” He looked across the room. Hal was returning. His soldering gun dangled from his fingertips by a long, orange extension cord. He stood beside Chuck and peered inside L.I.N.’s belly.

“What?” he inquired. Chuck pointed out a pair of shiny, black canisters. They were the size of shot glasses. The top of each canister had a threaded hole in the middle.

“Those,” Chuck replied. He stared between Hal’s eyes. “What *are*

those?”

Hal flicked his wrist. “Oh, that’s nothing,” he explained. “Those are L.I.N.’s kidneys.” He looked over his shoulder. “Brandy, give us a hand. Will you?” Brandy stepped towards the hospital bed. Chuck let go of the towel with his right hand and grabbed Brandy’s arm. Brandy froze.

“Those are *not* her kidneys,” Chuck responded. He pointed out a pair of long, skinny cylinders. They hovered near L.I.N.’s hips, behind her bowels. They had blue, rubber caps on both ends. The middles were shiny and white. They looked like replacement filters for a reverse osmosis system. “*Those* are L.I.N.’s kidneys,” Chuck explained. He pointed out the shot glass sized canisters. They were sticking out near L.I.N.’s pelvic region. “What the hell are *those*?” Hal tried to smile. He ended up laughing nervously, instead.

“Oh, Chuck,” he replied. “I’ve put so much work into my creation...” He looked Chuck in the eye. “I-I have no idea what my intentions were with those!”

“Those are ovaries,” Chuck insisted. “*That’s* what those are.” Hal tried to frown. His mouth didn’t budge. Brandy stood on her tip-toes. She peeked over Chuck’s shoulder and looked around. She widened her eyes and gasped. She looked at Hal.

“Hal! That can’t be!” She stared at the shiny, black canisters and shook her head. “Can it?”

Hal shook his head. “I’m afraid you two are mistaken.” He turned

and looked into L.I.N.'s abdomen. "I mean... that's absolutely absurd."

Chuck laid his crispy palm on Hal's slick, frosty shoulder. Hal faced Chuck.

"Hal..." Chuck remarked. "What... is going on?" He pointed at his girlfriend. "What is she... really?" Hal looked L.I.N. over. He sighed.

"L.I.N. Isn't Necessary."

Chuck tilted his head. "Hal..."

Hal looked over his shoulder. "I have my... daughter's ova," he explained. Chuck raised his eyebrows. He stepped back and folded his arms over his chest. Brandy stared at Hal, blankly. Hal pointed towards a room on the other side of the west wall. It was filled with chemistry equipment. "They're in a freezer in the other room. They're loaded in a pair of pressurized containers."

Chuck took a breath. "You're telling me... these are cold storage containers inside L.I.N.'s body?" Hal laid his soldering gun beside L.I.N.'s right leg. He faced Chuck, crossed his arms, and nodded. Brandy's eyes popped open. She motioned towards L.I.N. with her fingertips.

"You mean... she can get pregnant?" Hal's fat, plastic eyeballs focused on Brandy. He smiled and nodded. Rather, he just nodded.

"Oh, yes. That's very possible. That is... if everything works correctly."

Chuck threw his hands out at his sides. "Hal! Why didn't you tell me this?"

Hal faced Chuck. "I wasn't sure if you were ready or not." He tilted

his head. “You know... to have my grandchild.”

Chuck couldn’t help but smile. “It would... I would be honored.”

Brandy looked away and cackled. She laid her fingers over her lips.

“That’s weird!” she exclaimed.

“They’re... Mallory’s ova,” Hal added. He tried to narrow his eyes.

“You understand? It would be *her* child.”

Chuck motioned towards L.I.N. “Is *that* why you put all this work into her?”

Hal shrugged. “Oh, yes. I suppose.”

Chuck grinned. “The nanotechnology?”

Hal nodded. “Yes, Chuck.”

“Her digestive system?”

“Yes, Chuck,” Hal replied.

Chuck pointed at L.I.N. with his fingertips and swirled them around. “And, she’s all... warm and cozy.”

Hal nodded. “Well, she’d have to be. Otherwise, a fetus wouldn’t survive. And yes... the nanotechnology circulating through her blood can carry nutrients and deliver them through an umbilical cord.” He shrugged. “It would be just like keeping a fetus alive inside a *real* person’s body.”

Chuck nodded. He plopped his fingers over his lips and thought a moment. He dropped his hands on his hips.

“Do it. What are you waiting for?”

Hal looked at Brandy. “It’s a simple procedure. You take the

containers out of the freezer. And, you screw them onto the canisters sticking out of L.I.N.'s uterus." Hal pointed the canisters out. "Once the containers from the freezer decompress, the process is complete." Hal looked into Chuck's eyes. "She'll begin puberty, Chuck." He tilted his head. "She'll get rather... rude and obnoxious once a month."

Chuck rolled his eyes. "For about a week." He stared at the floor and nodded. "Yeah, I know."

Brandy stepped away and threw her arms over her chest. "You two are a couple of asses!" Chuck and Hal snickered. Brandy looked at Hal and smiled. "Can she use the pill?"

"Oh, of course," Hal assured her. "I mean, it would be pretty stupid of me to have designed all this and not thought of that." Hal turned around and looked L.I.N. over. "Her nanotechnology takes care of that as well. It can sense the presence of contraception." He looked over his shoulder. "It's all automated."

Chuck slid his lips to the side of his face. "The only thing is... shouldn't we wake her up and tell her before we do this?"

Hal stared into Chuck's eyes. "L.I.N. will love it. I am sure of it." Chuck inhaled through his nostrils. He looked at Brandy and pressed his lips together. Hal faced L.I.N. He reached across the hospital bed and brushed a handful of sapphire strands out of her face. "*She has no choice...*" he whispered. He patted her head, gently.

Jeff and Lisa stood in front of a tripod. It was identical to the one they

left at the power plant in Prospect. The shiny, spirally, rainbow colored hula hoop was C-clamped to the top. Jeff and Lisa were in their basement. They returned home and went there after leaving the power plant. Jeff looked at Lisa. Lisa looked at Jeff.

“Would you just do it?” Lisa begged. “Come on...” She stretched her lips, fluttered her fingers in front of her teeth, and exhaled a long, exhausted yawn. “I’m tired.” Lisa’s nose was puffy and swollen. Her fiery, blue eyes were surrounded by faint, violet rings. Jeff cupped his fingers under her chin. He leaned forward and kissed her lips.

“Okay,” he replied. He stepped away and stood beside the hula hoop. “No time like the present.” He flipped a tiny, steel switch on the side of the hula hoop. He looked into Lisa’s eyes. “Or, the past.” A pair of boots poked out of the middle of the hula hoop. They looked like cowboy boots. They were cornflower blue and wrinkled. The toes were pointy and curled. The boots descended. They dangled from a pair of legs. The boot owner’s legs were covered with a pair of tight, tan colored, corduroy britches. The boots stood on the floor. The legs’ knees bent. Two sets of fingers appeared. They curled out of the top of the hula hoop and grabbed on. Lisa stared at them and scrunched up her face. Each set of fingers was sort of normal looking. There were five per hand. But, the fingers’ flesh was pale and crinkly. The nail of the ring finger on the owner’s right hand was long, sharp, and pointed. It was shiny and green.

The fingers tugged the rest of the body they belonged to out of the

hula hoop. The creature looked like a person. Well, sort of. Jeff flipped off the switch. He turned and looked the creature over. It wore a brown, leather belt with a shiny, gold belt buckle. The belt buckle had a symbol on it. It looked like the letter, "O." But, the base was broken, and two feet were sticking out. It was the symbol for the Greek letter, omega. The humanoid that stepped out of the hula hoop wore a crisp, button up shirt. The fabric was splattered with black blobs. The areas that weren't black were colored with red, orange, and cream, blended together. He was definitely a "he." He looked at Lisa and smiled a little. His face looked like his hands. It was the color of ivory. It was also crinkly. His skin looked like it was damaged from years of crisping in the sun.

His eyes were filled with blue. His eyes had no whites or pupils. They looked like two shiny, blue marbles. His nose was barely noticeable. It was a tiny lump with two tiny holes. His lips were tiny and narrow. An old, crispy, suede cowboy hat covered the top of his head. Tufts of curly, red hair dangled from the rim. His hair wasn't red like a person's. It was crimson. It looked like blood. He had no eyebrows or eyelashes. His ears were similar to his nose. They didn't stick out of the sides of his head. There were no lobes or floppy parts. Pretty much, his ears were a pair of holes in the sides of his head. Swirls of skin around the holes resembled the cauliflower shape of a human's ear. The creature looked at Jeff. Jeff stared back. He also smiled a little.

"You must be the Omega," Jeff remarked.

The humanoid nodded. "My nomenclature is of such." Jeff batted a handle on the side of the C-clamp. It dropped to the floor. So did the hula hoop. Jeff knew from previous experiments that the hula hoop would be a bit unstable from its metamorphosis into a wormhole. He knew it would be destroyed if it was handled improperly. It hit the floor and shattered. It disintegrated like a hollow tube of glass and piled on the blocks covering Jeff's floor. Omega stared at the pile of shards Jeff's floor collected. He slid his lips to the side of his face. He turned and looked into Lisa's eyes. "Omega. That is how I am addressed in your language." He looked at Jeff. "The Alpha, you must be."

Jeff nodded. "You can call me 'Jeff'." Omega wandered away. He stood in front of Lisa and stared into her eyes. Lisa looked frightened. She lifted her fingers timidly and stepped away. She looked at Jeff. Omega stared at the floor. It was covered with shiny glass cubes. They alternated in color between red, yellow, blue, and green. Omega stared at them and tilted his head.

"I'm sorry to have frightened you," he confessed. He looked up. "It is not considered frightening to approach others where I am from." He stepped towards Lisa and looked into her eyes. Lisa blinked. She exhaled and tried to relax. Omega curled his fingers around hers. Lisa narrowed her eyes. Omega lifted her hand and stared at her palm. Lisa flattened her fingers. Omega smiled. He laid Lisa's fingers against his lips and kissed them. Then, he replaced her hand beside her thigh. "It is Lisa... correct?"

Lisa couldn't help but smile. She looked into Omega's glittery, blue eyes and nodded. Omega looked at the floor and nodded. "It is wonderful to meet you."

Jeff pressed his lips together. "Hmph."

Omega looked over his shoulder. "What is it, Jeff? Something is wrong. I can sense it."

Jeff motioned towards Lisa. "Is that some kind of custom where you're from?"

Omega nodded. "Greeted in this manner is the way of all living creatures." He tilted his head. "It only manifests itself by alternative resources."

"Well, it's obnoxious," Jeff replied.

Omega's lips parted. "If this offends you, I am sorry. Of what is obnoxious and what is not, I am unsure. I am only sure that dramatic changes are in store for your planet's future." He looked at Lisa and smiled a little. "That is all."