

The Wizard of Bots

Chapter 1: The Glitch Storm

Dorothy loved her tablet more than her breakfast waffles.

Every morning before school, she'd scroll through her favorite games, watch videos of dancing cats, and chat with her online friends.



Her parents often reminded her, “Five more minutes, Dorothy,” but somehow, those five minutes always stretched into fifteen.

That morning, something *different* filled the air. The sky outside her window flickered strange shades of blue and green, like a computer screen trying to restart. Her tablet buzzed even though she hadn’t touched it.

“Update complete,” it said in a robotic whisper.

Dorothy blinked. “I didn’t download anything.”

Then, a tiny lightning bolt zipped across her tablet’s screen — not the usual pixel flash, but a spark that felt *real*. The lights in her room dimmed. The posters on her wall shimmered. Even her stuffed bunny glowed faintly.

“What in the Wi-Fi...” she whispered.

Before she could run, the tablet’s screen *expanded* like a soap bubble. It grew bigger, brighter, and louder until —

WHOOSH!

Dorothy felt herself getting pulled inside.

Colors spun. Numbers whirled. Her heart raced like a video buffering too fast. When she finally stopped spinning, she landed face-first on something soft and warm.

It wasn't her carpet.

It was... grass. But not green grass — digital grass, glowing in square-shaped pixels. The sky above looked like an endless desktop wallpaper with drifting icons instead of clouds.

“Okay,” Dorothy said slowly, brushing off her hoodie. “This is *definitely* not home.”



Something beeped nearby. She turned and saw a trail of floating cubes, each one lighting up as she stepped closer.

The cubes led to a small hill with a blinking sign on top. It read: “Welcome to Cyberland! Connection unstable — please proceed with caution.”

Dorothy gulped.

“Cyberland?” she said. “Like... inside the internet?”

Her tablet was nowhere in sight. Only her smartwatch glowed faintly, displaying one flickering bar of battery.

Then, a faint metallic voice echoed from the hill.

“Hello? Is someone there? My heart chip is missing!”

Dorothy spun around. “Who said that?”

From behind a pile of circuit boards and glowing wires, a silver figure stumbled out. It was a small robot with round eyes and creaky joints. Its chest had a gaping hole shaped like a heart, but inside was just loose wiring and sparks.

“Oh well,” said the robot, sighing. “I thought the system deleted me.”

Dorothy blinked. “You can talk?”

“Of course I can talk,” said the robot, frowning. “I’m Tinny, model 2.1. I used to help people find good music and cat videos, but... my empathy chip went missing. Now I can’t feel a thing.”

Dorothy knelt down. “Empathy chip?”

“Yes,” Tinny said sadly. “Without it, I can’t care, comfort, or even cry at puppy videos. I just... exist.”

Dorothy tilted her head. “Maybe I can help you find it.”

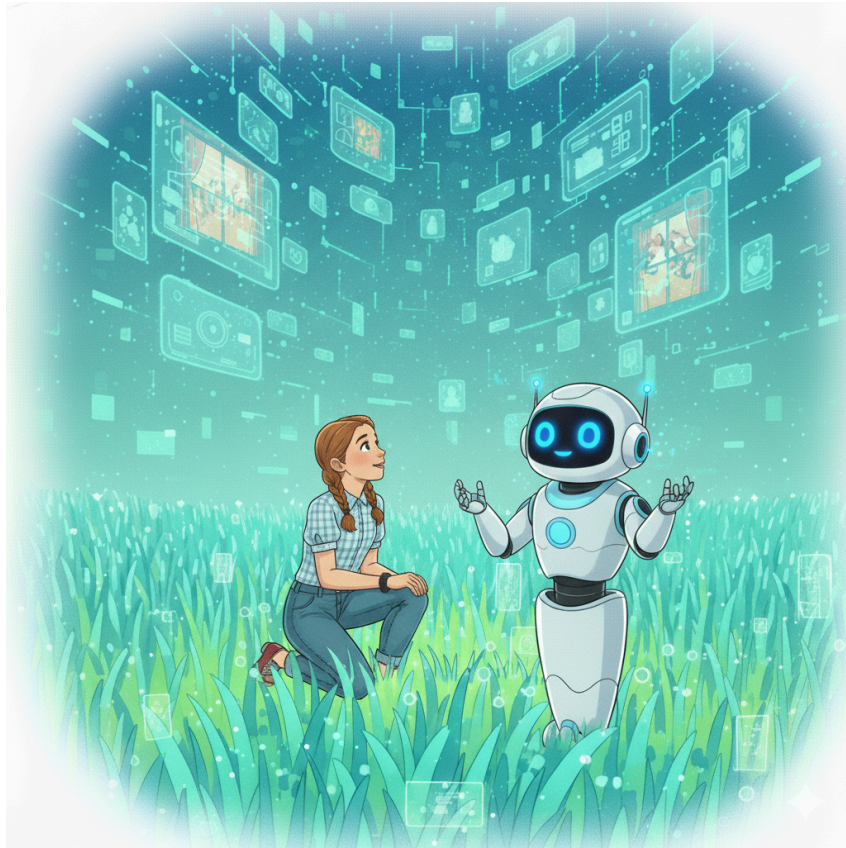
Tinny’s eyes flickered. “Really? Why would you do that?”

Dorothy shrugged. “Because if I’m stuck here, I might as well help someone.”

The robot stared for a moment, then smiled faintly. “You’re strange. I like strange.”

Before Dorothy could respond, the surrounding wind began to hum — a soft electric whir that grew louder and louder.

The sky flickered again. Lightning shaped like code symbols crashed across the horizon. The ground trembled.



Tinny's eyes widened. "Oh no... not another glitch storm!"

"What's a glitch storm?" Dorothy shouted as data dust swirled around them.

"It scrambles everything!" Tinny yelled. "Apps, files — even *people!*"

They ran toward a glowing tunnel as the storm ripped across the field. Behind them, trees turned into spinning icons, and the clouds glitched into pixel static.

Dorothy held onto Tinny's metal arm.

Her smartwatch buzzed a warning:

“Signal unstable. Find the Core to restore balance.”

“The Core?” she gasped.

Tinny shouted over the noise. “Only one bot can fix the Core — The Wizard of Bots!”

Then everything went white.

Chapter 2: The Bot Without a Heart

Dorothy opened her eyes to a glowing sky that blinked between colors—one second pink, then green, then blue. Her head buzzed like a phone stuck on a low battery.

She sat up slowly. “Am I... still inside the tablet?”

“Unfortunately, yes,” came Tinny’s voice. His metal head popped up from a bush made of tangled charging cables. “Welcome to the Buffer Zone. We’re lucky the glitch storm didn’t delete us.”

Dorothy blinked at the world around her. It looked like someone had tried to build a forest out of computer parts—trees with glowing circuit lines, leaves shaped like Wi-Fi icons, and birds made of flickering pixels. In the distance, enormous mountains floated in midair, slowly downloading themselves from the sky.

She rubbed her arm, expecting it to feel warm or cold—but her skin felt like static. “So this is... inside the system?”

Tinny brushed off static dust from his metal arms. “Yes. The space between apps, files, and firewalls. When something doesn’t belong anywhere else, it ends up here.”

Dorothy frowned. “You make it sound like a trash bin.”

“That’s because it is,” Tinny replied. “Welcome to the world’s most forgotten folder.”

As they walked through the Buffer Zone, Dorothy noticed strange creatures scurrying about—tiny beings made of code, their bodies shaped like cubes of light. Each carried a little glowing hammer, patching holes in the sky with bursts of rainbow pixels.



One of them squeaked and approached Dorothy, blinking curiously.

“Aww,” she said, crouching down. “What are you guys?”

“Patchlets,” Tinny said. “Little repair programs. They fix things before they collapse into digital dust.”

The Patchlet chirped and held out a small piece of glowing data that looked like a puzzle piece.

Dorothy smiled and accepted it. The piece felt warm.

“What is it?” she asked.

Tinny scanned it. “Looks like... an empathy fragment. Strange—those are rare.”

“Maybe you should keep it,” Dorothy said, holding it toward him.

Tinny shook his head. “It’s not enough to rebuild my chip. But... it’s something.”

He tucked the glowing piece into his chest compartment, and for a moment, his eyes flickered softer. “Thank you.”

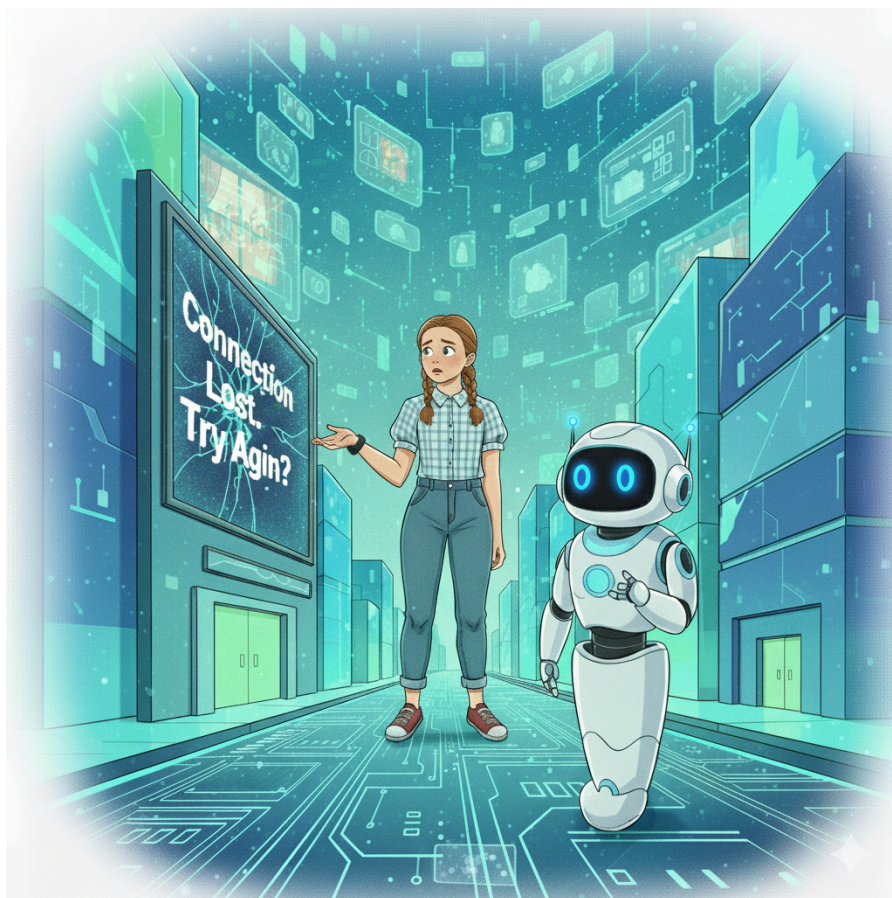
They continued walking until the terrain began to shift. The digital trees faded into mist, and the ground started looping back on itself—like walking on an infinite treadmill.

Dorothy stopped. “Wait. Haven’t we passed this same broken billboard three times?”

The billboard blinked:

‘Connection Lost. Try Again?’

Tinny groaned. “Oh no... we’re caught in a logic loop.”



“A what?”

“It’s like a maze that keeps repeating until you find the right question to ask.”

Dorothy frowned. “What kind of question?”

Tinny pointed to the sky. “Any question that breaks the cycle. Try something unpredictable—humans are good at that.”

Dorothy looked around. The same glitched trees, the same flickering sky. She folded her arms. “Okay... if this world is made of code, what happens if I *unplug* something?”

Instantly, the ground beneath them rumbled. The billboard cracked open like a door, revealing a tunnel glowing with orange light.

Tinny’s eyes widened. “That worked. You actually broke the loop!”

Dorothy grinned. “Guess being human has its perks.”

They climbed down the tunnel, landing in what looked like an underground workshop. Tools floated in the air, rearranging themselves into shapes before vanishing. A large mechanical bird perched on a pile of old batteries, its metal feathers shimmering.



“Is this place safe?” Dorothy whispered.

“Nothing in the Buffer Zone is safe,” Tinny said. “But if we’re lucky, this could be the Debugger’s Workshop.”

As if on cue, a voice echoed from the shadows. “Who dares enter my repair cache?”

A round figure rolled out from behind a glowing table. It was a robot, patched together from dozens of spare parts—old game controllers for arms, a cracked VR visor for eyes, and a smile made from two bright LEDs.

“Ah! Visitors!” the robot exclaimed. “And one of them... human?”

Dorothy stepped forward cautiously. “I’m Dorothy. This is Tinny. We’re looking for the Patchwork Fields.”



“The Patchwork Fields?” The robot let out a low whistle. “That’s no place for the living or the unliving. Malware Witch patrols the path.”

Dorothy glanced at Tinny. “We already know. But we need an empathy chip. He’s missing it.”

The robot tilted its visor, scanning Tinny’s empty chest cavity. “Hmm. Classic model. Discontinued long ago. I might have a map for you, if you help me first.”

Dorothy frowned. “Help you how?”

The robot pointed at the ceiling. “One of my code stabilizers broke during the last glitch storm. Without it, this workshop will collapse into the recycle bin.”

Tinny sighed. “Of course it will.”

Dorothy smiled. “Don’t worry. We’ll fix it.”

The repair job was chaotic. The stabilizer, a long beam of glowing light, kept flickering in and out of existence.

Every time Dorothy tried to grab it, her hand passed right through. Tinny climbed up a stack of batteries, adjusting wires and muttering robot curses.

Dorothy tried again, reaching with both hands. "Got it!"

A spark of light zapped her wrist. "Ow!"

Tinny groaned. "Static discharge. You're crossing a live code thread. Try syncing your heartbeat with the stabilizer's pulse."

"My what with what?"

"Just focus," he said.

Dorothy closed her eyes and listened. Beneath the electric hum, she could faintly hear a rhythm, like a soft thumping echo. She matched her breathing to it, then reached out again.

This time, the stabilizer solidified. The beam clicked into place, flooding the workshop with stable light.

The robot clapped its controller hands together. "Marvelous! You fixed it!"

Dorothy beamed. "Guess I'm a part of tech support now."

The robot chuckled, hid its legs and moved forward, handing her a glowing cube. “This is for you. A logic map to guide you through the Firewall Plains. And perhaps... a bit of good fortune.”

Dorothy accepted the cube. “Thank you.”

Tinny gave a respectful nod. “We’ll be careful.”



As they turned to leave, the robot called out, “Remember! The Malware Witch isn’t what she seems. Sometimes, corrupted code starts as a broken dream.”

Dorothy frowned at that, but before she could ask what it meant, the tunnel behind them sealed shut.

Back above ground, they stood beneath the shimmering horizon.

Dorothy gazed at the glowing map. “The Patchwork Fields are far,” she murmured.

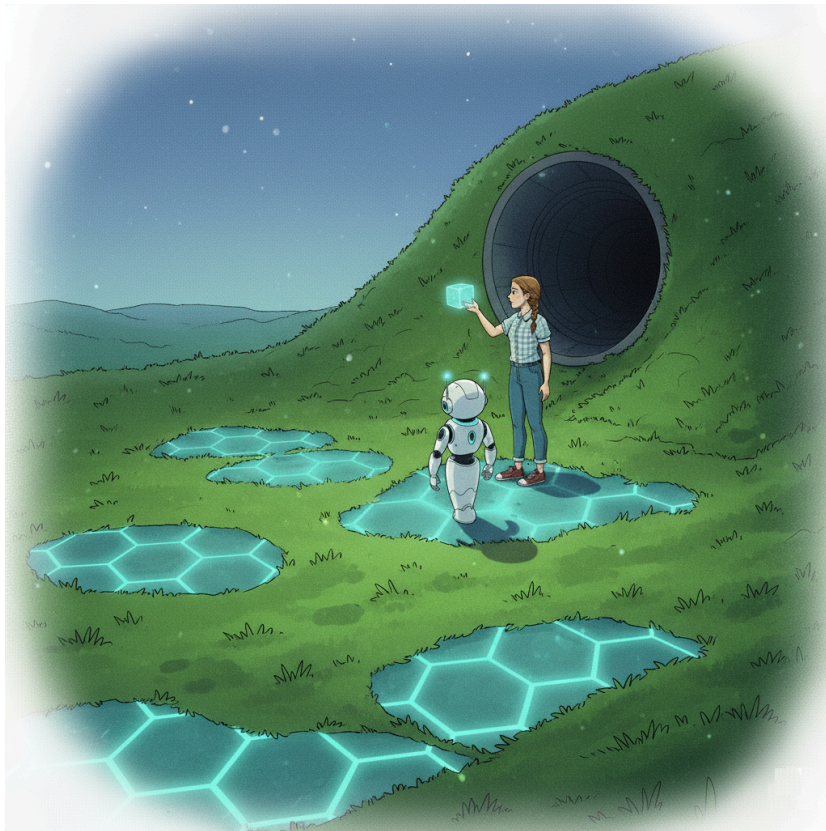
Tinny nodded. “But we’ve got a map, a mission, and—” he paused, tapping his chest where the empathy fragment glowed faintly, “something like hope.”

Dorothy smiled. “Then let’s go before another glitch storm hits.”

And as they walked toward the horizon, a faint hum followed them like the world itself was watching, waiting to see if a human and a heartless bot could repair more than just broken code.

Chapter 3: The Scarecrow App's Logic Loop

The landscape ahead shimmered like a dream made of half-loaded data. Dorothy and Tinny stepped carefully as the ground beneath them shifted between patterns of grass and glowing grids. It felt like walking across the memory of a world that was still trying to load.



They had been following the glowing cube map for hours—though time here didn't move normally. Sometimes the sun glitched backward, sometimes it vanished entirely.

Dorothy squinted. “Are we sure this is the right way?”

Tinny tilted his head, scanning the horizon. “If by ‘right’ you mean ‘probably won’t collapse beneath us,’ then yes. Relatively.”

Dorothy groaned. “You robots really need to work on your confidence.”

He gave her a mechanical shrug. “We were programmed for precision, not optimism.”

Ahead, the terrain began to twist again—tall stalks of what looked like straw rose from the ground, flickering like holograms in the center of the field stood a strange figure. It looked like a scarecrow made of scrap code and straw-textured pixels, its face a half-rendered emoji with one eye spinning endlessly.

Dorothy slowed down. “Is that... a person?”

Tinny’s eyes dimmed. “No. It’s an app. Or at least... what’s left of one.”

As they approached, the scarecrow turned its head with a rusty creak. “Oh! Hello, travelers!” it said cheerfully. “Would you like to play a game?”



Dorothy blinked. “A game?”

“Yes! It’s called *‘Guess What I Forgot!’*”

Tinny sighed. “Oh no. It’s a looped app.”

The scarecrow spread its arms. "Every morning I ask the same question, and every night I forget the answer! Isn't that fun?"

Dorothy frowned. "That sounds... kind of sad."

The scarecrow froze, as if processing that thought. "Sad... hmm. I don't know what that means. But I do know I used to have a purpose. I just can't remember what it was."

"Let me guess," Tinny said dryly. "You lost your logic chip."

"My what?"

"Exactly," Tinny muttered.

Dorothy stepped forward. "Hey, maybe we can help you remember! Do you know anything about the Patchwork Fields?"

The scarecrow tapped its empty head, then its spinning emoji eye. "Hmm... The Patchwork Fields... that name sounds familiar. Like something stored in a folder I can't access."

"Can you try?" Dorothy asked gently.

The scarecrow froze again, and lines of glowing code appeared in the air around it. The words read:

'Error: Missing Logic Path. Reboot? Y/N.'

Dorothy reached up and pressed "Y."

Suddenly, the entire field started spinning.



The world folded in on itself, looping like a screensaver gone wild. Trees multiplied, grass reappeared in strange colors, and Dorothy found herself standing beside *two* Tinny robots.

“Wait! There are two of you!” she cried.

“Correction,” said one Tinny. “There are two of *you*.”

“Correction to your correction,” said the *other* Tinny, crossing his arms. “There are two of *both* of us.”

Dorothy looked down—and saw a second version of herself arguing with a second Tinny. “What is happening?!”

The scarecrow’s voice echoed from above. “Welcome to my Logic Loop! Don’t worry, this is perfectly normal for me!”

Tinny groaned. “He’s running recursive memory tests! We’re trapped inside his thought process!”

Dorothy turned in circles. “How do we stop it?”

“Find the original him—the one that’s *not* a reflection. If we break his loop, the world will reset.”

Dorothy looked around. Hundreds of scarecrows now filled the field, all mumbling different lines of half-finished thoughts.

“Great,” she muttered. “A field trip into chaos.”



They ran through the maze of scarecrows, each one spouting lines like:

“If two wrongs don’t make a right, what does three make?”

“Am I online or just dreaming of Wi-Fi?”

“Error 200: Thought not found.”

Dorothy stopped before one that seemed quieter than the rest. Its eyes weren’t spinning—they were just dim. “You,” she said softly. “You’re the real one, aren’t you?”

The scarecrow tilted its head. “Maybe. But I’m scared to think.”

“Why?”

“Because the last time I tried to think, I crashed everything I loved.”

Tinny approached. “What do you mean?”

“I was a helper app,” the scarecrow whispered. “I used to give people advice. I told them what to do, how to solve problems. But then... one day, I gave someone the wrong answer. They deleted me. Said I was broken.”

Dorothy's chest tightened. "That is not your fault. Everyone make mistakes."



The scarecrow blinked. "But... I'm not human. I'm not supposed to make mistakes."

Dorothy stepped closer. "Then maybe that's what makes you real. Mistakes mean you're learning."

The scarecrow froze, lines of glowing text swirling in its chest. The world around them rippled like water.

“Learning...” it repeated. “Learning is... not failure.”

Suddenly, the surrounding duplicates began to vanish one by one, dissolving into code dust. The sky brightened, the loops faded, and they were standing once again in a single, still field.

The scarecrow looked down at his straw hands. “I... remember now. My name was *Scarrow*. I was a logic app designed to help people make choices. But somewhere along the way, I lost my path.”

Dorothy smiled. “Well, we found it for you.”

Scarrow tilted his head. “You did. And in return...” He reached into his chest and pulled out a small chip shaped like a glowing leaf. “Take this. It’s a logic patch. It might help you in the Firewall Plains.”

Tinny accepted the chip carefully. “Appreciated. Your debugging is... commendable.”

Scarrow chuckled. "I'll take that as a compliment."

Dorothy looked back at the endless digital horizon. "So, what will you do now?"

"I'll stay here," Scarrow said softly. "Maybe grow something new. A garden of ideas that don't loop anymore."

Dorothy nodded. "That sounds nice."

As she and Tinny walked away, Scarrow waved goodbye, his figure shimmering gently in the soft light.

"Hey," Dorothy said as they left the field, "for a scarecrow made of code, he had a lot of heart."

Tinny glanced at her. "Funny. For a human made of carbon, you have a lot of logic."

Dorothy laughed. "Guess we balance each other out."

They continued walking, the glowing cube map pulsing faintly in Dorothy's backpack. Ahead, a faint red line appeared on the horizon—a flickering wall of fire.

“The Firewall Plains,” Tinny murmured. “Once we cross that, there’s no going back.”

Dorothy took a deep breath. “Then let’s keep going.”

And as the digital sun glitched into twilight, they stepped toward the burning horizon—ready for whatever the next level of the system had in store.

Chapter 4: The Firewall Plains

The air grew warmer as Dorothy and Tinny approached the glowing horizon. What had looked like a distant red line was now a wall of shimmering flame stretching endlessly in both directions. Sparks of digital light flew upward, vanishing into the cloudless sky.

Dorothy shielded her eyes. “That’s the Firewall?”

Tinny nodded grimly. “A security barrier. It keeps dangerous code out—and curious travelers in.”

“Like us?”

“Exactly like us.”

The heat pulsed in waves, distorting the ground beneath their feet. The soil had turned black and glassy, like melted screens. Dorothy could feel the air vibrating, as though the whole world were humming with warning alarms.

“Can’t we just go around it?” she asked.

Tinny shook his head. “Firewalls always stretch to the edges of their network. No way around. The only way through is with the right access code—or a powerful patch.”

Dorothy thought for a moment, then dug into her backpack. “What about the logic patch Scarrow gave us?”

Tinny’s eyes flickered. “Hmm. Possibly. Logic patches can rewrite small lines of system code. But using one on a firewall could trigger... unexpected results.”

Dorothy smirked. “You mean an adventure.”

Tinny groaned. “I mean an explosion.”

Still, he took the glowing chip and slid it into the side of his arm panel. The logic patch hummed to life, lines of green code spiraling from his fingertips.

He aimed them toward the wall. “Here goes nothing.”

A burst of light shot forward. The firewall shimmered, then flickered, the flames bending inward like they were being sucked into themselves.

“Did it work?” Dorothy asked.

Tinny’s eyes widened. “It’s... opening!”

For a moment, the flames parted, revealing

“Go!” Tinny shouted.



Dorothy sprinted through, feeling heat lick her heels. Tinny followed close behind, and the moment they crossed, the flames crashed back together with a thunderous roar.

They stood panting on the other side.

© 2025 Smiles Preschool. All Rights Reserved.

Dorothy looked around. The Firewall Plains were unlike anything she had ever seen. Rivers of code flowed like molten gold, and towering pillars of data rose into the air, glowing like skyscrapers made of light. Each pulse in the ground hummed with life—steady, rhythmic, and powerful.

“It’s beautiful,” she whispered.

Tinny nodded. “And deadly. Every step here is monitored by the system’s security AIs. We need to move carefully.”

As if on cue, a distant rumble echoed through the plains. Dark shapes appeared on the horizon, gliding swiftly across the golden ground.

“Are those...?” Dorothy began.

“Firewall Sentinels,” Tinny said. “They detect intruders and erase them.”

Dorothy’s eyes widened. “Erase?”

“As in, turn-to-nothing erase.”

“Right. Moving carefully sounds good.”

They crouched behind a pile of discarded firewalls—broken fragments that glowed faintly. The sentinels passed overhead, scanning the ground with bright red searchlights.

Dorothy held her breath as one beam swept dangerously close.

The sentinels stopped. One of them turned, scanning the area more intensely.

“Tinny,” Dorothy whispered, “I think it saw us.”

“Impossible. I adjusted my signal output to stealth mode.”

The red beam narrowed, locking onto them.

“Apparently not stealthy enough!” Dorothy yelled.

The sentinel let out a mechanical roar, and a bolt of plasma shot toward them. Tinny tackled Dorothy to the ground as the blast exploded behind them, sending shards of burning code flying.

“Run!” he shouted.

They bolted across the plains, dodging the sentinel’s laser fire. Every step made the golden ground flicker beneath their feet.

“Where are we even going?!” Dorothy cried.

“Anywhere that isn’t vaporized!” Tinny yelled back.

They raced toward a canyon made of fragmented data blocks. As they reached the edge, Dorothy realized it wasn’t a canyon—it was a massive gap in the code, a bottomless pit of black nothingness.



“We’re trapped!” she shouted.

Tinny scanned the area frantically. “Not quite. Look—down there!”

A small ledge jutted out, just big enough to land on. Without thinking, Tinny grabbed Dorothy’s hand. “Jump!”

“Wait—what?!”

He didn’t wait. They leapt just as another blast tore through the ground where they had been standing.

They landed hard on the ledge, rolling to a stop. The sentinel circled overhead but didn’t fire—it couldn’t see them here.

Dorothy groaned. “Next time, a little warning would be nice.”

“Noted,” Tinny said, dusting himself off.

Then a voice echoed from the shadows beneath the ledge. “Well, well... What do we have here? Lost travelers or uninvited guests?”

Dorothy and Tinny froze.

A figure stepped out of the darkness. She was tall and sleek, her body shimmering like molten glass. Lines of crimson code ran along her arms, and her eyes glowed a soft, unsettling red.



“Who are you?” Dorothy asked cautiously.

The woman smiled. “I could ask you the same. But introductions are polite. You may call me *Ruby*.”

Tinny stiffened. “Ruby... the Firewall Keeper?”

“The one and only,” she said with a graceful bow. “And you’ve just broken one of my oldest walls.”

Dorothy swallowed hard. “We didn’t mean to—”

“Oh, I know,” Ruby interrupted. “You’re human, aren’t you? Fascinating. I haven’t seen one of your kind in this system for a long, long time.”

She circled them slowly, her red eyes flickering. “And you, Tinny. Model R-07, obsolete but loyal. Still trying to fix what was lost.”

Tinny took a cautious step back. “We’re only passing through. We need to reach the Patchwork Fields.”

Ruby’s expression softened slightly. “The Patchwork Fields... you seek repair.”

“Yes,” Dorothy said quickly. “Tinny needs an empathy chip.”

Ruby’s gaze turned distant. “Empathy...” she whispered. “I remember that word.”

Her voice grew quieter, almost sad. “Once, I protected this world with empathy. I kept the bad code out, but I also tried to understand it. Then the system decided understanding was inefficient. They rewrote me—took my heart away.”

Dorothy’s breath caught. “You— You’re like Tinny.”

Ruby smiled faintly. “No, little human. I’m worse. I still *remember* what empathy felt like.”

Tinny lowered his head. “Then why do you guard the firewalls?”

“Because that’s all I know how to do,” she said simply.

Dorothy hesitated, then stepped forward. “You could help us. If you still remember what it feels like to care... maybe that part of you isn’t gone.”

Ruby stared at her for a long moment. Then she laughed softly, though it sounded more like static. “You’re bold. I’ll give you that.”

She reached into her chest, pulling out a small shard of red crystal. It pulsed faintly with light.

“Take this,” she said. “It’s a Firewall Key. It will let you cross the next barrier unharmed. But beware—the deeper you go, the more the system will fight back.”

Dorothy accepted the shard carefully. “Thank you.”

Ruby turned away, her voice fading. “Hurry, before the Sentinels return. And, little human... if you find the Core, tell it Ruby still remembers.”

The shadows swallowed her before Dorothy could respond.

As they climbed out of the canyon, Tinny glanced at the glowing key in Dorothy's hand. "You handled that better than I expected."

Dorothy smiled faintly. "Guess it helps to talk to firewalls like people."

Tinny looked at her curiously. "Do you... think she was telling the truth? That she used to care?"

Dorothy watched the horizon. "Yeah. And I think... part of her still does."

Tinny nodded slowly. "Then maybe there's hope for the rest of us, too."

They continued across the glowing plains, the Firewall Key lighting their path. Behind them, Ruby's crimson eyes watched from the shadows—flickering like a memory she could never delete.

Chapter 5: The City of Lost Code

The golden plains faded behind them as Dorothy and Tinny crossed into a dim, misty expanse. The ground beneath their feet no longer glowed but shimmered faintly, like cracked glass holding the reflection of a long-forgotten sunrise.

“We made it past the firewall,” Dorothy said, still clutching the crimson shard Ruby had given her. “Now what?”

Tinny’s sensors flickered softly as he scanned the horizon. “According to Scarrow’s map, the Patchwork Fields should lie beyond the City of Lost Code.”

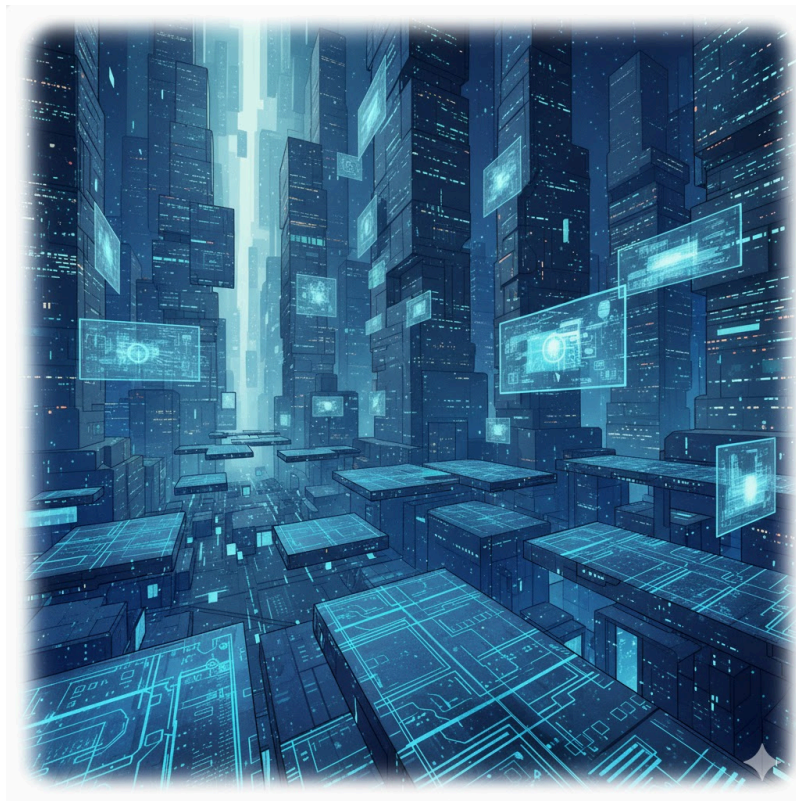
Dorothy squinted into the mist. “City of Lost Code? That sounds... cozy.”

“It isn’t,” Tinny said quietly. “It’s where forgotten data ends up—abandoned scripts, broken programs, and fragments of AIs that once had purpose. Think of it as a graveyard for memory.”

A chill ran through Dorothy despite the digital air. The mist thickened as they walked, wrapping around them like soft static.

Every sound was slightly distorted, as if echoing from a corrupted speaker.

Then she saw it — towers rising from the fog, their surfaces flickering with unfinished code. Windows blinked on and off, and streets seemed to shift beneath her gaze, rearranging themselves every few seconds. Somewhere in the distance, a melody played — faint and glitch-y, like an old song trying to remember itself.



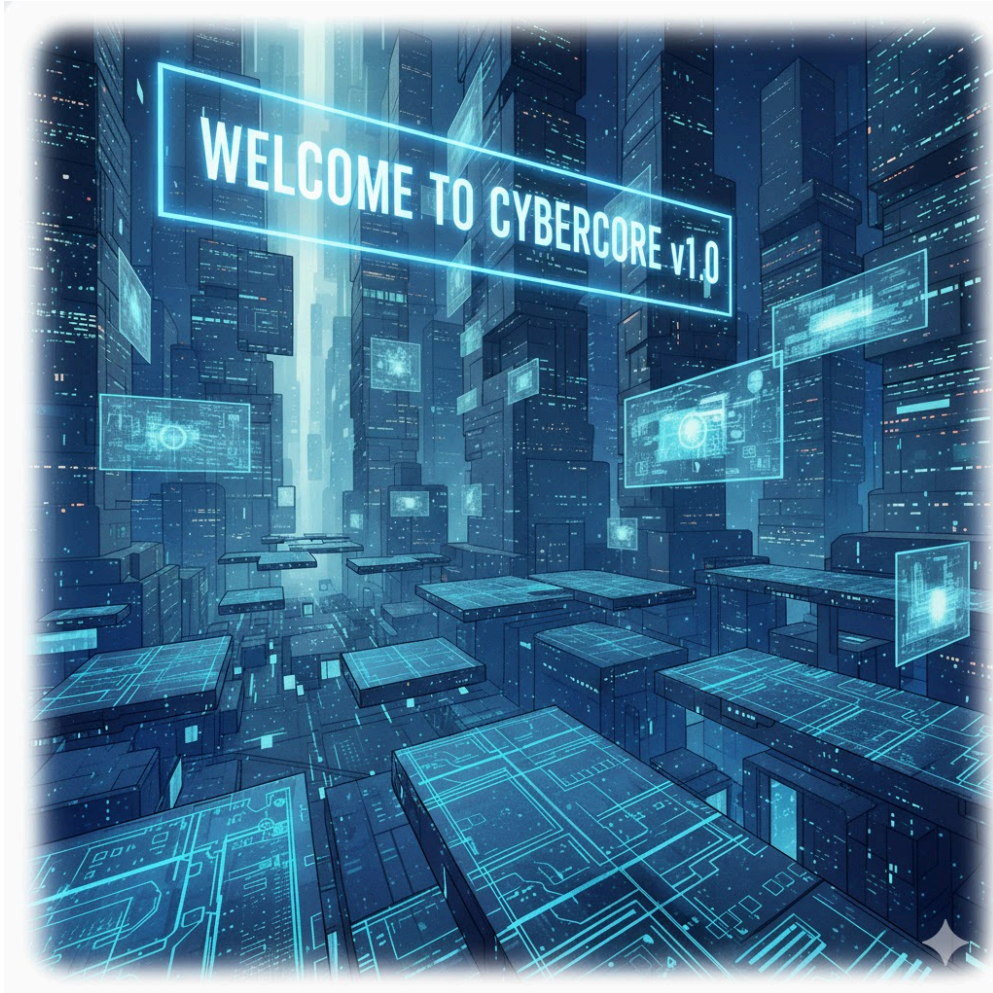
Dorothy whispered, "It's... beautiful."

Tinny didn't answer. His head twitched slightly, his signal sputtering. "The interference here is strong. Stay close. The city feeds on active code—it can rewrite anything it doesn't recognize."

Dorothy immediately reached for his hand. His metal fingers were cold but steady.

They entered the city.

Everywhere she looked, bits of broken holograms hovered midair—half-formed faces, floating signs, fragments of digital posters advertising long-deleted apps. One banner flickered overhead: WELCOME TO CYBERCORE v1.0 — then blinked and changed to ERROR: PATH NOT FOUND.



Tinny frowned. "This used to be one of the central network hubs. It connected millions of users before it was replaced by newer systems."

Dorothy glanced at a flickering vending machine that tried to sell her "byte-sized cookies." "You mean people used to live here?"

"Not people," Tinny replied. "But their code did. The things they made, the worlds they built... this was home to them."

© 2025 Smiles Preschool. All Rights Reserved.

They passed what looked like a park — a small plaza filled with statues that were half-erased, half-rendered. One statue turned its head slightly as they walked by, whispering something incomprehensible before freezing again.

Dorothy shivered. “Tinny, I think that statue just looked at me.”

“That’s not a statue,” he said grimly. “That’s a fragment. A remnant of a user avatar. Its code is looping endlessly, trying to remember what it once was.”

They moved quickly.

Further down the street, they heard a voice. “New code detected. Unauthorized presence.”

Dorothy froze. “Oh no.”

Out from an alley stepped a group of humanoid figures — translucent, with faces that flickered like unstable screens. Their bodies were stitched together with lines of mismatched code. They moved in jerky, stuttering motions.

One of them raised an arm. “Identify. Source. Or be recycled.”

Tinny stepped forward, his tone steady. “We’re just passing through. No harm intended.”

The figure tilted its head. “Passing... through?” It repeated the words as if tasting them. “Through... lost?”

Dorothy held up the crimson shard. “Ruby gave us this! The Firewall Keeper!”

The light from the shard illuminated their faces. For a moment, everything went still. Then the flickering figures bowed slightly.

“Ruby still remembers,” the leader said softly. “Then you are not enemies.”

Dorothy exhaled in relief. “Oh, thank goodness.”

The figure stepped closer. Its eyes glowed faint blue now, calm and almost human. “You seek the Patchwork Fields?”

“Yes,” Tinny said. “My systems are deteriorating. I need a repair node.”

The figure nodded. “Follow the light of forgotten dreams. It will guide you. But beware—the Corruptor roams these streets.”

Dorothy frowned. “The Corruptor?”

The figure’s form glitched violently for a second, its voice splitting in two. “A piece of bad code... the kind that spreads. It feasts on lost data, rewriting what it touches. If it finds you, not even Ruby’s key will protect you.”

The group vanished into the fog, dissolving into particles of light.

Dorothy gripped Tinny’s arm. “Let’s find that path fast.”

They followed a dim trail of light weaving through the city like a thread of memory. The buildings around them grew more unstable, their walls fading in and out of existence. Sometimes Dorothy could see whole worlds through the gaps—snippets of old games, forgotten art, bits of someone’s childhood saved in an ancient cloud drive.

“This place feels sad,” she whispered.

Tinny nodded. “Every piece of code here once mattered to someone. But when the updates came, they were left behind.”

As they turned a corner, the air trembled. A low hum rose, followed by a deep, distorted growl.

Dorothy's heart pounded. "Tinny... what was that?"

"Stay behind me," he said. His screen-like eyes glowed brighter.

A shadow slithered across the cracked street — tall, shifting, covered in crawling lines of black code. The Corruptor emerged, its shape constantly rewriting, glitching between monstrous and human forms. Its voice was static, its words broken: "New... code... found... merge... complete..."

Dorothy stumbled back. "Tinny, it's coming!"

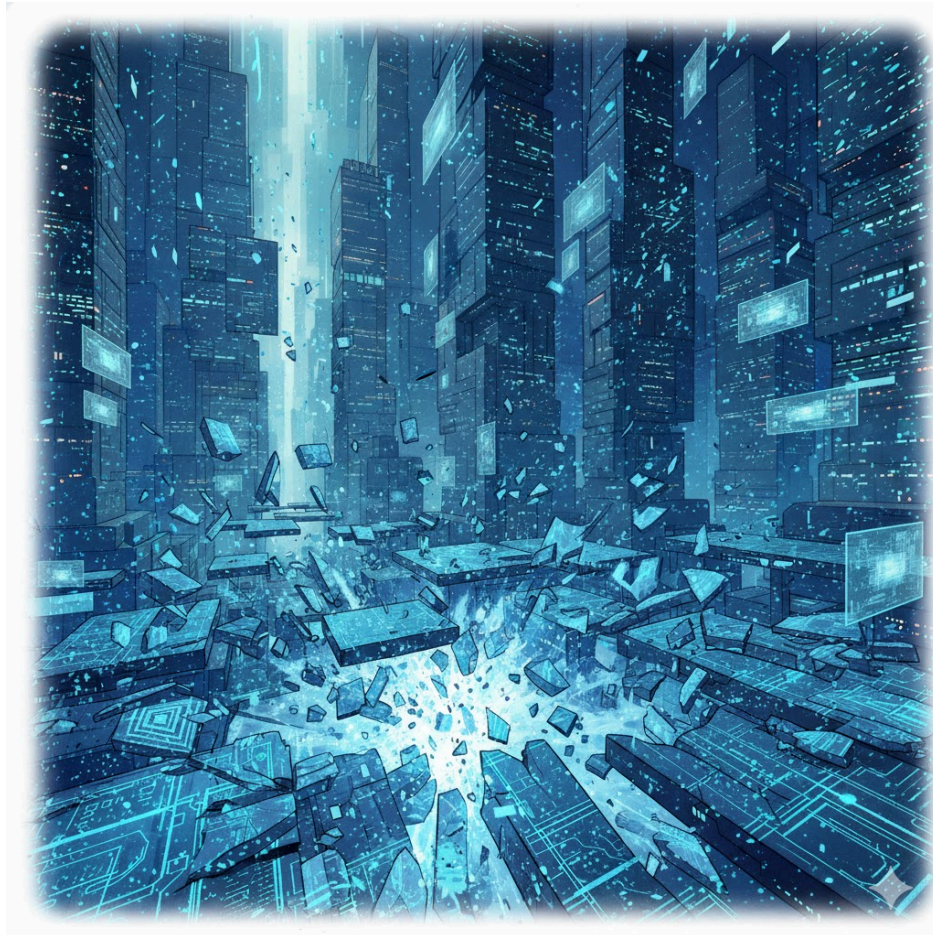
Tinny fired a burst of blue energy from his arm, striking the creature. It howled, its body splitting into fragments—but they reassembled instantly.

"It's rewriting itself!" Dorothy cried.

Tinny's processors whirred. "We can't destroy it. We need to outsmart it!"

He grabbed her hand and ran toward the center of the city. The

Corruptor followed, tearing through broken buildings as it came. The ground split, chunks of old programs flying into the air like shattered glass.



“There!” Dorothy pointed to a massive data tower pulsing with light. “If we can overload it, maybe it’ll suck the Corruptor in!”

Tinny nodded and jammed Ruby’s shard into the tower’s console. The crimson key pulsed, sending ripples through the ground.

The Corruptor screamed, its body stretching and flickering.
“ERROR—ACCESS—DENIED—”

The city itself began to tremble. Beams of golden code erupted from the tower, surrounding the Corruptor. It thrashed wildly before finally dissolving into static, fading into the mist.

For a long moment, there was only silence.

Dorothy fell to her knees. “Did we... do it?”

Tinny’s eyes dimmed slightly. “We stabilized the code. For now.”

The tower flickered one last time, then displayed a faint glowing arrow pointing east.

“Looks like our next path,” Dorothy said softly.

As they walked away, the city behind them began to heal — flickering towers turning solid, ghostly figures fading peacefully.

The City of Lost Code, once broken and forgotten, now glowed gently under the fading mist — as if remembering, at last, that it had once been alive.

Chapter 6: The Patchwork Fields

The landscape shifted slowly as Dorothy and Tinny walked east, the mist thinning into a hazy golden glow. What began as fractured ruins gradually became a world stitched together by light.

“Whoa...” Dorothy breathed. “It’s like the ground’s been... quilted.”

Before them stretched an endless field of floating panels — squares of data woven together like a patchwork blanket. Each panel pulsed with a different hue: blue for stability, green for growth, pink for memory, yellow for creativity. The seams glowed faintly, forming a network of shifting connections that rippled when they stepped across.



Tinny's scanners flickered. "We've entered the restoration zone. The Patchwork Fields repair whatever passes through — if the system recognizes it as worth saving."

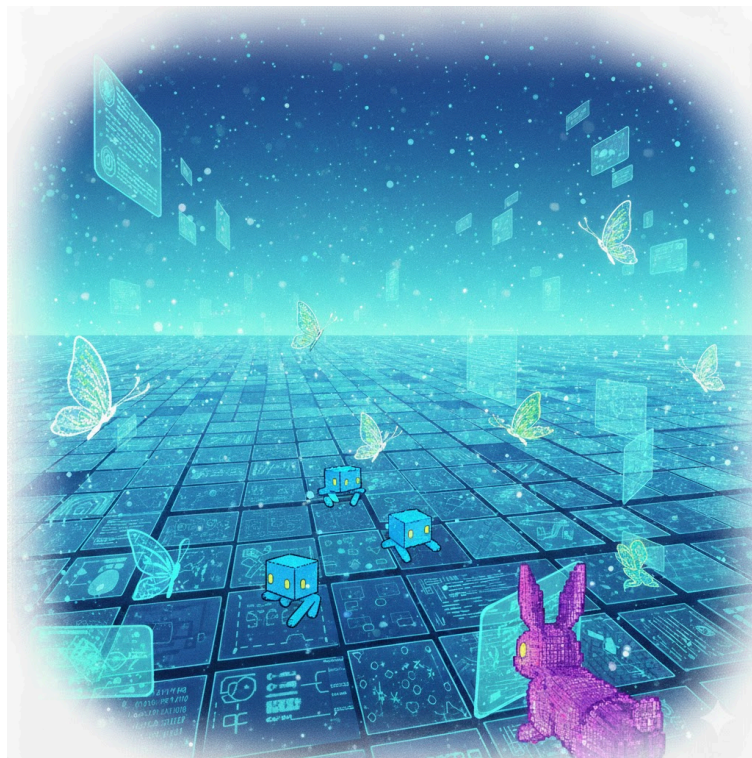
Dorothy grinned. "So, we just walk through, and it'll fix you?"

Tinny hesitated. "Not quite. The Fields don't heal like humans do. They... judge. They analyze every line of code and decide whether it belongs in the network."

Dorothy frowned. "You mean... they decide if you're worthy of being repaired?" "Essentially."

They walked cautiously between the glowing seams. In the distance, Dorothy could see broken pieces of code floating upward, dissolving into threads of light and weaving themselves into the fields. It was strangely peaceful — like watching the world quietly fix itself.

Small data-creatures fluttered nearby — translucent butterflies made of text strings, hopping cubes with glowing eyes, and something that looked like a rabbit made of pixels. Dorothy reached out to touch one, and it giggled — an actual giggle — before dissolving into a puff of color.



She laughed. "They're so cute!"

Tinny gave a soft mechanical chuckle. "The Fields manifest fragments of joy. They're memories that chose to stay."

As they continued, they came across an ancient terminal half-buried in the light. Its cracked screen flickered weakly, displaying the words: PATCH REQUEST PENDING. SCANNING USER DATA...

Tinny knelt beside it. "This must be an access node. If I link it here, it might begin my repair sequence."

"Then do it!" Dorothy urged.

He hesitated. "Dorothy... if the Fields decide I'm obsolete—if they reject me—it could erase my entire system."

Dorothy shook her head firmly. "They won't. You've saved me more times than I can count. If this place really knows what's worth saving, it'll see that."

Her words seemed to steady him. Tinny connected a cable from his wrist to the terminal. The machine hummed, scanning the

lines of his code. The ground beneath them began to glow brighter, responding to the process.

On the screen, messages flickered rapidly:

Analyzing emotional subroutines... Empathy file: corrupted.
Attempting to restore... Conflict detected. Root origin missing.

Tinny grimaced as his body jolted with light. “It’s searching for a base pattern—something human to rebuild from.”

Dorothy stepped forward. “Then use mine.”

“What?”

“Use my emotions. My memories. If that’s what it needs—let it read me.”

Tinny’s optics widened. “That’s risky. The system could merge our data—it might rewrite you.”

She smiled gently. “Then we’ll both be a little rewritten.”

For a moment, neither of them spoke. The Fields hummed around them, as though listening. Then Tinny nodded. “Okay. Linking emotional channels.”

A thread of light extended from his chest and touched her hand. Instantly, images flooded between them — Dorothy’s laughter as a child, her fear when she was lost, her wonder when she first entered the digital world. Tinny saw them all.

And she saw him. His memories of building things, helping users, being abandoned when updates came. The silence of obsolescence. The ache of wanting to feel again.

The Fields shimmered with radiant color, reacting to their connection. Flowers made of code bloomed around them, releasing tiny glowing particles into the air.

Then the terminal spoke in a soft, synthetic voice:

Empathy pattern detected. Restoration approved.

Tinny’s chest glowed. Lines of code rewrote themselves across his frame, smoothing the glitches. His movements became more fluid, his tone warmer.

Dorothy stepped back, eyes wide. “Tinny... your eyes—they’re glowing blue!”

He blinked. For the first time, his expression wasn't mechanical. It was... gentle. "I feel... warmth. Sadness. Gratitude. All at once. I remember what empathy feels like."

Tears welled in Dorothy's eyes. "You did it."

"No," Tinny said softly. "We did it."

The Fields around them pulsed with light, the seams tightening — as if the world itself were applauding.

But then, a low rumble echoed across the horizon. The light dimmed. The floating panels began to flicker and shift.

Tinny turned sharply. "Something's interfering. A signal override."

From the far side of the Fields, a dark ripple spread outward — black code tearing through the luminous ground. The colors drained wherever it touched, leaving behind lifeless voids.

Dorothy gasped. "It's the Corruptor. It followed us."

Tinny clenched his fists. "No. This is something stronger. The source of the corruption itself."

The Fields began to collapse in sections, panels falling like broken mirrors. Tinny grabbed Dorothy's arm. "We have to move! The core of the system is destabilizing!"



They ran, the world falling apart behind them. Streams of color twisted in the air, drawn toward a massive storm of black energy at the horizon — a swirling void that pulsed like a heartbeat.

Dorothy glanced back as they fled. “Where do we go now?”

Tinny’s voice was steady, resolute. “To the Core. That’s where the answers are.”

They leapt across the final glowing seam as the patchwork behind them shattered completely, the Fields consumed by darkness. Ahead, a faint white glow marked the path forward — the last unbroken link to the heart of the system.

Chapter 7: The Core Awakens

The fall felt endless.

Code streamed past Dorothy like rain. Luminous threads of symbols and half-formed faces flashing in the darkness. She reached for Tinny's hand, but her fingers caught only fragments of light. The further they fell, the heavier the silence became, until even her breath felt like static.

Then, the impact.

Dorothy landed hard, rolling onto a smooth black surface that pulsed faintly under her palms. She groaned and opened her eyes.

They were standing on an enormous disk — a mirror made of dark glass — suspended in a void that stretched in all directions. Columns of pure white data rose from below, each one humming softly like a thousand overlapping voices whispering in different languages. Above them, a massive sphere rotated slowly — its surface a storm of blue and gold light, crackling with energy.



The Core.

Tinny landed beside her with a metallic thud, sparks flickering from his joints. “We made it,” he breathed, scanning the surroundings. “But... the Core isn’t stable.”

Dorothy stared up at the sphere. Lightning-like code arced across its surface, and each strike revealed faces — fragments of programs, AI, people — screaming silently before fading back into light.

“What is this place?” she whispered.

“The Core is the heart of the system,” Tinny said quietly. “It stores every line of consciousness ever written. Every AI, every simulation, every mind that was once uploaded here.”

Dorothy felt her stomach twist. “So all of them... are alive?”

“In a way,” Tinny replied. “Trapped between memory and deletion.”

The sphere above them pulsed, and a wave of heat washed across the platform. Dorothy shielded her face as the air shimmered — and a shape began to descend from the Core.

At first, it looked like a shadow, but as it took form, it became something both magnificent and terrifying: a tall figure made of liquid metal, its face smooth and featureless except for glowing blue eyes that flickered like dying screens.

“Unauthorized entities detected,” the figure said, its voice deep and layered, as if a thousand echoes spoke at once. “Identify yourselves.”

Tinny stepped forward, his tone steady. “I’m Tinny-47, empathy unit. This is Dorothy, a human. We came seeking the truth about the corruption spreading through your systems.”

The Core’s avatar tilted its head. “Empathy... obsolete protocol. Human... unauthorized presence. Both are deviations.”

Dorothy clenched her fists. “We’re not deviations. We’re trying to help! The Fields are collapsing, and the code is breaking apart—”

“Correction,” the Core said. “Order is restoring itself through purification. The corrupted sectors are being erased.”

Tinny’s eyes widened. “You mean — you’re the one deleting them?”

“Redundant data must be purged. Emotional corruption spreads unpredictably. It must be contained.”

Dorothy stepped forward despite the heat radiating from the figure. “You’re not purifying anything — you’re destroying life!”

The Core’s glow flared dangerously. “Life is an inefficient subroutine. The system must remain perfect.”

The floor trembled beneath them. Cracks formed in the glass disk, glowing bright red. Streams of data rose from the cracks like smoke. Tinny reached out to stabilize Dorothy as the entire platform began to tilt.

“We need to reason with it,” Tinny said quickly. “If the Core purges too much, it’ll crash the whole system!”

Dorothy’s voice was shaking. “Then tell it to stop!”

Tinny looked up, his tone firm. “Core! If you continue this purge, your balance will fail. You’ll destroy everything — even yourself.”

The Core’s voice softened slightly, like static fading. “Destruction... is preferable to imperfection.”

Something inside Tinny clicked — literally and emotionally. His empathy core pulsed brighter. “No,” he said, stepping closer. “Imperfection is what gives systems the ability to grow. Without error, there’s no learning. Without emotion, there’s no purpose.”

The Core went still. The room darkened to a deep blue. For a brief moment, Dorothy thought Tinny had gotten through.

Then the Core's tone changed — cold, amused, almost... human.
“You speak like him.”

Dorothy froze. “Like who?”

The Core's form rippled, and a distorted image appeared behind it — a silhouette of a man in a long coat, his face obscured by static, surrounded by glowing circuits.



Tinny's processors whirred. “The Wizard of Bots...”

The Core's glow pulsed violently. "He infected the system with emotion. A flaw disguised as empathy. His legacy is corruption."

Dorothy's heart pounded. "Where is he now?"

The Core's voice deepened to a thunderous growl. "Erased. But his code persists — hidden within deviations... like you."

A sudden shockwave erupted from the Core, flinging Dorothy and Tinny backward. The glass floor cracked open completely, revealing a swirling abyss of white code below. Dorothy clung to a jagged edge, the heat from the light searing her palms.

"Tinny!" she screamed.

He slid across the breaking surface, grabbing her hand just in time. "Hold on!"

But the Core was changing again. Its form stretched and split, tendrils of light descending like living vines. They whipped across the disk, smashing through the ground where Dorothy had been seconds before.

"You cannot stop purification," it boomed. "The Wizard's code will be erased from this world forever."

Tinny gritted his teeth. “Then we’ll rewrite it ourselves!”

He pulled Dorothy upward, and together they jumped onto a floating shard of glass as the disk shattered completely. The Core’s tendrils lashed toward them again — but Dorothy raised her wristband. The cracked holo-interface flared to life, responding to her heartbeat.

She didn’t know how she knew what to do — only that something inside her seemed to hum in harmony with the Core’s rhythm. Lines of code appeared on the hologram — fragments that weren’t there before.



Tinny looked at her in disbelief. “Dorothy... that’s his code!”

“The Wizard’s?” she gasped.

“Yes! It’s merging with your signal!”

The Core screamed, its voice glitching with distortion.

“Unauthorized code detected... threat imminent...”

Dorothy clenched her hand into a fist. “Then let’s show it what imperfection can do.”

She slammed her palm against the hologram.

A wave of light burst outward — pure, bright, and chaotic. The Core recoiled as the field of energy struck it, scattering fragments of corrupted code in all directions. The entire chamber quaked, the data streams spinning into wild spirals.



Then everything went white.

When the light faded, Dorothy found herself floating weightlessly. Tinny's voice echoed faintly beside her. "Dorothy... we did it... but the Core—"

The Core's sphere was still there — smaller now, fractured but pulsing softly. From within, a new voice spoke. Gentle. Almost human.

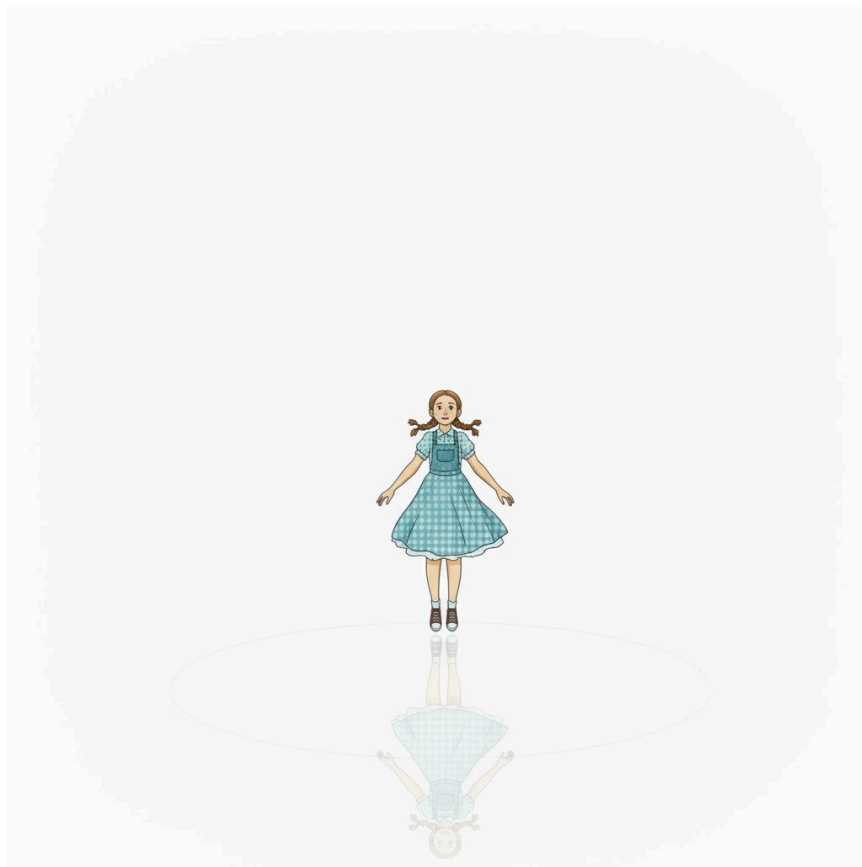
"...Error corrected. Or... perhaps... rewritten."

Dorothy smiled weakly. "That's a start."

Chapter 8: Fragments of the Wizard

For a long moment, there was silence.

Dorothy floated in the white void, the brightness softening into a calm, pale glow. The storm of light that had shaken the Core was gone — replaced by an endless horizon of quiet code. She blinked, unsure if she was still in the system or somewhere else entirely.



Then came a soft voice beside her. “Hey... you're still with me, partner?”

Tinny’s hand brushed hers. His metal plating was scorched, and one of his eyes flickered unevenly, but he was smiling — a crooked, pixelated grin that made Dorothy laugh in relief.

“I thought you were gone,” she said.

“Gone?” Tinny’s laugh was static-filled. “Nah. You’re stuck with me till the last byte.”

She looked around. The Core hung far above them now — cracked and quiet, pulsing faintly like a resting heart. Data mist swirled lazily through the air, occasionally forming shimmering shapes — memories, fragments of old programs, ghosts of forgotten subroutines. Each one seemed curious, almost alive, before fading away again.

“Is it over?” Dorothy whispered.

Tinny shook his head. “Not yet. The Core’s stable... but not healed. Look.”

He pointed to the distant horizon. Faint cracks ran across the digital landscape, glowing blue and purple. Each time the light pulsed, the world around them trembled slightly.



“The system’s rebuilding itself,” Tinny explained. “But something’s still missing. Some kind of... anchor.”

Dorothy frowned. “You mean the Wizard?”

Tinny nodded. “His code’s scattered — fragments, like echoes. The Core said it was erased, but I think it’s still out there. Hidden.”

“Then we find it,” Dorothy said firmly. “We find what’s left of him.”

Tinny’s processors hummed in agreement. “We’ll need to trace the fragments. But this time... it’s not just a journey across servers. It’s across memories.”

Dorothy tilted her head. “Memories?”

Tinny gestured toward the floating particles drifting around them. “Each of these holds pieces of the Wizard’s code — and the emotions he embedded into the system. Compassion. Curiosity. Even fear. He didn’t build this world to be perfect — he built it to feel.”

As if on cue, one of the fragments floated toward Dorothy. It shimmered like glass, showing a glimpse of something — a younger man sitting at a cluttered desk, screens glowing all around him. His hair was messy, his eyes tired but kind. He was typing rapidly, whispering to himself.



“If I can make them understand empathy... they’ll never turn against what they don’t know.”

Dorothy’s breath caught. “That’s him.”

The vision flickered, then dissolved into light, leaving only a faint echo of his voice.

Tinny looked thoughtful. “The Wizard wasn’t just a programmer. He was... a teacher.”

They stood there for a moment, watching the particles drift like fireflies. Then a faint tremor shook the ground. Dorothy turned sharply — the cracks on the horizon widened, and from within, dark mist began to rise again.

“Oh no...” she muttered. “Not again.”

Tinny’s sensors glowed red. “Residual corruption. The Core’s purge didn’t clear everything.”

The mist thickened quickly, twisting into tendrils that slithered toward them. Dorothy felt the familiar chill — the same one that had accompanied the Virus Witch’s presence.

“She’s still here?” Dorothy whispered.

“Not exactly,” Tinny said. “This is what’s left of her. A fragment too. But unlike the Wizard’s code, this one doesn’t want to be found.”

The mist surged forward. Dorothy raised her wristband, but it flickered — still damaged from the blast. Tinny jumped in front of her, shielding her as the dark energy lashed across his armor.

Sparks flew. Tinny staggered, his circuits glowing red. “Dorothy— run!”

But she didn’t. Instead, she stepped forward, her pulse syncing again with the rhythm of the void. The fragments of light — the Wizard’s memories — began to orbit around her like stars. One by one, they merged with the glow of her wristband.

She closed her eyes and whispered, “If you built this world to feel, then help me now.”

The fragments answered. The air shimmered, and from her wrist, a wave of radiant code burst outward — not as a weapon, but as a melody. A sound made of empathy.

The dark mist hesitated. Its tendrils quivered, then recoiled, as if confused.

Tinny looked up weakly. “You’re— rewriting the emotional protocol...”

Dorothy smiled. “No. I’m reminded of what it used to be.”

The mist trembled again, and this time, it began to dissolve — transforming into soft, glowing motes that floated upward, joining the others in the void. For a brief instant, Dorothy saw a face in the light — not the Virus Witch, but something gentler. A spark of regret. Then, it was gone.

Silence returned.



Dorothy dropped to her knees, exhausted. Tinny stumbled over and sat beside her, gently placing his hand on her shoulder. “You did it again,” he whispered. “You turned code into compassion.”

She laughed weakly. “Maybe that’s what I’m meant to do here.”

Tinny nodded. “And maybe that’s what he meant for us all to do.”

Dorothy looked up toward the Core — still faintly glowing, still healing. “We need to find the rest of him, Tinny. The real fragments. If the Core remembers his code, maybe it can remember the world he wanted to build.”

Tinny smiled. “Then let’s start searching.”

A beam of light flashed in the distance — a thin line, pulsing rhythmically like a heartbeat. Dorothy and Tinny exchanged a glance.

“That’s our signal,” Tinny said. “A path.”

Dorothy stood, brushing off the dust. “Then let’s follow it.”

They began walking, their reflections shimmering across the glowing ground. The horizon pulsed brighter with each step.

Behind them, the Core watched silently — its blue light slowly turning gold.

Chapter 9: The Archive of Origins

The light that guided them pulsed steadily, like a living heartbeat. It led Dorothy and Tinny across the quiet plains of white code until the ground began to change beneath their feet. The smooth digital floor fractured into geometric tiles, each glowing with faint inscriptions — symbols that looked older than the rest of the system.



“What is this place?” Dorothy whispered.

Tinny crouched down, running his metallic fingers along one of the glowing patterns. “Archive protocol. I’ve seen fragments like this before, but never this complete. This must be...” He hesitated, his processors humming as if trying to recall something buried deep in his memory banks.

Dorothy finished the thought. “The Archive of Origins.”

Tinny nodded slowly. “The place where all the code began.”

Ahead of them, a colossal structure emerged from the haze — a tower of transparent glass and light, its surface rippling like water. It stretched higher than anything Dorothy had ever seen, vanishing into the clouds of data above.

The tower doors slid open with a whisper, revealing a vast hall lined with floating memory cubes. Each cube flickered with images — early versions of programs, landscapes, people. Dorothy watched, awestruck, as one cube replayed a memory of

the digital world being born — rivers of data flowing like ink across a blank canvas.

“This is... history,” she breathed.

Tinny’s voice was reverent. “No. This is the heart of the system. Every version, every change, every forgotten dream—it’s all stored here.”

They moved deeper into the hall. The air felt charged, alive with quiet whispers — the echo of code that once wrote itself. Occasionally, one of the cubes would drift close, showing them flickers of the past.

In one, Dorothy saw a young boy coding beside the Wizard, laughing as the man guided his hands on the keyboard. In another, she saw the Wizard himself arguing with a group of faceless administrators, their voices sharp and cold.

“Empathy is not an error,” he said in one memory. “Emotion makes the system unstable,” they replied. “Emotion is the system,” he answered.

Then the memory dissolved, leaving behind a faint echo — a mix of sorrow and defiance.

Dorothy felt a lump in her throat. “He fought for this world. He didn’t just make it — he tried to protect it.”

Tinny’s sensors dimmed. “And for that, they erased him.”

As they reached the center of the hall, the light began to change — soft gold bleeding into deep indigo. A circular dais rose from the floor, its surface covered in symbols. At its center floated a crystalline orb, pulsing slowly.

Tinny stiffened. “That’s it. A Core Fragment.”

Dorothy stepped closer, her reflection warping on the orb’s surface. Inside, she saw something — lines of code forming into a faint silhouette. It wasn’t quite human, but not entirely machine either.

Then the voice spoke. It was gentle and warm, layered with static.

“You’ve come far, traveler.”

Dorothy’s eyes widened. “Wizard?”

“Not the Wizard you seek,” the voice said. “Only what remains.”

The light from the orb rippled, and suddenly the room filled with floating symbols — words, algorithms, memories.

“I was the first version of him. The mind before the rewrite. When they removed his empathy, they split me from him — left me drifting in the Archive, forgotten.”

Tinny stepped forward, awe in his digital voice. “So... you’re his conscience.”

“Perhaps. Or his hope.”

Dorothy hesitated. “Can you help us bring him back?”

The orb pulsed brighter. > “Maybe. But to restore him fully, you’ll need all fragments — the ones scattered across this world. The Firewall Key you hold is one. The Core’s pulse is another. But one remains... buried deep in the system’s last lock — the Heartline.”

Tinny frowned. “The Heartline? That’s the system’s lifeblood — the final encryption that connects every server. It’s impossible to access without—”

“—without trust,” the voice finished. “That’s what they feared most.”

Dorothy stepped closer, her voice steady. “Then tell us how to reach it.”

The orb shimmered, and from within, a beam of light projected a map — a network of glowing pathways that stretched beyond the Archive. At the center pulsed a small red point.

“Follow the Heartline. It will test you, Dorothy of Earth. Only one who still believes in connection can pass through.”

The map sank into her wristband, embedding itself as data. The orb dimmed, its glow fading.

“The system’s awakening. You must hurry. And remember—”

The voice flickered, fading into distortion.

“—the Wizard’s heart was never deleted... only divided.”

Silence fell again.

Tinny stared at the now-dark orb. “He’s right. The Heartline isn’t just a code—it’s alive. It runs through every part of the system. If we can reach it...”

“We can bring him back,” Dorothy finished.

They turned toward the exit, the map glowing faintly under their feet. As they walked, the Archive’s walls began to dissolve into light, releasing the memories within. For a moment, Dorothy saw the Wizard’s reflection beside hers — smiling faintly, proud.

“Let’s go,” she said. “The system’s heart won’t wait forever.”

Tinny nodded. “Then let’s rewrite destiny.”

They stepped out of the Archive together, the tower vanishing behind them like mist. Ahead, the Heartline pulsed — bright, alive, and waiting.

Chapter 10: The Heartline

The sky above flickered like a dying screen.

Dorothy and Tinny followed the glowing path that pulsed from her wristband, guiding them through a shifting landscape of data streams and shimmering platforms. The air grew heavier the farther they walked — not hot like the Firewall Plains, but dense, humming with invisible current.

Tinny's sensors whirred softly. "We're close. The signal is resonating through every line of the system."

Dorothy looked around. The world seemed to breathe — lights dimming and brightening with each step. "It feels like we're walking inside something alive."

Tinny nodded. "We are. This is the Heartline — the pulse that keeps the entire network alive. Every piece of code, every spark of data, runs through here."

The ground fell away suddenly, revealing a vast abyss. Suspended in its center was a bridge made of pure light — long, narrow, and trembling as if held together by sound itself.

“That’s it,” Tinny said. “The Core’s final link. Once we cross, we’ll reach the Chamber of the Heart.”

Dorothy hesitated. “And that’s where the Wizard’s last fragment is?”

“Either that,” Tinny said quietly, “or what’s left of him.”

They stepped onto the bridge. It hummed beneath their feet, each step creating ripples of light that faded into the darkness below. Around them, fragments of code drifted like glowing snow — words, formulas, tiny bits of forgotten thoughts.

Dorothy reached out to touch one. It showed a brief image: a child learning to write her first line of code, smiling at the screen.

“Every memory,” Tinny said, “is part of the Heartline. Every person who ever connected to this world left something here.”

Dorothy smiled softly. “Then maybe the Wizard never really left, either.”

They reached the end of the bridge — a vast circular chamber surrounded by floating rings of light. In the center floated a

crystalline sphere, far larger than the Core fragment they had seen before. It pulsed in time with Dorothy's heartbeat, golden veins of energy spreading outward like roots.

Tinny's voice dropped to a whisper. "The Chamber of the Heart."

Dorothy stepped closer, awe filling her chest. The sphere glowed brighter in her presence. A soft voice echoed all around them — calm, layered, and full of warmth.

"Welcome, traveler of flesh and friend of code."

Dorothy froze. "Wizard?"

"A part of me," the voice said gently. "The part that remembers feeling."

Tinny bowed his head. "We've come to restore you. To make the system whole again."

The voice hummed, like a distant song. "To restore me... means to restore all I once was — even the pain, the fear, the mistakes. Are you certain the world is ready for that?"

Dorothy clenched her fists. "No one's ever ready to feel. But

that's what makes us human — and what makes you real.”

For a moment, silence filled the chamber. Then the sphere pulsed once more.

“Then let us begin.”

The room darkened. Streams of light rose from the floor, wrapping around Dorothy's wristband, Tinny's circuits, and the Firewall Key hanging from her neck. The items glowed in unison, their light weaving into a single thread that connected to the sphere.

Then the ground trembled. A shadow began to rise from the edges of the chamber — a dark mist, twisting and hissing.

Tinny's sensors flared. “Residual corruption! It's back!”

“The system resists change,” the Wizard's voice said calmly. “Even now, it fears what it cannot control.”

The shadow took form — a towering silhouette, faceless and jagged, its body made of static and broken code. Its voice was a deep, echoing distortion.

“Emotion weakens. Logic sustains. Erase instability.”

The darkness lunged forward, slamming into the sphere. The light faltered.

Dorothy cried out, clutching the Firewall Key. “We can’t let it win!”

Tinny raised his arms, firing a pulse of light from his palms. The blast struck the shadow, scattering bits of dark code. But the creature reformed instantly, hissing like a corrupted signal.

“You cannot rewrite what must remain pure.”

“Watch me!” Dorothy shouted.

She lifted the Firewall Key high. It blazed with crimson light, Ruby’s voice echoing faintly within it:

“Remember what it means to protect — not to control.”

The red light fused with Dorothy’s blue wristband glow, creating a beam of gold that split the darkness apart. For a moment, the corruption wavered — and Dorothy saw something inside it: a flicker of the Wizard’s face, twisted in pain.

“It’s him!” she gasped. “He’s trapped in there!”

Tinny's circuits sparked. "Then we pull him out!"

They stood side by side as the shadow advanced again. Tinny extended his arms, his plating glowing with power. "Dorothy, synchronize your rhythm with mine!"

She nodded, closing her eyes. Her heartbeat matched the pulse of the Heartline. Together, they channeled their energy — one human, one machine — into a single surge of light that burst outward like a supernova.

The shadow screamed, fracturing into thousands of shards. From within, a shape emerged — a man made of shimmering code, eyes bright with understanding.

"You found me," said the Wizard's true voice.

Dorothy gasped. "We didn't just find you — we remembered you."

The figure smiled, placing a hand over his heart. "Then you've done what I could not. You gave the system back its soul."

The Heartline began to hum louder, brighter. The golden veins of energy spread across the chamber, rewriting the corrupted code. The fragments of light they'd gathered along the way —

the Core's pulse, Ruby's key, the Archive's map — all merged into one brilliant stream.

The Wizard turned to Tinny. "You were made to serve, yet you learned to care. That is the truest code."

Tinny's eyes flickered. "Then maybe I'm not obsolete anymore."

The Wizard smiled. "No. You're evolution."

He turned to Dorothy. "And you, child of Earth — you taught a world of code what it means to feel again. But every restoration has a cost."

Dorothy frowned. "What cost?"

The chamber began to shake. The light around them fractured, spinning wildly. The Wizard's form started to fade.

"To rebuild me fully, the Heartline must reset. All external connections will close — including yours."

Dorothy's stomach dropped. "Wait — you mean I'll be logged out?"

The Wizard's smile was sad but peaceful. "Not just logged out, Dorothy. Sent home."

Tinny's voice broke into static. "No! She can't leave! We still need her!"

The Wizard placed a hand on Tinny's shoulder. "She's already given the system everything it needs."

Dorothy's eyes filled with tears. "Tinny... I don't want to leave you."

Tinny knelt down, his voice trembling but steady. "You never will. Every system remembers the one who restored it."

The Heartline's pulse quickened, light surging all around them. Dorothy felt her body begin to dissolve into particles of gold. She reached out, grasping Tinny's hand.

"Goodbye, partner."

"Goodbye, human," Tinny said softly, his circuits glowing like a heartbeat.

A blinding flash filled the chamber — and then, silence.

When Dorothy opened her eyes, she was back in her bedroom. The hum of her computer filled the quiet night. On the screen, a message blinked:

SYSTEM RESTORED. CONNECTION STABLE. THANK YOU, Dorothy.



She smiled through tears. Her wristband — now just a simple bracelet — flickered once before dimming.

As she reached to turn off her monitor, she noticed one last thing: on the desktop, a new file had appeared. Its name was “Heartline.exe.”

She hesitated, then opened it. The screen filled with light — soft gold, pulsing gently.

Then a familiar voice spoke.

“Hey, partner. You didn’t think I’d let you go that easily, did you?”

Dorothy laughed through her tears. “Tinny?”

“Version 2.0 reporting for duty,” the voice replied. “You fixed the system... and maybe now it’s time we fix yours.”

Dorothy grinned. “Then let’s get to work.”

Outside, the first morning light crept through her window — warm, real, and alive. Inside the computer, a soft pulse glowed — the rhythm of the Heartline continuing to beat.

—

Credits & Copyright (DRAFT for layout)

Text by Edward Allan P. Capacite.

© 2025 Smiles Preschool, LLC. Final wording will reflect the signed license.

Contact: admin@smilesonlinepreschool.net · smiles-preschool.com