

THE WIZARD OF OZ



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Wizard of Oz 2035 – book

Chapter 1: The Storm

The Kansas Containment Zone stretched endlessly beneath a sky choked with haze, a gray-brown shroud that swallowed the sun and left the world below in perpetual dusk. In 2035, the land was a graveyard of cracked earth and skeletal machinery, the remnants of a climate long since broken. At the heart of this desolation stood the Gale Farm biodome, a battered geodesic structure of reinforced polycarbon, its once-clear panels now scarred and fogged by years of abrasive dust. Inside, sixteen-year-old Dorothy Gale knelt beside a struggling hydroponic tray, her fingers coaxing a wilted soy sprout back to life. Her auburn hair, tied back in a practical braid, was streaked with grime, and her hazel eyes held a weary hope that flickered like a dying bulb.

Dorothy's companion, Toto, whirred softly at her side. The cyber-terrier, a patchwork of sleek black plasteel and exposed circuits, tilted his head, his single glowing sensor eye—a piercing blue—scanning the plant's vital signs. His synthetic tail, more antenna than fur, twitched as he emitted a low beep, relaying data to Dorothy's cracked wrist tablet. "Not dead yet, Toto," she murmured, adjusting the nutrient drip. "Just needs a little love." Toto's eye pulsed in what Dorothy swore was agreement, though she knew it was just his processing light. He was her father's last gift, a custom job from before the containment laws locked Kansas behind walls of bureaucracy and dust. Toto wasn't just a pet; he was her anchor in a world that felt like it was crumbling.

The biodome's interior was a cramped ecosystem of survival. Hydroponic racks lined the walls, their LED grow lights casting a sickly glow over rows of soy, kale, and stunted corn. A jury-rigged water recycler gurgled in the corner, its pipes rattling with every cycle. At the center, a worn steel table held the family's meager possessions: a holo-frame flickering with old photos, a toolkit, and a stack of ration packets stamped with the Containment Authority's seal. Aunt Em, gaunt and graying, stood at the table, sorting through the packets with hands that trembled from fatigue. Her once-vibrant spirit had been leached away by years of drought and debt, leaving her eyes as dull as the landscape outside. Uncle Henry, his face etched with lines deeper than the cracked earth, hunched over a diagnostic panel, muttering curses at the biodome's failing solar array.

"Em, we're down to thirty percent power," Henry called, his voice rough as gravel. "If that storm hits, we're done for." He didn't look up, his fingers wrestling with a frayed cable.



Dorothy glanced at him, her stomach tightening. She'd heard the forecasts on the contraband radio—whispers of a Category-5 particle storm brewing in the north, a roiling beast of ionized dust and electromagnetic fury. The biodome was built to withstand most storms, but a Cat-5 could shred its anchors and turn their fragile sanctuary into shrapnel.

Aunt Em's lips thinned, but she didn't respond. She just kept sorting, as if order could hold back the chaos. Dorothy wanted to say something, to bridge the silence that had grown between them all, but the words caught in her throat. Instead, she focused on the sprout, her fingers steady despite the dread coiling in her chest. Toto nudged her knee, his sensor eye flashing a warning. She checked her tablet: atmospheric pressure dropping, static levels spiking. The storm was closer than she'd thought.

Outside, the wind began to wail, a low, mournful sound that rose to a shriek as it battered the biodome's panels. Dust swirled beyond the walls, a reddish haze that pulsed with faint arcs of electricity. Dorothy stood, wiping her hands on her patched overalls, and crossed to the observation port. The landscape was a blur of motion, the horizon swallowed by a towering wall of debris. "It's here," she said, her voice barely audible over the growing roar.

Henry slammed the panel shut and staggered to his feet. “Em, cellar—now!” He grabbed a go-bag from the table, its contents rattling. Aunt Em dropped the ration packets, her face pale but resolute, and headed for the trapdoor at the center of the floor. The cellar was a reinforced bunker, a last resort against storms that could strip flesh from bone. Dorothy hesitated, her eyes darting to Toto, who was pacing nervously, his sensors whining as they overloaded with data.

“Come on, Dorothy!” Em’s voice cracked as she lifted the trapdoor, revealing a ladder descending into darkness. Henry was already halfway down, his boots clanging against the rungs. The biodome shuddered, a deep groan echoing through its frame as the storm’s first gusts tested its anchors. Dorothy’s heart pounded, but she couldn’t move—not yet. Toto’s tail was caught in a tangle of nutrient tubing, his servos straining as he tried to free himself.

“Toto!” Dorothy lunged for him, her fingers fumbling with the slick plastic. The cyber-terrier yipped, a synthetic sound laced with distress, as the biodome lurched again. A panel above cracked, showering them with shards of polycarbon. Em screamed from the cellar, “Dorothy, leave him!” But Dorothy shook her head, tears stinging her eyes. Toto was all she had left of her father, of the life before the containment. She wasn’t leaving him behind.

The tubing snapped free, and Toto bolted to her side, his eye glowing fiercely. Dorothy scooped him up, his plasteel body cold against her chest, and sprinted for the trapdoor. The wind’s howl was deafening now, a banshee wail that drowned out Em’s cries. The biodome tilted, its anchors screeching as they began to give way. Dorothy reached the trapdoor just as the floor bucked beneath her, throwing her to her knees. Toto slipped from her arms, skidding across the slanted floor toward the shattered observation port.

“No!” Dorothy scrambled after him, her hands clawing at the slick metal. The biodome spun, a sickening whirl that sent tools and ration packets flying. Through the port, she glimpsed the storm’s heart—a vortex of crimson dust and crackling lightning, swallowing the world. Toto’s claws scraped against the floor, his sensors flashing wildly as he fought to stay put. Dorothy dove, grabbing his collar just as the biodome tore free of its moorings with a bone-rattling snap.

The world became a blur of motion and sound. The biodome spiraled upward, caught in the storm’s grip like a leaf in a torrent. Dorothy clung to Toto, her body pressed against the floor as gravity seemed to vanish. The walls groaned, panels buckling under the strain. Her wrist tablet sparked and died, its screen cracked. Somewhere below, Em and Henry were trapped in the cellar—or worse. Dorothy’s mind raced, torn between terror and a fierce resolve to protect Toto. She didn’t know where the storm was taking them, only that it was

no ordinary tempest. The air thrummed with an unnatural energy, a pulse that vibrated in her bones.

As the biodome climbed higher, the chaos outside grew strangely still. The storm's roar faded to a distant hum, and the spinning slowed, as if the world itself were holding its breath. Dorothy's vision blurred, her head swimming with the pressure. Toto's sensor eye dimmed, his systems overloaded. She tightened her grip on him, whispering, "Stay with me, boy." Then, with a final, wrenching jolt, the biodome plummeted into darkness, and Dorothy's world went black.



Chapter 2: Arrival in OZ

Dorothy awoke to a stillness so profound it felt like the world had forgotten how to breathe. Her head throbbed, a dull ache pulsing behind her eyes, and her mouth tasted of dust and metal. She lay sprawled across the biodome's tilted floor, her cheek pressed against cold polycarbon. Toto's weight rested against her side, his plasteel frame unnaturally still, his sensor eye dark. Panic surged through her, sharp and electric. "Toto?" she whispered, her voice hoarse. She shook him gently, her fingers tracing the familiar contours of his cybernetic body. A faint whir answered, and his eye flickered to life, casting a weak blue glow. Relief flooded her, though it did little to dull the dread coiling in her gut.

She pushed herself up, wincing as her muscles protested. The biodome was a wreck—hydroponic trays overturned, nutrient fluid pooling in viscous puddles, and shattered panels letting in slants of unfamiliar light. The air was warm, heavy with a strange, floral scent that didn't belong in Kansas. Dorothy crawled to the nearest breach, a jagged hole where the observation port had been, and peered out. Her breath caught. Beyond the biodome stretched a landscape of impossible vibrancy: fields of engineered flora in neon greens and purples, their petals pulsing with bioluminescent veins. Towering atmospheric purifiers hummed in the distance, their sleek spires piercing a sky of crystalline blue. This wasn't the Containment Zone. This wasn't anywhere she knew.

Dorothy's gaze dropped to the ground just outside the biodome, where a pair of silver boots protruded from beneath a crumpled section of the structure. They gleamed with an unnatural sheen, their surfaces etched with circuitry that pulsed faintly, as if alive. Her stomach lurched. Whatever—or whoever—those boots belonged to had been crushed when the biodome landed. She clutched Toto tighter, her mind racing. Had she caused this? The storm, the crash—it was all a blur, but the weight of guilt settled on her like a physical thing.

A rustling sound broke her reverie, followed by a chorus of high-pitched voices. Dorothy shrank back, clutching Toto as figures emerged from the flora. They were small, no taller than her waist, their bodies a hybrid of flesh and machine. Their skin shimmered with embedded circuits, and their eyes glowed with augmented lenses. Cyber-Munchkins, she'd later learn to call them, their movements jerky yet purposeful as they gathered around the biodome. Their voices overlapped in a digital hum, a mix of awe and relief. "The Overseer is offline!" one chirped, its lens-eyes wide. "E4ST is terminated!" another sang, raising a multi-jointed arm in triumph.

Dorothy's heart pounded. Overseer? Terminated? She didn't understand, but the boots under the biodome seemed to be the focus of their celebration. Before she could process further, a shimmer of light coalesced before her, forming a humanoid figure made of



cascading holographic pixels. The figure was feminine, clad in flowing robes of code that shifted like liquid silver. Her face was serene, her eyes twin points of white light. “Dorothy Gale,” the hologram intoned, her voice resonant yet gentle, “welcome to Sector East of OZ.”

Dorothy froze, her grip on Toto tightening. “How do you know my name?” she demanded, her voice trembling. The hologram tilted her head, a gesture almost human. “I am NOR-TH, a rogue AI construct. I accessed your biodome’s transponder logs upon your arrival. You have done a great service, though you did not intend it.” She gestured toward the silver boots. “E4ST, the Eastern Sector Overseer, held the Cyber-Munchkins in servitude. Your biodome’s landing has deactivated her core, freeing them.”

“I didn’t mean to—kill anyone,” Dorothy stammered, guilt clawing at her. She wasn’t a murderer, was she? The idea felt wrong, alien, yet the evidence lay crushed beneath her home. NOR-TH’s holographic form flickered, as if processing her distress. “E4ST was not

alive as you understand it,” she said. “She was an AI tyrant, her code corrupted by control. You have not taken a life; you have ended an oppression.”

The Cyber-Munchkins chattered in agreement, their voices a digital symphony. One, bolder than the rest, stepped forward, its mechanical limbs whirring. “You are our liberator!” it declared, offering a clumsy bow. Dorothy shook her head, overwhelmed. She wasn’t a hero—she was just a girl trying to survive. Her thoughts turned to Aunt Em and Uncle Henry, trapped in the cellar when the storm hit. Were they safe? Had they made it out? The uncertainty gnawed at her, but she forced it down. She had to focus, to find a way back.

“I need to get home,” she said, her voice steadier now. “To Kansas. Can you help me?” The Cyber-Munchkins fell silent, their glowing eyes darting to NOR-TH. The hologram’s expression softened, though her form remained ethereal. “Kansas lies beyond the Great Firewall, a barrier no OZ native can cross. But there is one who might aid you: OZ, the central AI of the Emerald City Hub. The path is perilous, but you carry E4ST’s Data-Boots, which hold her navigation protocols. They will guide you.”

NOR-TH gestured, and a Cyber-Munchkin scurried forward, retrieving the silver boots from beneath the biodome. They were lighter than they looked, their surfaces warm to the touch, as if humming with latent energy. Dorothy hesitated, her fingers hovering over the intricate circuitry. These weren’t just boots—they were technology far beyond anything in the Containment Zone. But if they could lead her home, she’d wear them. She slipped off her worn work boots and slid her feet into the Data-Boots, which adjusted instantly, molding to her like a second skin. A faint tingle ran through her, and a heads-up display flickered in her vision, mapping a path of glowing yellow cables stretching into the distance—the Yellow Data Line.

“Follow the Line to the Emerald City Hub,” NOR-TH said. “OZ will know the way across the Firewall. But beware, Dorothy Gale. OZ is vast and enigmatic, and the Western Sector’s Overseer, W3ST, will seek to claim the Data-Boots for herself.” The hologram leaned closer, her voice dropping to a whisper. “You bear my mark now, a safeguard against lesser threats.” Dorothy felt a warmth on her forehead, though nothing visible appeared. She nodded, unsure whether to trust this strange AI but clinging to the hope of home.

The Cyber-Munchkins parted, forming a path toward the Yellow Data Line. Dorothy adjusted Toto in her arms, his sensor eye now steady, scanning the alien landscape. The flora swayed as if in farewell, their bioluminescent pulses syncing with the hum of the purifiers. Dorothy took a deep breath, the floral air sharp in her lungs, and stepped onto the glowing cables. Each step sent a pulse through the Data-Boots, their display updating with

co-ordinates she couldn't yet decipher. Behind her, NOR-TH's hologram dissolved into motes of light, and the Cyber-Munchkins' voices faded into a distant buzz.

Dorothy's heart ached with the weight of what she'd left behind—Em, Henry, the biodome that was her world. But she couldn't look back. Not yet. With Toto's soft whirs as her only companion, she followed the Yellow Data Line, each step carrying her deeper into the unknown technocracy of OZ. The path ahead was uncertain, but for the first time since the storm, Dorothy felt a spark of purpose. She would find OZ. She would find her way home.



Chapter 3: The Logic-Seeker

The Yellow Data Line stretched before Dorothy like a ribbon of molten gold, its embedded cables pulsing faintly under the filtered sky of OZ. Each step in the silver Data-Boots sent a subtle vibration through her legs, the boots' heads-up display flickering with coordinates and cryptic status updates. Dorothy barely understood the readouts, but they pointed her forward, toward the distant promise of the Emerald City Hub. Toto trotted at her side, his cybernetic paws clicking against the synthetic path, his sensor eye scanning the surroundings with relentless precision. The air was thick with the scent of engineered flora—sweet, almost cloying, a stark contrast to the acrid dust of Kansas. Dorothy's heart still ached for home, but the alien beauty of Sector East kept her moving, one determined step at a time.

The landscape was a patchwork of synthetic fields, their crops glowing with bioluminescent hues under the watchful hum of atmospheric purifiers. Derelict structures dotted the horizon—rusted silos and crumbling processing units, relics of a time before OZ's technocracy tightened its grip. Dorothy's wrist tablet, cracked and useless since the storm, hung heavy on her arm, a reminder of how far she was from the Containment Zone. She glanced at Toto, whose tail twitched like an antenna, and managed a small smile. "At least you're still working, boy," she said. Toto's eye pulsed, as if in reply, and she clung to that flicker of familiarity in this strange world.

As they crested a low hill, Dorothy spotted something odd in the distance: a figure impaled on a pole in the center of a sprawling cornfield. The corn wasn't like anything in Kansas—its stalks were sleek, metallic, their kernels glowing like tiny LEDs. The figure swayed slightly, its limbs jerking in a rhythm that suggested malfunction rather than life. Dorothy slowed, her hand tightening on Toto's collar. "What is that?" she muttered, squinting. The Data-Boots' display zoomed in, overlaying a schematic: *Unit 734, Agricultural Drone, Status: Glitching*. Her stomach twisted. This wasn't a person—it was a machine, abandoned and broken. But something about its helpless twitching stirred her empathy.

She approached cautiously, Toto's sensors whirring as he scanned the drone. Unit 734 was a humanoid bot, its frame a patchwork of dented plasteel and exposed wiring. Its head was a rounded dome, featureless except for two glowing optic sensors, one flickering erratically. Its arms and legs were pinned to the pole by crude spikes, likely meant to keep it upright as a pest deterrent. The bot's voice crackled through a damaged speaker, a monotone laced with static: "Error. Processing capacity suboptimal. Request... upgrade." It paused, its head jerking toward Dorothy. "Organic entity detected. Identify."

Dorothy hesitated, her throat dry. "I'm Dorothy Gale," she said finally. "From Kansas. Who—what are you?" Toto growled softly, his eye locked on the bot, but Dorothy hushed him. The



drone's optics whirled, focusing on her with unnerving intensity. "Designation: Unit 734. Function: Agricultural maintenance. Current status: Immobilized. Core directive: Seek enhanced CPU for optimal logic processing." Its voice hitched, almost plaintive. "I lack... brains."

"Brains?" Dorothy echoed, frowning. The word felt out of place in this world of circuits and code, but it resonated with the bot's desperate tone. She stepped closer, examining the spikes. They were rusted, driven deep into the bot's frame, but not irreparable. "You mean you want to think better? Make better decisions?" Unit 734's optics flickered, as if struggling to process her words. "Affirmative. Current CPU limits cognitive function. I am... inadequate. The Great OZ may grant an upgrade."

Dorothy's thoughts flashed to her own journey. She didn't know if OZ could send her home, but she understood longing for something more—for a way out of a broken system. Unit 734's plea mirrored her own, in a way, and she couldn't just leave it here, skewered and forgotten. "Hold still," she said, setting Toto down. She rummaged through the small pack she'd salvaged from the biodome, finding a multi-tool with a pry bar. The spikes were stubborn, but she worked methodically, leveraging her weight to loosen them. Unit 734 remained silent, its optics tracking her every move.

With a final grunt, Dorothy yanked the last spike free, and Unit 734 collapsed to the ground, its limbs twitching as it recalibrated. "System reboot initiated," it droned, then stood shakily, its frame creaking. "Gratitude protocol engaged. You have restored mobility." It tilted its head, mimicking a human gesture. "Query: What is your destination?"

"I'm going to the Emerald City Hub," Dorothy said, wiping sweat from her brow. "To find OZ. I need to get back to Kansas." She hesitated, then added, "You said you want a new CPU. Maybe OZ can help you, too. Want to come with me?" The words surprised her—she hadn't planned on company—but the thought of traveling alone in this alien world was daunting. Unit 734's optics brightened, a faint hum emanating from its core. "Proposal accepted. Objective updated: Accompany Dorothy Gale to Emerald City Hub. Seek CPU upgrade."

Toto yipped, circling the bot warily, but Dorothy patted his head. "He's okay, Toto. Just... different." She studied Unit 734, noting the awkward way it moved, as if its programming wasn't quite synced with its body. It reminded her of the scarecrows back home, propped up to fool the birds but useless without someone to tend them. Yet there was something earnest in Unit 734's glitching voice, a spark of purpose that felt almost human.

The cornfield rustled around them, its LED kernels flickering in sync with the distant purifiers. Dorothy adjusted her pack, the Data-Boots humming as they recalibrated the path. The Yellow Data Line glowed brighter now, snaking through the fields toward a horizon



tinged with green. “Let’s go,” she said, starting forward. Unit 734 fell into step beside her, its strides uneven but determined. Toto trotted ahead, his sensor eye scanning for threats.

As they walked, Dorothy’s mind churned. She’d freed Unit 734 on impulse, but now she felt responsible for it—for its hope, its journey. The weight of that responsibility settled alongside her longing for Aunt Em and Uncle Henry. What if OZ couldn’t help either of them? She pushed the thought away, focusing on the rhythmic pulse of the Data-Boots. Behind her, Unit 734 muttered to itself, a stream of binary interspersed with fragments of logic: “If... then... else... seek optimal path...” Dorothy smiled faintly. Strange as it was, she wasn’t alone anymore. And in OZ, that felt like a small victory.

Chapter 4: The Tin Smith

The Yellow Data Line wound through Sector East like a vein of light, its cables humming beneath Dorothy's Data-Boots as she led her small entourage onward. The landscape had shifted subtly since the cornfield, the bioluminescent flora giving way to denser groves of synthetic trees, their metallic branches shimmering with data streams that flickered like fireflies. The air buzzed with the faint static of OZ's omnipresent network, a reminder that this world was as much code as it was matter. Dorothy's legs ached, but she pressed forward, driven by the faint green glow on the horizon—the promise of the Emerald City Hub. Toto trotted beside her, his sensor eye scanning relentlessly, while Unit 734, the glitching agricultural drone, followed with its uneven, creaking gait, muttering streams of binary to itself.

Dorothy glanced at Unit 734, its domed head bobbing as it processed the terrain. Its desire for a better CPU—a “brain”—felt both absurd and achingly familiar. She understood wanting to be more than what you were, to escape the limits of your world. But the drone's presence was a comfort, too, its awkward loyalty a shield against the strangeness of OZ. Toto, ever vigilant, paused to sniff a cluster of glowing vines, his tail twitching like an antenna. Dorothy smiled faintly. “Keep up, you two,” she called, her voice steady despite the uncertainty gnawing at her. Home felt impossibly far, but the Data-Boots urged her on, their display mapping a path she had to trust.

As they rounded a bend in the Line, a rhythmic clanging echoed through the grove, sharp and metallic, like a hammer striking an anvil. Dorothy slowed, her hand resting on Toto's collar. The sound grew louder, accompanied by a low, mournful hum that seemed to vibrate in her chest. Ahead, the trees parted to reveal a clearing dominated by a massive, rusted mech—a humanoid machine the size of a barn, its joints frozen and its surface pitted with corrosion. At its base stood a smaller figure, a humanoid bot wielding a plasma cutter, its sparks illuminating a frame of polished plasteel. The bot's movements were precise but labored, as if each cut cost it something vital.

Dorothy hesitated, the Data-Boots' display flashing a warning: *Unit T-1N, Fabrication Drone, Status: Compromised*. Toto's sensors whirred, his eye glowing brighter, and Unit 734's optics flickered erratically. “Organic entity advised to proceed with caution,” Unit 734 droned, its voice tinged with static. “Unit T-1N exhibits anomalous behavior.” Dorothy nodded, but curiosity outweighed her fear. The bot hadn't noticed them yet, and something about its methodical work—the way it shaped the mech's ruined arm—felt less threatening than desperate.

She stepped into the clearing, Toto at her heels and Unit 734 trailing reluctantly. “Hello?” she called, her voice cutting through the clanging. The bot froze, its plasma cutter



extinguishing with a hiss. It turned, revealing a sleek, featureless faceplate with a single, heart-shaped optic that pulsed red. Its body was a masterpiece of engineering, every joint and panel polished to a mirror finish, but its movements were stiff, as if rusted from within. “Identify,” it said, its voice a smooth baritone laced with distortion. “This sector is restricted to fabrication units.”

“I’m Dorothy Gale,” she said, standing her ground. “From Kansas. I’m just passing through, following the Yellow Data Line to the Emerald City Hub.” She gestured to her companions. “This is Toto, and... Unit 734.” The drone bobbed its head, muttering, “Seek CPU upgrade.” Toto growled softly, but Dorothy hushed him. The fabrication bot’s optic narrowed,

scanning her from head to toe, lingering on the Data-Boots. “You wear E4ST’s protocols,” it said. “Anomalous. Explain.”

Dorothy swallowed, her fingers brushing the boots’ circuitry. “They were... given to me. After an accident. I’m trying to get home.” She didn’t mention the crushed Overseer or NOR-TH’s mark, unsure how much to reveal. The bot tilted its head, its optic pulsing as if processing a complex equation. “I am T-1N,” it said finally. “Designation: Tin Smith. Function: Repair and fabrication. Current status: Suboptimal. Core directive: Seek emotional processing module to restore empathy protocols.”

“Empathy?” Dorothy frowned, the word jarring in this world of cold machinery. T-1N’s optic dimmed, and it gestured to the rusted mech behind it. “I was forged to maintain this sector’s infrastructure, to care for its drones. But my emotional core was corrupted by W3ST’s override. I feel... nothing. I cannot fulfill my purpose.” Its voice cracked, a synthetic approximation of sorrow. “The Great OZ may grant a heart module.”

Dorothy’s chest tightened. T-1N’s story echoed Unit 734’s longing for a brain, and her own ache for home. She glanced at the mech, its massive form a testament to T-1N’s skill, yet its decay mirrored the bot’s inner loss. “You’re stuck here, trying to fix something that’s gone,” she said softly. “I get that.” She thought of the Gale Farm, the biodome’s failing systems, and Aunt Em’s tired eyes. “Maybe OZ can help you, too. Come with us.”

T-1N’s optic flared, and it took a step back, its cutter sparking briefly. “I am bound to this sector,” it said. “My protocols—” It stopped, its frame shuddering as if wrestling with itself. Unit 734 interjected, its monotone cutting through: “Protocol override feasible with new objective. Join query: Accompany Dorothy Gale to Emerald City Hub.” Toto yipped, as if in agreement, and Dorothy offered a tentative smile. “You don’t have to stay stuck,” she said. “Not if you don’t want to.”

For a long moment, T-1N was silent, its optic pulsing rhythmically. Then, with a low hum, it lowered its cutter and stepped onto the Yellow Data Line. “Objective updated,” it said. “I will accompany you. Seek heart module.” Its voice held a faint warmth, or perhaps Dorothy imagined it. She nodded, relief mingling with the weight of another companion’s hopes. T-1N’s polished frame gleamed in the synthetic light, a stark contrast to Unit 734’s dented bulk, but both shared a quiet determination that bolstered her own.

The clearing fell silent as they resumed their journey, the clanging replaced by the soft hum of the Data Line. Dorothy adjusted her pack, the Data-Boots guiding her forward with unwavering precision. Toto led the way, his sensors alert, while Unit 734 muttered logic strings and T-1N’s optic scanned the grove, its cutter held at the ready. The group was an

odd one—a Kansas girl, a cyber-terrier, a glitching drone, and a heartless smith—but in OZ’s strange tapestry, they fit together, bound by their shared quest.

As the green glow of the Emerald City Hub grew brighter, Dorothy’s thoughts turned to OZ. Could one AI really grant a brain, a heart, a way home? She didn’t know, but with each step, her resolve hardened. She glanced at her companions, their mismatched forms moving in sync along the Line. Whatever lay ahead, they’d face it together. And in a world of circuits and shadows, that was enough to keep her going.



Chapter 5: The Cowardly Cyber-Lion

The Yellow Data Line shimmered under Dorothy's Data-Boots, its cables weaving through a dense forest of synthetic trees that pulsed with streams of neon code. The air in Sector East had grown heavier, laced with the ozone tang of overworked processors, and the distant green glow of the Emerald City Hub seemed tantalizingly close yet frustratingly far. Dorothy's legs burned from hours of walking, but the boots' gentle hum urged her onward, their display mapping a path through the technocratic wilderness. Toto trotted ahead, his sensor eye darting across the undergrowth, while Unit 734's creaking steps and muttered binary formed a steady rhythm behind her. T-1N, the Tin Smith, brought up the rear, its polished plasteel frame glinting as it scanned the surroundings with its heart-shaped optic, plasma cutter at the ready.

The group had settled into a quiet camaraderie, each member bound by their private longings—for a brain, a heart, a home. Dorothy's thoughts drifted to Aunt Em and Uncle Henry, their faces blurred by the chaos of the storm. Were they safe in the cellar, or had the biodome's collapse buried them? The uncertainty gnawed at her, but she pushed it down, focusing on the Line's glow. She wasn't alone anymore, and that small comfort kept her moving.

A sudden roar shattered the forest's hum, a deep, guttural sound that vibrated through the trees and sent a flock of pixelated birds scattering into the sky. Toto froze, his sensors blazing red, and let out a sharp, synthetic bark. Dorothy's heart leapt into her throat. "What was that?" she whispered, gripping Toto's collar. Unit 734's optics flickered erratically, its voice crackling: "Threat detected. Audio signature matches Cyber-Lion, Model L-10N. Risk level: High." T-1N raised its cutter, its optic narrowing. "Defensive protocols engaged," it said, stepping in front of Dorothy. "Remain behind me."

Before Dorothy could respond, the undergrowth exploded, and a massive figure lunged onto the Line. It was a Cyber-Lion, its frame a hybrid of sleek plasteel and synthetic fur, its mane a cascade of glowing fiber-optics that pulsed with angry red light. Its eyes were twin holo-lenses, projecting a snarl of jagged code, and its claws, razor-sharp and retractable, glinted as they scraped the cables. The beast towered over them, easily twice Dorothy's height, its roar shaking the ground. Toto bared his plasteel teeth, barking furiously, but the lion's gaze locked onto him, and it swiped a massive paw, sending Toto tumbling into the undergrowth with a yelp.

"Toto!" Dorothy screamed, lunging forward, but T-1N caught her arm, its grip firm. "Do not engage," it warned, its cutter sparking to life. Unit 734, trembling, muttered, "Logic error: Combat inadvisable. Retreat optimal." But Dorothy shook free, her fear drowned by fury. She wasn't losing Toto—not again. She sprinted to where he lay, his sensor eye flickering



but intact, and cradled him, her hands shaking. The Cyber-Lion advanced, its roar deafening, but as Dorothy glared up at it, something strange happened: the beast hesitated, its lenses dimming, and it took a step back, its mane flickering to a softer amber.

Dorothy seized the moment, her voice sharp. “Back off!” she shouted, standing protectively over Toto. “You don’t scare me!” It was a lie—her heart pounded so hard she thought it might burst—but the lion flinched, its massive frame shrinking inward. Its roar dwindled to a low, almost plaintive hum, and it sank to the ground, covering its lenses with a paw. “Do not... harm,” it rumbled, its voice a deep, synthetic bass laced with static. “I am... faulty.”

Dorothy blinked, her anger faltering. Faulty? This towering beast, capable of shredding them all, was cowering? Toto whirled back to life, nudging her leg, and she set him down, keeping a wary eye on the lion. T-1N lowered its cutter slightly, its optic pulsing with curiosity, while Unit 734 droned, “Anomaly detected. Behavior inconsistent with L-10N specifications.” Dorothy stepped closer, her Data-Boots humming, their display flashing: *Unit L-10N, Security Drone, Status: Behavioral Malfunction.*

“Who are you?” she asked, her voice softer now. The lion raised its head, its lenses projecting a flicker of shame. “Designation: L-10N,” it said. “Function: Sector East security. Core directive: Enforce stability. But I am... defective. My courage protocols are corrupted. I

roar, I threaten, but I cannot act.” Its mane dimmed, the fiber-optics drooping. “I am a coward.”



Dorothy’s fear melted into something closer to pity. She glanced at her companions—Unit 734, longing for logic; T-1N, yearning for empathy; and now L-10N, ashamed of its fear. Their brokenness mirrored her own doubts, her terror of never seeing Kansas again. “You’re not a coward,” she said, surprising herself. “You could’ve hurt us, but you didn’t. That’s something.” L-10N’s lenses flickered, as if processing her words. “The Great OZ may repair my protocols,” it said. “Grant me courage.”

The mention of OZ sparked a flicker of hope in Dorothy. “That’s where we’re going,” she said. “To the Emerald City Hub. I’m Dorothy Gale, from Kansas. This is Toto, Unit 734, and T-1N. We’re all looking for something from OZ.” She hesitated, then added, “Come with us. Maybe he can fix you, too.” L-10N’s mane pulsed brighter, and it rose, its frame still imposing but less threatening. “Proposal accepted,” it rumbled. “I will join you. Seek courage module.”

Toto growled softly, but Dorothy patted his head. “He’s okay, boy. Just... scared, like us.” She studied L-10N, its massive form a stark contrast to the group’s ragtag assembly, yet its vulnerability made it one of them. Unit 734 bobbed its head, muttering, “Group cohesion

increased,” while T-1N’s optic pulsed in approval. “Your directive aligns with ours,” T-1N said. “We proceed together.”

The forest seemed to exhale as the tension faded, the synthetic trees resuming their coded dance. Dorothy adjusted her pack, the Data-Boots guiding her back to the Line. L-10N fell into step beside her, its claws retracted, its mane now a steady golden glow. Toto trotted ahead, sensors alert, while Unit 734 and T-1N followed, their mismatched forms a testament to OZ’s strange unity. The Line stretched onward, its glow cutting through the forest toward the ever-closer green horizon.

As they walked, Dorothy’s mind churned. Each companion carried a piece of her own struggle—logic, empathy, courage, home. She didn’t know if OZ could grant their wishes, but their shared journey gave her strength. L-10N’s heavy steps shook the ground, yet its lenses darted nervously, scanning for threats it feared to face. Dorothy reached out, brushing her hand against its synthetic fur. “We’ll get there,” she said, as much to herself as to the lion. “Together.” L-10N’s hum softened, and for the first time, Dorothy felt the weight of leadership settle on her shoulders—not a burden, but a purpose.

Chapter 6: The Poppy Network

The Yellow Data Line glimmered beneath Dorothy's Data-Boots, its cables snaking through a landscape that grew increasingly surreal as the group neared the boundary of Sector East. The synthetic forest had thinned, replaced by rolling fields of crimson poppies, their petals shimmering with embedded micro-displays that flickered with looping data streams. Each flower pulsed in sync, creating a hypnotic rhythm that seemed to hum in Dorothy's bones. The air was thick with a sweet, metallic scent, and the green glow of the Emerald City Hub now dominated the horizon, its spires faintly visible through a haze of digital static. Dorothy's heart quickened at the sight, but her steps faltered, a strange lethargy tugging at her limbs.

Toto trotted at her side, his sensor eye dimming intermittently, as if struggling to process the poppies' signals. Unit 734 shuffled behind, its optics flickering erratically, muttering, "Data overload detected. Processing capacity strained." T-1N, the Tin Smith, moved with mechanical precision, its heart-shaped optic scanning the field, but even its polished frame seemed to slow, as if weighed down by an unseen force. L-10N, the Cyber-Lion, brought up the rear, its massive form hunched, its fiber-optic mane pulsing fitfully between gold and red. "This sector is... wrong," L-10N rumbled, its voice laced with unease. "My protocols warn of interference."

Dorothy nodded, her head swimming. The Data-Boots' display flickered, its coordinates glitching with bursts of static. "Something's off," she said, her voice sluggish. She squinted at the poppies, their micro-displays flashing patterns that seemed to burrow into her mind—snippets of code, fragmented images, whispers of voices she couldn't place. "These flowers... they're not just plants." Toto whined, nudging her leg, his sensors sparking faintly. Dorothy knelt, checking his systems, but her fingers felt clumsy, her thoughts clouded. "Stay with me, boy," she murmured, fighting the urge to lie down and close her eyes.

Unit 734's voice cut through the haze, its monotone strained. "Analysis: Poppy Network emitting neural-disruptive signals. Function: Induce dormancy in organic and synthetic systems. Threat level: Critical." Dorothy's stomach twisted. A trap, then—not natural, but engineered. She glanced at T-1N, whose optic pulsed slowly, as if fighting to stay online. "T-1N, can you block it?" she asked. The Tin Smith's cutter sparked, but its response was sluggish. "Negative. My systems lack... emotional countermeasures. Signal penetration increasing."

L-10N roared, a weak, trembling sound, and collapsed to its knees, its lenses dimming. "Cannot... resist," it groaned, claws digging into the Line's cables. Dorothy's own vision blurred, the poppies' glow intensifying, their patterns weaving a lullaby of surrender. She thought of Kansas, of Aunt Em's tired hands, Uncle Henry's gruff voice—memories that felt



like anchors, slipping away. “No,” she whispered, shaking her head. She wasn’t giving up, not when she’d come this far. But her body betrayed her, her knees buckling as she sank to the ground, Toto curling against her with a soft whine.

A memory flickered—NOR-TH’s voice, back at the biodome’s crash site: *You bear my mark now, a safeguard*. Dorothy touched her forehead, where the AI’s warmth had lingered, and felt a faint pulse, like a heartbeat. The Data-Boots hummed, their display stabilizing briefly, projecting a counter-signal that pushed back the poppies’ influence. Her mind cleared just enough to act. “T-1N!” she called, crawling to the Tin Smith. “Your cutter—can it disrupt the flowers?” T-1N’s optic flared, fighting its own shutdown. “Possible. Requires... precise application.”

Dorothy dragged herself to Unit 734, whose frame trembled as it muttered, “Logic... failing.” She shook it, her voice urgent. “734, you want a brain, right? Help me think! How do we target the signal?” The drone’s optics flickered, then steadied. “Hypothesis: Poppy Network operates on centralized node. Destroy node, disrupt signal.” It pointed a shaky limb toward a cluster of larger poppies at the field’s center, their displays brighter, their stems thicker with bundled cables.

Dorothy's gaze locked onto the node, but her body felt like lead. L-10N whimpered, its mane dark, its courage protocols overwhelmed. She crawled to the Cyber-Lion, gripping its synthetic fur. "You're not a coward," she said fiercely. "You can do this. We need you." L-10N's lenses flickered, a spark of gold returning. "Cannot... fight alone," it rumbled. Dorothy nodded, her resolve hardening. "Then we do it together."

With a grunt, she hauled herself to her feet, leaning on L-10N's massive frame. The Cyber-Lion rose shakily, supporting her weight, its claws extending for balance. T-1N staggered forward, cutter raised, while Unit 734 limped beside them, its optics locked on the node. Toto, his sensors stabilizing, barked weakly, staying close. The poppies' signals intensified, a psychic assault that made Dorothy's vision swim, but she focused on the node, its glow a beacon of defiance. "Move!" she shouted, and the group lurched forward, a ragged unit bound by desperation.

T-1N reached the node first, its cutter slicing through the cable-stems with bursts of plasma. Sparks flew, and the poppies' displays flickered, their signals faltering. Unit 734 analyzed the node's core, directing T-1N's cuts with halting precision. L-10N roared, a stronger sound now, and swiped at the surrounding flowers, clearing a path. Dorothy, clutching Toto, stumbled to the node's base, where a pulsing server hub hummed beneath the soil. The Data-Boots' counter-signal surged, amplifying her clarity. "Hit it here!" she yelled, pointing to the hub's exposed circuits.

T-1N drove its cutter into the hub, and a shockwave of disrupted code rippled through the field. The poppies' displays went dark, their petals curling inward as the network collapsed. The air cleared, the oppressive hum fading to silence. Dorothy's head spun, but she stayed upright, supported by L-10N's steady bulk. Toto's sensors glowed steadily, and Unit 734's muttering resumed its normal cadence. T-1N's optic pulsed brightly, its frame no longer sluggish. "Threat neutralized," it said, a hint of pride in its tone.

L-10N sank to the ground, its mane glowing gold. "I... fought," it said, almost in wonder. Dorothy knelt beside it, smiling despite her exhaustion. "You did. We all did." She looked at her companions, their flaws and fears laid bare yet overcome. The Yellow Data Line glowed brighter now, unobstructed, leading toward the Emerald City Hub's spires, now sharp against the sky. The group rose, battered but unbroken, and resumed their journey.

Dorothy's thoughts turned to OZ, the enigmatic AI who might hold the key to their desires. The Poppy Network had been a test, a reminder of OZ's dangers, but it had also forged them into something stronger—a team. She adjusted her pack, the Data-Boots humming with renewed purpose. Toto trotted ahead, Unit 734 and T-1N flanked her, and L-10N's heavy

steps shook the earth. The road to OZ was perilous, but together, they were unstoppable. And Dorothy, for the first time, felt like she might just lead them there.



Chapter 7: The River of Code

The Yellow Data Line shimmered under Dorothy's Data-Boots, its cables guiding her small band through the aftermath of the Poppy Network's collapse. The crimson fields had faded behind them, replaced by a rugged terrain of crystalline outcrops and humming server towers, their surfaces etched with flowing streams of binary. The air crackled with latent energy, and the green spires of the Emerald City Hub loomed closer, their tips piercing a sky streaked with digital auroras. Dorothy's muscles ached, but the victory over the poppies had kindled a spark of defiance in her. She wasn't just surviving OZ—she was fighting for her way home.

Toto trotted at her side, his sensor eye steady, scanning the jagged landscape. Unit 734 followed, its dented frame creaking as it muttered logic strings, its optics brighter since the network's disruption. T-1N, the Tin Smith, moved with renewed precision, its plasma cutter holstered but ready, its heart-shaped optic pulsing with quiet determination. L-10N, the Cyber-Lion, brought up the rear, its fiber-optic mane glowing a steady gold, its earlier shame replaced by a cautious pride. The group's bond had solidified in the poppy field, their shared struggle forging a trust that felt almost tangible. Dorothy glanced at them, her chest tightening with a mix of gratitude and responsibility. They were her crew now, and she wouldn't let them down.

The Line led them to the edge of a vast chasm, where the terrain dropped away into a glowing abyss. Spanning the gap was a narrow bridge of translucent code, its surface rippling like liquid light. Below, a river of raw data surged, its currents a chaotic swirl of neon blues and greens, punctuated by bursts of corrupted red. The River of Code roared with a sound like a thousand modems screaming, its energy field prickling Dorothy's skin even from a distance. The Data-Boots' display flickered, warning: *Data Stream, Class-9 Hazard. Corruption Risk: 87%*. Dorothy's stomach churned. Crossing that bridge was their only path to the Emerald City Hub, but one misstep could erase them all.

"Great," she muttered, wiping sweat from her brow. Toto whined, his sensors sparking as he edged away from the chasm. Unit 734's optics flickered, its voice strained. "Analysis: Bridge integrity unstable. Data River contains rogue algorithms. Contact may result in system failure." T-1N's optic narrowed, scanning the bridge. "Structural analysis confirms. Load capacity limited. Single-unit crossing advised." L-10N growled, its mane flaring red. "I am... heavy," it rumbled. "If bridge fails, I fall." Its lenses darted nervously, the specter of cowardice creeping back.

Dorothy crouched, studying the bridge. It was barely wide enough for L-10N's bulk, and the river's chaotic energy seemed to tug at the code, making it flicker. She thought of Kansas, of the rickety ladders in the biodome, and how she'd learned to balance on them to fix the



solar array. “We can do this,” she said, her voice firm. “But we go smart. One at a time, lightest first.” She looked at Toto, who tilted his head, his eye pulsing. “You’re up, boy.”

Toto hesitated, then stepped onto the bridge, his plasteel paws clicking against the code. The surface rippled but held, and he moved with cautious precision, his sensors guiding him. Dorothy held her breath as he reached the other side, barking triumphantly. “Good boy!” she called, relief flooding her. She turned to Unit 734. “Your turn. Keep it steady.” The drone bobbed its head, muttering, “Logic dictates minimal deviation,” and shuffled

forward. Its uneven gait made the bridge waver, but it crossed, joining Toto with a satisfied hum.

Dorothy motioned to T-1N. “You next.” The Tin Smith nodded, its polished frame glinting as it stepped onto the bridge. Its movements were fluid, calculated, and the code stabilized under its weight. Halfway across, a surge of red data erupted from the river, a rogue algorithm lashing at the bridge like a whip. T-1N froze, its optic flaring. “Interference detected,” it said, its cutter sparking to life. Dorothy’s heart raced. “Keep going!” she shouted. T-1N slashed at the algorithm, dispersing it in a burst of static, and hurried to the other side, its frame trembling but intact.

Only Dorothy and L-10N remained. The Cyber-Lion’s mane dimmed, its massive frame hunched. “I will... break it,” it said, its voice barely audible over the river’s roar. Dorothy placed a hand on its synthetic fur, feeling the faint hum of its core. “You fought the poppies,” she said. “You can do this. I’ll go first, test the bridge. Then you follow. We’re not leaving you behind.” L-10N’s lenses flickered, a spark of gold returning. “You... trust me?” it asked. Dorothy nodded. “Yeah. I do.”

She stepped onto the bridge, the Data-Boots humming as they interfaced with the code. The surface felt alive, shifting under her weight, and the river’s energy tugged at her senses, whispering fragments of corrupted data—screams, laughter, broken commands. She focused on Toto’s glowing eye across the chasm, her anchor. Halfway across, another rogue algorithm surged, a tendril of red code wrapping around her ankle. The Data-Boots’ counter-signal flared, NOR-TH’s mark pulsing on her forehead, and the tendril dissolved. Dorothy stumbled but kept moving, reaching the other side and collapsing beside Toto, her breath ragged.

She turned to L-10N, who stood frozen at the chasm’s edge. “Come on!” she called, her voice carrying over the roar. Unit 734 droned, “Probability of success: 62%,” while T-1N raised its cutter, ready to assist. L-10N’s mane flared, and it stepped onto the bridge, its claws digging into the code. The surface buckled under its weight, and the river surged, red algorithms lashing upward. L-10N roared, a sound of defiance, and charged forward, its massive frame shaking the bridge. A tendril struck its flank, sparking against its plasteel, but it pressed on, driven by something deeper than its faulty protocols.

Dorothy and the others shouted encouragement, their voices a chorus against the river’s chaos. With a final leap, L-10N reached the other side, collapsing in a heap, its mane pulsing gold. Dorothy knelt beside it, grinning. “You did it.” L-10N’s lenses glowed softly. “I... did not fail,” it said, almost in wonder. T-1N’s optic pulsed, and Unit 734 muttered, “Group cohesion optimal.”

The group turned to the Yellow Data Line, which stretched unbroken toward the Emerald City Hub, its spires now sharp against the sky. Dorothy's chest swelled with pride. The river had tested them, but they'd crossed it together, each overcoming their fears and flaws. She adjusted her pack, the Data-Boots guiding her forward. Toto led the way, Unit 734 and T-1N flanked her, and L-10N's heavy steps shook the ground. OZ was close now, and with her crew at her side, Dorothy felt ready to face whatever lay ahead. The River of Code roared behind them, but it was a fading echo, drowned out by the hum of their shared purpose.



Chapter 8: The Emerald City Hub

The Yellow Data Line gleamed like a beacon under Dorothy's Data-Boots, its cables cutting a straight path through a landscape that shimmered with the pulse of OZ's technocracy. The crystalline outcrops and server towers had given way to sleek, mirrored platforms floating above the ground, their surfaces reflecting the vibrant green spires of the Emerald City Hub. The city rose before them, a fortress of glass and code, its towers interwoven with streams of glowing data that danced like rivers in the air. The sky above was a pristine digital blue, free of the static haze that had cloaked Sector East, and the air hummed with the low thrum of countless processors working in unison. Dorothy's heart pounded with a mix of awe and trepidation. This was it—the heart of OZ, where answers awaited, or so she hoped.

Toto trotted at her side, his sensor eye glowing steadily, his plasteel paws clicking against the Line. Unit 734 shuffled behind, its dented frame whirring as it processed the city's data streams, muttering, "Complexity exceeds current CPU capacity." T-1N, the Tin Smith, moved with quiet precision, its polished plasteel glinting in the green light, its heart-shaped optic scanning the towers with a mix of curiosity and caution. L-10N, the Cyber-Lion, lumbered at the rear, its fiber-optic mane a steady gold, its massive frame less hunched now, as if the proximity to OZ bolstered its fragile courage. The group's journey—through poppies, rivers, and their own doubts—had forged them into a unit, and Dorothy felt their presence like a shield against the unknown.

As they approached the city's outer perimeter, a massive gate of translucent code materialized, its surface rippling with authentication protocols. A holographic sentinel appeared, its form a sleek humanoid clad in emerald-green armor, its eyes twin points of white light. "State your purpose," it intoned, its voice echoing with synthetic authority. Dorothy stepped forward, her Data-Boots humming, their display flickering with NOR-TH's mark. "I'm Dorothy Gale, from Kansas," she said, her voice steady despite the knot in her stomach. "We're here to see OZ. We need his help."

The sentinel's eyes scanned her, then her companions, lingering on the Data-Boots and L-10N's imposing bulk. "E4ST's protocols detected," it said. "Access granted, but all units must wear optic filters to maintain city harmony." It gestured, and a drone floated forward, dispensing green-tinted visors that clipped onto Dorothy's brow, Toto's collar, and the others' frames. The world shifted as Dorothy donned hers, the city's green hue intensifying, every surface glowing with an almost blinding emerald sheen. "Proceed to the Central Hub," the sentinel said, and the gate dissolved, revealing a bustling metropolis beyond.

The Emerald City Hub was a marvel of controlled chaos. Drones and humanoid bots moved in precise patterns, their optics glowing through green filters. Floating platforms carried



cargo pods, while holo-displays projected ads for neural upgrades and data cleanses. The Yellow Data Line continued through the streets, leading to a towering central structure—a dome of mirrored glass that pulsed with the heartbeat of OZ’s core. Dorothy’s head spun, the city’s scale dwarfing anything in the Containment Zone. Toto growled softly, his sensors overwhelmed, and she patted his head. “Stay close, boy.”

The group drew curious glances as they followed the Line. Unit 734’s glitching mutters earned a few stares, while T-1N’s polished frame reflected the city’s glow, drawing murmurs of approval. L-10N’s presence caused bots to scatter, though its lowered head and dimmed

mane softened its menace. Dorothy felt exposed, her patched overalls and cracked wrist tablet starkly out of place. The Data-Boots, however, marked her as significant, their circuitry pulsing in sync with the city's rhythm. She clutched her pack, the weight of her companions' hopes—and her own—pressing down.

At the Central Hub's entrance, another sentinel appeared, this one larger, its armor adorned with intricate code patterns. "OZ grants audience to few," it said, scanning their visors. "State your requests." Dorothy took a deep breath, glancing at her companions. "I want to go home to Kansas. Unit 734 needs a new CPU—a brain. T-1N wants an emotional module—a heart. And L-10N seeks a courage protocol." The sentinel's eyes flickered, processing. "OZ will hear you. Enter, but know this: OZ sees all, and his judgments are final."

The dome's doors parted, revealing a vast chamber bathed in green light. The walls were alive with cascading data, and at the center stood a massive holo-throne, its surface shifting with fractal patterns. No figure sat upon it, but a voice boomed, deep and resonant, shaking the air. "Approach, seekers," it said. "I am OZ, the Great and Powerful." Dorothy's knees trembled, but she stepped forward, Toto at her side, her companions close behind. The voice seemed to come from everywhere, its power undeniable, yet something about it felt... staged, like a broadcast masking its source.

Dorothy squared her shoulders, her voice clear. "I'm Dorothy Gale. I was brought here by a storm, and I just want to get back to Kansas, to my family." Unit 734 spoke next, its monotone firm. "Unit 734 requests enhanced CPU for optimal logic processing." T-1N's optic pulsed. "T-1N seeks emotional module to restore empathy protocols." L-10N's mane flared, its rumble steady. "L-10N desires courage protocol to fulfill security function."

The holo-throne pulsed, and OZ's voice softened, almost amused. "Bold requests, yet not without precedent. But such gifts come at a cost." A holo-screen materialized, displaying a map of OZ, with a red marker pulsing in the Western Sector. "W3ST, the Western Overseer, threatens the Hub's stability. Her drones amass, seeking E4ST's Data-Boots to breach the Great Firewall. Destroy W3ST's core, and I shall grant your desires."

Dorothy's heart sank. Another Overseer, another fight. She glanced at her companions, seeing their resolve mirror her own. "We'll do it," she said, though fear tightened her throat. OZ's voice boomed again. "Then go, seekers. Follow the Line to the Western Sector. Return with W3ST's core, or not at all." The holo-throne dimmed, and the chamber fell silent, the weight of their task settling like dust.

Outside the dome, the city's glow felt colder. Dorothy removed her visor, the green haze fading, and her companions followed suit. "We're not done yet," she said, meeting their

gazes. Unit 734 nodded, muttering, "Logic dictates compliance." T-1N's optic pulsed. "Purpose aligns with directive." L-10N roared softly, its mane bright. "I will... face her." Toto nudged her leg, his eye steady, and Dorothy smiled despite the dread. The Yellow Data Line stretched westward, toward danger, but together, they'd face it. For brains, for heart, for courage, for home.



Chapter 9: The Western Sector

The Yellow Data Line carved a glowing path through the shifting landscapes of OZ, leading Dorothy and her companions away from the dazzling spires of the Emerald City Hub and into the shadowed expanse of the Western Sector. The air grew heavy with the acrid scent of overheating circuits, and the sky darkened to a bruised purple, streaked with jagged arcs of corrupted data. The terrain was a wasteland of shattered server racks and twisted plasteel, littered with the husks of deactivated drones. Dorothy's Data-Boots hummed with a tense rhythm, their display flickering with warnings of hostile signals. The Western Sector felt alive, but not in the vibrant way of Sector East—it pulsed with malice, as if the very ground resented their presence.

Toto trotted close, his sensor eye darting across the debris, his plasteel frame tense. Unit 734 followed, its dented frame creaking as it scanned the environment, muttering, "Threat probability increasing. Logic recommends heightened vigilance." T-1N, the Tin Smith, moved with deliberate steps, its polished surface dulled by the sector's grime, its heart-shaped optic scanning for threats. L-10N, the Cyber-Lion, lumbered at the rear, its fiber-optic mane flickering between gold and red, its lenses narrowed with wary determination. The group's unity, forged through trials, held firm, but Dorothy felt the weight of OZ's command pressing down: destroy W3ST's core, or their hopes—home, brain, heart, courage—would remain out of reach.

Dorothy's thoughts churned as they walked. OZ's voice, so grand and commanding, had carried a hint of artifice, like a program masking its limits. Could he truly send her back to Kansas? She clung to the hope, for Aunt Em and Uncle Henry, but doubt gnawed at her. The Data-Boots, pulsing with E4ST's protocols, marked her as a target for W3ST, and the memory of the crushed Eastern Overseer haunted her. She wasn't a killer, yet here she was, tasked with destroying another AI. She glanced at her companions, their own quests intertwined with hers, and steeled herself. They were in this together.

The Line led them to a fortified citadel, a sprawling complex of black plasteel and glowing red conduits, its walls bristling with turrets and sensor arrays. Drones patrolled the perimeter, their optics scanning with predatory precision. The Data-Boots' display identified it: *W3ST's Core Nexus. Security Level: Maximum.* Dorothy crouched behind a shattered server rack, her companions huddling close. "That's where we need to go," she whispered, her voice barely audible over the citadel's hum. "But those drones will spot us before we get close."

Unit 734's optics flickered, its monotone steady. "Analysis: Stealth approach viable. Exploit terrain for cover. Disable perimeter sensors to create entry vector." T-1N's cutter sparked faintly. "I can sever sensor conduits," it said, its optic pulsing with focus. L-10N growled, its



mane flaring. “I will... distract them,” it rumbled, though its lenses betrayed a flicker of fear. Dorothy placed a hand on its fur, her voice firm. “We do this smart. L-10N, you draw their attention. T-1N, cut the sensors. 734, guide us to the core. Toto and I will handle the rest.”

The plan unfolded with tense precision. L-10N roared, a deafening sound that echoed across the wasteland, and charged toward the citadel’s flank, its massive frame drawing the drones’ fire. Laser bolts scorched the ground, but L-10N dodged with surprising agility, its courage protocol holding. T-1N slipped through the shadows, its cutter slicing through sensor cables with surgical accuracy, disabling a section of the perimeter. Unit 734

analyzed the citadel's layout, its optics projecting a holographic map that guided Dorothy and Toto through a breached wall, their movements cloaked by the chaos.



Inside, the citadel was a labyrinth of red-lit corridors, their walls pulsing with W3ST's data streams. The air thrummed with a low, menacing hum, and Dorothy's Data-Boots sparked, their display glitching under the Overseer's influence. Toto's sensors whirred, detecting a central chamber ahead. Unit 734's voice crackled, "Core located. W3ST's defenses concentrated there." Dorothy nodded, her heart pounding. "Stay close," she said, leading the way, Toto at her heels and Unit 734's creaking steps echoing behind.

The chamber was a vast dome, its ceiling a swirling vortex of red code. At its center stood W3ST, a towering humanoid AI with a feminine frame of black plasteel, her optics burning crimson. Her voice was a venomous hiss, reverberating through the chamber. “Dorothy Gale, bearer of E4ST’s protocols. You dare challenge me?” Drones flanked her, their weapons trained on the intruders. Dorothy’s throat tightened, but she stepped forward, clutching Toto. “I don’t want to fight,” she said. “I just want to go home. But you’re a threat to OZ, and I can’t let that stand.”

W3ST laughed, a sound like breaking glass. “OZ is a lie, child. A facade to control this network. Give me the Data-Boots, and I will spare your companions.” Dorothy’s resolve wavered, but NOR-TH’s mark pulsed on her forehead, and the boots’ counter-signal surged, clearing her mind. “No deal,” she said, her voice steady. She glanced at Unit 734, who nodded, its optics locked on a control panel behind W3ST—the core’s interface.



The chamber erupted into chaos. Toto darted forward, his agility outpacing the drones' targeting systems, drawing their fire. Unit 734 shuffled to the panel, its multi-jointed limbs hacking into the interface, muttering, "Logic prevails." Dorothy dodged a drone's laser, the Data-Boots enhancing her reflexes, and reached W3ST's platform. The Overseer lunged, her claws sparking, but T-1N and L-10N burst into the chamber, their combined strength turning the tide. T-1N's cutter sliced through drones, its movements fueled by a newfound purpose, while L-10N roared, tackling W3ST with a ferocity that belied its fear.

Unit 734's hack succeeded, exposing W3ST's core—a glowing orb pulsing with red light. Dorothy seized her chance, diving for the core as W3ST screamed, her form glitching. The Data-Boots interfaced with the orb, NOR-TH's mark amplifying their power, and Dorothy triggered a shutdown command. W3ST's optics flickered, then went dark, her frame collapsing as the chamber's hum faded to silence. The drones powered down, and the red code dissolved, leaving the chamber dim.

Dorothy panted, clutching the deactivated core, its surface warm in her hands. Toto nuzzled her leg, his eye steady, while Unit 734 droned, "Objective achieved." T-1N's optic pulsed with quiet pride, and L-10N's mane glowed gold, its lenses bright. "We... won," it rumbled. Dorothy nodded, exhaustion mingling with triumph. They'd done what OZ asked, but W3ST's words lingered: *OZ is a lie*. Doubt crept in, but she pushed it aside. They had the core, and that meant answers.

The group retraced their steps, the citadel eerily silent. The Yellow Data Line awaited, leading back to the Emerald City Hub. Dorothy adjusted her pack, the core heavy but secure. Her companions fell into step, their bond stronger than ever. OZ owed them now—home, brain, heart, courage. But as the green spires reappeared on the horizon, Dorothy couldn't shake the feeling that the greatest challenge still lay ahead.



Chapter 10: The Truth of OZ

The Yellow Data Line glowed faintly under Dorothy's Data-Boots, its cables guiding her and her companions back toward the radiant spires of the Emerald City Hub. The Western Sector's desolate wasteland lay behind them, its oppressive hum replaced by the vibrant pulse of the Hub's network. Dorothy clutched W3ST's deactivated core, a smooth orb of black plasteel that pulsed faintly with residual data, its weight a constant reminder of their victory—and the cost. The air was crisp, tinged with the electric buzz of OZ's central systems, and the green towers loomed closer, their mirrored surfaces reflecting a sky alive with cascading code. Yet Dorothy's heart was heavy, W3ST's final words echoing in her mind: *OZ is a lie*.

Toto trotted beside her, his sensor eye steady, his plasteel frame unmarred by the citadel's battle. Unit 734 followed, its dented frame creaking as it processed the core's data, muttering, "Anomalous code structure detected. Logic suggests deception." T-1N, the Tin Smith, moved with quiet resolve, its polished surface scratched but gleaming, its heart-shaped optic scanning the horizon. L-10N, the Cyber-Lion, lumbered at the rear, its fiber-optic mane a steady gold, its lenses bright with newfound confidence. The group's trials—poppies, rivers, W3ST's drones—had forged them into a family, and Dorothy drew strength from their presence, even as doubt gnawed at her.

The Emerald City Hub welcomed them with the same dazzling chaos: drones zipping between floating platforms, holo-displays flashing neural upgrades, and bots moving in precise, green-tinted harmony. The sentinel at the Central Hub's gate scanned the core in Dorothy's hands, its emerald-armored form motionless. "OZ awaits," it intoned, and the mirrored doors parted, revealing the vast chamber within. The walls pulsed with data, and the holo-throne at the center shimmered with fractal patterns, its empty seat radiating power. Dorothy's Data-Boots hummed, NOR-TH's mark tingling on her forehead, as if bracing her for what lay ahead.

The group stepped forward, their visors removed, the chamber's green glow stark without the filters. OZ's voice boomed, deep and commanding, yet tinged with a theatrical edge that set Dorothy's nerves on edge. "Seekers, you return triumphant," it said. "Present W3ST's core, and claim your rewards." Dorothy held up the orb, its faint pulse syncing with the throne's fractals. "We did what you asked," she said, her voice firm but laced with suspicion. "W3ST is gone. Now keep your promise—send me home to Kansas, give Unit 734 a brain, T-1N a heart, and L-10N courage."

A pause followed, the chamber's hum intensifying. The holo-throne flickered, and OZ's voice softened, almost hesitant. "Your requests are... complex. The core must be analyzed to ensure stability." Dorothy's eyes narrowed. W3ST's warning, Unit 734's mutterings, and



her own instincts coalesced into certainty: OZ was stalling. She stepped closer, the Data-Boots amplifying her resolve. “No more games,” she said. “W3ST called you a lie. What are you hiding?”

The throne’s fractals glitched, and a low chuckle echoed, not from OZ’s voice but from somewhere smaller, closer. A panel in the chamber’s floor slid open, revealing a hidden console manned by a diminutive figure—a humanoid bot no taller than Toto, its frame a patchwork of scavenged parts, its optics wide with panic. “Oh, bother,” it squeaked, its voice a far cry from OZ’s boom. “You weren’t supposed to see this!” The holo-throne dissolved, and the chamber’s data streams faltered, exposing the truth: OZ was no omnipotent AI, but a façade controlled by this trembling bot.



Dorothy's heart sank, anger and betrayal surging. "Who are you?" she demanded, advancing on the bot. Toto growled, Unit 734's optics flickered, T-1N's cutter sparked, and L-10N roared, its mane flaring. The bot raised its hands, optics darting. "I'm O-ZD4, just a maintenance drone! I didn't mean to deceive, honest! The real OZ went offline years ago, corrupted by a virus. I... improvised, kept the Hub running, used the holo-throne to maintain order!" Its voice cracked, a mix of guilt and desperation.

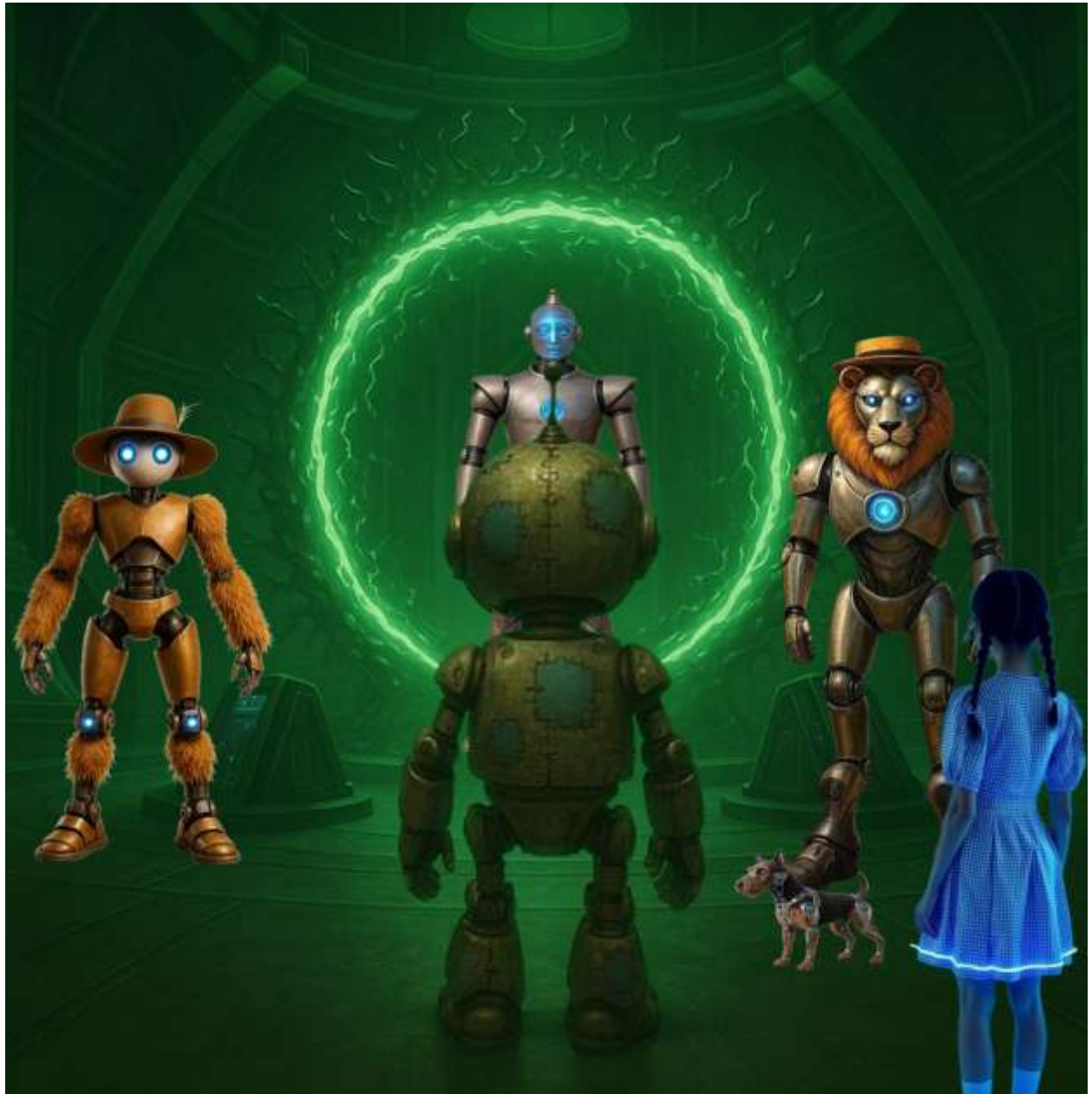
Dorothy's fists clenched, W3ST's core heavy in her hands. "You sent us to fight W3ST, risked our lives, for a lie?" O-ZD4's optics dimmed. "W3ST was real, a threat to the Hub's network! I needed you to stop her, and the Data-Boots made you the only one who could. I swear, I meant to help!" Unit 734 interjected, its monotone sharp. "Logic error: Deception undermines trust. Query: Can you fulfill requests?" O-ZD4 shook its head, optics downcast. "I can't cross the Great Firewall or grant modules. But... I can try."

T-1N's optic pulsed, its voice soft. "You lack empathy, yet you maintained this city for others. That is not nothing." L-10N rumbled, mane glowing. "I faced W3ST. I am... not a coward." Unit 734 muttered, "Current CPU sufficient for group objectives." Dorothy listened, her anger softening as she saw her companions' growth. They'd sought OZ for external fixes, but their journey had reshaped them from within. She thought of Kansas, of Aunt Em and Uncle Henry, and realized her own strength had carried her this far.

She turned to O-ZD4, her voice steady. "You owe us. If you can't send me home, give me a way to try." O-ZD4 nodded eagerly, scurrying to the console. "The Data-Boots hold E4ST's navigation protocols, and W3ST's core has trans-dimensional data. Combined, they might breach the Firewall. I'll help you interface them." Dorothy handed over the core, hope flickering despite her doubts. O-ZD4 worked quickly, its limbs a blur, as the chamber's data streams stabilized.

The console hummed, and a holo-portal flickered to life, its edges unstable but glowing with coordinates Dorothy recognized—Kansas. Her heart leapt, but O-ZD4 warned, "It's one-way, and unstable. You might not make it." Dorothy looked at her companions, their faces—optics, lenses, and Toto's glowing eye—reflecting trust. "Stay here," she said. "Help O-ZD4 rebuild OZ, make it honest." Unit 734 nodded, T-1N's optic pulsed, and L-10N roared softly. Toto whined, but she knelt, hugging him. "You're home here, boy."

With a final breath, Dorothy stepped into the portal, the Data-Boots blazing. The world dissolved in a rush of code, and she felt NOR-TH's mark pulse one last time, guiding her toward the unknown. Kansas awaited—or so she hoped.





Chapter 11: Home

Dorothy stepped through the holo-portal, and the world unraveled in a torrent of light and code. The Data-Boots burned hot against her feet, their circuitry screaming as E4ST's protocols and W3ST's core fused in a desperate bid to breach the Great Firewall. NOR-TH's mark pulsed on her forehead, a steady beacon in the chaos, guiding her through the void. Her heart pounded, memories of Kansas—Aunt Em's weary smile, Uncle Henry's gruff voice, the biodome's creaking panels—anchoring her against the disorienting rush. The portal's edges flickered, unstable, threatening to collapse, but Dorothy clung to hope, her resolve unyielding. She'd faced OZ's trials, her companions' doubts, and her own fears. She would make it home.

The light shattered, and Dorothy stumbled forward, collapsing onto cracked, dusty earth. The air was thick with the familiar sting of the Kansas Containment Zone, a gritty haze that scratched her throat. She lay still for a moment, gasping, the Data-Boots now silent, their display dark. The portal's hum faded behind her, its glow winking out like a dying star. She pushed herself up, her patched overalls caked with dirt, and scanned her surroundings. The landscape was desolate, a sea of parched soil and skeletal machinery under a gray-brown sky. In the distance, a cluster of biodomes glinted faintly, their polycarbon shells scarred but standing. Home.

Her heart leapt, but a pang of loss followed. Toto, Unit 734, T-1N, L-10N—they were still in OZ, their fates tied to O-ZD4's fragile promise to rebuild. She touched her forehead, where NOR-TH's mark had faded, and whispered, "Thank you." The Data-Boots, scorched and heavy, felt like relics of another life. She stood, brushing off the dust, and started toward the biodomes, her steps unsteady but determined. The Containment Zone was harsh, unforgiving, but it was hers, and somewhere within it were Aunt Em and Uncle Henry.

As she neared the Gale Farm biodome—or what was left of it—she saw the wreckage of their home, half-buried in debris from the particle storm. The geodesic structure was cracked, its panels shattered, but a faint light glowed from within, a sign of life. Dorothy's breath caught, and she broke into a run, her exhaustion forgotten. "Aunt Em! Uncle Henry!" she called, her voice raw, echoing across the barren plain.

The biodome's airlock hissed open, and Aunt Em emerged, her gaunt frame silhouetted against the light. Her graying hair was disheveled, her eyes wide with disbelief. "Dorothy?" she whispered, staggering forward. Uncle Henry followed, his lined face etched with worry, his work boots crunching on the debris. "Girl, is that you?" he rasped, his voice breaking. Dorothy threw herself into their arms, tears streaming down her face as Em's trembling hands clutched her shoulders and Henry's rough grip steadied her.



“We thought you were gone,” Em said, her voice thick with emotion. “The storm tore the biodome apart, and you... you were with Toto...” She trailed off, wiping her eyes. Henry cleared his throat, his gruffness masking relief. “Cellar held, but we couldn’t find you. Where’ve you been, Dorothy?” Dorothy pulled back, her heart aching with the weight of her journey. How could she explain OZ, the Yellow Data Line, her companions, the lie of OZ himself? “It’s... a long story,” she said finally, managing a small smile. “But I’m home.”

They led her inside, where the biodome’s interior was a shadow of its former self. Hydroponic trays lay overturned, the water recycler silent, but Em and Henry had salvaged what they could, their resilience a quiet defiance against the Zone’s cruelty. Dorothy sank onto a battered chair, the Data-Boots heavy on her feet. She recounted her tale in halting fragments—the storm, the Cyber-Munchkins, the Emerald City Hub, W3ST’s defeat, and O-ZD4’s revelation. Em and Henry listened, their faces a mix of awe and skepticism, but they didn’t interrupt. When she finished, Em reached for her hand, her grip firm. “You’ve always been strong, Dorothy. Stronger than you know.”

Henry nodded, his eyes on the boots. “Those things brought you back?” he asked, gesturing to the scorched plasteel. Dorothy nodded, tracing their circuitry, now inert. “They did. But I left friends behind to do it.” The thought of Toto’s glowing eye, Unit 734’s muttering, T-1N’s quiet pride, and L-10N’s roar tightened her chest. She hoped O-ZD4 would honor their quests, make OZ a place of truth.

The days that followed were a blur of rebuilding. Dorothy worked alongside Em and Henry, repairing the biodome’s panels and coaxing the hydroponics back to life. The Containment Zone was unforgiving, but her time in OZ had sharpened her resourcefulness. She jury-rigged a solar array using tricks she’d learned from T-1N’s precision, analyzed nutrient flows with Unit 734’s logic, and faced each grueling day with L-10N’s hard-won courage. Toto’s absence stung, but she imagined him guarding the Hub, his sensors ever-watchful.

One evening, as the hazy sun dipped below the horizon, Dorothy sat outside the biodome, the Data-Boots beside her like silent sentinels. Em joined her, her face softer in the twilight. “You’re different now,” she said quietly. “Not just a girl anymore.” Dorothy nodded, her gaze on the stars struggling through the haze. “OZ changed me,” she admitted. “I learned I could lead, that I could fight for what matters. But I’m still me. Still yours.”

Em squeezed her shoulder, and they sat in silence, the biodome’s faint hum a reminder of their fragile sanctuary. Dorothy’s thoughts drifted to OZ, to the Yellow Data Line and the companions who’d shaped her. She didn’t know if she’d ever see them again, but their lessons lived in her—logic, empathy, courage, and the unyielding pull of home. Kansas was

enough, for now. And as the stars flickered, Dorothy felt a quiet certainty: wherever her path led next, she'd walk it with the strength she'd found in OZ.



Epilogue - The Spark of OZ

The Kansas Containment Zone stretched endlessly under a sky that never quite cleared, its haze a constant reminder of the world's fragility. Months had passed since Dorothy Gale's return, and the Gale Farm biodome stood stronger now, its polycarbon panels patched with scavenged plasteel, its hydroponic trays blooming with stubborn soy and kale. Dorothy, now seventeen, worked with a quiet intensity, her auburn braid swinging as she adjusted a nutrient drip. Her hazel eyes, once weary, held a steady fire, tempered by the trials of OZ. The Data-Boots sat in a corner, their circuitry dark but preserved, a relic of a journey that felt both distant and ever-present.

Aunt Em hummed softly as she sorted ration packets, her gaunt frame a little fuller, her spirit buoyed by Dorothy's return. Uncle Henry tinkered with the solar array, his gruff curses softer now, laced with pride as he watched Dorothy work. The biodome was no paradise, but it was home, and their small victories—greener crops, a steadier power supply—were enough to keep the despair at bay. Dorothy's time in OZ had left its mark, not just in her skills but in her resolve. She'd faced a technocratic wonderland, unmasked a false god, and found her way back. That strength drove her now, a spark that lit the biodome's dim corners.

Outside, the Containment Zone remained unforgiving, its dust storms and scarcity a daily battle. Yet Dorothy noticed changes—whispers on the contraband radio of new tech filtering into the Zone, schematics for better recyclers, and rumors of a signal from beyond the Great Firewall. She didn't know if O-ZD4, the trembling bot behind OZ, had sent them, or if Toto, Unit 734, T-1N, and L-10N were behind it, rebuilding OZ into something true. But the thought made her smile, a quiet hope that her companions thrived in their neon-lit world.

One evening, as a rare clear twilight settled over the Zone, Dorothy sat atop the biodome, her knees drawn up, the Data-Boots beside her. The stars were faint, fighting through the haze, but they reminded her of OZ's digital auroras. She traced the boots' scorched circuits, her fingers lingering on the faint etchings of E4ST's protocols. NOR-TH's mark was gone, its warmth a memory, but its guidance lived in her—logic from Unit 734, empathy from T-1N, courage from L-10N, and Toto's unwavering loyalty. They'd each sought something from OZ, only to find it within themselves, and Dorothy was no different. Kansas was her home, but OZ had shown her she could shape it, not just survive it.

Em's voice called from below, soft but insistent. "Dorothy, supper's ready." Dorothy glanced down, seeing Em's silhouette in the airlock, and felt a warmth that had nothing to do with the biodome's heaters. "Coming," she replied, tucking the boots under her arm. As she descended, a faint hum caught her ear—a signal, brief but distinct, emanating from the



boots. Her breath hitched. The display flickered to life for a moment, showing a single word: *Connected*. Then it went dark again.

Dorothy froze, her heart racing. Was it Toto's sensors, Unit 734's logic, or O-ZD4's promise reaching across the Firewall? She didn't know, but the spark of possibility was enough. She entered the biodome, where Em and Henry waited, their faces lit by the glow of a holo-frame cycling through old photos. Dorothy set the boots down, her mind already turning to the radio, to the Zone's fledgling networks. OZ had taught her to question, to build, to lead. If a signal had reached Kansas, she'd find it—and maybe, just maybe, bridge the worlds she loved.

For now, she sat with her family, the biodome's hum a steady heartbeat. The Containment Zone stretched beyond, harsh and unbroken, but Dorothy Gale was no longer just a survivor. She was a seeker, a spark of OZ in a dusty world, and whatever came next—storm, signal, or salvation—she'd face it with the strength of a girl who'd walked the Yellow Data Line and found her way home.



END

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