

“I.C.U.”

By Michael Atkins

Chapter 1: "Icarus Cameron Ulrich"

Icarus looked like a freak. His face was twisted and horrific. It was thin and bony. It was littered with long, slender scars. His lips were long and thin. The left side of his upper lip never fell. It always pointed towards his left nostril. His eyes didn't match. The left one was ocean blue. It was nearly shut. The right one was caramel colored. It was wide, wiry, and intense. His hair was long and black. It stood straight up. He wore a black t-shirt, a pair of red pants with vertical, black stripes, a pair of red suspenders, and a pair of black army boots. His clothes were faded and worn. His boots were scuffed and crinkly. Icarus rarely stopped moving. He jerked, twitched, and scratched. His eyeballs bobbed from side to side. His head turned and tilted. He looked like he was on uppers. But, he wasn't.

It was after midnight. Icarus was driving a car. It was an old piece of crap he boosted two days prior. It was a four-door. The paint was faded and grey. It was chipped in places. The driver's door was smashed. A gathering of squiggly scrapes slid from the door's dents to the tail light. The car was an eighties model. The body was flat with straight edges. The interior was torn to pieces. It was covered with faded, maroon fabric. Tufts of yellow stuffing poked out of the corners of the seats. There were cigarette burns on the carpet. The roof was caving in. It was dotted with fist sized holes. The dash was sun damaged and smashed to pieces. An old, decrepit cassette deck dangled from the middle of the dash. It was suspended from an array of thick, stiff wires. A black cassette lay on the floor. Four feet of thin, waded tape connected the cassette to the mouth of the deck. It twisted across the floor in a giant knot.

The speedometer had tall, white letters. They spanned a panel below the steering wheel. An orange needle pointed at a space between seventy-five and eighty. Icarus passed a speed limit sign. It read "45." The rearview mirror began reflecting blue and red, flashing lights.

Icarus glared at them. He narrowed his right eye.

"Damn it..." he mumbled. He reached over the back of his seat and snagged a hold of a jacket. It was made of white wool. It was covered with tiny cameras. They looked like eyeballs. Each was the size of a quarter. They were covered with clear, plastic domes. Beneath the domes, there were irises. They were colored like human irises. Some were brown. Some were blue. Some were green. Some were hazel. Icarus threw the jacket over his shoulders, slid his arms through the sleeves, and zipped the front. The jacket had a hood. It was also covered with eyeball cameras. Icarus threw the hood over his head. He was driving down a four lane city street with no turn lane. He eased the brake pedal to the floor, flipped on his right blinker, and coasted onto a parking lot. He parked across a row of parking spaces and killed the engine. A blue police cruiser parked behind him. It was shiny and new. It had four doors. There were gold stars on the front doors. "NJCPD" was written on the back doors in white letters.

A female officer got out. She wore a navy blue uniform with a black tie. Her shirt had short sleeves and pockets. Her slacks had teal stripes down the sides. Her shoes were made of shiny, black leather. They looked like mirrors. A chrome nametag hovered above her left breast. It read "Phillips." A gold badge with six points rested below that. Phillips was thin and had pale skin. She had bright blue eyes that lit up the night. She had blonde, shoulder length hair. It was straight but curled at the ends. Phillips threw on a blue windbreaker and zipped it up. "NJCPD" was written across the back. Her car door was open. A blue hat with a black bill sat on the passenger's seat. Phillips grabbed it, situated it on her head, and closed the door. She holstered a 9MM on her right hip and approached Icarus. She exhaled a shaky breath. She was always apprehensive about making traffic stops in the middle of the night.

She glanced at the sky. It was dotted with heavy, black clouds. They glowed with lights

from the city. Stars poked between the clouds. Phillips inhaled through her nose and exhaled through her lips. The air was thick and frigid. She stopped next to Icarus' door. She looked it over. It was littered with dents and scrapes. Phillips slid her lips to the side of her face. She took a tiny flashlight out of her coat pocket and looked up. She shined the light through Icarus' window. Icarus stared back. His left eye was narrow and twitching. His right eye was poppy and wild. Phillips took a breath. She curled her fingers around the grip of her pistol. Icarus glared into her eyes. She looked like an angel. Her skin was soft and serene. Her cheeks were rosy and warm. Her eyes were vibrant and sincere. Her lips were puffy and pink. Icarus sensed no threat. There was a rusty handle with a cruddy, rubber knob sticking out of his door. He curled his fingers around the knob and rolled down the window. It squealed all the way down. He glanced at Phillips' nametag. Then, he looked into her eyes.

"Hi, Phillips," he remarked. He looked around. "Look, I'm sorry I was speeding." He looked up. "I'm kind of... on my way somewhere. You know?" Phillips looked Icarus over. She searched the white wool of his camera covered jacket. It was hideous and odd. It looked like it was covered with eyeballs. Of course, Phillips could tell the "eyeballs" were just cameras. She looked into Icarus' repulsive face. It made her stomach churn. Her fingers slipped off her gun. She turned off her flashlight and returned it to the pocket of her jacket. She folded her arms over her chest.

"I clocked you doing seventy-eight in a forty-five," she replied. She narrowed her eyes. "That's thirty-three over the speed limit, sir. You know, I could take you to jail for that?"

Icarus closed his eyes and nodded. "Yes, ma'am."

Phillips sighed. "I'm going to need to see your driver's license, insurance, and registration." Icarus opened his eyes and tilted his head. He smiled as best he could.

“Come on, Phillips. It’s late.” He glanced at the road. “I really just need to get to where I’m going. It’s just down the street.”

Phillips raised her eyebrows. “Sir!” she shouted. “I’m not going to ask you again!”

Icarus looked down and sighed. He showed Phillips his palms and turned around. The front seat was a bench seat. He reached across and opened a glove box. He looked towards the corners of his eyes. He slipped his hands inside the hood of his jacket and retrieved a pair of metal clips. They were tiny, alligator clips attached to wires. The wires were sewn into the jacket. Icarus opened the clips, slid them over the sides of his tongue, and closed the clips. Little teeth on the clips bit into his tongue. Icarus winced. There were power buttons sewn into the wrists of his jacket sleeves. Icarus tapped them with his index fingers, and his jacket came to life. He could see a sagging roof above him, faded seats around him, and a blonde, female officer behind him. Her arms were crossed over her chest. Her hand was nowhere near her gun. Icarus’ left arm saw the dash, the radio dangling from the dash, and the cassette tape on the floor. His right arm saw a bunch of seats, the glove box, and the passenger door. It was unlocked. Phillips was staring straight into the eyes across Icarus’ back. It made the hair on the back of Icarus’ neck stand up.

Phillips stared at Icarus’ jacket. Little, multicolored shutters adjusted along his back. Holes in the centers shrank and focused on her. It was freaky. It made her very uncomfortable. She felt like she was surrounded by creeps, staring at her. She reached for her pistol. Icarus jerked the handle on his passenger door and shoved the door out of the way. He flew across the seat, rolled onto the parking lot, and did a back handspring. He landed on the roof of the car. His back stared Phillips down. She fidgeted with her pistol. Icarus threw his feet behind him and dropped his palms on the roof of the car. He bent his elbows and thrust himself across the roof. Phillips exhaled a panicked shout. Icarus landed on top of her, and they tumbled to the

pavement. Phillips scrambled for her gun. Icarus saw it with his right sleeve. It was lying beneath the car. He snatched it off the pavement and did a hand stand. He turned on his hands, landed on his feet, and aimed Phillips' pistol between her eyes. Phillips was lying on her back. She held herself up with her elbows and stared down the barrel of her gun. Her eyes popped open. She gasped for breath.

"P-Please..." she begged. She showed Icarus her palms. They were covered with swirls of tar and tiny, jagged pebbles. She swallowed. "Please, don't." Icarus exhaled through his nostrils. He tilted his head. Phillips turned her head and pinched her eyes shut. "Please!" she shouted. Icarus sighed. He lowered Phillips' pistol and reached for the alligator clips. He detached them from his tongue and dropped them at the sides of his face.

"Phillips, look at me," he demanded. She looked up, timidly. Tears dribbled out of her eyes. Icarus showed her his palm. It was also tarry. "I'm not going to hurt you, okay?" Phillips breathed out a panicked shout. Icarus pressed his lips together. "But, I can't let you take me in." He looked Phillips over. "Do you have a backup piece?" Phillips tilted her head back and sobbed. She looked into Icarus' eyes and nodded. "Ankle?" Icarus asked.

Phillips swallowed. "Yes..." she groaned. Icarus nodded. He knelt in front of Phillips and patted her right ankle. He checked below her pant leg. He found a revolver strapped to her ankle. It was in a leather holster. Icarus unbuttoned it and slid the revolver out. He lowered Phillips' pant leg and looked into her eyes.

"Any others?" he inquired.

Phillips rolled her eyes and shook her head. "No."

Icarus' left, upper lip quivered. "Alright, then." Phillips' revolver was a double action. Icarus popped it open and tilted it back. Six bullets tumbled to the pavement. Icarus closed the

revolver. He held up Phillips' 9MM and pressed a button on the side. A magazine dropped to the pavement. Icarus shoved back the slide. An additional round ejected from a hole in the side. It landed beside Phillips' head. Icarus showed Phillips her weapons. "I'm going to leave these on the hood of your car," he told her. He tilted his head. "And, I can't have you following me. So, I'm going to take your car keys. I'll leave them on the side of the road a couple of blocks away." Phillips tilted her head back and sighed. Icarus forced a grin. "Look, I'm sorry. Alright?" He shrugged. "What can I say? You shouldn't have pulled me over."

He hopped up, returned to his car, and fired up the engine. He backed up and stopped next to Phillips' cruiser. He got out, laid Phillips' firearms on the hood, and opened the door. Phillips watched, grimly. Her eyebrows fell at the sides. Icarus yanked out her car keys and shut the door. He looked into Phillips' eyes and forced a smile. It was hideous. He wandered in front of Phillips' car, hopped inside his own, and drove backwards. He turned the steering wheel and eased the brake pedal to the floor. He threw the car into overdrive and skidded off the parking lot. Phillips watched him drive away. She exhaled a shaky sigh and dropped her eyes in her palms. She felt tar sticking to her face and pebbles digging into her cheeks. She chuckled.

Chapter 2: “Paul Carmichael”

L.I.N.’s bedroom was cozy and warm. There was an open door on the eastern wall. The rest of the wall was covered with panels of mirrors. The floor was covered with fluffy, tan carpet. There were two wooden doors along the northern wall near the middle. They concealed a closet. One was open a crack. The other was open halfway. There was a window across from that. It consisted of a copper skeleton and four glass squares. The skeleton was shaped like a plus sign surrounded by a square. The window squares were different colors. One was red. One was blue. One was yellow. One was green. Except for the eastern wall, all the walls were painted navy blue with a bumpy texture. The coat of navy blue was splattered with white, teal, and canary yellow. The ceiling was done the same way. It was also decorated with squishy, stick on stars. The stars were different colors and sizes. Some were pink, some were teal, some were yellow, and some were white. They glowed in the dark. There was a ceiling fan with five bulbs and five wooden blades in the middle of the stars.

There was an oak bed across from the entrance. It had four wooden posts. There was a shiny, black lamp between the bed and the northern wall. It had three white, translucent shades. Most people would put an ordinary, incandescent bulb under each shade. L.I.N. had fluorescent, black lights in hers. There was a wicker basket between the bed and the southern wall. That’s where L.I.N. kept her dirty clothes. The lid was missing. L.I.N. had no idea what happened to it. There were two posters above L.I.N.’s bed. One was a poster of the solar system. One had a giant picture of a puzzle cube. Both posters glowed when the black light lamp was on. A mattress with blue and white stripes lay across L.I.N.’s oak bed. A black sheet was stretched over that. L.I.N. lay on top, facing the western wall. Her head was plopped on a squishy, worn out pillow with a faded, black case. Her right arm was folded underneath. Her eyes were

pinched shut. A blanket of shiny, blue hair draped across her face.

Chuck lay next to her. He cradled her in his arms. His head was plopped on a brown pillow with white polka dots. He wore a pair of red, plaid boxer shorts. L.I.N. wore nothing at all. A tie dye comforter lay on top of them. There was a clock between the posters above the bed. It looked like a black kitty cat. It had giant, cartoon eyes that turned side to side. A black pendulum dangled from the bottom. It was long and skinny like a cat's tail. It hooked at the end. It was synchronized with the cat's eyes. The clock face was on the kitty's tummy. The letters were big and black. So were the hands. The hour hand pointed at six. The minute hand pointed between four and five. L.I.N.'s eyes opened a crack. She slid her hair behind her ear and yawned quietly. She licked her lips and looked up. She could barely see her kitty clock. It was lit by a faint glow from stars dotting the ceiling. L.I.N. studied the clock and sighed. It was past six, and Hal hadn't come to wake her up. It made her sad.

She inhaled through her nostrils and exhaled through her lips. She felt Chuck's arms around her waist. It made her smile. She curled her fingers around his and wobbled his hand. Chuck groaned. His eyebrows fell in the middle. He peeled his eyelids apart and sighed. He forced a smile and patted L.I.N.'s shoulder.

"What is it?" he whispered. *"What's wrong?"*

L.I.N. looked over her shoulder. *"Nothing's wrong."* She smiled. *"It's time to get up."* Chuck puffed up his cheeks and widened his eyes. He looked at the kitty cat clock. He exhaled a breath between his teeth. L.I.N. turned and sat up. *"Come on. I'll make some eggs."* Chuck scrunched up his face. He grabbed L.I.N.'s hand.

"No..." he whispered. L.I.N. looked down. Chuck shook his head. *"No, no, no, no, no, no, no. I don't think so."*

L.I.N. smiled. *“What?”*

Chuck pointed at L.I.N.’s clock. *“It’s not even six-thirty, yet. We’re not getting up.”* He looked into L.I.N.’s eyes and shook his head. *“Uh-uh.”*

L.I.N. tilted her head. *“Chuck, it’s late. Hal never let me sleep this late.”*

Chuck’s eyes crinkled. *“No, no,”* he whispered. He curled his fingers around L.I.N.’s shoulders and eased her to the bed. *“Lay back down, sweetheart. At least wait until the sun comes up.”* He slid his arms around L.I.N.’s waist. *“Jeez.”*

L.I.N. sighed. *“But, Hal always woke me up before six.”*

Chuck closed his eyes. *“Hal isn’t here.”* He kissed L.I.N. on the back of her head. *“Go back to sleep.”* L.I.N. slid her lips to the side of her face. She looked over her shoulder.

“Are you sure?”

“I’m positive,” Chuck replied. L.I.N. smiled. She laid her head on her pillow and closed her eyes.

There was a room between the northern wall of the house and the stairs. It was tucked into the northwest corner of the house. The walls stretched from the checkered, tile floor to the ceiling. There were two shiny, oak doors. One was on each wall. A little after nine, Chuck came out of a bathroom upstairs. It was across the hall from Hal’s old bedroom. Chuck wore a teal shirt with navy blue stripes, black jeans, and a pair of floppy, black sneakers. His shaggy, black hair was damp and slicked back. Chuck trudged down the stairs. He stared at the room between the northern wall and the stairs on his way down. It made him curious. He reached the living room and made a left. He stopped in front of the door facing the east. He folded his arms over his chest and stared at it. L.I.N. wandered out of her bedroom and stood at the top of the stairs. Her tie dye blanket dangled from her shoulders. She stared at Chuck and tilted her head.

“That’s Hal’s laboratory,” she remarked.

Chuck stepped back and looked up the stairs. “Yeah?” he inquired. “Can I see?” L.I.N. took a breath through her lips and exhaled through her nostrils. She held up her index finger.

“Give me a second. Okay?” She pointed towards the bathroom. “Let me get ready?”

Chuck smiled. “Sure. I can’t wait.” L.I.N. nodded. She hurried into her bedroom and grabbed some clothes. Chuck wandered into the kitchen. It was separated from the living room by a long bar. The top was black marble. The base was shiny veneer. All the cupboards and countertops in the kitchen were the same. All the appliances were stainless steel. There were three gas stoves. Chuck stood in front of them and stared. They stood side by side next to a refrigerator with two vertical doors. Hal’s kitchen was exquisite. It was designed for serving large groups of people. Chuck narrowed his eyes and shrugged. “*I wonder why?*” he whispered. He wondered if there was a large freezer somewhere with more food. Maybe there was a steak or two. Chuck’s stomach growled. Chuck chuckled. He patted his belly and reached for the refrigerator.

He got a pitcher of milk, a carton of eggs, and a package of bacon from the refrigerator. He scrounged up a bowl, a pan, a hot pad, a whisk, a spatula, three plates, two glasses, and a couple of forks. He laid them on the counter. He snagged a salt and pepper shaker from the bar. They were in a little, wooden box. There were six eggs in the carton. The package of bacon was half gone. Chuck decided to make what was left. He whisked the eggs with some milk in the bowl. He added salt and pepper. He laid the skillet on the front, left burner of the stove and turned a knob. A flint clicked inside the stove, and the burner ignited. Chuck laid the remaining bacon on the skillet. He deposited the package in a trashcan below the sink. He cooked the bacon until it was crispy. He laid a paper towel over one of the plates. He got it from a

dispenser beside the stove. He laid the bacon strips on top.

Chuck poured the eggs in their place. He cooked them until they were hot and fluffy. Then, he turned off the burner. He laid a hot pad on the bar. He set the pan with the eggs on top. He set the bacon next to that. He laid the remaining plates in front of two of the barstools and dropped a fork next to each. He set a glass in front of each fork. He heard L.I.N. coming down the stairs. He looked up. L.I.N.'s long, blue hair was sopping wet and messy. She wore a teal turtleneck, a pair of dark blue jeans, and a pair of blue, canvas shoes. She scampered down the stairs and faced the kitchen. She stopped and looked around. Chuck grinned.

“What?” he inquired.

L.I.N. smiled back. “I said *I* was going to make breakfast.”

“Awe...” Chuck moaned. He turned around and opened the refrigerator. “I’ll bet you’re a good cook, too.” He found a carton of orange juice. He grabbed it and set the milk in its place. He closed the refrigerator and turned around.

“I *am*, actually,” L.I.N. replied.

Chuck nodded. “Well, you can make us lunch, then.” He set the orange juice on the bar. “How’s that sound?”

L.I.N. nodded. “Did you see a brush while you were in the bathroom?” She held up her hands, pressed her fingertips together, and spread them. “Like a... hairbrush?”

Chuck pressed his lips together. “Hmm...” He turned and tapped his chin. He faced L.I.N. “Middle drawer, below the sink.”

L.I.N. dropped her forehead in her palm and shook her head. “I’m losing it.” She hurried upstairs. “I looked right at it!” Chuck sat down. He poured L.I.N. and himself some orange juice. He set the pitcher on the other side of the bar. L.I.N. returned a moment later. This time,

her hair was straight and fluffy. She and Chuck ate breakfast. Then, they did the dishes. L.I.N. scrubbed. Chuck rinsed. He watched L.I.N. with intense fascination. She was a dishwashing aficionado. She was a maestro with a sponge. Chuck figured she did a lot of dishwashing for Hal. Hal didn't seem like the type to waste time with such things. L.I.N. looked at Chuck and smiled. Chuck rinsed the last dish and placed it in a strainer. It resided next to the sink. He looked up. L.I.N. tugged a wad of paper towels loose and dried her hands. She handed the paper towels to Chuck. He followed suit. He tossed the paper towels into the wastebasket below the sink. L.I.N. took his hand. She motioned towards Hal's laboratory with her head.

"Come on," she instructed. She led Chuck towards the front of the house.

"Hal has a server, I take it."

"Three," L.I.N. replied.

Chuck nodded. "Do you do backups, periodically?"

L.I.N. laid her fingers over her lips. "Oops!" She looked at Chuck. "I'm supposed to." They stood in front of the laboratory's east facing door. "It's been a few days." L.I.N. turned a knob on the left side of the door and swung the door aside. She flipped on a light switch next to the door. Chuck followed her in and looked around. The floor was covered with white tiles. The walls were trimmed with slats of oak. There was a long, oak desk along the southern wall. Seven cruddy, old CRT monitors sat on top. Three keyboards lay in front of those. One was white with white and grey buttons. One was all black. One was a squishy, spill proof keyboard that rolled up. Chuck spotted three desktops on the floor at the end of the desk. A wireless router sat on top of the one in the middle. There were two rolling chairs in front of the desk. One was a brown, leather chair with a high back and arm rests. The other was a student's chair, trimmed with grey fabric. There was a bookcase next to the desk. It was filled with textbooks.

The subjects included computers and advanced mathematics. There were also books on chemistry and quantum mechanics. There were others.

Chuck wandered across the room. There was a stack of wire shelves along the opposite wall. There were rows of grey, plastic bins along each shelf. Chuck stood in front and folded his arms over his chest. Each bin was labeled. A bin on the right side of the top shelf was labeled “femur.” Chuck looked inside. It was filled with halves of long tubes. Each half had a rectangular piece at one end with a hole. The other end was threaded. Chuck picked up two halves and pressed them together. He looked the resulting piece over and nodded. He looked over his shoulder. L.I.N. was standing behind him, smiling. Chuck showed the two halves to L.I.N.

“These are replacement bones, aren’t they?”

L.I.N. nodded. “Among other things.” Chuck lowered his hands, turned his head, and looked the pieces over. He slid them around in his fingers. They were made of composite material. It was slick, grey, and lightweight. Chuck returned the two halves to the femur bin. The bin next to that was labeled “humerus.” It contained similar pieces. But, they were smaller and shorter. Chuck looked at the shelf below that. The first bin on the right was labeled “hip.” It was filled with large, composite spheres with threaded holes. The hole was the right size for one of L.I.N.’s femurs. Chuck smiled and nodded. He looked around. He spotted a bin labeled “tendon.” It was filled with rolls of piano wire. Another bin was filled with circuit boards. Chuck looked to the left. There was an old, wooden desk next to the shelves. Several circuit boards were scattered on top. There was also an electric soldering gun and a magnifying glass. The magnifying glass was stationary. It had a flat base and a series of adjustable rods. The base was screwed into the top of the desk. A thick, round, semicircle of glass was attached to the end

of the rods.

In the northwest corner, there was a rolling, hospital bed. Chuck looked at L.I.N. She was standing beside him. Chuck wandered to the bed and looked it over. He poked the mattress. It was memory foam, covered with a white sheet. There was a pillow at the other end. There was a small, rolling table between the bed and the wall. An LCD monitor rested on top. An identical table resided on the other side of the bed, near the pillow. There was a wire basket on top. It contained three Phillips screwdrivers, two scalpels, a pair of needle nose pliers, two white towels, a roll of gauze, a roll of surgical tape, a bottle of iodine, and a baggie filled with cotton balls. Chuck looked under the bed. There was a flat, rollout drawer. He pulled it out. There was a keyboard and a mouse on top. They were plugged into a USB hub. Chuck smiled at L.I.N. He held out his hand.

“Do you mind?” he asked.

She looked into his eyes. “Oh...” She laid her hand in Chuck’s. “No. Of course not.” Chuck helped her onto the rectangle of memory foam. L.I.N. sat in the middle of the bed and folded her legs like a pretzel. She held out her thumbs. The ends folded back. A USB port was hiding behind the tip of her left thumb. A VGA port was hiding behind the tip of her right thumb. Chuck reached across the bed and snagged a hold of a cable. It was sticking out of the LCD monitor. He attached the end of the cable to L.I.N.’s right thumb. There was a USB cable sticking out of the hub next to the keyboard and mouse. Chuck attached it to L.I.N.’s left thumb. He reached across and tapped a power button on the monitor. It displayed an image. Chuck looked it over and grinned. There was a taskbar at the bottom. There was a video feed above that. It was an image of the soldering table and the wire shelves across the room. Chuck looked up. L.I.N. was staring across the room. She looked at Chuck. Chuck checked the monitor.

Now, *he* was on the screen. He waved hello and watched. L.I.N. waved back. Chuck chuckled.

“That is so cool.” He noticed a black arrow with a white border. It was near the upper, right corner of the screen. Chuck pointed at it. “Move your mouse cursor.” The arrow began wiggling around. Chuck smiled. He noticed an icon on L.I.N.’s taskbar. It was a black square with a grey border. Chuck pointed at it. “Open up a terminal.” The little, black arrow wandered across the screen and clicked the icon. A terminal opened. It printed “smash” followed by a greater than symbol. A white rectangle appeared next to that. It was a cursor. Chuck crossed his arms over his chest. “Okay. Now, type something.” L.I.N. looked at the ceiling and thought for a moment. The video feed wandered along. It stopped and showed an image of the ceiling. The word “temp” appeared on the terminal. L.I.N. faced forward and issued a “return” command. The terminal printed a line. It read “72 degrees Fahrenheit.” Chuck pointed at the screen. “That’s the temperature of the room?”

L.I.N. shrugged. “That’s what my temperature sensor says.”

Chuck nodded. “And, *you’re* just a binary file...” He looked into L.I.N.’s eyes. “Right?”

L.I.N. nodded. “l-i-n.” She typed “lin” into the terminal. Chuck pressed the “Home” key on the keyboard at the bottom of the hospital bed. The terminal’s cursor rested at the end of the word “lin.” It disappeared and reappeared at the beginning. Chuck typed “mnl” and a space. He pressed the return key. A manual opened. It filled the terminal and stopped at the bottom. Other text was hidden below. Chuck began reading. The lin binary file had hundreds of runtime options. It used thousands of text files to determine what to do in given situations. Chuck skimmed the manual a bit and closed it. There was one, particular runtime option he was interested in. It was the “-b” runtime option. It was the option used to do a backup. It had the

syntax “lin -b <filename>.” Chuck assumed the lin binary made a copy of all its text files and dropped them into a single file when called in that manner. That file was the “backup” L.I.N. mentioned earlier. She said she’d neglected to do one for a few days. Chuck looked at L.I.N.

“Do a backup.”

L.I.N. nodded. “Yeah, I usually put them in my home directory.” She issued a command. It read, “lin -b /home/lin/\$date.” The cursor moved to the next line and paused. After a moment, it printed “smash” and a greater than symbol. She looked into Chuck’s eyes. “Then, I secure copy them to one of Hal’s servers.” She pointed at the desktops next to the desk near the door. Chuck looked over his shoulder. L.I.N. was pointing at the desktop nearest the desk. It was an old, black desktop with grey trim. “Hal named it ‘BlackBetty’,” L.I.N. remarked. Chuck chuckled. He faced the monitor. L.I.N. issued a new command. It read, “scopy /home/lin/\$date BlackBetty:/HalsStuff/Backups.” The cursor moved to the next line and paused. Then, it printed “smash,” followed by a greater than symbol. Chuck looked into L.I.N.’s big, green eyes.

“Do you have chess on there?”

L.I.N. pointed between Chuck’s eyes. “No! I am *not* playing chess with you!”

Chuck threw his hands out at his sides and smirked. “What?”

L.I.N. laid her fingertips on her chest. “I hate playing chess! Hal used to beat the crap out of me all the time.” Chuck chuckled. L.I.N. looked away. “I started stealing the pieces and hiding them.” Chuck laid his forehead in his palm and shook his head. L.I.N. crossed her arms over her chest. “Hal would just go buy another chess set.” L.I.N. looked at Chuck. She narrowed her eyes and shook her head. “No way.”

Chuck smiled. “We have to, L.I.N. Come on. I’d love to see how you play.”

L.I.N. shook her pointer finger. “You know what I think? I think Hal *intentionally* made me a bad chess player just so he could beat me all the time.” Chuck snickered. L.I.N. gritted her teeth. “It pisses me off. No! No chess!” She waved her hands in front of her face. “Nuh-uh.”

Chuck nodded. “You probably just need to work on your endgame.” L.I.N. looked down. She tapped her pointer finger on her palm.

“I need to... not play anymore chess.” She looked up. “That’s what I need to do, Chuck.” She grinned. Chuck grabbed a hold of the edge of the bed frame. There was a snap. It sounded like a giant rubber band coming loose. Something hard toppled to the floor. L.I.N. gasped. “What did you do?” She and Chuck looked at the floor. A little, wooden box lay on the tiles. L.I.N. looked at Chuck. “What the hell *is* that?”

Chuck shook his head. “I don’t know.” He bent over and retrieved the box. He slid off the top and peeked inside. L.I.N. watched, anxiously. Her eyes widened.

“What is it?” Chuck took out a small book. L.I.N. had never seen anything like it. It had the word “Passport” written on the front. Chuck opened it and looked it over. He raised his eyebrows.

“Uh...” He looked at L.I.N. “It’s you.” He showed L.I.N. the book. It had a photograph of her and some other information. There was a name next to the photo. It read “Laura Isabelle Nelson.”

L.I.N. shrugged. “I don’t understand.” She squinted. “That’s not what ‘L.I.N.’ stands for. I told you, it stands for ‘L.I.N. Isn’t Necessary’.” Chuck found a few other items in the box. There was a Social Security card. It too was marked with the name “Laura Isabelle Nelson.” There was also a typewritten letter. Chuck skimmed through it and nodded. It was a will. It was signed, “Hal Damon.” Chuck also found a business card. It was titled “Paul Carmichael,

Attorney at Law.” Chuck looked up.

“I think I get it.”

Chapter 3: “Where’s Hal?”

Paul Carmichael was a well tanned, well built, clean cut attorney with rimless spectacles and shiny, chin length, brown hair. L.I.N. stared at his long, glinting locks. *Hers* was supposed to be brown. But, they always came in blue. Her slick, sapphire eyebrows fell in the middle. She narrowed her eyes and shook her head. She and Chuck sat across from Paul. They sat in shiny, brown, leather chairs with high backs and wooden arm rests. The backs were dotted with glossy, bronze buttons. Chuck threw on a red, plaid jacket before leaving the house. He sat, leaning in. His arms were folded across his lap. His face was strained and focused. L.I.N. slouched in her seat. Her eyes bobbed around, searching Paul’s office. Her elbows rested on her armrests. Her fingers dangled lazily along her belly. She wasn’t even paying attention. She was trying not to fall asleep. Paul sat behind a shiny, wooden desk. Two wire baskets sat near the front, left side. A wooden nameplate with white letters resided on the right. A laptop sat in the middle. It was folded shut. L.I.N.’s “passport” and “Social Security card” lay next to that. Paul pored over a packet of paper. He laid it on his desk and pointed at L.I.N.

“Now, *you’re* Laura?” he inquired.

L.I.N. showed Paul her palms. “No, I’m L.I.N.” She lowered her hands. “I don’t know *who* the hell Laura is.”

Paul nodded. “Well, I’ve been looking over this passport.” He opened the passport and showed it to L.I.N. “Sure *looks* like you.”

L.I.N. looked at her lap and widened her eyes. “Well, it’s not.”

Paul picked up the packet of paper and looked it over. “And, this will that Hal Damon filed with the county clerk sure does mention Laura a lot.” He looked at L.I.N. “In fact, it *only* mentions you.”

L.I.N. looked up. “Okay.”

Chuck faced L.I.N. “Do you understand what he’s saying?” L.I.N. looked at Chuck. She shook her head.

Paul smiled. “You’re his soul heir.” L.I.N. faced Paul. She narrowed her eyes.

“Wait, are you saying all of Hal’s stuff...” She laid her fingers on her chest. “...goes to *me*?” Paul nodded. L.I.N. took a breath. “His house and all his land?”

“Yes, Laura,” Paul replied.

L.I.N. squinted. “His laboratory and all his servers?”

“Yes, Laura,” Paul replied.

L.I.N. gritted her teeth. “His... bank accounts?” She looked at Chuck. “Or, whatever?”

Chuck smiled. “Yes, Laura.”

L.I.N.’s eyebrows fell in the middle. “Stop calling me ‘Laura’, Chuck.” Chuck chuckled. L.I.N. faced Paul. “That’s not my name.”

Paul shook the passport. “Says here it is.” He laid it on his desk. “And, it looks legit.” He looked up. “Social Security card, too.”

L.I.N. shook her head. “It can’t be.”

Paul shrugged. “Can’t be... but, it is.”

L.I.N. scrunched up her face. “No...” She looked at Chuck. Her eyebrows fell at the sides. “No! I can’t take care of Hal’s old place and all his stuff. There’s no way.” Chuck snickered. He laid his hand on L.I.N.’s shoulder.

“It’s okay, honey. *I*’ll help you. Don’t worry.” L.I.N. shook her head. She faced Paul.

“No. Mr. Carmichael, please. I can’t do this.”

“It’s done,” Paul replied. He laid the passport and Social Security card on top of Hal’s

will and set them aside. “Me and Hal set this up a long time ago.”

Chuck narrowed his eyes. “Wait... you and Hal?”

Paul looked at Chuck and nodded. “Mm-hmm, yes.” Chuck smirked. He pointed out the passport and Social Security card.

“What are you saying? Like... you two forged all this?”

Paul showed Chuck his palms. “Hey, these are legitimate, Mr. Parker. And, you can’t prove otherwise.” He squinted. “I assure you.”

Chuck eased back and nodded. “I’ll be damned.”

Paul looked at L.I.N. and smiled. “I’ve arranged for us to meet with a judge tomorrow morning.” He held up Hal’s will, the passport, and the Social Security card. “We just need to present this and a copy of Hal’s death certificate. Then, all his belongings will go to you.” He smiled. “Laura.” He winked. L.I.N. collapsed in her chair and sighed. She forced a smile.

Paul Carmichael’s office was located on the twenty-third floor of a skyscraper, downtown. It was a red, brick building with eighty-five stories. There was a pair of glass doors out front. They slid aside when a sensor was tripped. A sidewalk surrounded the building. A parking lot surrounded that. Chuck and L.I.N. came strolling out and stood out front. The sky was filled with grey. Rain was tumbling in sheets. There was a curtain above the glass doors. It was decorated with maroon and amber bands. It shielded L.I.N. and Chuck from the rain. Chuck was carrying a black umbrella with a wooden, hook shaped handle. He popped it open and held it above their heads. He looked at L.I.N.

“Well, Laura...”

“Shut-up,” L.I.N. replied.

Chuck chuckled. “It’s great!” he told her. “You get all of Hal’s stuff!” He slid his

fingers through hers. “That’s like... the best news ever.”

L.I.N. looked up. “I don’t even know what I’m going to *do* with it all.” She sighed. “I don’t even know how to *use* a bank account.” Chuck snickered. He wiggled L.I.N.’s hand.

“I’ll teach you. Don’t worry.” L.I.N. exhaled through her nostrils. She slowly nodded. Chuck stood to the right of L.I.N. He looked to his right. A man was standing next to him. His back rested against rows of bricks. A white hoodie dangled from his head and shoulders. Strands of long, black hair dangled from the hole in the hood. His white jacket was covered with cameras. Chuck had seen cameras like them before. They reminded him of web cameras. Only, these had funny colored irises. They were colored specifically so they looked like eyeballs. Some were blue. Some were green. Some were hazel. And, some were brown. Chuck looked down. The man wore red pants with thin, black stripes. He also wore cruddy, black, leather boots. Chuck looked up. The irises of the cameras moved with him. They were all focused on *him*. It was creepy.

“*I see you...*” the man groaned. Chuck looked up. He couldn’t see the man’s face. It was hidden behind his white hood and his long, black hair. The eyeballs on his jacket readjusted. They focused on L.I.N. Chuck looked to his left. L.I.N. wasn’t paying attention. She didn’t even know the man with the eyeball jacket was there. She stared at the sidewalk and folded her arms over her chest. “*Where’s Hal?*” the man hissed. L.I.N.’s eyes popped open. She looked up.

“Huh?”

Chuck looked to his right. “Hal who?” The man looked to his left just a little. Chuck caught a glimpse of his face. It was hideous and deformed. It was littered with thin scars and a ghastly smile.

“Not *you*,” he snarled. He bent over, curled his knees, and whirled in front of L.I.N. and Chuck. He landed in a crouched position, facing them. He glared into L.I.N.’s emerald eyes. L.I.N. stared back. She tilted her head. The man’s left eye was narrow and blue. His right eye was wide and brown. The left side of his upper lip began to twitch. A pair of thin wires dangled from the edges of his lips. They disappeared inside the hood of his jacket. He pointed between L.I.N.’s eyes. “You.” L.I.N.’s eyes popped open. She inhaled a shaky breath.

“Um...”

Chuck stood in front of her and showed the man his palms. “Whoa... eyeball freak.” He sighed. “Look, I don’t know who you are, but you better back off.” Icarus gritted his teeth. They were jagged and bright. He looked at L.I.N.

“Surely *L.I.N.* remembers me.” He tilted his head. “It wasn’t *that* long ago.” Chuck looked over his shoulder. L.I.N. stared back. She widened her eyes and shrugged.

“Never seen him before.” She and Chuck faced forward. Icarus nodded.

“I see...” He licked his long, thin lips. “Hal must’ve wiped me from your memory. How... inconvenient.” L.I.N. stared at Icarus blankly. She tried to remember his face. Nothing came to mind. Icarus’ eyebrows fell in the middle. He bent his elbows. “*Damn...*” he whispered. His legs uncoiled and went straight. He sprang from the sidewalk and held himself up with his left hand. A puff of white dust replaced his right hand. There was an earsplitting pop. Chuck and L.I.N. winced and stuffed their fingers in their ears. Icarus’ left elbow bent. He bounced to the left and landed on both hands. There was another pop. A second puff of white dust replaced his left hand.

“Icarus!” a woman shouted. L.I.N. and Chuck looked across the street. A uniformed police officer had a 9MM aimed at Icarus. She stood below an awning that traced a building

across the street. Tufts of blonde hair swirled across her face in gusts of angry wind. She scrunched up her face and gritted her teeth. “Icarus Ulrich!” She fired two rounds at Icarus’ hands. Icarus shot off the sidewalk, pressed the soles of his boots against the wall, and dug his long, thin fingers into the bricks. Two white puffs replaced his hands. Icarus stuck to the wall like a spider and looked over his shoulder. Rain spattered his eyeball cameras, his clothes, and his face. He grinned at Officer Phillips.

“I told you, Phillips!” he shouted. “I can’t let you take me in!” Phillips snarled. She began firing. Icarus danced across the wall, dodging bullets. He snaked around the corner, folded his knees and arms, and sprang across the parking lot. He landed on the next building and continued. Phillips emptied a magazine at him. She ejected it and inserted another. She chased Icarus across the wall with seven additional slugs. Icarus made it across the side of the second building, rounded the corner, and slithered down the back. He dropped to a fire escape, dashed down the stairs, and skidded across a parking lot. Phillips lowered her pistol and sighed. She looked at L.I.N. and Chuck. Chuck took his fingers out of his ears. L.I.N. did the same.

“Who the hell *was* that guy?!” Chuck shouted.

Phillips slid her lips to the side of her face. “I was hoping you could tell *me!*” she shouted back.

Chapter 4: “Where’s Icarus?”

Chuck and L.I.N. sat across from Phillips. They were in a diner called “Shirley’s.” It was a stone’s throw from Paul Carmichael’s suite. It was divided by a waist high wall. The waist high wall was covered with wood paneling with a shiny, white border. The floor was covered with white and teal, checkered tiles. The waitresses wore pink dresses and white aprons. Chuck, L.I.N., and Phillips sat at a booth beside a window. Rain poured down the glass. Their table stuck out of the wall. It was a blue table with faint, squiggly lines. A napkin dispenser, a salt shaker, a pepper shaker, a glass bottle of ketchup, and a jar of sugar lay below the window. A black, plastic ash tray lay on top of the napkin dispenser. Chuck put a glass of water to his lips and took a sip. L.I.N. sat beside the window. A glass filled with cola sat in front of her. A white straw with red bands was sticking out of the top. L.I.N.’s arms were folded on the table. Her head rested on top. She stared at her murky drink, smiling. Phillips sipped coffee from a shiny, white mug. She looked at Chuck and exhaled through her nose. She looked at L.I.N. and smiled.

“Did you tell me your names? I forgot.” Chuck set his glass on the table. He laid his palm on his chest.

“I’m Chuck Parker.” He looked at L.I.N. “And, *this* is Laura Nelson.” L.I.N.’s eyebrows fell in the middle. She glared at her boyfriend.

“It’s ‘L.I.N.’, you dick!” Chuck chuckled. L.I.N. couldn’t help but snicker. “Stop calling me that!” Phillips narrowed her eyes. She threw her hands out at her sides.

“Huh?” Chuck pressed his lips together. He forgot he was sitting at a table with a cop.

“Nope. Nothing.” Phillips put her coffee mug to her lips. Chuck glanced at her nametag. “Officer Phillips,” he remarked. He looked into her eyes. “What’s your first name?”

Phillips shook her head. “Just call me ‘Phillips’.”

Chuck squinted. “No. I don’t like that.”

Phillips smiled. “What?” She shrugged. “Why?”

“Because, ‘Phillip’ is a *guy’s* name,” Chuck explained. L.I.N. cackled. She sat up and laid her fingers over her lips. Phillips looked into Chuck’s eyes and nodded.

“Okay.” She sipped her coffee. “It’s ‘Laura’, if you really want to know.”

L.I.N. threw her arms out at her sides. “What? You’re kidding, right?”

Phillips snickered. “What are you two *talking* about?”

L.I.N. pointed at her. “*You’re* name is ‘Laura’?”

Phillips nodded. “Yes, L.I.N.” She rolled her eyes. “Or, Laura. Whatever.” Chuck turned and cackled. L.I.N. grinned and shook her head. She jabbed Chuck’s ribs with her elbow. Chuck faced Phillips.

“So, you’re name is ‘Laura’. I *like* that.” He nodded. “I like that so much better than ‘Phillips’.” He faced L.I.N. and smiled. “‘Laura’ is such a nice, pretty name.” L.I.N. folded her arms over her chest. She rolled her eyes and shook her head. Phillips snagged the ash tray from the top of the napkin dispenser. She laid it in front of her and looked beside her.

“You guys don’t mind if I smoke, do you?” Chuck shrugged. L.I.N. faced the window and scrunched up her nose.

“Mm...” she groaned. “I *guess* not.” Phillips’ wind breaker lay next to her. She shoved her hand into a pocket on the side and snagged a pack of smokes. She took out a cigarette and laid the rest on the table. She put the cigarette to her lips and looked up. “Got a light?” Chuck looked at L.I.N. L.I.N. looked at Chuck. She sighed and rolled her eyes. She rested her elbow on the table, held her hand in front of Phillips’ face, and extended her index finger. The tip

folded back, and a black tube extended from below. Phillips looked startled. She backed up a little and jerked the cigarette from her lips.

“What...?” she grumbled. L.I.N.’s finger clicked. A flame appeared at the end of the black tube. Phillips blinked. She looked into L.I.N.’s eyes. “Huh?”

Chuck smiled. “Yeah, she...” He looked at L.I.N. “L.I.N. is an android.” He shrugged. “What can I say?” Phillips slid her mouth to the side of her face. She looked at L.I.N. L.I.N. smiled and exhaled through her nose.

“It’s just a lighter, Officer Phillips. Go ahead.” Phillips gritted her teeth. She returned the cigarette to her lips. Then, she leaned forward, timidly. She laid the tip of her cigarette against the flame from L.I.N.’s lighter and took a puff. She backed away, yanked the cigarette from her lips, and inhaled. The tube returned to L.I.N.’s finger, and the tip folded shut. L.I.N. retracted her arm and laid it on the table. Phillips’ face was tense and uncertain. She looked Chuck over. Then, her eyes switched to L.I.N.

“Who *are* you people?” Chuck chuckled. L.I.N. smiled and shook her head. Phillips pointed towards the window with her thumb. “Who *is* this guy with the jacket?”

Chuck shrugged. “You said his name, earlier.”

Phillips nodded. “It’s Icarus Cameron Ulrich.” She took a drag of her cigarette. “I looked through some photos this morning and figured it out.”

Chuck nodded. “Well... you already know more about him than *I* do.”

“Why are *you* looking for him?” L.I.N. inquired. Phillips faced L.I.N. She sighed and narrowed her eyes.

“You’re not real?” L.I.N. smiled. Phillips looked at the table and laid her fingers on her forehead. “I mean... you’re not really...” She looked up. She scrunched up her face and looked

at Chuck for clarification. Chuck and L.I.N. faced each other. Chuck laid his knuckles on the table. L.I.N. laid her palm on his. They interlocked their fingers. Phillips held her stogie above the ashtray. She flicked ash from the end. She pointed at L.I.N. and Chuck. "And, you two are..." Chuck and L.I.N. kissed each other's lips. Phillips' eyes popped open. "Oh... you are." Chuck and L.I.N. faced Phillips and smiled. Phillips took a drag of her cigarette. "This guy, Icarus..." She exhaled smoke through her nostrils. "He got the better of me, last night. Took my gun from me. Pointed it at me." Chuck raised his eyebrows and parted his lips. He sat back and folded his arms over his chest. He narrowed his eyes.

"How did you get away?"

Phillips licked her lips. "He... let me go. He said he didn't want to hurt me. But, he couldn't let me take him in."

Chuck nodded. "You pulled him over?"

"For speeding," Phillips explained. She laid her cigarette between her lips. "I wasn't even going to give him a ticket. But, when I asked for his license and registration..." She looked away and shook her head. The tip of her stogie glowed. Phillips yanked the cigarette from her lips, tilted back her head, and puffed a row of smoke rings into the air. She folded her arms on the table and leaned in. "I've been doing traffic stops for a couple of years, now. I've run into my fair share of problems." She pointed towards the window and wobbled her wrist. "I've *never* seen anything like this." L.I.N. rested her elbows on the table. She laid her chin in her palms.

"*I* have."

Chuck looked at his girlfriend. "You *have*?"

L.I.N. faced Chuck and nodded. "I saw it TV." She looked at Phillips. "There was this

blind guy.” She wiggled her fingers in front of her eyes. “You know he... couldn’t see?”

Chuck smirked. “Yes, I got that,” he remarked.

L.I.N. smiled. “Anyway, they connected a camera to the back of his tongue or something.” She licked her lips. “And, he could see what the camera was seeing.”

Chuck looked at his lap. “The occipital lobe...” L.I.N. and Phillips faced him. He looked up. He turned his head and tapped the back of his skull. “It’s here... in the back of the brain.” He folded his arms on the table. “It’s responsible for decoding sensory input from the optic nerves in the eyes. From what I understand, it’s connected directly to the tongue.” L.I.N. nodded.

“Hmph,” Phillips remarked. She stubbed her cigarette in the ash tray. She looked up. “You’re telling me he really *can* see through all those little eyeballs on his jacket?”

Chuck raised his eyebrows and tilted his head. “Uh...” He blew a breath through his lips. He looked away and scratched his head. “I mean... I *guess* it’s possible.”

L.I.N. threw her hands out at her sides. “But, why? I mean, why would somebody want to do that?”

Chuck shrugged. “To... increase awareness? To bring things into focus?” Chuck squinted and tilted his head. He folded his fingers and rested his chin on top. “The effect that would have on the brain...” He looked at L.I.N. and smiled. “Like, imagine you had eyes in the back of your head. Right?”

L.I.N. scrunched up her nose. “No, uh-uh.” She turned and shook her head. “Stop it, Chuck! I don’t like to *think* about stuff like that.”

Chuck looked at Phillips. “Laura? Can you imagine what that would be like?”

Phillips crinkled her eyes. “It would be kind of weird.”

Chuck tilted his head. “Not really. You would just be more aware of your surroundings. You know what I mean? And, your occipital lobe is fully capable of recalibrating itself to accommodate the extra sensory data. You would be able to see things you wouldn’t ordinarily be aware of. And, you would have an obvious advantage over anyone who only has eyes in the front of their head.”

Phillips pressed her lips together and nodded. “Might be useful if you were trying to scale a wall.”

Chuck held out his hand. “Right.” He shrugged. “Or, you might be able to overpower a traffic cop and take her gun.”

Phillips tapped the table with the nail of her index finger. “So, how do we stop him?”

Chuck smiled. “Who says we should?” Phillips scrunched up her face. Chuck uttered a single laugh. “Look, you said he didn’t hurt you. Right?”

Phillips’ eyes dulled. “Well, yeah. But...”

Chuck folded his arms over his chest and grinned. “And, he gave you your gun back, I take it.” He looked around the table and examined Phillips’ belt. “You were firing at him, earlier.” Phillips sighed. She slowly nodded. Chuck threw his hands out at his sides. “So, what’s the problem?” Phillips flattened her lips. She pointed at Chuck.

“He was going to hurt you two. I’m pretty sure about that.”

Chuck raised his eyebrows and held up his index finger. “No! No, we *don’t* know that.” He looked at L.I.N. “I don’t think he was going to hurt us, necessarily. Do *you*?”

L.I.N. looked at Phillips. “Yeah, I don’t know about that, Officer Phillips.” She shrugged. “He was kind of jumpy. But, he’s got those eyeballs all over his hoodie. You know?” She smiled. “Maybe it makes him all stir crazy or something.”

Phillips looked at the table and shook her head. "I have to bring him in." She sat back and folded her arms across her chest. "He was speeding; he resisted arrest; he assaulted a police officer." She threw her hands out at her sides. "What about theft?"

Chuck squinted. "Theft?"

"Oh come on, Chuck," Phillips replied. "The car was stolen. Can't you see that?" She laid her palms on the table. "That's why he freaked out when I asked him for his license, registration, and insurance. The car wasn't in his name." She shrugged. "He might not even have a license, for all I know."

Chuck furrowed his brow. "You're doing all this... for a stolen car?"

Phillips looked into Chuck's eyes. "Hey, he stole a car, Chuck. Who knows what else he's done." She pointed at him. "This guy's a freak. I'm telling you." Their waitress arrived. She had long, wavy, brown hair and rosy lips. She had a bright smile that lit up the room. A golden nametag with black letters was pinned to her left breast. It read "Ginger." She held a large, brown tray with three plates. She laid a plate in front of Chuck.

"Here you go," she remarked. Chuck got a cheeseburger and a mountain of thick, golden French fries. Ginger laid a plate in front of Phillips. She got a row of deep fried chicken strips, mashed potatoes with cream gravy, and two fluffy biscuits. Ginger laid L.I.N.'s plate in front of her. L.I.N. ordered breakfast. She got four cherry filled pancakes drizzled with cherry preserves. There was a dash of whipped cream on top and four bacon strips on the side. L.I.N. grinned and looked up. She faced Chuck.

"Look at all the cherries!"

Phillips smiled. "You've got a thing about cherries, huh?"

Chuck looked at Phillips. "She's got a thing about *food*." He looked at their waitress.

“Thank you, Ginger.”

“You’re welcome,” Ginger replied. “You guys enjoy.” She tucked the tray under her arm and wandered away. Chuck pointed at L.I.N. with his thumb.

“That reminds me,” he remarked. “*You* were supposed to make us lunch.” He pointed at the bottle of ketchup below the window. “Remember?” L.I.N. was already chewing. She picked up the ketchup bottle and handed it to Chuck.

“Nah...” She pointed at her cherry pancakes with her fork and swallowed. “This is much better.”

Chuck plopped some ketchup next to his fries. “Dinner, then,” he remarked. He looked at Phillips. “So, what are you going to do about it?” he inquired. Phillips was chewing. She held half a chicken strip between her finger and thumb. She narrowed her eyes and swallowed.

“You mean Icarus?” Chuck nodded. He picked up his cheeseburger and took a bite. Phillips laid the remainder of her chicken strip between her lips and sucked at her fingers. “We have to find him.”

Chuck raised his eyebrows. “We?”

Phillips smiled. “He’s after *you*, right?”

Chuck pointed at L.I.N. with his thumb. “He’s after *her*,” he remarked. L.I.N. scrunched up her face and threw her hands out at her sides. “And, you’re a traffic cop, not a detective.” Chuck laid the tip of a French fry in the puddle of ketchup on his plate. He snagged the top half with his teeth. Phillips shrugged.

“Well, I’m gonna find him. I don’t care.” She scooped up some mashed potatoes and laid them on her tongue. “What are they going to do, fire me?”

Chuck shrugged. “How can we find him?” Phillips slid her lips to the side of her face.

She looked at L.I.N. Chuck took a breath. He turned and looked L.I.N. over. L.I.N. was staring at her plate. She stuffed her mouth full of pancakes and chomped away. She licked a dab of whipped cream and cherry preserves from the corner of her lips and looked up. She stopped chewing and stared into Phillips' poppy, blue eyes. She slowly turned her head and faced Chuck.

“Wrah?”

Chapter 5: "I See You. Where Am I? Oh, There I Am."

There was a carnival downtown. It was ten blocks from Shirley's. Chuck and Phillips knew the best way to catch a man covered with eyeballs was to scrounge up some bait and put it in plain sight. Icarus was looking for L.I.N. What better place to spot her than a wide open space with lots of discreet vantage points, like a carnival? L.I.N. objected at first. She didn't like the idea of being used as bait.

"I feel like a worm on a hook," she grumbled. "What if he really *is* trying to hurt me? Hmm?" Her eyebrows fell in the middle. She threw her hands on her hips and glared into Chuck's shiny, tan eyes. "What if he *does* something to me?"

Chuck shrugged. "Hal left all those spare parts in the laboratory. I can probably rebuild you." L.I.N. scoffed. Chuck smiled. "I'm kidding, L.I.N. You don't have to do this, if you don't want to." He pointed at her. "But from this moment on, I'm going to start calling you 'Laura Nelson'." L.I.N. tilted her head, dangled her arms, and sighed. Chuck folded his arms over his chest. "So, what's it going to be, Laura?"

L.I.N. looked at Phillips. "Officer Phillips?" she inquired. "You promise me nothing bad is going to happen?"

Phillips looked at the ground and widened her eyes. "Um..." She blew a breath through her lips and looked up. L.I.N. gritted her teeth. "I'll try my best," she assured her. She looked at Chuck. "You and Chuck can go wandering around the fair, together."

Chuck took L.I.N.'s hand. "Of course," he remarked. L.I.N. looked into his eyes and smiled. Phillips pointed at them.

"I'll hide in the crowd. I'll be right behind you, ready to strike."

Chuck laid his hand on L.I.N.'s shoulder. "It'll be okay, sweetheart. Don't worry."

L.I.N. was worried. She had no idea what this Icarus guy wanted. She was afraid he was going to do something terrible to her. She kept picturing him, looming over her, staring her down with his eyeball jacket. L.I.N. imagined herself lying on the ground with her arms folded over her face, bawling her eyes out. She imagined gasping for breath and begging Icarus for her life. Icarus filled her thoughts with insidious cackling.

L.I.N. and Chuck wandered along, holding hands. They drifted through a sea of people. It was still raining, but the carnival was crawling with patrons. L.I.N. squeezed Chuck's hand as hard as she could. Chuck held an umbrella above their heads with his free hand. He looked L.I.N. over and smiled.

"Will you relax?" he inquired. "It's gonna be okay."

L.I.N. looked up and sighed. "I hope you're right." She grabbed a hold of Chuck's arm and laid the side of her face on his shoulder. "I'm scared to death."

Icarus had no trouble spotting them. His eyeball cameras could zoom up to five hundred yards. There were two knobs inside the left sleeve of his jacket. One controlled the zoom. The other was for focusing. Icarus spotted Phillips as well. She crept along, twenty feet behind Chuck and L.I.N. She'd changed out of her uniform. She always kept a change of clothes in the trunk of her car just in case. She wore a tan turtleneck, a pair of dark blue jeans, and a pair of red tennis shoes. Icarus liked her outfit. It was a nice change of pace. He tried to smile. It was hideous. Phillips held a tiny umbrella above her head. It was red with white bands. Her eyes bobbed around as she walked. She was ready for anything.

Icarus was perched at the top of the city's water tower. It was a block away from the fair. It was a shiny, white behemoth shaped like an inverted teardrop. The top was surrounded by a narrow catwalk. The catwalk was surrounded by a thin, waste high railing. Icarus' arms were

folded on top of the railing. His shoulders were shrugged up. He was stooped over, watching. A row of tall, black letters stood above him. They spanned the top of the water tower. They read “New Jack City.” The sky was filled with grey and black patches. A mesh of white lightning scorched the sky behind the tower. Grids of steel bars kept the water tower from toppling to the ground. They filled giant gaps between thick, steel uprights. Icarus flipped over the guardrail, grabbed a hold of the nearest steel bar, and slid to an upright. He wrapped his legs around the upright and dangled from his thighs. He grabbed a hold of the upright with his arms and let go with his legs. He toppled down the upright in that fashion until he reached the ground.

He plopped on the ground and looked around. The base of the water tower was surrounded by a two story, chain link fence. The top was wrapped with barbed wire. Icarus was standing on patches of mud and grass. He skidded towards the fence, hopped through the air, and stuck to the fence like a lizard. He scrambled to the top, rolled over the barbed wire, and whizzed down the other side. He dropped to the earth and headed for the carnival.

L.I.N. looked around nervously. She felt like she was being watched. It gave her the creeps. Chuck felt her shaking. He retrieved his arm and snaked it around her waist. He stopped walking and sighed. L.I.N. stopped and snuggled up next to him. Chuck kissed the top of her head.

“You’ve gotta chill out.” L.I.N. smiled and exhaled through her nostrils. Chuck looked around. The carnival was filled with attractions. Chuck and L.I.N. stood in front of a giant Ferris wheel. There were bumper cars to their right. There was a spook house to their left. “Maybe we should ride something,” Chuck suggested. He looked down at L.I.N. “Would *that* make you feel better?” L.I.N. looked to their left. She spotted the spook house. It was shaped like a train car. It was decorated with dark, swirling clouds and clusters of ghosts with big, black

eyes and sharp teeth. L.I.N. was terrified of ghosts. Once, she and Hal watched a television program about poltergeists. For the next two weeks, she slept with her bedroom light on. L.I.N. faced forward. Her eyeballs followed the structure of the Ferris wheel to its peak. It looked a mile high. L.I.N. hated heights more than anything. They scared the crap out of her. She didn't even like standing on the kitchen counter. Just looking at the top of the Ferris wheel made her want to throw up. L.I.N. looked at the ground and exhaled a shaky breath. She licked her lips.

"Um..." She looked over her right shoulder. There was an attraction called "Ezam." It was a maze made of mirrors. L.I.N. smiled. She tugged on Chuck's jacket. He looked where she was looking. He slid his mouth to the side of his face.

"That's what you want to ride, huh?" L.I.N. looked into his eyes and nodded. She slid her fingers through his, whirled around, and dragged him towards the mirror maze. Luckily, there was no one in line. The front of Ezam was covered with mirrors. They were the size of closet doors. The ride's logo was made of pieces of mirror cut into letter shapes. They spanned the top. There were two openings. They stood side by side near the middle. One was marked "Enter" in tall, red letters. The other was marked "Exit." Like most carnival attractions, Ezam was several feet off the ground. Across the front, there was a diamond plated floor. A steel guardrail stood in front of that. There were rows of steps on the left and right.

A man sat on a cruddy steel chair near the steps on the left. He held a wrinkly, black umbrella above his head. He looked rough. He wore a dirty, ripped up cap, a faded, red shirt, a pair of dingy, denim overalls, and a pair of scuffed up, suede boots. Swirls of long, scraggly hair framed his face from the bottom of his cap. Half his hair was brown. Half was silver. The lower half of his face was coated with shaggy fur. He looked like he'd needed a shave for several weeks. His eyes were cold and fierce. His face was piercing and grim. His skin was like

leather. He stared at everyone who passed like they were a hardened criminal.

Chuck bought blue, paper bracelets for L.I.N., Phillips, and himself. He got them at a ticket stand when they arrived. The bracelets were like an endless supply of tickets. They allowed them to go on any ride they wanted as many times as they wished. L.I.N. scrambled up the steps and looked the man over. She smiled and showed him her bracelet. Chuck followed close behind. He showed off his paper wristband. The man grumbled something under his breath. He pointed towards the entrance with his thumb.

“Thank you,” L.I.N. remarked. She grabbed a hold of Chuck’s hand and dragged him inside. They wandered around a corner and became surrounded by reflections. It was dizzying. L.I.N. squinted and looked around. Chuck stood beside her. L.I.N. laid her fingers on an image of her hair. Chuck watched her and smiled.

“What is it?” he asked.

L.I.N. smiled. “My hair,” she replied. “It’s blue.”

Chuck raised his eyebrows. “I noticed.”

L.I.N. looked up. “It’s supposed to be brown.”

Chuck chuckled. “Yeah...” He stood behind her and peeked over her shoulder. “You already told me that.” L.I.N. faced forward. Chuck slid his fingers through her hair and fluffed it up. “Why don’t you just dye it brown?”

L.I.N. scrunched up her nose. “We tried that, once. Hal and me.” She looked at Chuck from the tops of her eyes. “It was a pain in the ass.” Chuck snickered. L.I.N. threw her hands out at her sides. “And then, the roots were all blue again after a week.”

Chuck nodded. “Your hair...” He glided his fingers across her scalp. “It actually grows?” L.I.N. tilted her head back, looked at the tops of her eyes, and smiled. She curled her

fingers around Chuck's right hand. She lowered his hand, laid her fingers on his, and slid his fingertips along her knuckles. She looked over her shoulder.

"It's nanotechnology."

Chuck bobbed his head. "Ah."

L.I.N. slid Chuck's fingertips across her fingernails. "My skin, my nails, my hair..." She pointed at the corner of her right eye. "Even my eyes. It's all nanotechnology."

Chuck nodded. "I see." L.I.N. extended her right, index finger. The tip folded back, revealing a set of lock picks. She found a sharp, pointed one and pressed it against the tip of her left, index finger. "L.I.N.!" Chuck protested. "What are you doing?" L.I.N. winced. She pricked her finger and showed it to Chuck. A drop of blood appeared on her fingertip. Chuck exhaled through his nose. He held L.I.N.'s finger in front of his face and studied it. "You bleed, too?"

L.I.N. nodded. "Part of the nanotechnology."

Chuck narrowed his eyes. "But, why?" He looked at L.I.N.'s reflection. "I mean, why bother?"

L.I.N. slowly shook her head. "I have no idea. But, I *do* know that Hal went to a lot of trouble to do it." She slid her fingers away from Chuck's. She put her index finger to her lips and sucked at it. Chuck bobbed his head.

"Will that heal on its own?"

L.I.N. nodded. "The nanotechnology is self maintaining. You could rip half my flesh off, and everything would *still* grow back. My skin, my hair, my eyes... everything." Chuck nodded. "But, it would take several days." She looked over her shoulder and smirked. "Which is why there are tubes of it in the laboratory." L.I.N. pressed her palms together then spread

them. “Like... little tubes of goo.” She looked at Chuck’s reflection. “Like one time, I laid my hand on one of the stove burners.” Chuck scrunched up his nose. “This was a while back. It was before I was able to sense pain. Hal didn’t write the source code for that until sometime later.”

Chuck nodded. “Okay.”

L.I.N. shrugged. “Most of the flesh on my palm burnt off. So, Hal scraped off all the burnt skin. Then, he squirted some of that goo stuff on there. After a few minutes, everything grew back.”

Chuck smirked. “Nice. I *like* that. Makes it simple.”

Phillips’ voice cracked the air in two. “It’s a maze, guys!” L.I.N.’s eyes popped open. Her head jerked to the right. “You’re supposed to be finding your way out!” Chuck faced Phillips and shook his head.

“Damn, Laura...” He looked at L.I.N.’s reflection. He slid his arms around her waist. “You almost gave me a heart attack.” L.I.N. sighed and looked at the floor. Chuck faced Phillips. “Did you see anything?”

Phillips shook her head. “Nope. The rain’s picking up.”

Chuck nodded. “Maybe we should try again tomorrow. The carnival’s here all week.”

Phillips shrugged. “Maybe.” L.I.N. licked her lips. She took Chuck’s hand and wandered towards Phillips. She offered her other hand.

“Come on, guys,” she remarked. “I wanna go check out the mirror maze.” Phillips smiled. She took L.I.N.’s hand. Chuck motioned towards the left with his head.

“Lead the way.” L.I.N. took off. She led Chuck and Phillips around a couple of corners. She stopped at a dead end. She looked over her shoulder and gasped. Chuck grinned. “Not *that*

way.” L.I.N. led Chuck and Phillips a different direction. She rounded three additional corners. She stopped at an intersection. There were six different directions to choose from. She gritted her teeth and looked at Chuck. Her eyebrows fell at the sides.

“Chuck!” she cried. “How the hell do you get out of here?”

Chuck chuckled. “Just pick one. *You’ll* figure it out.”

L.I.N. pressed her lips together and exhaled through her nostrils. “I don’t like it in here. It’s scary.” She dragged Chuck and Phillips across the intersection and headed right. She arrived at a dead end. She dropped her hands at her sides and exhaled an impatient breath. “This... This is shitty! Whose stupid idea was this, anyway?” Chuck patted L.I.N.’s shoulder.

“L.I.N., chill. It’s alright.” L.I.N. turned around and looked into Chuck’s eyes. *Hers* were big and sad.

“*Chuck...*” she groaned. “*Get me out of here...*” Chuck smiled. He held out his hand. L.I.N. laid her fingers in his. He looked over his shoulder. Something didn’t feel right. He felt like he was being watched. A voice drifted through the air. It came from a couple of corners away.

“*It helps when you can see...*” the voice remarked. Chuck looked at Phillips. Her eyes popped open. She shoved her hand into her pocket, yanked out her 9MM, and aimed it around the nearest corner.

“Icarus?!” she shrieked. “Where are you?” Icarus spotted Phillips’ pistol. He tilted his head and studied thousands of reflections. He followed the reflections around two corners and spotted the *real* pistol. Phillips’ eyebrows fell in the middle. Her eyes darted about. “Icarus?!” Icarus’ lips curled at the edges. He threw his legs in front of him and shot through the air. He kicked Phillips’ pistol out of her hands. Phillips exhaled a panicked shout. She lost her balance

and fell on her butt. Icarus rolled across the floor and retrieved her 9MM. He appeared in front of Phillips and aimed her pistol at her face. Phillips pinched her eyes shut. She tilted back her head and sighed. “Seriously?” she rasped. She faced Icarus. “You’ve got to be kidding me.”

Icarus pressed his thin lips together. “Just the one?” he inquired. “Where’s your backup?” Phillips glared into Icarus’ hideous eyes. She exhaled through her nostrils.

“Ankle,” she remarked. L.I.N. slipped behind Chuck. She laid her palms on his back and peeked over his shoulder. Icarus knelt in front of Phillips. He snagged a hold of her right ankle and slid her across the floor. Phillips gasped. Her face was inches from Icarus’. She stared into his eyes. The left one was blue and half shut. The right one was wide open and brown. Icarus stared back. Phillips’ eyes were bright blue and serene. They made his heart skip a beat.

Phillips parted her lips. She took a quick breath and exhaled a shaky sigh. Icarus tried not to smile. It made his face look horrific and strained. But, he couldn’t help it. Phillips swallowed.

“Officer Phillips,” Icarus remarked. He looked her over. She was trembling. He exhaled slowly and laid his palm on her shoulder. “Laura...”

Phillips’ eyeballs bobbed. “W-What?” She blinked. “What is it?”

Icarus smirked. “If you wanted me... all you had to do was ask.” He parted his lips and inched them towards hers. Phillips took a sharp breath. She stayed perfectly still. Then suddenly, she looked away.

“Um, no...” she remarked. “Wait...” Icarus stopped and backed away. Phillips looked into his eyes. She pressed her lips together and exhaled through her nostrils. She laid her fingers on his cheeks. She curled them around a pair of wires. They connected Icarus’ tongue to the hood of his jacket. Icarus smiled a little.

“Oh, right,” he remarked. “Forgot.” Icarus stuck out his tongue. Phillips smiled. She

removed a pair of alligator clips from Icarus' tongue. Then, she slid the wires inside his hood. Icarus returned his tongue to his mouth and smiled as best he could. Phillips laid her palms on his cheeks. She eased his face towards hers and shut her eyes. She parted her lips and waited. Icarus laid his lips on hers and closed them. Phillips breathed out a trembling breath. She tilted her head, pressed her lips against Icarus', and kissed him back. Chuck stared at the back of Phillips' head. He slid his mouth to the side of his face.

"Uh... guys?" Icarus and Phillips touched tongues. Their mouths glided together. Their lips closed. L.I.N. smiled. She wandered out, took Chuck's hand, and looked up at him. Chuck looked down at her. A smirk twisted across his lips. L.I.N. faced Icarus and Phillips. She made a circle with her thumb and forefinger, laid it between her lips, and whistled. Phillips sucked at Icarus' bottom lip and backed away. She looked into his freakish eyes and smiled. Then, she looked over her shoulder. Icarus joined her. L.I.N. grinned and gritted her teeth.

"I'm *very* confused, right now." She looked around. "Isn't anybody else?"

Icarus smiled and shook his head. "You really don't remember me, do you?" L.I.N. looked him over. She crinkled her eyes and thought carefully. She tilted her head and sighed.

"No." She folded her fingers in front of her and shook her head. "I'm sorry."

Icarus nodded. "Hal must've wiped me for some reason." He shrugged. "I can't imagine why."

Phillips faced him. "Who's Hal?" Icarus looked into Phillips' eyes. He licked his lips.

"Not an easy question to answer," he replied. He looked over Phillips' shoulder. "For starters, he's the man who created *her*."

Phillips looked at L.I.N. "Hal's the person who built you?" L.I.N. nodded. Phillips pressed her lips together. "Where is he?" She faced Icarus. "I want to meet him."

“He’s chillin’ in the dirt,” Chuck remarked.

Phillips faced Chuck. “Oh.” She looked at L.I.N. Her eyebrows fell at the sides. “You poor thing! I had no idea!” L.I.N. looked at the floor. She smiled and looked up.

“It’s okay.” She looked at Chuck. “I have Chuck, now.” Chuck smiled back. He took her hand and faced forward. L.I.N. looked at Icarus. “So... what’s the deal?”

Icarus turned his head without looking away. “You mean, why am I here?”

L.I.N. nodded. “What do you want from me?”

Icarus looked at his lap. “I don’t want anything from you.” He slid his hand into his pocket and looked up. “I’m here to give you *this*...” He tossed a bright red flash drive across the room. L.I.N. snagged it out of the air, held it in front of her face, and looked it over.

“What is it?” she inquired.

“It’s a flash stick,” Icarus replied. He tilted his head. “I would think an android would *know* that.”

L.I.N. looked at Icarus from the tops of her eyes and smiled sarcastically. “I meant what’s on it, smart-ass.” Phillips giggled. She faced Icarus and awaited an explanation. Icarus folded his arms over his chest.

“I have no idea.”

Chuck motioned towards the little, red disk with his head. “You haven’t even *looked* at it?”

Icarus shook his head. “Hal told me to hang on to it.” He licked his lips. “He told me to plug it in and update it once a week.”

Chuck narrowed his eyes. “Update it?”

Icarus nodded. “I’ve been logging into some server he told me about for the past couple

of years. I don't know where it's located, but it doesn't belong to Hal."

"Who does it belong to?" Chuck inquired.

Icarus shrugged. "Near as I can tell... it doesn't belong to *anybody*." Chuck slid his lips to the side of his face. Icarus continued. "Anyway, he told me to login to this server once a week, download a file from the slash directory, and copy it to this flash disk."

"Just one file?" Chuck asked.

Icarus nodded. "Yes. He just said to copy that one file. Nothing else." He licked his lips. "He said to keep doing it until the timestamp was the same twice in a row. Hal said that would mean he was dead." He squinted. "Last night, the timestamp was the same as it was last week. So, I came to see L.I.N." He pressed his lips together. "Hal said if he ever passed away, I'm to deliver this flash drive to her, immediately."

"What kind of file is it?" Chuck inquired.

"It's just a text file," Icarus replied. "A really *big* text file. Like... nearly a gigabyte. It usually takes about half an hour to download."

Chuck held out his palm. "And, you've never read it?"

Icarus smirked. "Hal just said to copy it." He narrowed his right eye. His left eye was nearly shut. "He never said to read it." Chuck faced L.I.N. He bobbed his head.

"Check it out. See what's on it." L.I.N.'s left thumb popped open. She slid a cover off the flash disk. She connected it to a USB port inside her thumb. She opened a terminal and typed "mnt /dvc/sda1 /flash." She issued a return command. A cursor in the terminal dropped to the next line and paused. Then, the word "smash" was printed, followed by a greater than symbol. The cursor appeared after that. L.I.N. typed "list /flash." list showed a single entry on the flash disk. It was a text file called "hal."

“Hmph,” L.I.N. remarked. She typed “ted /flash/hal.” The hal file opened in a text editor. It was filled with ones and zeroes. That was it. L.I.N. tilted her head. She scrolled through the file. It was nearly endless. It contained millions of characters. L.I.N. had never seen anything like it. She looked at Chuck.

“What is it?” he asked.

“It’s a text file alright,” she replied. She looked at Icarus. “It’s filled with binary digits.”

Icarus shrugged. “News to me. I’ve never even looked at it.”

Chuck looked at the floor and tapped his chin. “Binary...”