

# Lia + Helen's Cyberspace Adventure

"How was school, my little spaz?" I asked, I know that's Lia's school nickname, Spaz.

"In science, we broke federal law. We did an experiment where we shredded up dollar bills, which is technically illegal. Do you have a dollar?" Lia's hair is everywhere today. She has perfect, ringlet curls, like a Botticelli baby.

I pry one out of my wallet. We can hardly afford any money shredding experiments, so I have to hope it doesn't become a habit.

Lia works some origami magic. She knows how to do origami, card tricks, friendship bracelets, things most adults lack the time, the creativity and the dexterity to master. Her fingers work like the hands of child factory workers replacing bolts on assembly lines.

"Look, George Washington looks like a walrus!" and he did, after Lia's magic, wrinkled forehead, teeth sticking out like dull pencils.

"People say he had wooden teeth, but I've never heard he had walrus teeth." Lia smiled, but didn't laugh at my lame joke. Outside, the sky is hyperblue and the birds argue violently.

"Actually, Washington had ivory teeth. That's what they used to replace teeth with, since wooden teeth would rot."

"Really?" I say. "Wow, that makes sense. Dead elephants in your mouth." Lia smiles, as if she is a teacher and I am one of her pupils. She learns strange, entertaining facts in fifth grade science and history, facts I never know.

Lia's like a sponge, absorbing fun facts, baking tips, science vocabulary words. She's weird, not because she likes video games, or writes plans for fantasy worlds with accompanying

maps and illustrations of different species. Lia's mostly a little weirdo because of her capacity for enjoyment. Lia likes everything, stereotypical girly-girl activities like horseback riding and field hockey and gory movies and science experiments. She comes down to my level to comb the internet for new trailers or graphics specs. "I guess that makes sense."

"Want to make some popcorn?" I ask Lia. We both love popcorn, it is our go-to snack. I get a pan and dump in some oil; Lia measures out half a cup of kernels from the bulk bag and gradually pours them out, making sure none fall on top of each other.

"I heard about this person who went to a movie theater and got an allergic reaction from the buttered popcorn," Lia says. "When manager asked if he had any allergies, he said the only thing he'd ever been allergic to was cat dandruff."

"Gross," I say. Lia smiles and sprinkles butter on the popcorn, daintily.

"Cat dandruff," she says.

"Do you think they have a running cat dandruff farm, in the back room? Do they comb the cats to get dandruff every day?" I ask.

"That's why it's so expensive. Not enough cats."

I crack up, leaning against the counter to get my breath back. I wonder how much money we spent in the past few weeks, since Lia and I splurged on fancy snacks and soda at the grocery store. "Guess it's OK we don't get popcorn at the movie theater," I say.

"It's a good thing about being poor," Lia says, "You make more stuff at home." I fill my mouth with popcorn to stop myself from wincing.

"We just spend all our money on video games," I tell her. We bring the popcorn onto the couch and fire up the TV.

“Glacier Software should give you a discount, since you worked there.”

“Yeah, except I don’t work there anymore.” Confessions: I lied to Lia that we can afford the new game system I gave her for Christmas. I lied to Lia about working for Glacier Software, a big deal video game company, in my twenties. Lia doesn’t know that people who work for Glacier go to college, as opposed to playing Meteor Sweepstakes 24/7.

A few minutes after Lia comes home from school, we retire to the couch and get down to the business of playing Meteor Sweepstakes. A break to catch up on Lia’s life at school, then work time; we made lists of tasks, wrote any shortcuts we discovered on a piece of paper tacked next to the TV.

We are on the edge of a breakthrough in Meteor Sweepstakes. In the game, we are controlling the biological fates of planets. We do this by colliding the planets with meteors. On the meteors are different kinds of chemicals and life, which spread to the planets. Our problem right now is that one of our planets is infested with snakes. The planet seethes, an orange ball constantly in motion. Our health weakens along with our planets’, and right now we can hardly move.

“We need a snake predator,” Lia says. “A hawk, or a mongoose. Mongoose kill cobras.”

“Or we could get a disease...a snake disease.” I say, “Wait, wasn’t there a hawk-like person on another asteroid? Maybe we should talk to him.”

“Wait,” says Lia. “The leopard man told us there were disease infested rats in the blue tunnel. We need to get into the blue tunnel.” Lia slicks the Botticelli curls back from her face and squints at the screen, no longer interesting or social or quirky but fixated, staring into the TV like a fire. Like the TV’s a fire that’s burning down the house. For a second I’m sure she knows

exactly how to get into the blue tunnel, and that I never worked at Glacier Software. I'm sure Lia knows about everything.

I am clipping the coupons off macaroni boxes before taking them apart to put in the recycling. Lia is reading the newspaper. I look closer, sneaking peeks and realize she is reading the article about Governor Stentson running for a second term.

"Reading about Stentson's reelection?" I ask Lia.

"Yeah." Lia's eating Lucky Charms, delicately picking out the marshmallow parts and shoving handfuls of them in her mouth.

"I'm not going to vote for Stentson. He won't support people like us. He thinks we're lazy, and we need to work for better jobs." And Lia watched me, Botticelli curls sprawling, and said:

"I heard that comedian make fun of him. Do you want to see?" Lia pulled up youtube and we laughed and laughed, my spiky, loud laughter and Lia's quiet, burbling laughter. Laughter that flies under the radar.

I don't know if Lia can really understand how I live. Lia's never really been teased, insulted, hit; she's not the most popular girl in school, but she hasn't been abused.

Today I lost my shit in the natural foods store. I do all my shopping in the local Stop and Shop, but I enjoy the culture on display in the natural foods store. I enjoy the new mothers gossiping about the neighbors and the health benefits of Celtic salt.

I went into an aisle and saw a can of soup called “Mama’s Homemade, Hearty, Organic Chicken Stew.” My mother chopped vegetables and meat when I came home from school. The knife was gleaming, blinding, like the sun. The soup smelled beautiful, the meat sitting like slugs and the onions bubbling and everything fattening in the pan. It didn’t seem worth asking why, why every day, why the same food every day. Now here I am, I’m not in that kitchen, I’m not waiting for the soup and counting how many games of Pac Man I can play before my father comes in. How many cherries can I eat before my father comes in? I’m not pretending to need to go to the bathroom after my dad says, “What have you been up to today, kid? Doing taxes? Hosting a dinner party? Working on your homework?” I said a prayer Lia will never understand everything Mama’s Homemade Hearty Soup symbolizes, and halfway through I realize I am crying in the middle of the soup aisle. I turned away fast before a gossiping new mother could notice, and was gone, hope to Redflight and Lia.

In seventh grade I was called cunt. I was sent to the principal’s office, and the other kid went free. Every time I read the news lately, I feel like I’m reliving that whole episode, over and over, a slap to the head.

I was called a cunt by an anonymous ambassador of most of the preppy kids, who couldn’t figure out how I could exist the way I lived, why I didn’t care about friends or grades or sports, why I was basically alone and played video games all the time. I was the classic loser, I must have seemed like a stereotype. Sometimes they asked me questions, like what I ate and how I got good at video games, and whether I did anything else besides play video games. They dared the boy to call me a cunt; most people guessed he wouldn’t do it, but he did.

I acted like a deer in the headlights while the guidance counselor asked me why I resorted to violence. I can tell she believes in a morally perfect response to being called a cunt. So I sit at the desk and pull my hoodie over my face, like a stereotypical bad teenager. I say, “I just got angry.” She probably thought I just should have stood there. Ignoring the bullies is just agreeing to your own powerlessness. Not that I would seem weak, exactly, just that I wouldn’t seem like anything at all, I would fade into other people’s fear and curiosity.

After that kid – his name was Sebastian, I think – punched me in the face, I went to my last three classes, and took the sweaty sardine tin of a bus home as always. I had fifty math problems to do. “Just shoot me now,” I remember whispering at the rusting buckling roof. My mom was in the kitchen, cutting the single saggy half-pepper to go in the meatloaf. My mom was basically someone who had outlived her dreams. She wanted to be in a band, but ended up being a housewife. I was happy my dad wasn’t home yet. My mom would talk too much, scold and set up lists of rules and chores, because she was afraid my dad would swear or say something racist or offensive. My uncle was sitting on the couch, in the same position as always.

My uncle, wearing a blotched T-shirt, was twisting in his seat, controlling the swerve of his virtual machine gun. I sat and snatched a controller. We killed zombie Nazis for a few hours, throwing our weight around on the half-bald couch. The couch made noise like we were having sex. The Nazi soldiers choked and fell straight backward, like dominoes onto the street, SS, Gestappo, even big shot Himmler’s gray skin split open under our fire.

“I’m reading a book that says humanity’s getting less and less fit over time. Not enough evolutionary selection power.” My uncle said he was a philosopher; he used to study philosophy, and now he just thinks about it a lot. His books hung over all the furniture: books for college

students, all dog eared and bent out of shape. I liked the names: Wittgenstein. Schopenhauer. They sounded like the names of people in cartoons.

“Yeah?”

“Yeah, there was this one guy, he always took a shower and ate a poptart for breakfast before work. So one day he decides to save time by putting his toaster with his nice smelling shampoo and soap and whatever in the bathtub, so he could eat the pop tart while taking the shower. And then of course he knocked the toaster into the bathtub, and died a terrible death. He never would have made it past twenty five in the wild.”

“If he had wanted chicken, he would have brought the oven in,” I said. I was too smart to really crack up at my uncle’s sense of humor, but I smiled.

“Probably. Or moved the bathtub to the roof and waited for lightning to strike and crisp that bird.” We’re moving through level 3 – Mengele’s Laboratory, a creepy place where heads in jars lay scattered across dusty shelves.

I gave Mengele a good-bye shot to the head.

“Nice. Time to go after Hitler. The Jews getting our revenge at last.”

I blasted down one of the Hitler clones guarding the real (zombie) Hitler’s munich estate. I decided next time Sebastian called me a cunt I would not resort to violence. Instead I would slip a cheesy Easter card into his locker. Maybe I’d cheerily greet him on other holidays, too. Thanksgiving? Halloween? Memorial Day? Groundhog Day? After we assassinated Hitler, we made witty small talk with undead Roosevelt and Churchill at Yalta.

My parents were OK with my video game obsession until my grades started slumping and they blamed the video games, and my mom tried to stop me from playing, and my dad made

jokes about how I was lazy, going to end up in fat camp, unemployed et al which he said “weren’t supposed to be serious, of course you will stay trim and eventually find the right job.” My uncle’s example didn’t help things much.

Eventually, my dad threatened to call the police on my uncle if he didn’t help pay the rent. He never contacted us after that, but I’m not really in any position to blame him. Live and let live, hate the fascists, hate death. That’s what we have in common.

We are in the old arcade, one of the only physical places left for video game geeks – here, a few festivals. There’s nothing innovative or cutting edge about these games, not like artsy games like REDFLIGHT or even Meteor Sweepstakes. There are, mostly, games about shooting things, and we’ve tried almost all of them.

The one Lia’s playing is one of our favorites. Her character runs through a maze while poisonous purple pixels ooze from the walls. Yellow brick barriers spring out of Lia’s hands; she shoots back the purple ooze, drops bombs which explode and carve out huge chunks of open space. At the end of the maze, there is a resupply station and a trapdoor which leads to the next level.

“I’m just blowing everything up,” Lia says. “I’ve saved up 17 bombs, and I’m going to use them all at once, so I blast away the maze and can see where I’m going.”

“You’re like Matt Damon in that action movie.” Lia’s wearing one of my old T-shirts that she wanted to have, which reads “Republicans for Voldemort.”

“Yeah, where he was supposed to be secret but everyone in New York saw him chasing that guy on buildings.”



“Nice one,” I say, as Lia drops a bomb. “Want a french fry?” I hold one in my fingers and Lia bites it out of my hand like an animal. “Just a minute,” I say, “I have to go to the bathroom.”

The bathroom’s dirty white and keeps reminding me that this is a place designed for shit, that people do nothing in the bathroom but shit. I am returning from the bathroom when I find Lia standing a space away from the classmates from the artists’ tables.

The red converse boy laughs. “You got a heart attack? Lia, you’d better watch your cholesterol.”

“Lia, are you high?” says the other boy. He stares at her with brown eyes, a dark, wholesome brown, the color of chestnuts and bears. He looks like the kind of boy who would be a boy scout, who would play lacrosse and football and get along with his mother.

“Are you high, Lia?” says red converse boy. “Is that why you’re not saying anything?”

Lia smiles, presses the “save score” button, smooths her long T-shirt around her body.

“She is high,” says the girl. The girl’s not pretty, with a face that tilts to one side, as if the skin was just slightly too loose. Lia walks away from the screen, towards another machine, and the boys and girls shuffle behind. “Lia’s stoned!” the girl calls. Lia keeps walking, at a normal pace, not turning to look behind.

I start walking towards Lia, fast, and the kids back away, straightening.

“She’s my daughter,” I call. It does not seem adequate, but it’s all I can think of. “Stop bothering her.”

“We weren’t bothering her,” says brown eyed boy, with surprise that seems genuine.

“What the hell do you think you were doing?” I shake my head and try to look stern. Was there a time when kids knew how to deal with unabashed difference, people who don’t join teams and apologize for teams, people whose problems don’t have to be everyone’s problems.

“You’re her mom?” red converse calls after us. Red converse boy looks young: reddish cheeks, flyaway, baby blonde hair. His body is big and lanky, skin freckled, marked with a few healing scars, maybe from falling out of trees or wrestling in the grass.

When I look up, Lia’s at another machine, feeding in quarters, watching intently as the game loads.

On the way home, the car’s lukewarm and filled with dust that crawls into noses and ears, like tiny bugs, and makes me want to itch my face off.

“You know, when I was your age, a lot of kids were mean to me,” I tell Lia,

“They don’t usually bother me,” says Lia. “And they’re easy to deal with.”

“You know, once you grow up, no one tries to mess with anyone else’s problems. Everyone just worries about themselves.” Lia yawns from the backseat. When we get home, she is slumped over the door, hair draped over the door. I reach down to smooth Lia’s thousands of tiny braids, like parallel friendship bracelets. I’d always associated braids with black people until one day Lia walked downstairs with twenty or thirty tiny braids, each secured with a different colored hair tie.

That night I lie in bed after three hours of Meteor Sweepstakes. We have almost unlocked the last level. I lied to Lia some more about working at Glacier software. Someday she will find out, and I will be screwed. What would happen if I told her? Maybe she’ll decide video games are more important, maybe we’ll meet again tomorrow on the couch to continue Meteor

Sweepstakes. Maybe she'll forget eventually, as school sways between easy and boring, and her friend group abandons ship, and she starts dating. Maybe it will all be forgiven among the detritus of life.

I remember hiking with my parents at the town forest, a place with a tall, bouldery hill I called a mountain. I was seven or eight years old, and my dad called straight into my ear in his excited, whispery voice. *Come on, Helen*, my dad would bend down and tap me on the arm, *Let's beat your slow mom to the top. She's too fat to catch us.* And we'd run up the hill, giggling, his giggles loud like bird calls. We'd lean against the rock at the top, drinking water, while my mom came slowly around the last bend.

Once, we started hiking down before my mom got to the top. My mom finally appeared at the hill's bottom, hair ruffled and sweaty, eyebrows screwed up with confusion. "Where were you," she said, "I was worried," but we would just laugh and laugh, out our mouths and our asses, laugh until we couldn't laugh any more.

That night I dream Lia and I are in our tiny kitchen area. Lia spreads her arms and closes her eyes, as if she's walking across hot coals. Her muscles are stiff like a deer standing in the road, and her eyes are squinted shut. She carries a bowl of Lucky Charms in one hand. I can see the veins in her knuckles. Lia walks right into my arms, the cereal bouncing onto the floor, bright dots of clovers spilling everywhere. I clutch her, and she lays her arms around me like the wings of a bird, covering me up. "Here," I say, and I hand her a game I didn't mean to let her play until she's older, but now I feel like it is OK. It is a token of our bonding, both Lia and I know that. I think the game is about Nazis. Lia puts it in her pocket, and I look out the window to see a

sprawling, pixelated rainbow, like a hand waving around in the sky. It is a new day, It occurs to me that I'm living a Greek myth, every night I sin and sweat and stew between the sheets. When I wake up, I am saved by my daughter's friendship, the friendship my daughter keeps locked away in bracelets. When I wake up, my daughter has forgiven me.

That week I take Lia to a video game festival. I bought the tickets six months ago and gave them to her last month as an eleventh birthday present. We've been checking off days on the calendar since then, the day of the festival marked with a bright red star.

We walk into the festival and I'm dressed in a new T-shirt with a picture of Meteor Sweepstake's main character building a leaning tower of meteors to the moon. Lia's dressed as the sarcastic cardinal from REDFLIGHT. She's wearing a costume she sewed herself, red felt scales that flow around her body.

I reach to brush dust off Lia's draped feather-scales. We walk in through the glass door. Inside are facilitators in bright colored suits who press our customized name tags into our sweating hands. Lia's reads, "Angry Bird." Mine says, "Geek Mom."

Artists' tables line the first, huge room. Piles of buttons and t-shirts are lined up, like oranges or dead fish in some market in another country. Lia hovers over the table, examining each button in one of the rows. "Why are you in a costume?" says a boy lingering nearby, a huge boy, dressed in a shirt with a player's number on the back and green Nikes. "You like video games enough to dress up?" Lia nods.

"Did you make that costume yourself?" says a girl.

“Yeah.” Lia smiles, an all-gums smile, tucks her friendship-bracelet braids behind her ears.

“It looks great, you’re a good sewer,” says the girl.

“Thanks.” Lia drifts towards another table.

“Want to get some food?” I hear myself saying, to the onlooking group of children, who stare at each other for a second. Brown eyed boy looks up at me, a confused smile on his face. I walk over quickly, and the boys and girl turn to glance at me.

Lia’s not at my side any more, I glance up and see her bent over a artists’ table, talking with a college student behind a pile of T-shirts. I walk quickly away, towards Lia, who’s holding a button that says “How many worlds did you build this summer?” up to the light. When I get there, she and the college student, a girl with at least five piercings, are engaged deeply in conversation. I hear something about T-shirt designs, the word Fireflight murmured – a new website, maybe, or a game I haven’t heard of yet.

“How do you print the buttons?” Lia asks, and the college student leads Lia to a hefty iron machine like a medieval torture device. The student’s necklaces jangle as they both bend over the machine, hair drifting towards eyes. Lia punches the top of the machine. The student glances back and smiles.

We eat bagged lunches from home, and I buy Lia the chocolate covered pretzel sticks from Japan that are so popular now. Being here reminds me of the cost of the tickets, and I feel determined to enjoy myself without spending much more. I give Lia fifteen dollars to spend freely, to take responsibility for, and we began to wander the booths. Around one corner a station

screened-off by a glass panel; inside, a few arcade machines release dull red light. A sign says “A chance to win a FREE beta version of Alien Invaders.”

“Want to do this?” I ask Lia, and we slip inside. An operator, dyed black hair looking purple in the light, walks up to Lia with a fake-looking grin. In the light she looks like a vampire.

“Hello, would you like to play the beta version of Alien Invaders? If you win the game, you could also win the game to take home.” Lia’s nodding and taking out a few crumpled dollar bills; I wonder if she’s folded them to make Washington into a walrus.

“Step right over here, we’ll fix you up with some goggles. These will make the aliens look 3-D.” Lia steps into the booth.

The booth operator slides the futuristic goggles over Lia’s eyes. Her finger hovers over the button, diving down to strike the aliens. Her character’s a huge-headed elfin guy standing in the middle of a city park. The aliens come from the street and the sky. The aliens can’t breath our air, and in their spacesuits look a lot like human astronauts. One, two, three, boom boom boom, crumpling up like aluminum foil in their spacesuits. Lia kills aliens until her health begins to fail. The little bar drops to the ground. Lia’s character crumples down, into a ball of pixels at the bottom of the screen. All wadded up in the fetal position.

“You were going to fast,” the operator says. “You got a heart attack.”

“A heart attack?” I ask. “In a video game?” But the operator’s talking to Lia, not Lia’s mom. Lia nods professionally, hair slicked back by the goggles.

“It’s a component of health. You have to take it slow. Would you like to try again?”

Lia says something and shells out a few more dollars of the money I gave her. I want to shout that the game’s somehow rigged, that in order to kill the aliens fast enough you would need

to die. Lia kills methodically this time, gun shooting like some kind of deadly sprinkler system. The aliens come in heavier and heavier barrages, falling from all sides. I'm surprised Lia's so good at this, it must be from going to the arcade; Meteor Sweep isn't a war game, a shooting game, and I've always thought of Lia as a pacifist.

"Come on, Lia! You're almost there!" And suddenly a bullet Her onscreen body crumples up and falls to the floor. Her goggles shine obsidian in the light.

"Lia, good job, time to come on out! Let's look at the artist tables!"

Lia's shaking the operator's hand, murmuring thank you, shelling out the last of the money I gave her. The red light of the booth shines like the red light around the moon.

The operator glances at me, annoyed, eyes blinking red in the light like some kind of female secretary version of Voldemort. "Almost got it that time. One more time?" Lia nods. The red light turns Lia's scales to digital fire, she looks like a phoenix on a screen. She looks like a beautiful creation.

"I have to meet some friends," Lia tells me, "I arranged to meet up with some people online."

"Who are your friends?" I try to sound curious. I know Lia plays on the computer when I'm not around.

A girl, older than Lia, fourteen or fifteen, with feathers strung into her hair. "Hi, are you...do you play on Dragonquest?" She squints at Lia.

Lia steps towards the girl, smiling in a way that strikes me as mysterious. "Yeah, I'm Fireflight," she says. I hope the girl isn't going to bully Lia. I hope she's being honest.

“Captain Murphy told me you’d be here,” she said. “I’m Rawr.” A smile twitches at Lia’s face. “I just want you to know you’re an amazing artist. You should take commissions.”

“Thanks,” Lia says, and suddenly her cheeks flush and a smile breaks out all over her face. “Did you read the new Tia Landry book?”

“I’m halfway through it,” the girl says, and toys with the feathers in her hair. “Remember the part where Death gets elected president?” The two girls laugh and speak with their hands, and Lia’s curls are bouncing like little animals. And suddenly three other kids, two other girls and a boy, all older than Lia, are around. I have a vision of the four kids ganging up on Lia, but she shakes all of their hands and hugs one, and takes their compliments with little nods and bounces of hair.

“Your last sculpture was so amazing, with the feathers.”

“You could sell these.”

“I saw your drawing on the Redflight Fandom homepage.”

I need to pee again, as I watch what happens there, everyone’s examining her necklace and shouting and laughing and brushing admiringly at her red scales. Lia’s hair is staticy and bouncing like a little animal, costume beautiful and shiny and a little dirty and sweaty. I want to shield her from Mama’s Homemade Hearty Chicken Soup, and I want to know she can always come back to me.