

L.S. CASKEY



# MOTHERBOARD

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Motherboard: Book 00: Prequel

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## CHAPTER ONE\_

I bit down on a piece of skin jutting out from my chapped bottom lip and pulled as I waited for my opponent to make his move. My attention was focused on the digital battleground before me, a murky place where the swamps met the plains, and bodies of dead soldiers littered the floor. We were in the final throws of the battle... and only one of us was coming out of this thing alive.

Past the graveyard of angels and pixies, I spied my still-standing elven goddess, Lakeshia the Emboldened. Her bow and arrow were steadfastly pointed at my opponent's arsenal, a vampire knight with ice-white hair and fiery red eyes.

Niclas Matxin was alone right now, but I knew what I was up against. If I didn't play my cards right, I would soon be facing down a whole horde of vamps I wouldn't be able to stop.

Just when I thought I was going to gnaw my bottom lip completely off, bubbles started to emerge from the inky depths of the swamps. Something was happening.



Lakeshia took a step back, her sandaled feet squelched through the muck to make room for whatever was about to appear.

The vampire knight kept his eyes zeroed in on the frothy marsh and grinned from ear to ear - as if the battle was already won.

*That isn't good.*

More and more pockets of air formed on the top layer of the swamp, each one bigger than the last. I watched as one popped and a putrid combination of fetid water and decaying biological matter shot through the thick air like a lightning bolt - hitting my nostrils with a sting. My eyes watered and I fought back the urge to vomit.

In real life, strands of my short, bleach-blonde hair stuck to the thin layer of perspiration dotting my brow like beads of water on the outside of a cold glass of water as I stared at the screen. I was nervous. *What is this thing?*

The threat finally started to materialize, and within moments I knew I was up against Felicius Gnaeus, the Dragon-god. I watched as the razor-edged wing-tips and the unnaturally smooth curvature of his horns rose out of the roily bog. Soon, his beady yellow eyes were above water and they fixated on my avatar, a thinner, more attractive version of me positioned at the back of the battlefield; his hard mouth drawn in concentrated focus.

He was going to kill me.

While he continued to rise from the depths of whatever hell hole he came from, I scrambled for an answer. He was relatively weak right now, but as soon as he became fully visible and completely free of the roots that bound him to the earth, he would reach full strength and be unstoppable.

My goddess shot arrow after arrow at the beast, but each one

hit his armored steel breast plates with a “*CLANK*” before ricocheting off and falling to the floor. Even in his fragile state, she was no match for him.

Big, burly storm clouds gathered, and bodies sunk into the mire as the growing behemoth gathered height and strength before me. His arms were crossed in front of his armored chest, his biceps the color of gunmetal.

I searched my stores for something, *anything* to combat the dragon. But I wasn't prepared for this and I didn't think I had anything I could use to defeat him.

And even if I did, I simply didn't have the resources. I was tapped out.

Then I remembered I still had one trick up my sleeve. Something sudden and unexpected that with a little bit of luck, would throw my opponent off just long enough to kill him.

The only thing I needed was a sacrifice.

I cringed for a moment. It was my only option...and I didn't know if that would even be enough.

But I couldn't think like that. I had to keep fighting.

With sudden and accurate precision, I cast a spell to immolate my elven goddess and watched as her iridescent blue-green hair caught the light and gave her one final moment of brilliance before she crashed into the mire.

Suddenly, the arch angel Julianna Maia burst through the graveyard rubble, and like a beacon, shot straight up toward the sun, a pale yellow disc barely visible behind the cloud cover. Her dark, ebony hair and skin was a beautiful, a stark contrast to the white and gold of her feathers and armor, which glimmered.

The muscles behind my shoulder blades relaxed as the slightly warm rush of the wind beneath her wings filled my ears and fanned my face.

She was *glorious*.

She was also effective. On her ascent, she fired off three succinct power blasts, all directed at the Dragon-god who was still rising out of the swamps. Each blast connected and pushed him slightly back down into the muck.

*Will it be enough?*

A thick, slow voice bellowed all around me, as if from the heavens, "CONCEDE!"

It came from my opponent; my *true* opponent. She wasn't visible, but I knew she had a full view of the battleground and complete control over her soldiers; just like me.

"Never!" I shouted back, without hesitation. The odds were stacked heavily against me, but I didn't care. I would fight to the death and would never concede.

"Do you really think you can defeat Felicius Gnaeus?"

Through clenched teeth, I managed to respond. "He isn't indestructible."

She laughed. It was sickly sweet. "We'll see about that."

Without warning, two shrieking vampire hawks burst through the misty cloud cover.

"Shit!" I shouted as Julianna narrowly escaped their outstretched, dagger-like talons.

In my mad dash to eliminate the Dragon-god, I had completely forgotten about Niclas Maxtin.

I nibbled on my bottom lip as my angel tried to fight back against the blood-sucking killer birds. I saw a flash of light and heard an elongated shriek a moment later, but quickly lost sight of the trio as they disappeared into the clouds.

I refocused my attention on the battlefield and my eyes darted back and forth between my enemies. Niclas Maxtin's red eyes glowed as he inched closer and closer. He wasn't smiling anymore because he was hunting...and I was his prey.

I glanced to the right at Felicius Gnaeus, who was once again growing. In moments, he would be free of the roots that bound him.

I looked to the heavens searching for my angel. I knew deep down there was no saving me, but I would never surrender.

"Ahhhhhhhhh!" I cried as my avatar charged. It was a suicide mission, but in real life, I was blinded by rage and doped up on adrenalin.

The god roared, and the vampire's eyes glowed even brighter before everything turned to a sudden and deafening black.

GAME OVER  
YOU LOSE



## CHAPTER TWO\_

"SHIT!" I roared as I ripped the VR goggles off my head and hurled them to my left - where they crash-landed against the old stone wall of the cluttered storage room I was sitting in, cracked apart, and plummeted to the floor.

I barely noticed. I had just lost another game of *Dansu*, and I was pissed.

*How the hell did she find that card?*

I pushed with all my angry might and sent my high-back gamer chair flying backward. The wheels slammed into a rickety bookshelf on the rear wall and the impact reversed my momentum and began to tip the chair over. My stomach dropped and I tucked my chin as I threw my weight forward to compensate. I held my breath as the chair wobbled back and forth about three and a half times and then exhaled quickly when it remained upright.

Closing my eyes, I took a deep breath only for an old soda can from the top shelf to suddenly crash-land on the top of my head. It was like the punchline to a really bad joke.

"Ouch!" My hands flew to my skull while I kicked the now fallen can and watched as it skittered back toward my computer terminal: three towering columns of stacked monitors, each about four feet high. At its base was a keyboard, a deep purple stress ball that had seen much better days, and a thick cable that connected the entire thing to the Motherboard. It all sported a tag of ownership: *Property of DragonCorp*.

My fingers ran along my head, as if rubbing the wound would make the pain go away.

"Why does shit like this always happen to me?" I complained, loudly asking no one in particular. I was alone in this musty room, and there wasn't anyone else around for miles.

I huffed a big gust of air in, puffed out my cheeks, and slowly blew it out. I hated losing and I had to get even.

Pitching my weight forward, my feet kicked against the smooth concrete floor below me to gain traction and my chair sailed back toward the computer terminal.

The back of my hand brushed aside a half-eaten protein bar sprawled across the keyboard and then my poorly manicured fingers flew to action. The inactive monitors all blinked to life and a pixelated, lime-green Motherboard logo flashed on each screen. My face lit up with their flickering glow.

## MOTHERBOARD

### Access Hub

Each screen displayed a portal to a different network within the Motherboard, and to access them, all I needed was a password.

I toggled over to the monitor in the middle of the bottom row of screens to connect to LUDUM, the gamer network virtually

everyone could access. Getting a password to LUDUM was easy, as long as you could afford the annual memberships rates.

My login handle was auto-populated, so hitting the tab button twice automatically jumped me to the password box. I typed in mine and waited a few agonizingly long seconds for the screen to load. My mouth stretched into a yawn as a gallery of images from a few of LUDUM's most popular games rotated across the screen, the whole thing was set to outdated, non-descript elevator music.

*Ping!*

No sooner had my dashboard appeared, when a chat box popped up in the bottom right corner of the screen: it was Daffy. My best friend and fiercest competitor.

DAFFY: BWAHAHAHAHAHAHA!

You definitely didn't  
see that shit coming!

Yeah, yeah, yeah. Let's  
see if you can do that  
again.

DAFFY: Do you have  
anything in your deck  
that can beat him?

Daffy was referring to Felicius Gnaeus, that damned Dragon-god. I snorted. She was so damn cocky all the time. My jaw clenched, but I bit my tongue. I wanted a rematch...but if I pissed her off, she'd disconnect.



No, but I have a card  
in storage that can.

DAFFY: You were losing  
before I brought him out  
though, so I'm not sure  
what good it will do...

Keep talking shit. We'll  
see what happens.

Daffy and I first learned to play *Dansu* ten years earlier when we were kids. We were living in the same commune at the time and played together almost every single day. We only lived together for a short time, but even after she moved away, we continued to play online.

That was the beauty of the Motherboard. No matter where we are in the world, if we could access the Motherboard, we could access LUDUM, which meant we could game online.

So we played *Dansu* all throughout our childhood and were always very evenly matched. But now that we were older, Daffy was starting to pull away, her skills too advanced for me to effectively combat.

And it was really pissing me off.

I rolled my eyes as I toggled over to a different monitor to access my storage account.

NUBES NETWORK  
*Storage for life!*

Login: \_

*The Nubes Network* was the storage network for the lower class. I inputted my login credentials, pressed enter, and watched as the login page dissolved. It was replaced by a continuous rotating hourglass symbol. The network was loading.

*Ping!*

My eyes darted back to the screen and the chat box; Daffy had responded.

DAFFY: Don't take all day  
getting that card though,  
OK? My dad has been bugging  
me to pack up my room and  
if I don't have it done by  
the time he gets back he's  
going put a hold on my  
LUDUM account.

Shit. That's serious.

DAFFY: Tell me about it.

I thought you weren't  
moving until next week

DAFFY: Change of plans.  
Again.

Any idea where you're  
headed this time?

DAFFY: Ha. As if. But  
it's not like I could  
tell you anyway ;)

I know, I know.

Wait a sec. Don't you  
have a *Dansu* tournament  
this wknd?

DAFFY: Yep. He doesn't  
care.

I'm going to need at  
least 30 min. You know  
how long it takes to  
connect to Nubes...

*The Nubes Network was as slow as it was cheap, and connecting always took forever...especially from here. My foot tapped against the floor faster than a DragonCore i77 Processor as I stared at the screen and watched the hourglass continue to spin.*

DAFFY: I can't wait that  
long.

Come on! Can't you pack  
while you wait or  
something?

DAFFY: Are you serious?

*I rolled my eyes again, but longer this time. Nothing was ever easy.*

OK, fine. There's a new  
backdoor hack I've been  
building. It's supposed

```
to allow me to jump from  
one network connection  
to another, w/o inputting  
a PW. It *should* get me  
in faster. Let's see if  
it works.
```

DAFFY: K.

My attention refocused on the keyboard in front of me. I was still connected to LUDUM, and within a few keystrokes I accessed the network's dashboard. My hands reached for my oversized white coffee mug with the phrase "I'D RATHER BE GAMING" written in big black letters. Lukewarm liquid lathered against my lips as I pressed several more keys and created a combination of characters that rolled off the tips of my fingers. I had been programming since before I could talk and memorizing code was second nature.

A black command box popped up in the middle of the screen and the cursor inside blinked impatiently. Another combination of numbers, letters, and symbols danced off my fingertips; ashen, off-white characters against an inky, jet-black background. This code was my baby and now it was time to push her out of the nest and watch her fly.

The finished script stared at me from the other side of the screen. The cursor had resumed its rhythmic tick.

Only one more button to press...

My eyes ran along the code; one final review.

I did it quickly, I already knew I had typed it in perfectly, then slammed my right pointer finger into the return button...

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*Boop BEEP*

...and watched as my code started to run.

ALSO BY L.S. CASKEY\_

## THE FARMED

(Book One of *The Farmed Trilogy*)

Published: April 2016

*No one thought human beings would be forced to farm their own in order to survive nuclear war. But in 2030, the CIA set out to do just that.*

*For 60 years, this genetically perfect race has been immune to all disease...until one day, a plague rips through their community, and suddenly they are not.*

*Desperate to protect their elite, the government will stop at nothing to find a cure.*

*But they didn't count on Winnie, a seemingly common teenage girl, who isn't very common at all: she's telepathic, extremely fast, and incredibly strong.*

*They arrested Winnie. They arrested Winnie's mother. Now she is determined to stop the government and liberate her people. Even if it means losing everything she loves.*

AVAILABLE ON AMAZON: <http://bit.ly/thefarmedbook>

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## THE MUTATED

(Book Two of *The Farmed Trilogy*)

Published: February 2017

*Against all odds, Winnie managed to escape San Francisco...but now she is being tracked, stalked by Mutants that roam the Wasteland.*

*Once human, exposure to radiation has rendered them more beast than man. But it*

*has also made them incredibly strong and shockingly fast, putting Winnie's own supernatural abilities to the test.*

*If that weren't enough, the people she cares about the most are missing. The Council continues to hunt them down and will stop at nothing until they are destroyed.*

*Will Winnie and her allies make it to Kansas City? If they do, will it be anything like they imagined?*

*In The Mutated, Lisa Caskey's second novel in The Farmed trilogy, the story of Winifred Kimball continues.*

AVAILABLE ON AMAZON: <http://bit.ly/themutatedbylisacaskey>

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## THE CURED

(Book Three of *The Farmed Trilogy*)

Published: March 2017

*Winifred Kimball was happy living in Kansas City...until the Council killed her best friend and kidnapped the only father she's ever known.*

*Now, the girl with superstrength and lightning speed is determined to return to San Francisco and make the government pay for what they've done.*

*But the Council has other plans. Armed with secret weapons of their own, they are set out to destroy Winnie, and The Enterprise, for good.*

*Winnie's own telepathic abilities continue to grow stronger every day, but will it be enough to save the lives of those she loves and the freedom of those she fights for?*

*In The Cured, Lisa Caskey's final novel in The Farmed trilogy, Winnie's journey comes to a shocking end.*

AVAILABLE ON AMAZON: <http://bit.ly/thecuredbylisacaskey>

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR\_

Lisa “L.S.” Caskey published her first book, *The Farmed*, in 2016, and books two and three, *The Mutated* and *The Cured*, in 2017. She also has walking tours published with VoiceMap (<http://bit.ly/lisacaskeywalkingtours>).

She lives in Phoenix, AZ with her husband, where she enjoys hiking, spending time with her mini-schnauzer, Betsey, and cozying up to a good book on a monsoon afternoon.

Lisa has a Bachelor of Fine Arts from the University of Arizona. More information about her and her work can be found at [www.lisacaskeyauthor.com](http://www.lisacaskeyauthor.com).





