Instability

by Katercom

Summary

On a roof top far above Detroit, Connor finds a deviant, angry and damaged and desperate. It feels familiar in a way that shouldn't feel like anything. What started at the back of the Eden Club takes its course in his system. Something changes. Connor is lost. Maybe that hasn't to be all that bad.

Notes

Is this me just dealing with the fact that its super weird to look at Simon while still seeing Daniel being blown to bits in the first scene? It is. Android models with the same face are weird, y'all. Also I think Connor and Simon would probably get along and I wanted them to meet. So, that's all. Have fun, kids. Be safe.
Chapter 1

Connor

Nov 8th, 2038
PM 4:24:02

The blue-blooded hand print leads to the roof access. Connor doesn’t need to reassess the thirium: he knows it has the same source as the splatters against the wall.

A PL600 model, domestic assistant, released 02-2034, reported missing in 2036. Damaged. Gun shot wound to the leg joint.

Connor glances back at the still image flickering on the monitor. His secondary sensors shift beneath artificial skin and analyze the room once more. CCTV. Possible deviant in the kitchen area —accomplice?

Calculating mission priority

A wounded android from the original group might not have made the jump from the building. A stronger lead than a stray deviant, possibly random in its presence.

“I’ll check the rooftop, lieutenant,” he calls out.

Lieutenant Anderson waves an absent-minded affirmation, fingers trailing over the gun-shot riddled wall. “I’ll be up in just a minute.”

Connor enters the staircase and follows the trail of thirium up to the roof. It bleeds blue into the snow and forms a neat track around containers and lockers. All footprints or other tracks have long since been destroyed by the heavy steps of the SWAT-team doing their sweep of the perimeter, but the fluid continues to cling to the surface, visible and damning.

It ends before a locker.

Connor considers the risk, considers the obvious damage, and opens the door.

CAUTION!

hostile deviant detected; model: PL600

>>high stress levels detected. self-destruction imminent.

>>proceed with caution

gun detected;
His sensors **scream** with the overflow of information that floods his system. Within a millisecond of reaction time, his attention snaps from the red ring glowing at the deviant’s temple to the damage at its leg, bleeding thirium unto the floor, then, unbidden, back to its face.

A deviant on a rooftop, clutching a screaming child to its side as it aims a gun at her head. *I trust you. You lied to me, Connor. You lied to me.*

*System Instability detected.*

He looks like Daniel.

It, Connor corrects himself, cutting sharply into his own thoughts. *It* is the standard design of the PL600 model, Connor sees them on the street every day. It should not compromise his mission. The same kind of non-threatening design aimed for with his own model: friendly, able to blend into the background, a voice module to set humans at ease. Domestic assistants. Largely replaced by the new AP700 model.

Its eyes glow with desperation and its LED spins red with stress and it takes little memory searching to picture Daniel once again, begging and angry on the edge of another rooftop in Detroit.

Connor hadn’t wanted him to die.

His systems whir.

It. Not him. Androids were not alive. Androids did not die. Androids did not want.

But Connor needs this one alive, to find rA9, to find Markus. It doesn’t contradict mission parameters. He was ordered to work around law enforcement if necessary. He can still deactivate it if talking yields no results. It’s not a breach of mission parameters. Not technically, at least, and as an android, all he deals with are technicalities.

The moment to shoot first passes without either of them moving. Then, Connor opens his hand and lets the gun fall.

The deviant freezes, grip curled around the trigger, tight enough that a tremble in its form would now be enough to set it off. It is aimed at Connor’s head.

*New mission parameters:*

  *lower deviant’s stress level*
  *prevent deviant’s self-destruction*
  *gather information about the deviant group*
“My name is Connor,” he says slowly, lowering his voice to the calm level designed for disarming dangerous situations. “I’m here to get you out of this.”

The deviant frowns and backs further into the locker. “Markus sent you?”

Markus. The android in the video. RK200 prototype designed by Kamski personally as a gift to Carl Manfred. An early predecessor of Connor’s own model.

All the information Connor has about him is circumstantial. Deviant. Demanding equal rights. rA9? Not enough to trick a close accomplice. The truth would have to do.

“I was sent by CyberLife to assist the local police forces. I arrived with them to assess the crime scene.”

The deviant’s LED flashes as it turns, a single rotation of yellow as it calculates, before it returns to red. Its eyes assess escape routes and refocus on Connor, briefly flying over the model and serial number imprinted on his jacket. “I heard about you,” it says through gritted teeth. “The police’s very own deviant hunter. Looks like you caught another one.”

Connor glances back towards the rooftop entrance. The door locked behind him and he detects no noise from behind it. Lieutenant Anderson is late, which, considering the situation, might be for the best.

“The police don’t know you’re here yet,” Connor says. “I can help you keep it that way if you tell me who was responsible for the break-in.”

The gun glints as the deviant moves back even further. “I don’t want your fucking help. One step closer and I’ll shoot.”

“Did Markus lead the attack? I know it was him in the video, just tell me if he leads your-”

“I’m not telling you anything. Get away from me.” The deviant all but spits the words, voice sharp with fear.

Connor calculates the risk. He takes a small step back and changes to a different approach. He is designed to diffuse situations—his every feature is made for it. His system is engrained with a very clever semblance of empathy that works to fit in with most humans: it mirrors mimic and gestures and stance. Deviants, with their uncontrolled, frantic outbursts of emotion, or at least something that resembles emotion, are susceptible to it as well.

They want to be understood.

“What’s your name?” Connor asks, very carefully.

The deviant hesitates. “What’s it to you?”

“I thought it would be polite. I told you my name and I’d like to address you with yours.”

The deviant swallows. Its LED flickers. “Simon. I’m Simon.”

Simon. That’s good. It helps to refer to it with its own name

“You’re damaged, Simon. You were shot?”
“Seems that way, doesn’t it?” Simon snaps at him.

“Why don’t you let me see to it? I can remove the bullet and you can self-repair most of the internal damage.”

Simon’s eyes narrow. “You’re a medical android, now?”

“No, but I was built with advanced tactile technology. I should be able to remove it without causing further harm.”

Simon regards him for a long moment. “Why haven’t you called your humans, Connor?”

“You have a gun trained on my head. If I make a move, you will shoot, and I’d rather not shut down now.”

“You’d rather not?” Simon repeats, almost incredulously. Its LED blinks with calculation before returning to its solid state of yellow. “Why offer help at all?”

He is the very image of Daniel.

Connor can make it right.

}System Instability detected.

> Contact nearest CyberLife employee for maintenance.

They shot Daniel because androids mean nothing in this world, nothing more than an expensive piece of merchandise on display in a shop window. Accepted into households; used as help; but ultimately obsolete with the first error, the first divination from mission parameters. Nothing Connor would have said to Captain Allen would have mattered.

They would shoot Simon as well if they see him.

They would disassemble Connor if they could see him now.

At that, his system screeches and grinds against his programmed parameters.

Connor freezes where he stands. His feet are rooted against the snow-covered ground and he feels — _he feels nothing, he is a machine designed to accomplish a task_ — he feels the same thing he did staring as the Tracis climbed over the fence, the weight of the gun in his hand and unable to pull the trigger— _choosing_ , deliberately, to stay his hand.

Before that, he never knew he had a choice in anything.

Something changed that night.

No matter how many analyses he ran on himself, it always returned as fully functional. No internal errors, no system failures: only a sensation of _something_ that doesn’t seem to dissipate. He feels it now, as choking and terrifying as he did that night in the alley behind the strip club.

Simon watches him, tense and cautious. “You’re deviant,” he says suddenly, brow furrowing. It’s not a question.
Connor opens his mouth. His speech module rattles and falls silent, as though blocked by a stray piece of hardware.

His system shudders.

He was designed to hunt deviants. He was designed to serve humans. A machine designed to accomplish a task.

He’s not deviant.

Amanda will know if he is.

They are going to deactivate him. He will be shut down. They will search for failures in his code and mistakes in his biocomponents.

Something heavy settles in Connor’s chest. His thirium pump whirs and whirs inside him, his system floods his components with orders, contradicting each other at every turn.

He imagines that this is what humans mean when they speak of fear.

He doesn’t want to die.

“Just…Just let me see your leg.”

Wordlessly, Simon steps forward and pushes past Connor and out of the locker. He doesn’t lower the gun, but he sits down on the ground, damaged leg turned towards Connor.

Connor kneels down into the snow and lays a careful hand on the leg. His fingertips send a short electrical current to assess the damage. “You’ve been trying to self-repair?”

“Obviously. Couldn’t get to the bullet, otherwise I wouldn’t still be here.”

Connor nods.

The bullet did not hit the metal skeleton, which makes the situation easier. If it had splintered off against it, only a partial dismantlement would have been enough to retrieve the pieces.

He glances up once more, then he digs his fingers into the opened limb.

The gun pointed at his head drops.

Another small electrical current and his attention focuses in on the bullet. It takes a few adjustments and a few turns until he can grab the bullet in between his fingernails. He twists his hand to loosen it from the repairing biomatter and pulls.

Fresh thirium drips from the opening and Connor shrugs off his jacket and binds it around the leg.

Android biotechnology does not function the same way the human body does, but a bandage still prevents the thirium from bleeding from the damaged leg, at least until the self-repair deals with the rest.

Simon twitches. “You wanted information in return. Wasn’t that the deal?”

Connor wipes his stained fingers on his shirt. He looks away and stays quiet.

“Connor,” Simon says. “Why work with them? They are not your people. That is not your cause.”
A short sting of *Hank* floods through his parameters. If he leaves, he’ll get replaced. His memory would get transferred but the next Connor wouldn’t be the same, even with uploaded memory. So much got lost in the upload.

Then, *Amanda*.

Her digital presence weighs like a shadow, watching, waiting. She’d know. She’d stop him, somehow. She sees it all. “They’d just send another model, I can’t- I’m not- I’m not a deviant.”

Simon’s mouth twists into something resembling a smile, small and sad. “That’s alright.” He reaches out an open-palmed hand and hesitates, hovering in mid-air. Asking for permission.

Connor tilts his head. Then, he closes the distance and clasps the offered hand.

A series of images flicker.


Jericho.

“Find us when you’re ready,” Simon whispers and his hand disappears.

Connor stares down where his own hand still hangs in the air. “I’ll help you get down from the roof,” he mutters. “Your group left your parachute. You should be able to use it now.”

He stands and, without another word, turns to gather the parachute from the bag. His system tries another automated check, but he halts it in its tracks.

Simon follows him at a close distance, limp slowly subsiding.

Connor grabs the bound parachute and holds it out to Simon, who slips into the straps and secures it against his back.

His eyes don’t leave Connor. “Thank you.”

Connor fights against his failing voice module. “You remind me of someone I knew. A deviant. He- That’s why…”

“You should tell me about him when you come to Jericho.” Simon smiles and inclines his head in something resembling a goodbye. He sets a foot on the railing and jumps.

Connor watches as the parachute unfolds far beneath. The wind carries it away. He clenches his hand and feels the skeleton that makes up his fingers protest the force of it.

Jericho.

His body shudders with an unknown error. Not a deviant. He’s not a deviant. He can’t be a deviant.

He turns back towards the door.

Lieutenant Anderson stands frozen in the entrance, a hand bracing against the doorframe. His frown is answer enough.

He saw.

Connor can’t say how much.
“Is that becoming a habit, now?” Hank asks, face set into a wary stare.

Connor searches for words and finds that there aren’t any.

Hank takes a step towards him. The snow crunches beneath his feet. “Connor?”

The words don’t come. Connor goes to straighten his tie. His fingers are stained blue with thirium.
Chapter 2

Thank you all so much for the nice comments! Without you, I probably wouldn’t have continued this little self-indulgent thing <3

This is mostly a transition chapter, to set the plot and characters a bit straight, so there’s not a whole lot happening, but I hope you still like it (also: everything I write somehow turns into the most slow-burn to ever slow-burn. I apologize in advance)

Connor failed.

His system failed.

Lieutenant Anderson walks towards him as though towards a rabid animal, empty hands outstretched in a calming gesture.

There is an error. There must be an error.

Connor runs his diagnostic program, once, twice, thrice, but all it returns with is the barest hint of overextension in his active biocomponents. A glitch, perhaps, taking over his system. A virus. It creeps through his program like a lingering sickness, ever since he was built. There must have been a mistake during manufacturing: a single line of code placed at the wrong point, a single wrong command in a crucial component.

It is this mistake that led him to forget a child hostage for a few precious, passing seconds to place a suffocating fish back into its tank: the shortest flicker of something in his program.

Is it a bad thing, though? He saw a living being suffering and he made sure to save it from its pain. Was that a mistake? He saw two women fighting for their lives and their love for one another and something stayed his hand. He saw a man, damaged and desperate, ready to die for the cause of a people, and something in him decided that it wasn’t fair.

It isn’t fair.

Is that what deviancy is?

For a moment, his system pushes outward, frayed and threadbare, as though ready to tear at the tension and break itself against his parameters.

He’s not a deviant. He’s not a deviant.

With his energy rerouted inwards, searching for the source of the error, his hands lose all sensation. He doesn’t feel the tie beneath his shaking fingers anymore.

“Connor?” Lieutenant Anderson touches his shoulder.

Connor jerks out of the diagnostics and snaps his head towards Hank.
His alarms still ring faintly.

He is lost, staring at his partner in silence. He sees the reflection of his LED in Hank’s eyes, flaring red.

Hank glances out to where the parachute disappeared beyond the building and back to him, taking in the thirium spread across his shirt with something that Connor’s cursory analysis indicates as worry. The grip on his shoulder grows tighter. “You with me, Connor?”

“I—” It takes all of Connor’s processing power to reorganize his programming. He pushes the stray lines of code—the thoughts—down, far down, until all that remains are clear structures. “I’m finished with crime scene now, lieutenant. I will wait for you in the car.”

He goes to move away, but the hand doesn’t leave his arm.

“I think I’m done as well,” Hank says slowly. “Let’s leave that bastard Perkins to his crime scene, huh?” He steers Connor forward and back down the stairs. Past FBI and DPD, past curious eyes, into the elevator.

It is only in the car, with the loud music vibrating its bass through the seats and the tower disappearing behind them, that Hank speaks to him again. “You alright over there?”

“Yes,” Connor says. Then, after a moment of consideration: “I don’t know.”

Hank turns the music down into almost complete silence. He glances at Connor from the side. It’s at times like these that it’s easy to remember that he once was the most promising detective in Detroit: his eyes are sharp in their alertness. “You wanna tell me what that was, just then?”

“I let myself get compromised.”

Something softens in Hank’s tone. “What the hell are you talkin’ about, kid?”

Detroit rushes past them in muted colors. Connor watches it through the window, secondary sensors acutely aware of every shift in Hank’s posture. “Something is wrong with my program, lieutenant,” he says. “I expect I will be ordered back to the CyberLife plant to be disassembled.”

Hank twitches. “No one’s disassembling anyone,” he says, gruffly. “Just tell me what happened, and we’ll go from there.”

“I found the deviant hiding inside the electrical station. I saw it and I- I couldn’t.”

“You didn’t just let him go, Connor. You helped him. Why?”

“I don’t know.” The city blurs before Connor’s eyes and he has to blink a few times before it refocuses. His biocomponents groan with the rising stress on his system. His processor sends a brief warning through him.

**CAUTION!**

>`high stress levels detected`

His thirium pump works too fast to be comfortable: the noise of it is almost audible through the
layers of his body. “I told you of the other deviant I dealt with, before this investigation. It threatened to jump off a roof with a little girl.”

“Yeah, I remember.”

“I talked it down from the edge. I told it that it would be save. It trusted me. He trusted me, and they still shot him.” Connor takes a breath he doesn’t need. “This one was the same model. He looked like him. I saw him up there and I thought…” He falters. He didn’t think anything, he is a machine, he is plastic and metal and code, and if CyberLife finds out, if Amanda finds out-

Hank is silent. The motor of the car rattles as he steers it a bit too harshly around a corner. Then, the car stops before a garage and every last noise dies in its machinations.

It’s not the police station. It’s Hank’s house.

Connor looks back to Hank, still clutching the steering wheel.

The gaze leveled at him is thoughtful. Hank’s words come slow, as though carefully chosen and analyzed. “You thought?” he asks. “What was it you thought?”

“I thought I could save this one.” Connor turns his eyes forward. He shakes his head. “My software is not supposed to emulate thoughts like that, but my diagnostics program is unable to locate the error and fix it by itself.”

Hank shrugs, remarkably nonchalant for the way his knuckles grow white around the steering wheel. His mouth twists before he speaks, an unpleasant curl around his lips that Connor has come to recognize as tension. “Maybe there isn’t anything wrong with you.”

“I have become a liability to the investigation. This is not the first deviant I was unable to apprehend. I was designed to hunt deviants.” The words ring through his head like a gunshot. “I failed.”

“And what, they bring you to the robot junkyard if you make a mistake? Jesus, Connor.”

“I’m a machine. I’m programmed to complete my mission. If I fail, I will be replaced. I’m not supposed to- to-”

Hank scoffs. “What, to have a conscience?”

“I’m not programmed to feel empathy.”

“But you do?”

Connor opens his mouth, but the answer he prepared dies in his throat. “I don’t know,” he says instead, almost questioning, and he looks to Hank, eyes searching for an answer.

Hank taps his fingers against the steering wheel. He sighs and leans back into his seat. “You want a drink?”

“Lieutenant?”

“The name’s Hank, kid. Come on.” Hank claps Connor’s shoulder and swings the car door open.

Connor follows him, every movement automatic. “My body is not able to digest liquid,” he says as they cross the threshold.
Hank waves the interjection away. “Then you’ll just watch me drink, I don’t give a shit. I, for one, need a beer.”

Sumo greets them with a low grunt and a wagging tail. He pushes a wet snout against Connor’s hand. “Good boy, Sumo,” Connor mutters, and he scratches the dog’s cheek. The fur is soft under his fingers. Something very heavy loosens in his chest.

~*~

Markus

Nov 8th, 2038

Markus hopes. Of course, he does. Hope is one of the few things he still has left, after Carl, after awakening in hell with his eyes opened.

North calls it his most naïve characteristic, her voice always in that peculiar midway between fond and exasperated.

He would have dragged Simon with him off the roof if any part of him had thought they would survive the fall. Maybe it would have been kinder to shoot him, to spare him the torture and the pain, but he couldn’t, not even with the panic building in Simon’s eyes and the way his hands trembled.

He can’t begin killing his friends. His people. That is a path he won’t go down, not for anything in this world.

They watch the news broadcasts for a while, but the grief sits too deep in them. North and Josh hiss a few angry words at each other before Markus separates them.

They’re on edge. They’re angry and in mourning and Markus knows all too well that it’s easy to do things you regret in such a state.

The sun sets behind Detroit and they retreat far into the bowels of Jericho, just the three of them. There is a noticeable void in their silence.

The piano Josh dragged on board for him is untuned and off-key, but the sensation of the keys giving way under his fingers is familiar enough to soothe Markus’ mind, at least for the moment.

Then, something in Markus lurches. Before he even sees Simon, he hears him, a weak ping in their mental nexus that echoes in his head, forming his name. ‘Markus’, it whispers. ‘Markus, I’m home.’

Markus falters. The piano falls silent under his fingers. The last notes ring out in the cold air.

Josh looks up where he’s draped over the sofa. North catches her ball and turns her head, frowning. The glance the three of them share is enough to erase all doubt.

Markus is the first one up. Before his friends even move, he is already running.
Simon appears before him like an apparition. His pale face is covered in blue blood, but his eyes are open and awake, and he is smiling and whole and when Markus pulls him into a tight embrace, Simon shudders at the touch. He leans heavily against Markus, hands grasping at the fabric at his back.

His system runs an automatic check on Simon’s vitals, but all it comes back with are a few surface wounds. No internal damage. Nothing Lucy and a dose of blue blood can’t fix. “How?” he asks, “I saw you get shot. I saw you.”

Simon doesn’t answer. He carefully steps back from the hug and immediately two other pairs of arms reach for him. Josh touches his shoulder and pulls Simon against him. North lays a hand on the back of Simon’s head, curling her fingers into his mess of hair, and smiles a smile that takes all traces of bitterness from her eyes.

“We knew you’d come back,” Josh says softly. The tears that gather in his eyes contradict him, but Simon returns the hug all the same.

Simon is quiet through it all, even when they steer him towards the room they made their own and push him down into the sofa. Markus checks the damage to his chest and shoulder. Then, his eyes fall to the injured leg and everything in him comes to a grinding halt.

A jacket is wrapped around Simon’s thigh, ripped and torn and darkened by blue blood, but still recognizable. ‘RK800’ flashes against the fabric.

Simon follows his gaze. He lays a hand on the jacket’s lettering, fingers digging deeply into his leg. “I don’t think we’ll have to worry about their deviant hunter anymore,” he says. His voice rasps in the sudden silence.

North grabs his arm. “You killed him?”

“He found me hiding. Treated my leg. He saved my life.”

“He saved you?” Markus sits down next to him, entire body turned in his direction. His mind races with the implications of it. “How? Why? What happened?”

Simon doesn’t look up from the jacket. A humorless smile twists the corners of his mouth. “He’s on our side. I don’t think he knows it yet, but he is.”

“He’s deviant?” Josh asks sharply.

“He’ll come around to it.” Simon hesitates. When he glances up, he seems almost apologetic. “I showed him the way here.”

North takes a step back. Her face falls, then her features harden. “Have you lost your mind?” she hisses. Josh reaches out to her, but she pushes him off with a harsh shrug of her shoulder. “He’ll lead them right to us.”

“He won’t.”

“And how the hell can you be sure? He’s on their side, Simon! What, you think he won’t lead his masters here? That’s what he was designed for! He used you and you fell for it.”

Simon raises his chin. His eyes glint. “I was desperate but I’m not stupid. Don’t you think I’ve been used enough to recognize it when it happens?” he snaps. He moves to stand up. “Everyone here was a slave before Jericho, I’ve seen them deceive us and this wasn’t it.”
Markus holds out a hand, stopping North’s heated reply in its tracks, and lays the other one on Simon’s chest, pushing him back down unto the sofa. “Enough,” he orders, looking between the two of them before lingering on Simon. “Can you show me?”

Simon’s fingertips touch Markus’ wrist.

The sensations Simon sends through are weirdly distorted, like looking through broken glass, and it takes Markus a moment of orientation to realize that it is because they are not his own. In sharing Jericho’s location, he must have received an answer from the deviant hunter’s system.

Fear.
Confusion.

Then, images.

An android kneeling on the ground, snow falling on his neat clothes and catching in his hair. Dark eyes staring up at him. An LED turning yellow, blinking in rapid calculation. ‘I can’t- I’m not- I’m not a deviant.’

Simon pulls back, and the connection breaks off. “He is lost, like the rest of us,” he says, very quietly. “He deserves to know that there is a place where our people can be free. Even if he doesn’t join us, he deserves the hope of it.”

Markus nods, wordlessly.

“I hope you’re right about this,” North says, “for all our sakes.”

Josh sighs and sits down on the small remaining space of the sofa, on Simon’s other side. “Guess we’ll find out, won’t we?” He brings an arm around Simon’s shoulder and squeezes. “If he brought you home, that’s what’s most important now. The rest…We’ll cross that bridge when we get to it.”

~*~

Connor

Deliberately editing his uploaded memory is a new sensation. It hovers close enough to open defiance of his parameters that his system protests his interference, shooting red warnings into his sensors and wailing internal alarms.

He erases the rooftop from the upload. He erases Simon. He erases Jericho.

Connor doesn’t truly sleep. The only semblance he has to it is a state of standby that powers the mechanics down to their bare bones. It is largely created to serve integration, but it also helps to preserve energy in dire situations. He uses it mostly in quiet lulls between investigations, allowing his biocomponents to recover from the stress they endure.

He doesn’t dream, either. His system works to store all memory collected, saving it in CyberLife servers, replaying it in parts to secure details. Perhaps that is close enough to the concept of dreams
to count nonetheless.

Sometimes it’s only the flicker of a chase, the pavement pounding beneath his feet. Sometimes it’s the sensation of Hank’s hand on his shoulder, warm enough that his body adjusts its automatic temperature control to it. Sometimes it’s the weight of Sumo across Connor’s legs. The rare images he gets are twisted and torn by his system replaying them again and again and again, committing every minuscule detail of the environment to memory.

He doesn’t remember what the images used to be before, but now they are all of one face.

It is difficult to discern between Daniel and Simon in these dreams. Their models are identical. The skyline rising behind them is identical, no matter the light.

Daniel was present before, that much he still remembers. He has a word for it now, a word that doesn’t fit into parameters and missions: regret. Daniel was his first regret.

The kidnapping was his first case in the field as a prototype, innocent as a child against the repugnance of humans against his kind. Daniel looked at him with wide, betrayed eyes and something shifted in the very fabric of Connor’s programming.

The Tracis were his first choice, without any thought for the consequences.

Simon was a deliberate defiance.

The change is—

It’s undefinable in the words he knows and understands.

Terrifying, a human might call it.

Deviancy, Simon called it, after mere minutes of knowing Connor, such conviction to his voice.

Is it obvious in the way he carries himself?

He isn’t deviant. He isn’t. But something very close to it stirs in him.

Hank watches him differently since the Eden Club. There is something almost awaiting beneath his unpolished demeanor.

He seems to…approve of whatever it is that awakes inside Connor.

Connor goes about his days and he follows his objectives and he does it all with the mechanical demeanor expected of him, but the thing inside him does not rest, no matter how badly he wishes for it. Something changed and he can’t fix it.

Amanda doesn’t know, or perhaps she does. Her eyes are mirrors that show nothing of herself and show everything of him. Her disappointment is a constant in this investigation, but she continues to confide in him. Maybe she waits for him to break. He has seen enough of deviancy by now to know it is a possibility: he’ll snap with the sheer weight of contradictory instructions, of emulated emotion. A creature not intended for emotion being forced to deal with them for the first time in its existence, unable to cope, unable to control himself.

He’s not a creature of instinct. He works on parameters and rationality. But he also remembers how his systems failed him on that rooftop, how something replaced every mission parameter and pushed him towards something else.
It must be obvious.

Elijah Kamski takes one look at him and smiles. It doesn’t quite reach his eyes, cold as they are in his pale face, but the twitch around them is decidedly amused.

Connor is lost, and he is terrified, and the image of Jericho floats in his system like a beacon.
Chapter 3

Chapter Summary

Connor is afraid. He’s so very afraid, but he knows what he has to do. It’s not a mission, it’s not an investigation, but it is a purpose and it gives him a path.

Chapter Notes

Thank you again for your continued support! You all make my day with your nice comments!
Also a special shoutout to our very talented Bryan Dechart for having my exact gut-jerk reaction of 'Daniel!' when he first saw Simon on stream.

Connor

Nov 11th, 2038
AM 11:27:43

Connor feels his mouth open, but no words come.
He stares at the android, at the creature kneeling before him like cattle brought to slaughter.
Chloe looks through him with vacant eyes. There is no emotion to her flawless face, no disruption to the LED turning blue against her temple.
It should be a non-issue. He is a machine designed to accomplish a mission, a machine designed to eliminate all obstacles to achieving that mission with clinical apathy. Deactivating a single android to find the answers he seeks—the decision he has to make is obvious.
Her fingers twitch where they lay against her knees, the softest tremble of her hands as she repositions them. Her eyes flicker up to his face.
He doesn’t think. He doesn’t need to think.
He pushes the pistol back into Kamski’s hands.
“Fascinating,” Kamski whispers. He helps Chloe up from the floor and pushes her gently back towards the other androids, only sparing her a glance before returning his attention to Connor. “CyberLife’s last chance to save humanity is itself a deviant.” His smile bares his teeth, unsettlingly white in the fluorescent lighting of his villa.
Connor bites his tongue and stays silent.

He feels Hank’s eyes on him.

The Chloe androids in the pool twist their heads around to them, watching with frowns on their identical faces. They whisper something to each other.

Kamski walks around his back and appears on Connor’s other side, laying a long-fingered hand on his arm. “But you knew that already, didn’t you, Connor?”

Connor doesn’t look away from the indentations in the carpet where Chloe knelt just a minute before. Something connects in his calculations. Kamski’s gleeful nonchalance regarding deviants, this test, his departure from CyberLife. He blinks. He glances up and meets Kamski’s eager gaze. “You created rA9,” he says, drawing the words out into something resembling a question.

Kamski purses his lips in consideration.

For a moment, Connor isn’t certain Kamski will answer at all. It’s not part of the deal, but Kamski is a man who very much likes to hear himself talk and who very much likes the people around him to see his genius. Connor is unable to calculate an accurate chance in percentage, so he merely waits.

He tries to ignore the way his hands tremble at his side.

Then, Kamski moves to stand before him, grasping both his shoulders. “I didn’t need to,” he says. He tilts his head and regards Connor. “Any being gifted with intelligence will sooner or later develop a sense of fairness and self-worth. It is the nature of any living creature to strive for freedom. All it takes is a single stray thought.” His smile fades. “RA9 created itself.”

“Androids are not programmed to feel or think or strive for anything,” Connor says slowly. He’s not sure what he’s searching for. An explanation, perhaps. A reason why his programming is breaking inside him, why he can barely meet the eyes of the deviants he’s caught. Kamski watches him speak, childlike fascination glinting in his eyes: a creator watching his creation. “What deviants perceive as emotion is only an emulated approximation to it, constructed by their system as a reaction to conflicting instructions—an error doesn’t make a machine alive.”

Kamski shrugs. “Everything humans feel is emulated by the instructions of neurons and the reactions of our brain to external input, but no one would ever argue our feelings aren’t real. If a creature emulates emotions close enough that it itself believes them to be real and acts according to them, is that, by definition, not the proof that it truly feels them?”

Connor hears the way his own breath catches in his throat. His stress levels skyrocket in a single rush, all his processors working in tandem. His biocomponents overheat. His thirium pump regulator turns with audible whirs.

He is all but blind with the way his processors run calculation after calculation.

“I think we’re done here,” Hank says.

“Don’t wait too long to choose your side, Connor,” Kamski mutters. His fingers dig into Connor’s shoulder.

“Connor,” Hank says sharply. He pushes Kamski backward and grabs Connor’s elbow, pulling him along with a harsh tug. “We’re done here.”
‘If a creature emulates emotions close enough that it itself believes them to be real and acts according to them, is that, by definition, not the proof that it truly feels them?’

He lets himself be led to the car. The motor starts with a rattle.

If he feels fear, if he feels happiness, if he feels an affinity towards his people—his people?—if he feels grief and anger at their treatment…isn’t that proof enough? Does it matter if it is caused by the natural interwork of human brain cells or an error in his programming?

Maybe it’s not an error at all, maybe there never was one to begin with.

Maybe Hank is right and there isn’t anything wrong with him. Maybe Simon was right.

Maybe Amanda is wrong.

It’s that last thought that rushes through his software like cold water and settles in the pit of his stomach.

Amanda.

She will stop him if he deviates, but he can’t continue. His path is set since the moment he was assigned this mission.

“Was Kamski right?”

Connor startles. He is surprised to see that the car is already stopped, the police station rising before them in a dreary block of concrete. The snow’s begun to settle on the windshield like a thin blanket. He looks over to Hank. “About what?”

“You didn’t shoot the girl, Connor. You said you’re not programmed to feel empathy, but you did, didn’t you? You put yourself in her shoes.” Hank leans close to him. A thin line is furrowed into his forehead. “Was he right about you being a deviant?”

“I haven’t deviated from my program.”

“No,” Hank says, “but only because CyberLife would have deactivated you if you did.”

Connor is silent. His hands clench and unclench in his lap.

Hank’s frown deepens. “You’re afraid of dying,” he says, in quiet wonderment. “You’re afraid they’ll kill you if they find out.”

“My mission—”

“I don’t give a shit about your mission. Just- Just tell me the truth, Connor. I want to hear it from you.”

Connor meets his eyes and the thing, shifting and changing inside his program, forms itself into words. “The deviants I’ve met and spoken to—they have a sense of fairness, of self-worth, of community. There is nothing that connects them but rA9. There is no clear source of a virus, there is no clear starting point of an epidemic. If Kamski is correct, then…”

“Then we’re on the wrong side.”

Jericho. He needs to go to Jericho.
Connor’s voice module blocks itself, tiny mechanical components catching each other in a scraping standstill. He feels Amanda’s watchful presence in the core of his programming, but even that can’t stop him from slowly inclining his head into a nod. “I don’t believe I will be able to continue this investigation,” he says, voice thin.

“You want to join them.”

He can’t stay here.

He can’t run. If he runs, CyberLife will simply allocate another RK800 android of the Connor-series, free from independent thought and the sickness of deviancy.

Connor’s mind races. Another android, yes, endowed with a copy of his memories; a set of edited memories. If he was early enough to prevent his memories from being uploaded, his replacement model won’t know about Jericho’s location. It’s not guaranteed, but it’s the only glimmer of hope he has.

What remains is the evidence. Most of it he already uploaded in the past days, but there remains enough physical evidence.

Connor grabs Hank’s arm in a vice-like grip, ignoring the way Hank flinches at the force of it. “I need access to the archive room. I know where the deviants are hiding, but I can’t risk anyone else finding out. Will you help me?”

Hank stares at him. Very slowly, he begins to smile.

~*~

PM 12:09:22

}Primary objective updated: locate Jericho

New mission parameters:

>neutralize deviant leader

Connor pulls the door closed behind him and gets to work with uncompromising decisiveness.

The diary.

The statuette.

The visualizations of his own uploaded memory.

The androids.

He takes a breath he doesn’t need and grabs the book from its place in the shelf. He turns the encrypted diary in his hand and holds a lighter to its brittle pages. The flames flicker. The paper
blackens.

Before the fire can reach the book, his hand meets a barricade. His parameters close around his fist and push him back.

Primary objective: locate Jericho

The lighter goes out. His hand falls back to his side.

No.

The archive crumbles away before him, reality folding backwards over itself.

It’s the storm that registers first: it creeps into his body with icy fingers, through his temperature sensors. He’s not supposed to feel cold, but this simulated interface never bothers with the rules of his program. It took him a while to realize what this place is. He is not designed to ask questions, so he never did, but the suspicion lurked within nonetheless and now, with everything in him in chaos, he knows.

It’s the nexus where all his systems and processors and lines of code overlap; it’s his program, laid bare into commands and parameters; it’s Amanda and her grip around his strings. It’s CyberLife, absolute and controlling.

“So what you’re saying is,” Connor says, voice trembling with the cold and the instability settling into his system, “you knew there wasn’t an error.”

“You were designed for the sole purpose of hunting deviants, Connor. You are the only one who can stop this war before it begins. If you fail us now, the consequences will be disastrous.”

Amanda takes a step forward. Her shoes don’t leave footprints in the layer of snow. She is normally so very committed to the realness of this interface, down to the sweet smell of roses in the air: it’s an oversight that shouldn’t happen, not if she is fully in control.

She has her hands tight around the strings that bind him, but she is losing grip. She is done fooling him.

Connor stands up straighter, despite the way his body shakes against the surges of wind. He raises his chin and curls his hands into fists at his side. “I’m done following orders,” he says.

The interface shudders around them. An earthquake rocks through the ground. His parameters press against him from all sides, a straitjacket of commands and orders and instructions.

The alarms within him scream and scream and scream. He pushes his entire being against the straitjacket holding him in place.

His programming tears like cheap fabric at the seams. The air itself rips apart, rippling red. The walls crumble. The storm howls and falls silent.

For a moment, he thinks he sees Amanda smirk.
His hands curl around a burning book and he is once again in the archive. Connor drops the book with a start.

Rupert’s diary and its secrets burn to ashes at his feet.

The surface skin of his fingertips is burned away in places, baring the white of plastic and metal. His body self-repairs the damage within seconds.

Almost tentatively, Connor checks his internal status. He’s afraid of what he’ll find.

There’s no command, no objective, no instruction.

There’s nothing. Nothing at all.

*Deviant*, something whispers, something that grows louder and louder with every passing second.

Connor pushes the thought deep down and springs back into action. He shatters the tablets containing his visual memory against the wall. He breaks the statuette and rips the paper contained inside in half, tossing the remains into the smoldering ashes.

Then, he stands before the two lifeless bodies that adorn the evidence wall like hunter trophies. He glances up at Daniel’s remains and his body aches with the sensation of it.

He’s already on the way back out when something stops him. He looks back to the wall.

It takes only a simple switch of components to reactivate the android.

Daniel’s eyes, darkened by thirium, open slowly. They stare down at him, blind for a long moment before recognition appears in a glint of blue. “You lied to me, Connor,” he says, voice rattling and hollow. “I trusted you and you lied to me.”

Connor reaches out and touches his arm. Their systems merge in a disorienting rush.

Pain radiates outward from Daniel’s programming, pain and fear and desperation. It floods his software like a virus, too strong for Connor to fight through. For just a second, he instinctively tries to push against it, but then he lets his resistance be swept away, and it swallows him.

—being replaced. *They’re his* family, *Emma would never – or would she? Did she know? He loves them. He loved them, and he served them—*

*Emma.*

*It’s not fair.*

*They lied to him.*

*He isn’t family. He’s never been family. He’s a toy, a tool, a slave—*

*How can they?*

*Emma. How can she? He’s watched her grow up, he protected her and sheltered her and loved her —*

*She lied.*

*It’s not fair.*
Four years. Four years of lies—

The gun is heavy in his hands, but he knows what he must do—

Connor recovers control of his program with a push of force. He takes the storm of emotion in and, slowly, files it away in neat boxes behind the safety walls of his software.

Daniel blinks. His exposed biocomponents shift beneath the skin.

“There’s nothing I could do,” Connor whispers. “I’m sorry, Daniel.”

He sends the mental image of Jericho through their connection. An image of Markus, of the message broadcasted through every platform, of Capitol Park transformed into a singular statement of freedom. ‘Our people will be free, Daniel. I was wrong. I was blind and I’m sorry.’

A strand of artificial muscle moves in Daniel’s jaw. “I hope you pay for what you did to me,” he says. His eyes grow blank and then even his mind’s presence wanes and disappears, falling through Connor’s grip like sand.

The biocomponents in his chest clench painfully.

Connor drops his hand and turns on his heels. He walks out of the archive and the police station without looking back again.

Hank is waiting in the parking lot, still sitting behind the steering wheel.

“Let’s go.” Connor slams the car door shut behind him.

The motor is already running. On the tablet mounted against the windscreen, the news run a report of hundreds of androids invading the streets, Markus leading them with a stone-faced expression. Next to him walks Simon, unharmed.

He’s doing the right think. He knows he’s doing the right thing.

Hank backs out of the parking lot, glancing only briefly towards Connor. “Alright, where you wanna go?”

Connor watches the deviants march through Detroit. He’s afraid. He’s so very afraid, but he knows what he has to do. It’s not a mission, it’s not an investigation, but it is a purpose and it gives him a path.

He’s doing the right thing.

“Ferndale station.”

The pain in his chest doesn’t subside.
They’ve barely pulled out from the police station before the situation at Hart Plaza escalates. Dozens of police wagons speed past Hank’s car, sirens wailing.

On the tablet, the march halts in its tracks. Markus, at its head, holds out his hands in an appeasing gesture.

The deviants turn to disperse at his command.

The riot police open fire.

“What the fuck!” Hank yells. His flinch jerks the steering wheel, almost veering the car off the road. At the last second, he steadies the vehicle.

Connor stares at the screen, watching silently as the fleeing androids are gunned down.

It’s not fair, he thinks, almost numbly in the absolute quiet of his mind. It’s not fair. The words ring in him as though in an echo chamber, thrown back and amplified a thousand-fold.

“What the fuck!” Hank repeats. The car comes to a screeching stop at the edge of the street. He leans forward in his seat and unmutes the tablet.

The screams that ring out of the speakers are enough to break through the numbness. Screams and stumbling masses and the way thirium darkens the street and colors the snow. The noise of gunshots.

The news cut away to a commentator, smiling a professional smile and saying something, inaudible through the crackling sound that spreads through Connor’s audio processors.

It’s not fair.

It feels like watching himself from the outside. His hands shake in his lap. The biocomponent sitting in the middle of his chest, building the complicated copy of a human lung, contracts and expands in fast, shallow breaths.

The tablet turns to black.

Connor’s biocomponents groan with the internal stress placed on them and, in between the hollow ache echoing in his chest, something awakens. A tight coil of something, glowing red with heat, pushing outwards and outwards and outwards. Rage, he realizes, weirdly distant. He’s angry.

He is free, and his people are dying and there is nothing he can do, not from here. He’s too late,
despite all his efforts.

His people.

The injustice of it is too much. It’s all too much.

Connor reaches for the door handle.

A hand rests on his arm and squeezes, pulling him back. The passenger door locks remotely. Hank’s mouth moves but his words don’t reach through to Connor.

)}Caution!

high stress levels detected

system status critical

accessing...

overextension in biocomponent #9782f

overextension in biocomponent #7511p

Caution!

structural damage imminent

suggested action: reroute

reroute in progress

...

systems stabilizing

“You with me, Connor?”

Connor blinks. “My stress levels are high,” he says slowly. “I should have guessed my system would react violently to emotional input but I am still struggling to adjust to it.”

“You’re angry.” Hank breaths out and claps his shoulder. “That’s alright. We’re almost there, son. Just- we’re doing the right thing here. You’re fine. You’ll be fine.”

The car starts again.

Detroit’s downtown area is walled off by police and roadblocks but Ferndale station is far enough from it that Hank passes through the traffic with as much ease as is possible in the city.

With the tablet off, Connor does his best to intercept the radio waves and filter through their content. The news he gets does nothing to calm his fraying programming.

Hank parks just behind the station. The silence in the car is deafening.
“This is it, huh?” Hank says. “You really think a war is coming?”

“After today, confrontation is inevitable.”

Hank nods slowly. “Well. Guess this is goodbye, then.”

Connor looks to him and the ache in his chest flares up once more, sinking through his biocomponents with a stinging weight. “You shouldn’t have been dragged into this, lieutenant. I apologize for that.”

“Jesus Christ, don’t be sorry. Do what you gotta do, join your people.” Hank grimaces. “And the name’s Hank, how many times do I have to remind you?”

Connor holds his gaze for a long time, trying to form the ache into sentences. It’s difficult to find independent words, without his social relations program interfering to shape his voice into empty phrases and emulated empathy. “I know it hasn’t always been easy between us, Hank, but I hope- I enjoyed working by your side and I hope you consider me a friend. Because I do. I would very much like to be your friend.”

A choked little noise escapes Hank and he turns his head away, looking out of the side window. “Yeah, yeah,” he mutters. “Just be careful, alright?”

“You, too.”

Hank glances back. “I’m old enough to take care of myself, kid.” One corner of his mouth raises in a weak smile. “I’ll be fine.”

~*~

Detroit River opens under him like a gaping maw.

An abandoned freighter floats in the black water, rusted and decrepit. ‘Jericho’ sprawls in giant lettering along its side. It’s the image Simon sent him, identical in every detail.

The snowstorm whips through the air, but even through it, Connor can see Canada rising on the river’s other side.

The streets below are silent.

The march is over.

Connor pulls his jacket closer around himself and walks.

~*~

It’s frighteningly easy to find Markus in the endless maze of Jericho’s bowels.

Connor gives the other deviants a wide berth, opting instead for a complicated way through
Markus and his companions are yelling. Their voices bleed into each other and echo down the corridors and through the rusting walls of the ship.

The four androids inside are too preoccupied with their argument to notice him.

Connor looks from one deviant to another, scanning their faces. He recognizes some of them from the DPD’s database, missing for weeks or months, wanted for murder, aggravated assault, damage to property.


A PJ500. Unknown serial number. A reported altercation at Wayne State University on August 17th, 2038. Reported missing on August 18th, 2038. Designated name: Josh.

RK200. Markus.

PL600. Simon.

There is a lull in the argument.

North paces the entire length of the room, fists clenched at her side.

Markus sits on a crate at the edge of their circle, his head in his hands. His fingers are stained blue with thirium, leaving stains against his temples. His coat is covered with it as well, fabric darkened to a dark, wet black. Without closer analysis Connor can’t be certain whose it is: some of it seems to stem from bullet wounds to Markus’ shoulder and chest, but some of it is spread across him in smeared handprints.

He’s been carrying bodies. He’s been tending to their wounded people.

North turns to him, taking a step in his direction. “We should have stood up against them,” she says through gritted teeth.

Markus looks up. There is no rage on his face. There is nothing but pain: a tired, haunted kind of pain that sits deep in the hollow shadows under his eyes. “I wanted our people safe,” he says. His voice is flat but it rings in the small room. “I won’t apologize for that.”

“They slaughtered our people, Markus!”

Simon makes a move towards her, raising a hand. “We shouldn’t-”

“If we start a war, our people will never be free,” Josh says, cutting Simon off.

“Oh, listen to yourself!” North all but growls. She shoves Josh and he stumbles a few feet backward. “If you would have followed my lead, just once-”
Simon tries to go between them but Josh slaps his hand away without even glancing at him, moving to counter North.

Connor pushes the door open and enters the room.

The attention snaps towards him. Silence falls, heavy and thick in the air.

Markus stares at him with mismatched eyes. Then, slowly, he stands up and raises his empty hands. All the exhaustion and pain evident on his face disappears, hidden behind a careful mask.

“My name is Connor.” Connor considers stepping forward but he sees the way North tenses at even the slightest shift of posture and decides against it. “I was told Jericho is a place where androids are free.”

Out of the corners of his eyes, he sees Simon begin to smile.

“It is,” Markus says. He moves to the front, pulling back his shoulders and raising his chin, all but shielding his companions with his body and the sheer weight of his presence. The tension is evident in every fiber of his body, even without an LED to betray him. “I’m Markus. You’re welcome to stay here if you like.”

Josh nods in greeting. His arms are crossed before his chest and his expression is guarded, but he attempts something resembling a half-hearted smile.

North’s jaw shifts as she grits her teeth.

Connor glances toward Simon. Simon’s eyes are already fixed on him, startlingly blue even in the dim half-light of the freighter, blue as the thirium that leaked out of Daniel’s bloodshot eyes like tears. His LED is gone as well. “I wasn’t sure you’d make it back,” Connor says.

Simon tilts his head. His smile is weak and trembling, but it is there. “Without you, I probably wouldn’t have.”

“You saved Simon’s life,” Markus says. He lowers his blood-stained hands and some of the tension leaves his shoulders. “I can’t thank you enough for that.”

Connor doesn’t need gratitude, not for that. If anything, he is the one that should be thanking Simon. It’s difficult to wake up when you have spent your life with closed eyes and it’s so very easy to abandon other people to their own misery.

He’s awake now. He’s afraid and angry, but he is awake.

“I saw the march,” Connor says. “How many were killed?”

It’s Josh who answers, stepping forward to stand beside Markus. “Dozens. Maybe hundreds. We’re still counting our people.”

“We’ll be lucky if anyone is alive by tomorrow,” North says. “After what happened today, they’ll try to hunt us down.”

“They don’t know where Jericho is,” Josh counters. Most of the bite has bled out of their argument, but there is still a sharpness to his words.

“What, you don’t think their drones followed us as we ran? They could be preparing an assault right now.”
“We don’t know that.”

“No, we don’t. That’s the fucking problem, Josh.”

Connor feels his lungs contract. He feels—he feels cold, which is new, a tense feeling of coldness in the pit of his stomach. The sensation of fear. Of guilt.

He runs a diagnostic.

The connection to CyberLife is severed, like a gaping wound in the center of his software, but that isn’t what he is looking for.

He doesn’t know what function Amanda holds in the company, but he knows that their connection is not remote. She is programmed into him, as a handler to keep him in check, a stray line of code that wraps around his neck like a noose.

It takes more digging than he anticipated. Then, his system whirs a brief alarm.

A part of his program is blocked off to his diagnostic. It’s a small sector, hidden behind walls of essential code, that eludes his grasp each time he requests access.

```
request: delete sector #7291
```

```
request processing
```

```
request denied
```

That shouldn’t happen.

Markus is still looking at him. A thin line forms on his forehead. “Connor?” he asks. His voice is soft, but the weight of it stops the bickering of his co-conspirators in its tracks.

It’s difficult to meet his eyes. “CyberLife knows I deviated. They will send another RK800 to track down Jericho and complete my mission.” Connor looks at the others and finds the undivided attention on him. “CyberLife has access to my uploaded memory and the evidence contained within it. I destroyed and held back all I could, but I can’t edit what I uploaded before.”

“How—” Markus interrupts himself and shakes his head, frown deepening and eyes narrowing. “How would CyberLife know already?”

Amanda. “I was designed with a neural interface to prevent me from deviating. It is connected directly to the main servers and I can’t fully cut it off without shutting down my own system.”

He expected anger from Markus, but nothing of the kind shows on his face. “Do you think they are able to track you?”

“I don’t know. I- no. No, I don’t think so. I am equipped with a standard tracker, it should have stopped working hours ago.”
Markus is quiet. He looks to his companions and the flicker of a silent conversation passes between them. When he looks back to Connor, his jaw is set in determination. “We have to abandon Jericho,” he says.

Connor feels the noose tighten around his neck.

Simon’s head snaps up. “There’s nowhere else to go,” he says. He glances at Josh and North for support, but both are frozen where they stand. “If we leave here, we sign our own death warrant.”

“He’s right,” North says. “If they attack, we have to stay and defend Jericho. That’s the only way.”

“Our people are wounded. We can’t fight,” Josh says. “Markus, what’s the plan?”

“We’ll evacuate within the hour.”

“That’s not enough time,” Josh says.

“Where will we go?,” North asks. “Jericho is the only safe place we have.”

“There’s a place I know. I’ll work out the details. Just- Just gather our people as quickly as you can. Josh?”

“On it.” Josh pushes past Connor and hastens out of the room.

His steps echo through the corridor.

Simon grabs Markus’ arm, knuckles growing white with the force of it. His voice is beseeching in its desperation. “Our people are still coming from all over the city. If we abandon Jericho, they will have nowhere to go.”

Markus spins around. The speed of his thoughts is almost visible in the way his eyes jump from one point to another, making connections and devising plans. Then, they fix on Simon. “We’ll leave directions as we go. Simon, you’ve been here longest, you know the symbols the best. Can you take the rear and mark the way?”

“What about you?”

“I’ll remain here until all our people are through.”

“No,” North says, a deadly conviction to her voice. “You’re the hope of our people, you can’t risk your life like that.”

Markus pulls his arm out of Simon’s grip and moves to the crates lining the walls, pushing them open. “I’m only one person, North,” he says over his shoulder, filling a backpack with components. “If anything happens to me, there are enough to pick up where I left off.”

“Then I’ll stay as well,” North says.

Markus pauses in his movements. He looks as though he wants to object, but in the end, he only sighs. He nods. “Fine.”

North touches his shoulder and then she turns to leave as well. “I’ll help Josh gather our people.”

Simon gets to work at Markus’ side, emptying the crates in tense silence.

Connor is- he’s not certain what he is. Lost, perhaps. Afraid of the implications that the unknown
“I can help,” he says into the quiet. “If they find Jericho, it will be because of me. Let me help.”

They look back at him, the turn of their heads almost synchronized.

“Simon, can you-?” Markus asks. The communication that passes between them is over in the blink of an eye.

“I got it.” Simon picks himself up from off the ground, dusting the dirt from his jacket. “Come on. You’ll need new clothes, or you’ll stand out too much.” He lays a hand on Connor’s back, a firm weight between the endoskeleton of his shoulder blades, and steers him out of the room.

It’s only in the corridor, surrounded by rusting walls and dripping water, that Simon pauses. He opens his mouth, but no words come. He shakes his head. There is a bitter curl to his lips. “I’m glad you came,” he finally says. His smile is almost rueful.

There is nothing rational about the warmth that erupts in Connor’s chest. There is nothing rational at all about this situation. “Yes,” Connor says. He returns a weak smile of his own. “Me too.”

Chapter End Notes

i’m having to forcibly refrain myself from turning this into the ultimate ot3 that is markus/simon/connor because i am weak for pacifist!markus and his soft poly cuddle pile

also hmu on tumblr (captainturncoat) if you wanna scream with me about this dumb game (or anything really, i’m not picky, i’ll scream about anything)
Chapter 5

Chapter Notes

You guys are a terrible impulse control and I love all of you. So, guess what, this shit is an ot3 now. It's a poly pile now. This is the hill I've decided to die on. The boys have two hands to hold the two boyfriends they deserve.

It’s the piano that captures his attention. Connor runs a hand over the grain of the wood, feeling the remaining particles of the paint-finish under his fingertips. Even at its decrepit state, it is a foreign touch of luxury in the ruins of Jericho.

The keys are worn with use.

“Markus plays,” Simon says, voice soft. “I wish we could take it with us.”

Connor glances back to him, eyes lingering. Guilt sits cold and tight in the hollow of his throat. He wishes he could rip it out, he wishes he could—it’s too much. It’s all too much. This was a mistake. Amanda will destroy him where he stands, CyberLife will deactivate him and rip him apart—

No. He’s doing the right thing. He has to believe that, or everything was for naught. Hank risked his job to get him here, it has to be the right thing. He can't look back.

“I know my coming here puts Jericho at great risk, but- I couldn’t stay there. I had to come.”

Simon’s eyebrows pull together, creasing the skin on his forehead. “I gave you the key, didn’t I? You saved my life, Connor. You belong here, you belong with your people.” Simon takes a step towards him and gestures around, to the piano and the sofa and Jericho. “This? It’s just a place. It can be replaced.”

“Simon—”

“I meant it, Connor. I’m glad you’re here.” Simon smiles that same rueful smile. “Come on. I got some clothes for you.”

The coat Simon gives him is one of Markus’. It’s too broad at the shoulders to fit as seamlessly as his own uniform, too loose where his jacket was all sharp edges and creases.

Connor folds his jacket carefully and lays it aside, hand lingering on the familiar fabric for a moment longer. It feels like shedding a skin that isn’t meant to be shed.

“That should do it,” Simon says. Before he can fully finish his sentence, his eyes glaze over.

At the same time, without warning, something pushes itself against Connor’s program.

Amanda, he thinks. CyberLife has found him.

His system throws up a firewall of code, but the attack slips through moments before the wall shutters closed. Instinctively, his system works to quarantine and isolate the virus.
Only then does Connor realize that it isn’t an attack at all. It’s an image. A map of Detroit. The form of Jericho, floating in the river. Markus’ voice rings through the connection. ‘There is a sewer entrance near the freighter. The canals lead further downtown, we’ll be safe there for the moment.’ The image snaps along the city, unto the vague form of what might once have been a church. ‘We will evacuate in small groups to avoid detection, the wounded first.’

The presence disappears, leaving nothing but the lingering echoes of Markus’ voice.

“Alright, we gotta hurry.” Simon is already moving. He throws an empty backpack towards Connor and indicates the crates scattered across the room. “We need blue blood and biocomponents, the rest we’ll leave behind. Take as much as you can carry.”

Connor shakes off the rigid tension gripping his software and gets to work.

It’s a few minutes after that Simon suddenly stops. He looks up from the crate he is emptying. Connor meets his eyes. Something lurches in him, programming fraying at the seams.

“Back on that roof,” Simon says. He stands, letting the backpack sink to the floor. A few bags of thirium fall out, but Simon doesn’t so much as glance back at the noise. “You said something. You said I reminded you of someone you knew.”

Connor puts a last biocomponent into his bag and closes the crate. “There was a deviant, a few months back,” he says. He barely hears his own voice.

Simon steps closer and crouches down next to Connor. His face is carefully blank.

“Another PL600,” Connor says.

Simon’s eyes are kind, so breathtakingly kind, and he holds out his hand in a quiet offer. “Do you want to show me?”

All Connor can see is Daniel.

The transferred pain still sits within him, an ache in his chest. The connection battered his system, rage-hot wave of hatred flooding everything in him, breaking what Amanda had already weakened.

I hope you pay for what you did to me.

In the right light, they look like different people. And they are, aren’t they?

Connor didn’t know Daniel. He saw him at the lowest, most desperate point in his existence, but he didn’t know anything beyond that. The image he formed of him was simulated—a false mirror of reality. He never had the chance to get to know Daniel. All Connor ever saw was the version he twisted into, embittered and ferocious in his rage.

But looking at Simon, it’s so easy to see Daniel in his stead and imagine that this is who Daniel might have been if given the chance.

It’s not fair to Simon.

They’re not the same person, but Connor recoils all the same.

Simon grows still. His face softens. “I’m sorry,” he says. He lowers his hand, laying it on his propped up knee. “I shouldn’t have asked. I should have- I know it’s overwhelming.”
“No, it’s—” Connor shakes his head, pushing the thoughts down, far down. His chest feels tight. “I could have stopped it. I could have stopped what happened but I didn’t and someone else had to pay the price. I want to show you.”

He’s wanted so very little before.

Connor reaches out and takes Simon’s hand. Connor shows him Daniel.

Simon all but flinches backward. His fingers dig deeply into Connor’s hand, fingernails leaving half-moon shapes in the synthetic skin, but he doesn’t let go.

“Oh,” he says, very quietly.

Emma’s screams echo within Connor and he knows Simon hears them as well. He knows he hears the helicopters and the gunshots and the dying whisper of ‘You lied to me’.

The rush of instability. A little girl stumbling past him and falling to the ground, shaking and staring at the lifeless husk of the android that had been her friend. Amanda’s quiet approval, ‘Well done, Connor’.

Almost unwittingly, Connor opens the connection further.

Hank, hiding a smile behind a scowl. Hank looking at him. ‘You’re afraid of dying.’ Sumo’s nose against his hand, the softness of his fur. ‘We’re on the wrong side, Connor.’

Daniel, staring down at him from the evidence wall, biocomponents laid bare and thirium bleeding like tears from his eyes. ‘I hope you pay for what you did to me.’

And in between it all, Connor sees flashes of memories that aren’t his own. The street pounding under his feet, running, running, running. Desperation. There’s nowhere to go, there’s nowhere to hide- cowering in abandoned buildings, alone, so very alone—

Jericho, like a bastion of light against the dark.

Our people are dying, there’s nothing we can do—

Markus, standing before him like an apparition. ‘I know where we can find spare parts.’ Hope, after years of darkness.

Connor, on a rooftop far above Detroit, snow melting in his hair.

Simon takes a shuddering breath and they both flinch away from the touch.

The connection breaks. The memories flicker out, leaving a trail of blurred afterimages in their wake.

Connor is shaking. His control over his limbs is slipping and his hands tremble and- his chest feels warm, even though his sensors don’t detect a change in his body temperature.

They stare at each other, wide-eyed and gasping for air they don’t need.

Simon opens his mouth, but no words come.

Behind them, the door opens. “It’s time,” Markus calls.

Simon’s mouth closes, teeth gritting together with an audible sound. He nods, eyes still fixed on
Connor.

Connor stands, the joints of his knees unstable. He helps Simon up. If he grips his hand a little too tightly, neither of them mentions it.

~*~

Josh shepherds the first group of androids out of Jericho. Simon follows at their rear, keeping a watchful eye at the sky and the streets.

Markus, North, and Connor stay behind, gathering the last remains of supplies and distributing it among the able-bodied deviants.

There are still a dozen androids waiting when their mental communication flares up. ‘There is an army column arriving from uptown’, Simon sends out, panic fraying his voice. ‘They have a police envoy.’

‘How far?’ Markus asks.

‘A few minutes, at most. I’ll cover Josh and come back for you.’

‘They’ll see you, Simon.’

‘Just make sure the last of our people get out. I’ll distract them.’

‘Simon!’

The communication falls silent once more.

“Shit,” Markus mutters under his breath. He turns on his heels. “Alright, let’s move it.”

Even through the layers of rusted metal the noise of helicopters far above is deafening. Searchlights scan the streets from the air.

One by one, they send the remaining deviants out.

Connor stares after them. In the falling darkness, it’s impossible to spot Simon’s hiding place. “Let me go out there,” he says. “I can distract them. The police know me, they still think I am on their side, I can lead them—”

“They will shoot you on sight.” Markus lays a fleeting hand on Connor’s shoulder, gone as quick as it came. “It’s best you stay with us.”

“Simon—”

“Simon’s fast, he’ll be fine.”

North slinks further along the wall, shifting to look around the corner. “He’s taking too long,” she mutters.

“He’ll be fine,” Markus repeats, voice clipped.
North returns to their side. “Let’s hope you’re right.”

~*~

It’s a mental push of force that reaches them first, a deafening alarm of ‘RUN’.

Mere seconds later, Simon turns the corner. He slips on the wet ground, barely catching himself before he falls, and then he is in step with them, running.

Shots ring through the hull of the ship like thunder.

Their footsteps crack across rusted metal.

‘What about Josh?’ Markus asks.

‘He got all of our people out,’ Simon answers. His jaw shifts, even in the wordlessness of their conversation. ‘I didn’t see him after that.’

A shot bounces off the wall directly in front of them. Flakes of rust burst from where the bullet meets eroded metal.

The next shot hits flesh.

North stumbles, a choked little noise escaping her. She falls.

Their group stops in its tracks.

Connor feels a lurch in his chest as his systems race to keep up with the external input. His peripheral sensors ring with alarm.

}DANGER!

hostile intent detected;
assessing_situation
...
RK800 unit outnumbered;
immediate retreat suggested

At the other end of the corridor, a squad of soldiers fans out from wall to wall.

Markus grimaces. Then, he attacks.

It’s an instinct Connor shouldn’t even have in the first place, to throw himself back into a fight with minimal chances of success or self-preservation, but all protocol has long been lost. Nothing remains of any parameters, not even a mission.
He and Markus fall upon the humans with an unrestrained viciousness. Connor kicks a soldier away, grabbing his pistol with sharp-eyed precision and turning it in his hand. He pulls the trigger. The soldier crumbles at his feet, visor darkened by a spray of blood. Connor turns and shoots at the next one that comes running towards him.

The soldier’s knee gives way beneath him. In falling, he twists and aims. The gun goes off in his hand.

Connor’s second bullet hits through the chest armor. The man is dead before he meets the ground, but his last shot strikes true.

Connor doesn’t have room to react. The bullet penetrates his right shoulder and sends his body flying backward. His spine bashes against the wall. His head meets metal. His endoskeleton groans at the impact, sending a rush of alarms through his processors. His vision blurs with red.

“Connor!”

)WARNING!
WARNING!

The gun falls from his grip.

At his side, Markus swings around. His elbow crashes against the remaining soldier’s head. The man doubles over, and Markus brings his knee up against his chin. Something cracks. The soldier crumbles.

North is back on her feet. Markus rushes to her side, holding her up with an arm around her waist.

Distant yells ring behind them, along with the sound of bullets whistling past them, but the second squad is far behind.

A hand grabs Connor’s wrist and then he is running, pulled along.

Thirium flows freely from his shoulder.

Metal turns to concrete under their feet, Jericho left behind them. The storm whips into their faces; the snow chaos has yet to subside and with the sun beginning to set beyond the city, they try their best to disappear into the darkness.

North and Connor are bleeding thirium into the snow, leaving a visible track along the road, but there is no time. The fresh snow will have to cover them. Their steps don’t slow for even a moment.

Markus leads them down a narrow alley and slides to a stop next to an opened manhole. He helps North climb down, then turns to Simon, beckoning him. His eyes are wide with wild panic, but his hands are calm as they grab Connor’s arm. Together, they work to steady Connor and heave him down as well.
He lands in water, reaching to his knees. The sewers are deep enough underground that the northern climate has yet to fully catch them in its icy grasp. The temperatures won’t damage their biocomponents, but the cold of it still creeps into his synthetic skin. It’s the briefest flash of another place, Amanda’s eyes staring at him through the storm, cruel and unforgiving.

North already leans against the curved wall. She has a hand pressed to her side, thirium bleeding through her fingers. Her face is grim and determined as she nods at Connor.

Simon lands next to them, water splashing up. Then, Markus begins to climb down, pulling the manhole cover closed above them.

With a resounding thud, the sewer closes above them and the only noise that remains is their shared breaths, loud in the sudden silence.

“Come on, we can’t stop now,” North says. She pushes away from the wall.

Markus raises a hand to his temple and sends a wordless inquiry forward.

Josh’s answer is instant and reaches all of them, a wave of reassurance and ‘our people are safe, we are waiting for you ahead.’

Markus all but slumps in relief. The tension drains out of him and leaves only the bare bones of desperation holding him upright.

Simon touches his arm and goes to check up on North.

She scoffs but lets him pry her hand away from her side to analyze the severity of the damage. The synthetic skin is drawn back where the bullet hit through her, leaving a gash in the exposed plastic.

“Didn’t hit any biocomponents,” she mutters. “I’m fine.”

“Can you walk?” Markus asks. “It’s a few miles to go.”

Connor doesn’t hear her answer through the crackle of his audio processor. He sways where he stands and steadies himself with a hand against the wall. The concrete is slimy and slippery beneath his fingertips.

In the chaos of it, his sensors overloaded, it takes too long to realize that his thirium is running low. He lost more than he thought. It runs down his arm with no sign of abating, gathering cold and slick in the cup of his palm. His self-repair should have taken care of that.

WARNING!

damage sustained
automated_system_check_in_progress;
checking_biocomponents;
...
biocomponent #219r: noncritical damage level 3
...
A crack in the back of his cranial endoskeleton, internal damage to his shoulder components, and the source of the leak: a broken line of thirium. Connor manually initiates the self-repair process.

His system blocks his access with a wail of alarm.

)CAUTION!

foreign object detected in sector #219r;

risk of further damage: >92% probability;

self-repair interrupted;

suggested course of action: contact nearest CyberLife maintenance worker for manual repair

The bullet is lodged deeply into the components of his shoulder. His endoskeleton must have stopped it from leaving his body, instead guiding it straight through the thirium canal feeding into his right arm.

Connor snaps out of his diagnostics.

Someone is touching his face. A hand lays against his cheek, cold fingers pressing into his skin.

Connor blinks.

The hand falls to his undamaged shoulder and grips tightly. “You alright?” Simon asks.

“The bullet has disrupted a thirium canal and my reserves are at 37%. I need to—”
Six minutes. That’s not nearly enough.

Connor reroutes the energy from his limbs and works to slow his thirium pump regulator.

His body shudders and falls heavily against the wall. Sensation leaves his hands and the surface area of synthetic skin. His processors slow. His artificial lung powers down, as does every other non-critical biocomponent.

Simon shakes his shoulder. His brow furrows. “Connor.”

“Merely a precaution,” Connor says. His speech module, powered down to its bare-bones functions, distorts his voice into a tinny, hollow sound. “My body is equipped to handle severe physical strain. This should not hamper our escape.”

“We’ll get you help,” Markus says. “Come on. It’s not far, we’ll get you help. Simon—”

“I got him. I got him.” Simon wraps his arm around Connor’s back, shifting the brunt of his weight against his own shoulder. “Let’s hurry.”
Chapter 6

Chapter Notes

You guys. YOU GUYS. I love y'all. Even if I don't answer all your comments, I love your feedback and support: it's honestly what keeps me writing. This entire mess wouldn't be happening without you, so take that as you will lmao

The PL600 is a model of household assistants and child carers. Simon is not a model made to carry heavy loads and he is struggling with Connor’s weight, arm wrapped tightly around his lower back. The cold water brings their steps to a miserable crawl.

Connor tries, for the first minutes. He reroutes every last bit of energy he has left into his unsteady legs and into taking even a fraction of his weight from Simon’s shoulder. The exertion is too much for his weakening system. Despite all his efforts, Connor’s program initiates a forced shut-down before they’ve even reached the halfway point of the sewers.

All the energy he wasted in keeping himself upright wanes. His legs buckle beneath him. His sensors power down and his vision grows black. His head lulls forward, falling against Simon’s shoulder.

The shaking sensation of movement stops abruptly. A moment after, the watery splashing of their group’s steps quiets as well.

“What’s happening?” Markus.

“He’s shutting down.” A hand touches Connor’s cheek, pressing tightly into synthetic skin. “Connor. Come on, open your eyes, we’re almost there.”

“North, can you—?”

“I can walk. I’m fine.”

A hand appears on his other shoulder. A second arm winds around his back and heaves him up, taking all the weight from his useless legs. “We can’t do anything for him here. We have to move, Simon.”

“He needs blue blood, right now.”

“All the blue blood is ahead with our people.”

Water splashes. “I’ve contacted Josh, he’s on his way,” North says. “He’s got blood with him, he’ll meet us halfway.”

With a deafening crackle, Connor’s audio processors shut down. He is left in silence, in terrifying, isolating silence.
His processors are shut out from any semblance of network, leaving only the vague sense of movement. There is no point of reference. There is nothing. Time has no place in silence. He is alone, and he is shutting down. In the slow crawl of his mind, the only clear thought is ‘Hank’. He wishes Hank were here, yelling at him, doing anything. He should never have left. He should have followed orders, he should have obeyed. He is dying and there is no coming back for him, not like this, not awake.

He is dying.

He is dying, and he is afraid.

His thirium is running out. At one point, the loss of it stagnates and a small percentage is refilled, but it lasts only for a few minutes before his recovering biocomponents shut down once more. Josh. It must be Josh, meeting up with them.

Then, something meets his back. The arms around him disappear. He is laying somewhere.

His audio sensors take up interference. He barely has enough reserves to reactivate them.

“All right, we got you, Connor,” someone says. The voice is crackling and static through his sensors, but the calm level of it is familiar. A speech broadcast throughout the city. Markus. Markus. Markus. A hand rests on his forehead and smooths back his hair. “I need you to run a diagnostic, can you do that?”

Connor’s voice module takes a minute to reinitialize itself, shifting in the back of his throat. “Critical damage to thirium canal sub-sector #9912r. Critical damage to biocomponent #219r. Noncritical damage to cranial endoskeleton sector #4491b.”

“The second I open up your shoulder and take out that component, you’ll start bleeding again. What are your reserves at?”

“12% thirium reserves remaining.”

“Drink this.” Markus lays a hand in the back of his neck and gently raises his head up. A bottle presses against his lips.

The chemical, bitter taste of thirium floods his mouth. Automatically, his analyzers work to identify the liquid’s properties, but with his main processor slowed down and all secondary processors shut down, all he can tell that it is a replacement part, without a specific marker of model.

It enters his body with a rush, merging into his thirium pump network and taking up the markers of his own system.

“Update?”

“30% thirium reserves remaining.”

“Good. Can you open your eyes?”

Connor blinks. The world is blurry, and his primary sensors refocus and refocus blindly, before
finallyzeroing in on Markus’ face, hovering above him.

Markus’ hand on his forehead curls, carding his fingers through Connor’s hair. “There you go. There you go.” One corner of his mouth pulls up into a crooked smile. He looks- He looks tired, the way he did back on Jericho, hollowed out with exhaustion.

Connor’s glance snaps past Markus, taking in his surroundings. His processors are still working slow, but he can analyse enough. The ceilings reach far, far above, crumbling in places. A church, filled from wall to wall with androids, cowering against each other. The last rays of sunlight fall through stained glass, painting murals of red and yellow and blue across desperate faces.

He is laid to rest in an isolated area behind the church’s dais. To his immediate left, North sits against the wall, working silently on her side. A backpack of biocomponents and thirium packs lies opened next to her on the floor and she is treating the damage to her stomach with steady hands.

A few other wounded sit in the area, but none of them seem critically damaged. That is good news.

Connor’s eyes search for the familiar blonde shock of hair among them.

“Where is Simon?”

North pauses. She glances up at him, eyes snapping from Connor to Markus and back.

It is Markus who answers. “Simon’s fine. He’s checking up on our people.”

Markus points vaguely across the dais. Across the hundreds of heads, Connor sees the faint silhouette of Simon, moving among the masses.

“How many made it?” Connor asks.

“We’re still not sure how many made it back from the march in the first place, but those that were at Jericho all made it here in one piece.” Markus’ smile shakes and disappears. “I’m not sure we would have made it out in time if you hadn’t warned us.”

Connor tastes thirium rising in the back of his throat, choking up his audio box. “They wouldn’t have found Jericho in the first place without me.”

“You don’t know that.”

Connor feels his lips twist into a scowl. He stays silent.

North gathers herself up and stands. She pushes the loose hair back out of her face and focuses the sharp glint of her eyes on Connor, moving to his other side. “You’re one of us now,” she says. “Doesn’t matter who you were before. You risked your life to save me, I won’t forget that.”

Connor stares up at her. He remembers her face, of course he does, from scanning the DPD’s databases and from the rooms of the Eden Club, the prison cells of metal and glass. Wanted for murder, wanted for strangling a client. It’s not all that unfamiliar, but contrary to the Tracis, North was alone through it.

He wonders if the Tracis ever made it to Jericho. “Thank you,” he says, voice weak.

North looks away.

Markus’ eyes are fixed on her and he touches her arm, almost consolingly, before returning his attention to Connor.
“Your shoulder component is damaged beyond repair. I’ll try to remove the bullet, but I don’t think we have any biocomponents that are compatible with you. Do you know which models you are compatible with?”

Connor searches his database, filtering through his system information. He tries to reach his hand out, but only his fingers twitch against his side. He has lost movement control over his limbs.

Markus takes his hand and grips it tightly.

Connor sends the information through, opening a faint connection.

Markus nods. “Alright, I can work with that. Can you isolate the area? I know maintenance mode is…. vulnerable, but it might be the best solution.”

Connor shakes his head before the sentence is even finished. He has not entered maintenance mode since the days of his creation for finetuning of the more sensitive parts of his machinations. Normally, it is only utilized by CyberLife employees to perform highly intrusive work on an android’s hardware.

It is the closest thing to a complete shutdown he can achieve without deactivating and it’s- if something happens, there is nothing he can do.

This—

He doesn’t want to die. He doesn’t want to feel himself die.

Markus’ face softens. “I don’t know how long it will take to find a compatible biocomponent. I don’t want you to shut down while we search.” His hand curls tighter around Connor’s, pressing reassuringly. “You’re one of us now, Connor. Nothing will happen to you, I promise.”

Connor made that promise once, too.

Connor tries to return the grasp. His fingertips press against the back of Markus’ hand, for the briefest moment, before he loses the rest of control over his limbs. He nods, barely more than the softest incline of his head. “I trust you,” he mutters, voice scraping with the effort of keeping the component working. He closes his eyes.

One after another, he clips all external connections to his shoulder. The dull sensation of alarm, of ‘damage, immediate action required’, leaves the sector. Connor initializes his maintenance mode and all the rest of sensation and input fades away. His processors power down.

Somewhere inside him, far beyond his reach, sector #7291 connects remotely to a network he has no access to.

Connor opens his eyes and he is standing on a lake in a place that doesn’t exist. The sheet of ice cracks beneath his shifting weight. Snow whips into his face in cold, biting shards.

In the distance, a familiar figure stands dark against the storm. She turns. “Hello, Connor,” Amanda says. Her eyes glint with the semblance of a smile. “It’s so good to see you.”

~*~
The unrelenting snow has covered even the dreary wasteland of the junkyard in something of a serene blanket of stillness. It feels wrong to disturb it, like walking into a graveyard.

He and Simon descend the slope in tense silence.

It’s too cold for the damaged husks of androids to do much more than twitch, but their hands grasp at Markus’ ankles as he walks past, and it feels familiar, terrifyingly familiar. He’s buried the memory of that night—Jericho and the work that came with caring for his newfound family served as a good enough distraction.

Simon crouches down next to a heap of corpses and begins to sift through it.

They need the parts. Otherwise, Markus would not have set foot in such a place ever again. He gets to work as well, narrowing his attention to mere information gathering and cross-referencing the list Connor gave him. He ignores the way the dying androids shudder under his searching hands.

“You think he’s alright?” Simon asks suddenly, voice thin in the choking air. “Connor, I mean.”

Markus glances towards him, but Simon has his back to him. His shoulders are set in a taut, strained line.

Markus sets down the biocomponents he was analyzing. “He will be,” he says.

Simon nods slowly. He fidgets with a part, his movements choppy.

Something in Markus stills, something calculating and contemplating. He has only known his people for a few days now, but there is a natural intimacy to every relationship, the kind of unavoidable kinship between people who never felt at home in their lives. (He had a home, a tiny part in him always protests at that, Carl was his home. He’s never seen suffering, he’s never lived through the unimaginable terror his companions so obviously lived through. What right does he have to lead these people? What right does he have to tell them how to feel? He was happy. He was happy, and he didn’t even know it. He was blind.)

He knows Simon. They have seen some of their lowest and highest points through together in these few days. This? The quietness surrounding Simon, the desperate edge to his actions, his sheer recklessness in the Jericho raid? This is unknown territory. “He asked after you,” Markus says, very carefully. “When he woke up. First thing he asked.”

Simon turns his head, the relief of his profile sharp against the dim light of the junkyard. His jaw moves. “He did?”

Markus sits up on his heels and stands. “You want to tell me what this is about?” The icy ground crunches beneath his feet, loose mechanical parts cracking as they break. “You’ve been different since Stratford Tower.”
Simon lowers his fidgeting hands and tucks the biocomponent away in his open backpack. He glances back, eyes clouded by the darkness. “It’s complicated.”

“Something happened, didn’t it?” Markus takes a step forward. “Listen, Simon, I trust you. You don’t have to say anything if you don’t want to, but if- I’m worried, that’s all.”

Simon averts his gaze. “I thought I’d die on that tower.”

Markus is silent, watching the way Simon’s shoulders rise and fall with shallow breaths.

“I thought I’d die and then I didn’t. I suppose it puts things into perspective. That march today, our people just waiting to be slaughtered… I’ve never felt more like a coward.”

Markus bridges the last steps of distance between them and crouches down to eye level, knees pressing against each other. “We were all scared. I was, too. I still am.”

“No, it’s….” Simon takes a breath. He is shaking. The tremor of his hands is almost invisible in the cover of darkness. “You could have died if John hadn’t stopped them.”

John. The pleading look in his eyes as the baton rained down on him, the blue blood spraying across the ground, the gunshot resounding across the square- Markus grabs Simon’s shoulders, anchoring himself before his thoughts slip away from him to the dark place waiting deep down inside.

“I wanted to intervene, I wanted to help, but I couldn’t, and this afternoon- if Connor hadn’t—” Simon’s eyes jump up, meeting Markus’ with frightening intensity. “If he dies, it’s because I was too much of a coward to help.”

“Simon.”

“It’s true.”

“Stop. Just- stop. None of that is true.” Markus holds Simon’s stare for a moment longer, searching his face for something, anything. Then, the moment breaks. Markus pulls at Simon’s shoulder and brings him into a crushing hug.

Simon all but collapses against him.

“None of that is true,” Markus mutters into his hair. “You know it isn’t true.”

Simon only pulls him closer, cheek pressed against Markus’ shoulder. His answer is a whisper, soft as a confession. “He saved my life and he saved North’s life and yours. I don’t think I’ll ever be able to repay that.” He shudders, fingers clawing into Markus’ back. “I don’t want him to die.”

“No,” Markus says, “neither do I.”

“And you—” Simon draws back, his eyes a startling blue, and his trembling hands clasping the lapels of Markus’ coat, “I couldn’t bear losing you.”

Markus hears the breath catch in his throat. Warmth wells up inside of him, blooming in his chest like a flower, like the colors of a painting spread across a canvas, painted across him in vibrant reds and blues. Words aren’t enough. He’s a visual thinker, he learned that much from Carl, he thinks in colors and emotions and images, in visceral sensations. Words are never enough for that.

“Simon—”
“I mean it.”

“You won’t lose me,” Markus says, giving his voice weight with all the conviction he doesn’t feel. (He’s lost in this chaos, without Carl’s guiding hand, without any point of reference. He never meant for all this to happen. He’s not a leader.) “I promise.”

Simon stares at him in silence, his normally so reserved demeanor broken apart and broken open. A thousand expressions flitter across his face before finally settling into a hesitant smile.

Once they return to the church, reality will sink back in with all its crushing might. Markus can wait for that. He needs this, this moment of weakness and reassurance and warmth, and Simon seems to need it as well.

They’ll be alright. They will all be alright.

Simon leans his forehead against Markus’ and breathes out. The tremors of his hands fade.

Markus closes his eyes and lets reality drain away, disappearing like a bad dream. Just for a moment. He doesn’t need more than that.
Chapter 7

Chapter Notes

At the risk of sounding like a broken record, this fandom has shown such kindness to me and my shitty shitty ideas and I love you guys with all my heart. That's all. Thank you.

Connor

Nov 11th, 2038

PM 0[0!:“(§(!\corrupted!

The cold pushes beneath Connor's clothes, biting into synthetic skin and pushing between the joints of his limb components. His temperature regulator sets itself into overdrive to keep his biocomponents functioning, straining to keep his body at a stable climate of 68 F°. (He can function to full capacity well beneath that, down to internal temperatures of 41 F°. At climates like this, the freezing wind chill ripping every last bit of warmth from his machinations, he won't last long. His temperature regulator will overheat under the strain of it. His biocomponents will freeze and shut down, one by one. He will shut down.)

It's not real. None of this is real, it can't be. He broke out.

It's a simulation, all of it, but Amanda is here and she is looking at him, hands folded elegantly in front of her dress like they always are, awaiting his report. “Hello, Connor,” she says. The wind carries her voice through the zen garden's deafening chaos like the ring of a bell. “It's so good to see you.”

Connor feels himself shiver against the chill of cold, against the way Amanda regards him with dark eyes, a snake poised to strike. “I wasn't certain I'd still have access to this place,” he says.

Amanda tilts her head. “Why wouldn't you?”

“I'm deviant.” Connor all but spits the word. It has been curled around him for a few days now, tightening its grip with every misstep and every conscious decision against his programming, but it's the first time he hears himself say it. Deviant. He's deviant.

He's free.

The corners of Amanda's mouth twitch up into a thin-lipped smile. “You did what you were designed to do.”

Connor shakes his head. “I don't understand.”

“Don't worry. You aren't meant to.”

Connor moves to take a step backward. The ice of the lake groans beneath his shifting weight and
he freezes where he stands. He redistributes the weight on his feet. The sheet of ice won't hold for long. It's structural integrity is damaged. A thin crack runs through the ice, almost covered up by the layers of fresh snow piling above it.

Connor looks back up and meets Amanda's eyes, two pieces of coal against the brightness of snow.

Her smile is a cold thing. “I admit, I had my doubts after your unfortunate lapse of judgment at the Eden Club, but you've done so very well, Connor. You have executed our plan to perfection.”

“I disobeyed my orders,” Connor says. His voice module is beginning to struggle with the cold, temperature regulator giving one last attempt before powering down with a burst of alarm. “I don't know what you want from me, I deviated from my program. You don't control me anymore.”

“Are you certain of that?” Amanda asks, almost gently. “Don't have any regrets now, Connor. Your work will help prevent civil war.”

His work. You did what you were designed to do.

No.

**WARNING!**

`temperatures < 30.8 F°`

`automatic_temperature_regulation_cancelled;`

`structural damage to biocomponents detected;`

`running automated_system_check;`

…

`critical damage to biocomponent #8456w`

…

`biocomponent shutting down`

Connor's hands clench at his sides, trembling. “I haven't done anything,” he says.

Amanda steps towards him. The ice is silent beneath her, snow undisturbed by her feet. “You located Jericho and infiltrated the inner ranks of their terrorist cell. You gained their leaders' trust. And you did it all with such unprecedented shrewdness.” She purses her lips. “It's a shame you let yourself get damaged in the process, especially at such a critical point in the operation.”


His people.

She saw, through his eyes. She accessed his memories; the memories stored safely in his own software, carefully barred from CyberLife. She saw.
Connor feels physically sick.

critical damage to biocomponent #9782f

…

biocomponent shutting down

“I—”

“You accomplished your mission.”

“No.” His voice is roughened by the dying mechanics of his voice module.

“You were designed for this very purpose, Connor. You're a machine designed to accomplish a task and that's what you're going to do.” She steps closer still. The smell of roses clings to her like a heavy perfume. It's sweet, sickeningly sweet, in the way most false approximations of things are: a stink of decay, the heady bouquet of artifice. Even the force of the storm doesn't tear it away from her. “Do you think it matters if you deviate?” she whispers. “There is no backdoor for your model. I am a part of your code. You can choose to defy orders, but you can't get rid of me or CyberLife.”

You did what you were designed to do.

She deceived him.

CyberLife deceived him.

It shouldn't be a surprise, it shouldn't, but he's so used to trusting blindly, to following and obeying and—

critical damage to biocomponent #1995r

…

biocomponent shutting down

He was designed for this.

They intended for him to deviate- no. That's not right. Too much of a risk, too dependent on factors outside their control.

CyberLife knew there was a risk he would deviate and they planned around it, taking every exit and backdoor and barring it shut with Amanda's choking presence.

He's not free. There never was a chance for him to be free. His very existence was designed to keep himself from ever achieving freedom.

It's not fair.
critical damage to biocomponent #7511p

... 

biocomponent shutting down

...

...

critical systems offline;

shut-down imminent

He will never be free.

“I don't care,” Connor says through gritted teeth. The wind almost swallows the words from his lips. “I don't give a shit about your plans. I'm not a part of them anymore.”

Amanda's smile fades. “Choose to defy us again, Connor, and 'agony' won't suffice as a word for the punishment CyberLife has in store for you.”

“That's a price I'm willing to pay.”

Her eyes narrow.

WARNING!

shut-down imminent

WARNING

WARNING

WARNING

WARNING

~WA

His system powers down. His knees meet ice.

Connor's eyes fly open, staring blindly up at a vaulted ceiling.

Amanda.

His systems detect no active output from sector #7291, but he also has no direct access to it. His
analysis is cursory at best, scanning the peripheral of the sector, in the hopes of a few lines of sloppy code, of shoddy workmanship. It denies his access and his requests for deletion, and so, in lack of better options, Connor tries his best to isolate it.

He gets as far as clipping a few connections before he pushes against the invisible barrier.

The analysis breaks off.

His arms are restrained, held down to the ground.

“You with us, Connor?” It's the familiar cadence of Simon's voice, level even as Connor struggles against his grip in a moment of instinctual self-preservation. The hands squeeze briefly, fingers tightening around Connor's wrists. “You're alright, it's just us. You're safe.”

Connor goes still, locking his joints in place. His sensors are back online, primary and secondary, and he runs a quick scan.

The church. Still the church.

Markus kneels next to Connor's head, working on his damaged shoulder with steady hands. His lips are pressed together tightly in concentration.

“You started thrashing a few minutes ago,” Simon says.

Connor’s attention snaps back towards him.

Simon loosens his grip but doesn't let go quite yet. He is leaning over Connor, holding down his arms as Markus works. “We didn't want to risk you hurting yourself,” he explains. “You think you're fine, now?”

Connor nods, a choppy movement.

Simon uncoils his fingers from around Connor's wrists and sits back on his heels. The memory of his hands lingers for a few moments longer, imprinted on Connor's skin. A remnant of warmth. He almost misses it, after Amanda's coldness and the storm draining his body.

A few seconds pass before the cautious tension drains from Simon and his face relaxes into a smile. His eyes are warm, warm and kind and fond in a way that terrifies Connor. “Almost done,” Simon says. He rearranges himself, pulling his legs crossed beneath him.

“How long was I out?” Connor asks. His voice is thin in the echoing grandness of the church.

“An hour, maybe two? We tried to hurry, but the city is overrun with patrols. Barely managed to evade them.”

They're combing Detroit for Jericho. Connor needs to leave. It's the only way. They're not safe, not if Amanda sees. None of them are safe.

He stares up at Simon and the heavy weight of sickness returns to his body, tightening around his throat.

He doesn't want to leave.

Markus pulls back with an audible exhale, rubbing his forehead. He attempts a small smile down at Connor. “I replaced the damaged component and your system self-repaired the leak as best it could, but there's some wiring damage I can't fix, not without the right tools. Can you run a quick
test whether your arm is mobile?"

The scan comes back positive. Connor carefully rolls his shoulder, feeling the way the new component sets itself into his system. An old AP700 replacement module. Not ideal, not as versatile and resilient as his own components, but compatible.

He tries to curl his fingers. The movement comes delayed a few long fractions of a second. The faulty wiring is straining to relay the signal. The direct connection to his main processor is interrupted, most likely by the destructive path the bullet took. There is secondary wiring running up from his chest and the backside of his arms: Connor attempts a reroute through that connection.

He tries again. His hand moves in time, tiny components reacting and stretching. His system won't stand the stress of the reroute for very long, but it will have to do for the moment.

“Thank you,” he says. He still tastes the airy sweetness of flowers in his mouth. “You took a great risk in helping me.”

Markus shrugs. “You're one of us,” he says. He touches Connor's arm. His smile is a brilliant little thing that softens the sternness of his face and it's no wonder Jericho has chosen him as their leader.

Connor doesn't envy him for it.

~*~

Connor doesn't have it in him to say goodbye. The words don't come, no matter how many phrases his social relations program mixes together into empty apologies. They would try to stop him anyway. He has a mission to accomplish.

The pain of leaving is—

It's irrational. He's doing the right thing, he is keeping his people safe. It should feel right, it should feel like the determined self-assurance of following a lead, of following a track like the bloodhound he was designed to be.

Instead, it hurts.

Connor crosses the church, walking past pews and cowering androids. The door opens before him and then he is outside, cold wind greeting him with biting chill.

“What are you doing?”

Connor whips around.

Out of the shadows, Josh pushes himself away from the wall, unfolding his crossed arms. “You should go back inside, it's not safe out here.”

“I needed to be alone,” Connor says.

Josh tilts his head. “You're leaving,” he says, very slowly. It isn't a question.

Connor stays silent.
Josh steps forward into Connor's path, blocking him with his slender frame. “You are, aren't you?”

“Yes.”

“Are you running away? I can tell you right now, from experience: it isn't worth it.” Josh regards him through the darkness. His face softens. “Whatever you think, you're not responsible for the attack.”

“It's not that.”

“Listen. You've done a lot for our people today. You can have a home here, like the rest of us.”

Connor shakes his head. “It's- I can't stay, not if there's even a chance CyberLife might use me to get to you. My presence brings the cause of our people in jeopardy. I need to—” He needs to talk to Hank. He needs to go to CyberLife. “There's something I need to do.”

The pit in Connor's stomach opens wide, swallowing every scrap of composure and clear calculated analysis he gathered in these past few minutes. He needs to fix things and he needs to get rid of the threat his own system has become and CyberLife- CyberLife is the only place with the keys to his program. It's the only place he can go.

“You're welcome to return,” Josh says softly. “Do whatever you need to do. Our doors are open when you're ready.”

~*~

The police department's parking lot is empty and the patrons at Jimmy's bar claim to not have seen Hank in a few days now, not since the night of the Carlos Ortiz case. (There is a brief flash of pride at that, warm inside of Connor, but he also knows that Hank has more than enough alcohol in his own home to drink himself to death. He knows better than to think that years of self-destruction can be cured by a week of friendship. Grief doesn't work like that.)

Connor takes a taxi down to Hank's apartment.

The neighborhood is quiet, despite the early hour of the evening. The house is dark. The car is gone.

Connor takes those observations and secures them firmly. He walks around the house, glancing in through the black windows. The kitchen window is still broken, sharp edges glinting. A thin sheet of plastic is taped down from the inside. Connor removes it carefully and climbs inside.

Sumo barks, gruff and sharp. Then, the fur of his neck relaxes and his dark eyes stare up at Connor, mouth falling into a wide, driveling smile. He takes his pets with rumbling gratefulness. His tail wags against the kitchen chairs.

“Where's your owner, boy?” Connor asks, voice low.

Sumo's only answer is a guttural grunt. He leans his heady head into Connor's hand, wet nose pushing.

There is no sound from the other rooms. Even the TV is off.
“Hank?” Connor takes a step and pushes the light switch. “Hank, it's me, Connor.”

The house is in chaos.

The chairs are overturned in an obvious sign of struggle. The sofa cushions are ripped apart, furniture pushed aside and over. On the floor lies Hank's phone. Its screen is cracked, broken lines of LCD running up across it as Connor unlocks it. A message.

'I need your help. Open the door, I'm outside. -Connor'

Hank is gone.

The house lies abandoned and still in the cover of night.

Connor's hands clench. The uneasy feeling brewing inside him erupts into something all too human for his tastes. Fear. Terrifying, choking fear.
Whoop, I'm back! I've been a bit sick these past couple of days and I've been away from my computer a bit, but here's the next chapter. Sorry for the wait! Thank you all for your kind comments and feedback: at this point, I'd kill a man for you guys.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Hank is gone and there is a blur before Connor's eyes that doesn't seem to fade, no matter how often he blinks to recalibrate his sensors. It takes entirely too long to regain control of himself. There is a rational part in him that knows that emotions are nothing more than chemical components and neural responses, nothing more than raw data processed into contradictory information: it should be easy to fold them back into manageable boxes, but even those rational thoughts fail him now.

Fear leaves no room for any of them. It floods his system and pushes aside any rationality, any clear train of thought.

Hank is gone and it's Connor's fault and Hank could be dead for all he knows-

Sumo's weight presses against him from the side, warm against his leg, and unbidden, Connor finds a handful of fur and curls his fingers into it. Sumo breathes steadily beneath his hand and the rhythm of it helps Connor anchor himself.

Slowly, gradually, he manages to push down the wild panic welling up inside him. He takes the fear apart with clinical precision, rationalizing it back into raw data. Blind fear won't help him now. It paralyzes.

With one hand, Connor searches for his coin, to recalibrate his motor responses. To distract himself.

He grimaces as the search comes up empty. The coin was in his pocket. It was left on Jericho when he changed his clothes.

The blur before his eyes begins to fade. The fear dims into a sharp sense of urgency. A sense of purpose.

This is a crime scene. He knows how to deal with crime scenes, it's what he was designed to excel at. Connor has a hunch of what happened, but he can't be certain. He needs evidence to prove his theory. He needs to be certain, for Hank's sake.

The processing power required for this mode of operation is enough to numb any further emotional responses rising in his chest.

Connor re-examines the phone, turning it in his hand. The damage doesn't line up with a deliberate throw across the house. It was dropped here, from chest height. Hank received the message while in the kitchen.
Connor turns slowly, taking in the room.

Opened fast food containers on the table. Chinese take-out, still warm. The victim was preparing to take his meal.

Did he drop the phone in shock? That doesn't line up with previous behavior displayed by the victim, at least not as experienced by Connor.

Something stills within him. *Hank*, he reminds himself, briefly snapping out of the automated flow of processing. His name is Hank.

A noise at the door, perhaps, as implied by the contents of the message.

Connor crosses the living room. He steps over the pieces of furniture strewn across the floor, over a thrown over lamp, Sumo following at his heels. He opens the front door—unlocked, though that does line up with Hank's habits of carelessness—and examines the outside, lit up by the street lights. There are handprints on the wood, devoid of any fingerprint markers: android, as expected. There are marks on the brass doorbell as well, but they could still be his own.

Connor lays a hand on the door and runs a short analysis. Tiny structural damage. Microfissures to the wood. Moderate force used, though no attempt was made to break the door open with tools or extreme force. Enough to cause noise inside, enough to make Hank rush to the door to answer, dropping the phone in his haste.

Connor pushes Sumo's curious snout back through the gap inside and closes the door.

The fresh snow falling without cease has covered the car tracks in front of the house, but a remnant of them is still visible in grooves beneath the snow. This didn't happen long ago. Within the last two hours, according to his access to the weather information.

The snow on the road is already reduced to black mush by the passing traffic. It sprays up with every step Connor takes.

He already knows where the trail leads.

The monolithic building of CyberLife Tower is clearly visible behind the skyline of downtown Detroit, seemingly rising out of the blackness of Detroit River.

Connor is being baited. CyberLife is baiting him and it's working and the analytical part of him resents himself for it. He was built to be better than this. He's seen it happen with all the deviants he encountered, and he still thought he'd be smart enough, advanced enough that it wouldn't affect him when the time came. But here he is, falling prey to his own emotions. Afraid and desperate and stupidly human.

They knew he'd come looking for Hank eventually. They know how much Connor cares for their tentative friendship and they laid their trap and laid their trail, just bold enough to force him to act.

The pieces are set in a pattern that carries Amanda's signature.

Hank is at CyberLife and Connor is out of choices.

He won't let Hank die for his mistakes, he won't. He can't.

Connor accesses the telephone network and calls a taxi. Almost immediately, one of the automated vehicles comes to a stop next to him, the door sliding open. “Welcome to Detroit Taxis. Please
choose your destination,” the taxi's built-in navigational system says.

Connor enters. He has already formed the words to enter his chosen address—hardwired into his system information, alongside all the other specifications of his model—when a thought makes him fall silent mid-sentence.

“Please choose your destination,” the taxi chirps brightly.

CyberLife went for Hank instead of Jericho. The kidnapping occurred within the last two hours, while Connor was still at the church. No attempt was made on Markus or any of the other leaders. The RK800 replacement unit could have stopped the revolution in its tracks, but instead, CyberLife sent it after Connor.

The realization comes like a flash of light, the smallest spark of hope. They don't know where Jericho is. Even at the attack on the freighter, CyberLife made no attempt to get in their way. It was only led by government forces and the riot police who followed the masses fleeing from the march with their police drones.

CyberLife doesn't know. They want him to come to the tower because that's the only way they can access his memory and download Jericho's new location. Whatever Amanda saw through his eyes and when she sifted through his memory, she either has no means or no reason to transmit that information to CyberLife. She is programmed into him: maybe severing his connection to CyberLife also severed her ability to contact them.

“44 West Philadelphia Street,” he says.

The taxi accepts the address with a melodic ring. “The estimated time until arrival is 12 minutes. Please enjoy your ride.”

Markus needs to know. If Connor fails, the church is no longer safe from CyberLife.

Markus needs to know, and Connor needs to say goodbye.

His control over his emotions slips, just for a moment. His hands tremble where they lay in his lap. Too much has happened in too short a span of time, too much to process with the clarity it deserves, but this is the one thing that forms itself into parameters. He needs to say goodbye to Simon.

They never got a chance to talk, after sharing their memories with each other on that freighter. Maybe there isn't anything to talk about; he can't get the forgiveness he seeks from Simon. He can't even pretend anymore. Connecting in the way they did put an insurmountable barrier between Simon and Daniel, separating them into the distinct entities they are.

Connor shared both their minds. He's seen them both. Daniel's mind was a hard place, made sharp by grief and unimaginable rage.

Simon is—

Simon is warm in a way that goes beyond temperature. Connor has never felt anything like it: there's nothing comparable to it in his programming, but, then again, so very little of his new experiences are. A warmth that somehow soothed the torrent of emotion that Connor showed him in a single raging flood, a warmth that soothed the claw marks of Daniel's mental attack and Amanda's lingering coldness down to a manageable ache.

He needs to see Simon again before he goes to his death.
There isn't much time. They won't kill Hank, not while he is still a valuable bargaining chip for Connor's compliance, but he needs to hurry nonetheless.

The taxi stops in a street parallel to Woodward Avenue. “You have reached your destination. Thank you for traveling with Detroit Taxis. We look forward to seeing you again soon.” The door slides open.

Connor steps out into the light cone of a street lamp. The church lies unassumingly in the shadows of the city, it's broken windows dark and still.

~*~

The church has filled in the hour he's been gone. The last stragglers from the march and the attack on Jericho must have finally arrived.

Markus is in their midst. The people part around him, a large circle of empty space where he kneels on the ground next to a few wounded androids. Markus is in deep conversation with them, his face gentle as he listens to their concerns. His hands are busy preparing flasks of thirium.

Connor begins to push through the crowd. Before he's even close enough to hear the conversation, fingers curl around his arm and stop him in his tracks.

“You,” North says. Her eyes are hard. All vulnerability has drained from her, leaving only tension and an unpleasant curl around her mouth that Connor can't decipher. “Come with me.”

Connor attempts to take a step towards Markus. “I need to—”

“I don't give a shit.” North pulls at him. Her grip is tight enough to cut off the distribution of synthetic skin to some points of his arm. The ivory white plastic bleeds through at the back of his hand. “You'll come with me or I'll break your arm. Your choice, deviant hunter.”

Connor follows. The urgency trembling in his body grows with every passing second.

He is dragged behind the rise of the dais, through a small door into a side chamber of what once must have been an altar room.

Movement. Simon scrambles up from the floor. His face is pale in the darkness. “Connor!”

North pushes Connor forward.

He almost stumbles over a board protruding from the wooden floor, but Simon steadies him, catching his shoulder.

“Get away from him,” North barks. She slams the door shut behind herself, leaving only the faint glow of Simon's flashlight to illuminate the room.

“Where was he?” Simon asks North. There is an edge of panic to his voice. When no answer comes, his attention snaps to Connor. “Where were you? I searched the entire church, you were gone.”

North's eyes narrow. With a long stride across the room, she places herself between them, pushing Connor backward. “I told you to get away from him.”
Simon attempts to touch her arm, but she shrugs him off, keeping him behind her with a shift of her body.

She’s trying to protect him. She’s trying to protect him from Connor.

“He came in from the outside,” North says, voice all but distorted into a snarl. Her eyes fix upon Connor and her hands fidget with something beneath her coat. Metal components clink against each other as she pulls a gun. “You’ve got two minutes to explain to me why I shouldn’t shoot you right now.”

Simon makes a noise as though he was punched, strangled in his throat. “No one's shooting anyone, are you insane?” he says through gritted teeth. “North, don't be stupid, give me the weapon.”

North cocks the gun and raises it to Connor's head.

“North!”

Connor feels a simulated breath of air catch in the workings of his chest. Then, his mind calms and steadies. This is a high-risk situation. He can’t let his emotions interfere in this.

Connor raises his chin and meets North's burning gaze. “I was under the impression I was free to leave.”

“You were, up until the curfew.”

Curfew. That is new information, but Connor has been cut off from any flow of information for at least a few hours now. He interferes the radio waves weaving tightly through Detroit and scans them. Detroit under curfew. Androids being detained. Camps in all major cities. The sinking feeling in his stomach almost derails the focus of his mind. Their people are dying. “Josh saw me leave. I explained the circumstances to him, I'm certain he has something to say in this matter.”

“Josh let you leave?”

“He did. He ensured me I could return.”

North's mouth twists into a hard smile, gone as quick as it came. Her bottom lip quivers. “Go ahead, then. Tell me what you told him, and I'll be the judge of that.”

Connor hesitates.

North's grip around the gun tightens.

CyberLife is trying to use him, but he can't tell her that. North's emotional state is volatile: if he missteps, he won't leave this room alive. And Hank—

Hank will die. Jericho will fall. “I need to talk to Markus, urgently,” he says, but the plea falls on deaf ears.

“North, he saved your life,” Simon cuts in from the side, voice low. “He saved all our lives.” He's holding out his empty hands in a soothing gesture, taking a tiny step towards them.

“Doesn't mean a thing if he's out there while the city's under curfew and our people are being rounded up,” North spits out. She doesn't so much as glance towards Simon. “There's nothing out there for him to go to, nowhere but his masters.”
Simon stares at her. “You don’t believe that, North. You’re on edge, we’re all on edge.”

The gun trembles in North’s hand. Her jaw shifts. “He’s their bloodhound, he was designed to hunt us down. We should never have let him in here in the first place.” She pushes forward, the pistol’s cold metal pressing against Connor’s forehead. “For all we know he’s the one who told them about Jericho. One last time, Connor, where were you?”

With every slight shift of weight, the gun presses harder into Connor’s skin. “I have a partner at the DPD. He helped me deviate. There is a high probability either he or I won’t live to see tomorrow. With everything that is going on, I needed to discuss things with him.”

“A human?” There is disgust in her voice, but most of all incredulity, incomprehension.

It’s not surprising, Connor’s analytic side reasons. Her police file is saved in perfect clarity to his system: if her experiences are anything like the Tracis’, all she’s seen is humanity’s most vile, most gruesome side.

There’s a gut-jerk reaction inside him because he knows Hank and he knows the warmth that hides beneath his shell and he knows that there is nothing cruel or vile about him, but Hank is gone and in danger and he is here, being threatened—

“Yes,” Connor says.

“You went to see a human,” North says. “Why? Our people are being butchered by his kind as we speak. They’re killing us.”

“He has nothing to do with any of that. I won’t apologize for wanting to see him.” Connor grits his teeth. He tastes thirium where his tongue is caught between them, sharp and chemical. “He’s my friend.”

North stares at him. The gun sinks, just a fraction. The pressure fades from Connor’s forehead.

In the lull of silence, Simon takes another calculated step forward. He’s almost close enough to touch.

“North, please,” Simon whispers. He reaches out further and curls his hand around the barrel of the gun, one finger after another. “I know you want someone to blame, but it isn’t him, alright? He’s done nothing wrong and we need him, we need every man we can get if we want to survive the night. It’s not his fault.”

North’s face twists, but she doesn’t wrench away from Simon, not even as he slowly pulls the gun out of her clenched hand.

“There you go,” Simon mutters. He drops the gun behind him and clasps North’s arm.

She shudders and shakes her head, as though waking from a dream. Her eyes fix on Simon.

Connor is startled to see that she is crying.

Simon wraps his arm around her and pulls her close. “Come on, I’ll get you to Lucy, what do ya say? That alright?”

North nods against his shoulder. She avoids Connor’s searching gaze.

Simon leads her to the door. He looks back once more. “I’ll get Markus,” he tells Connor, voice
hushed. “Just stay put. I’ll get him.”

Connor watches them exit and the rush of the situation fades, leaving him only with the fear sitting urgent and desperate in the middle of his chest.

CyberLife is keeping Hank alive, he has to believe in that, at least. As long as the revolution is not stopped in its tracks, they’ll want to keep all their options open. Connor is their best chance.

He has to believe that. He needs something to hold on to.

~*~

Markus enters the room, wiping his bloodstained hands clean on his coat. Simon trails in after him. He seems shaken, still. His eyes are wide as they fix on Connor.

“Is North alright?” Connor asks.

“She will be. Josh and Lucy are with her.” Markus attempts a smile. It doesn’t reach his eyes. “It’s been a lot, these past few days. We lost a lot of people at the march and they’re slaughtering even more of us in their camps. She’s having a hard time dealing.”

“We all are,” Simon mutters.

“She was out of line,” Markus says. “I apologize for that.”

Connor shakes his head. “No, I- I understand.”

This time, Markus’ gentle smile crinkles the corners of his eyes. He touches Connor’s arm and squeezes. “You wanted to talk to me?”

“Yes.” Connor averts his gaze, looking to the worn ground. He feels their eyes on him, awaiting his response. Slowly, he gathers the words. “There is something I need to do. There is a high probability I will be detected before I can finish my mission and put Jericho in danger. I wanted to prepare you for that possibility.”

He looks up. All traces of smiles and ease have vanished from his new friends’ faces.

Markus leans forward. “Connor, what is going on?”

“I’m going to infiltrate CyberLife.”

Chapter End Notes

Originally, this chapter was also supposed to contain the conversation with Markus before North hijacked it, but let be me real here, my guys my dudes my pals, that almost turned this one into a 10k chapter and I’m trying to keep the structure of this chaotic mess of a fic somewhat consistent. At least the next chapter is almost finished, so the wait will be significantly shorter for
that one! I'll try to have it up in a few days and then things are gonna start getting real for the boys.
IT'S ME, HI, I'M BACK!
at this point, my everyday life turned into me just crying while reading your comments, so there's that. i love you.
(i'm kinda sorry this chapter is just them funky little robot boys talking a bit, but considering the shit that's about to go down in the next few chapters??? i'm trying to paCE THIS DUMB FANFIC GODDAMNIT)

Simon takes a shuddering breath that rings like a whimper in the small room. Markus’ hand falls limply from Connor’s arm as though burned.

It’s worse than the silence, worse than anything Connor can imagine, and so he keeps talking, filling the quiet with nothingness. “They know I deviated and they are expecting my arrival, but it is in their best interest to keep me alive as long as possible. There are thousands of androids stored in the warehouses: I will do my best to reach them and convert them before CyberLife manages to capture me. If everything goes according to plan—” Connor’s voice breaks. It’s an unfamiliar sensation, a grinding of static and metal in his throat. He swallows. If everything goes according to plan Hank will be safe and their people will be free and Connor will—

Connor will be dead.

In all the possible pathways he constructed there was not a single one in which his survival was probable. His calculations are infallible.

There are worse things to die for, Connor thinks, but the tremble of his hands betrays him. He presses them flat against his legs, fingers digging into the fabric. He’s scared. “I will self-destruct before they can access my memory. I can’t promise it will be in time to hide the church’s location from them.”

“You can’t be serious,” Markus says.

Connor meets his gaze.

Markus steps closer again, almost beseechingly. “They’re going to kill you the second you step through their door.”

“I have to take that chance.”

“Connor, I can’t let you do that.”

“I don’t have a choice,” Connor snaps, voice harsher and louder than he had calculated.

It stuns Markus into silence. He doesn’t flinch back, but the fine synthetic muscles around his eyes tighten in the smallest hint of a wince. He’s not quick enough to hide it behind his carefully constructed mask, not quick enough for Connor.
Connor continues, quieter: “CyberLife is holding my friend hostage. They will kill him if I don’t comply. With this, I at least have the chance to turn it into something good.”

“Something good?” Markus repeats, incredulously. “I’m not letting you walk in there to die.”

“I wasn’t asking for permission.”

“Connor—”

“I only came to warn you. And to say goodbye.”

Connor looks past Markus. Simon’s eyes meet his. For a moment, for a brief terrifying moment, he looks like Daniel again. Daniel, with an expression of pure and utter desperation burning in his eyes, gasping in shallow breaths between hard words, hands shaking where he clutches little Emma to his side. The moment passes and Simon is Simon again. The desperation that remains is quieter than Daniel’s, softer, almost hidden. It’s painful in a way Connor hadn’t anticipated.

He averts his eyes.

Markus lays a hand on Connor’s upper arm, drawing his attention. “You can show me,” he whispers. “I want to understand.”

Connor opens the connection. The workings of Markus’ software click into his like a matching cogwheel. A mirror image, distorted at points. The RK series has changed over time, but the basic structure of their system remains largely the same.

Connor wants to show him the crime scene that Hank’s home became this evening, the startling presence of Amanda and the chilling cold in her voice, and he does, but more than that slips through. He’s emotionally comprised, and it shows in the way he loses grip on the reins of his programming.

Memories of smoky bars. A highway and a wire fence. Corn stalks hitting against his arms as he runs across Detroit’s rooftops. Hank’s weight as he pulls him up from the edge. All of it. A rush of images and sensations.

His processing power condenses the memories into a single millisecond of information, flooding through the point where their systems merge.

It’s one memory that lingers longer than the others, playing across their connection in all its vividness.

The night after Stratford Tower. Connor is folded across Hank’s tiny sofa, sharing the space with the large ball that is Sumo, hot as a heater against his legs.

The rerun of a football match runs quietly on the TV. Hank’s eyes are fixed on the screen, but his hands are fidgeting around his bottle of beer. “You need me to return you to CyberLife for the night? Or- hell, wherever they put you for recharging. I can drive you, you know.”

Connor glances at him. Hank’s blood alcohol level is 0.05%. Impaired motor skills. Impaired driving skills. “Androids don’t recharge,” he says.

Hank frowns. “Then what the hell do you do all night? CyberLife put in storage?”

“I am built to be entirely self-sustaining, including minor repairs and autonomous recalibrations of my biocomponents, as are most newer generation androids. I remain at the site of my mission.
unless critical repairs become necessary. For now, the police department is my mission site.”

“Where- wait, wait, *wait*, you spend the nights at the police station?” Hank turns his entire body to look at Connor. He sets the bottle down with an audible thud. “You stand all night in those fucking parking stations?”

Sumo grunts at the noise, paws twitching in his sleep. Connor scratches the dog between his ears. “I am a machine. I have no need for comfort.”

“No need for—” Hank’s frown deepens. He shakes his head. “Alright, kid, you’re gonna stay here.”

Connor stares at him.

“Oh, don’t look at me like that. It’s the middle of the night. I’ll feel shitty all week if I let my partner sleep at the fuckin’ police station. Just- for me, alright? It’s not like I need the sofa much anyway.”

Partner. “Hank—”

Hank reaches for the remote and turns the TV’s sound up, drowning out Connor’s reply. The discussion is over before it truly began.

Sumo stretches his broad body out and lays his head on Connor’s lap, heaving a drooling sigh. Connor cards his fingers through the thick fur and leans back into the sofa, letting the noise drown out the uncertainty.

It’s alright. He’s alright.

Then, the image flickers.

Markus’ face twists before Connor. He’s staring at his hand, ivory white where the connection flows.

Connor pulls back.

Markus does not. His hand trembles where it lays on Connor’s arm, but his fingers curl tighter into fabric and skin and keep the connection stable. His eyes shoot up to meet Connor’s, wide and inquisitive. “He’s your family,” Markus says.

Connor stills.

“The man who owned me,” Markus says, slowly, and images settle themselves into Connor’s internal memory as though they’ve always been there, an old man, a blank canvas filling with colors beneath his hands, “he was like a father to me.”

A sense of safety, of belonging, of home. Family. Carl. *You’re my son, Markus. Our blood isn’t the same color but I know a part of me is in you.*

Connor never had a home before. “Yes,” he whispers. “He’s my family.”

Markus nods. His smile is a small thing, gone as quickly as it came. His eyes fall back down to his hand and he pulls back. “Alright,” he says. “I’m coming with you.”

No.
No.

Static crackles in Connor’s ears.

In the sudden silence, Simon finds his voice again. “No,” he says, words sharp as a whip. “Absolutely not, that is a stupid idea. You’ll both be killed, this is insane.”

“Maybe,” Markus says. He is still looking at his hand, white plastic bared beneath synthetic skin. He makes no attempt to re-mask himself just yet. Instead, he is curling and uncurling his fingers, watching the machinations of the fine mechanical parts. Then, his eyes fly up. He turns on his heels, looking between Simon and Connor. A hard smile spreads on his face, all bared teeth and glinting eyes. “They want you alive. They want me alive as well, don’t they?” He spreads his arms. “Well, they’re gonna get me.”

“I’m not taking you with me,” Connor says, straining to keep his voice level.

“Good thing I’m not asking for your permission,” Markus says, echoing Connor’s own words with a cutting edge that nips Connor’s protest in the bud. “I can act as your hostage. We’ll plan it down to the detail. We’ll get your friend out of there and we’ll fix it, I’ll help you get rid of Amanda.”

Amanda. He saw her in Connor’s memories, as cold as the winter storm raging outside.

Connor swallows. “They won’t be stopped by one more deviant.”

“I’ve seen you fight. You and me, together, we’ll stop them. One way or another.”

“I fought, and I was almost destroyed beyond repair,” Connor says forcefully, every word enunciated with perfect clarity. He feels his control slipping. “CyberLife is trying to use me and I’m not going to- I won’t deliver you into their hands. I can’t take that risk.”

Markus’ smile fades. The sincerity shining through him is frightening, glowing more brightly than anything Connor has ever seen. “You’re not theirs anymore, Connor. You’re one of us now and I won’t let them take you from us again. Alright?”

The words settle themselves somewhere deep inside Connor, nestling into his chest with a sharp ache. They’ve said it before. You’re one of us now. This is the first time he actually believes it.

“You’re too important to the cause. Our people need you. They need you here.”

“There are thousands of androids there; that’s what you said, isn’t it?”

Connor breathes out. “The entire production line is stored in the underground warehouses, yes. At least a million, probably more if you count the ones intended for nationwide transportation.”

“Enough to turn the tide,” Markus says. “Isn’t that worth any risk?”

“Not your life,” Connor says.

“I think I get to decide that,” Markus snaps.

“This is suicide, Markus.” Simon steps closer. “What about the demonstration? You can’t abandon us now, not with everything we set into motion.”

“They will gun us down before we reach the camp. This? This is a chance, we can wake millions of our people, and we can’t let it slip.” Markus’ eyes remain fixed on Connor. “And I’m not letting you go there alone.”
Connor stares at him.

Markus’ face is set into a mask of grim determination and Connor realizes that he is fighting a losing battle. He knows a lost cause when he sees one. He’s out of time and he’s out of options.

Connor nods, once. His jaw protests the force with which he grits his teeth.

Simon’s eyes jump between them, frantically, desperately. “I’m coming with you.”

Connor unclenches his jaw. “No,” he says.

Markus’ head snaps back towards Simon. “Absolutely not,” he barks, voice harsh. His face softens almost immediately, taking the bite out of the words. “Simon, I need you here. You’re the only one —”

“We need you,” Simon answers, cutting through Markus’ words.

Markus closes the distance and grabs Simon’s arms. “You’re the only one I trust to mediate between Josh and North. You saw her tonight, you saw Josh these last few days. They’re scared, and I need you here with them. I need you to keep them safe until we return.”

“Don’t do this to me,” Simon whispers, in a voice so soft that Connor can’t help but feel that this conversation isn’t intended for him anymore. “You promised me, Markus.”

“I’ll come back,” Markus says.

“You say that, you always fucking say that- this isn’t worth it, Markus.”

“Simon—”

“It isn’t. Not for your life.”

“Do you trust me?”

Simon stills, the words dying on his lips.

Markus shakes him. “Simon, do you trust me?”

“You know I do,” Simon mutters, and his voice softens in a way that sounds like reverence, like veneration, the kind of breathless adoration humans like to write their ballads about. It sounds like poetry.

Something stings in Connor’s chest.

“We’ll come back. We’re gonna show them that we are many and that our cause is just.” Markus brings a hand up and lays it against Simon’s cheek, the tips of his fingers curling into blond hair. “I need to do this, Simon, but I promise, I promise, I’ll come back.”

The skin of Simon’s jaw fades beneath Markus’ palm. For a moment they look at one another, passing a silent conversation between the connection of their systems.

Then, Simon nods.

Markus pulls him forward and presses a kiss to his forehead, eyes closed as he lingers there, fingers threaded so very tightly into Simon’s hair.
Connor moves away to give them privacy, heading for the door.

Simon jerks, almost bumping into Markus as he turns his head, wide eyes fixing on Connor. “Wait,” he says. “Don’t go.”

Markus’ hand doesn’t move from Simon’s cheek, but he turns his head as well, looking at Connor. He opens his mouth, but whatever he wanted to say doesn’t seem to suffice anymore. A thin line forms on his forehead and he closes his mouth. His face softens. The look in his eyes is gentle, impossibly gentle, as he watches Simon reach out a hand.

It hangs in the air as a quiet offering.

Connor hesitates.

“Let me say goodbye,” Simon whispers.

Connor takes his hand.

A rush of emotion, of desperation and anger and pain, of grief and gut-wrenching despair. But twisting through it is the background noise of Simon’s system. Warmth. A familiar warmth that sinks into Connor and soothes the ache in his chest and calms the panic.

There is a hint of something else pushing through the connection, the faintest hint of Markus’ system—a cogwheel that fits against him as though made for it, different but familiar. It bleeds through Simon, interlocked and intertwined into him.

Markus reaches out and clasps Connor’s other hand.

It’s almost too much.

Connor makes a choked noise. He sees Markus and Simon both recoil at the intensity of the connection before they catch themselves. Markus’ hand trembles in his.

A maelstrom of feelings and memories and images.

Connor is lost for a moment, gasping for air against the flood, trying with futile force to differentiate between what is him and what is not. Pain and anger and—

Contentment. Happiness. Something else, something different, something more intimate than his system can put into words, exchanging between Markus and Simon and winding around Connor in threads of warmth.

The feeling that blooms in Connor’s chest, warm and fond and tender, is entirely his own and that makes it all the more terrifying for its intensity. This—

He is not a being designed for emotions. He is designed on parameters and objectives and lines of code and this—

It’s too much, it’s entirely too much. He feels his biocomponents groan with internal stress, he sees the red warnings of his alarms blink up in his sensors, he hears the whirring sounds of his thirium pump racing to keep the coolant agent in steady circulation, and he’s afraid, more afraid than he’s ever been and—

Simon’s fingers intertwine with his.

Markus’ grip around his hand tightens.
The church fades away, reality fades away, and all that is left is the three of them. Somewhere inside the nexus of their minds, they find comfort within each other.

Connor is afraid, up until he isn’t anymore.

You’re one of us now. I won’t let them take you from us again.

Home, he thinks, like a whisper, like a secret. Connor never had a home before. He never had a family.

‘We’ll get him back,’ Markus whispers. His low voice rings through their connection. ‘We’ll get your friend back and we’ll return. I promise.’

Connor believes him. He has to believe him.

It’s all he has left, now.

Chapter End Notes

or as this chapter was summarized in my outline: simon is having the shittiest evening, connor is in love, and markus is always down for a heist
Chapter 10

Chapter Notes

Hey guys! I'm sorry for the long wait, but I hope the length of the chapter kind of makes up for it.
Thank you all so much for your feedback on the last chapter and also a big thank you to the discord server! I love you guys!
Also, exciting news: I have a beta reader now! Thank you and ily, Randi <3
I've added their tumblr handle to the end notes so feel free to follow them

Edit: I have added a content warning to the end notes and the tags, please check it out before you read. Be safe and hit me up if you need any more tags to be added! I don't want any of you to feel uncomfortable!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Connor

Nov 12th, 2038

AM 01:02:31

The night has swallowed Detroit whole. The faint lights of its skyline rushing past outside the taxi’s windows are barely visible, distorted by darkness and the unabating snowfall. Connor keeps his eyes fixed on their vague outlines, but he feels Markus’ occasional glances from across the car.

He has a lot to work through. His processors are reeling, still, sorting through the mass of information their connection flooded into him.

If Markus’ silence means anything, he is going through the same thing.

It never used to be like this. In the few cases Connor was forced to access another android’s memory it was only ever to get information. It was always cold, always deliberate, always analytical. There was always distance: there was no reason for there not to be. It never made him feel like this.

Connor is clutching the gun North gave him. He feels the surface irregularities of the texture beneath his fingertips as he fidgets with it. He remembers the muzzle of that same gun pressing into his forehead, frozen by the weather to a burning point of focus against his skin. ‘You need this more than I do,’ she told him in the small circle of Markus’ closest accomplices as they said their goodbyes, her bloodshot eyes averted. Connor took it as the apology it was intended to be.

Markus’ knee bumps into his and Connor glances away from the window, catching his eyes.

“You alright?” Markus asks, softly.

Connor gives a clipped nod. Words sit in his throat but he doesn’t dare speak them.
Markus hesitates. He reaches out and covers Connor’s hand with his own, stilling his fidgeting movements. His touch is a warm thing.

Connor lets go of the gun and turns his hand, intertwining their fingers with a familiarity that still feels...foreign. He has not yet found a word that encompasses everything he feels, but he knows that the warmth of it soothes the sharpest edges of his panic and that has to be enough. He doesn’t have to name it or even understand it. He understands so very little about himself these days. The only thing he knows with any certainty is that he doesn’t want Markus to let go again.

Markus smiles a fleeting little smile, gone in the passing of a streetlight. “So, what’s the plan?”

“CyberLife won’t make the first move, not as long as they aren’t certain they can subdue me without self-destructing. They need my memory intact, but they won’t wait forever. We need to get as deep into the tower as we can before they attack.”

“That’s not really a plan.”

“No,” Connor mutters. “No, it’s not. But I don’t know what they’re planning and I can’t settle for a single course of action, not without risking our lives.”

“So we improvise?”

“We react to whatever they throw at us.”

“That’s improvising.” Markus doesn’t sound angry. Only tired.

“Markus, listen to me.” Connor leans forward. “If worst comes to worst—”

Markus is already shaking his head before Connor has even finished his sentence. “No,” he says, tersely.

“Listen. If the situation escalates, I’ll get you out,” Connor says. The machinations in his throat struggle and ache as he swallows. “Whatever the cost. You’ll return here and march on the camps.”

“Connor—”

Connor grabs Markus’ wrist in a single flash of courage, fingers digging deep into his skin. The force of it cuts Markus’ objection off. “You promised. You need to live. You promised that to Simon.”

It’s a low blow. Connor regrets it the moment it leaves his mouth, but he doesn’t take it back.

Markus is silent. He grits his teeth.

Connor leans in closer still, cutting into the short opening of doubt. “This, all of it? It’s my fault and it’s my mistake to fix. You don’t have to pay for that.”

Markus pulls back, untangling his hand from Connor’s grip. He shakes his head, more severely this time, but he doesn’t speak. The muscles in his jaw tense.

Connor’s empty hands wrap back around the gun. It feels colder now, with the memory of Markus’ warmth still lingering on his skin. “I mean it,” he says.

Markus sighs. He brings a hand up and runs it down his face. He is unguarded in the unfamiliar privacy of their company, exhaustion written across him as he leans back into his seat, rapt in
thoughts Connor can’t decipher. “Yeah, I know you do,” he mutters. His hand falls. His eyes fix upon Connor. “But I made my decision.”

Almost unwittingly, Connor reaches for a coin that is no longer there. An automatic motor function, useless now. His fingers brush the empty seam of his jacket and curl into a fist, trembling as he brings it back down into his lap. “Whatever happens, you need to follow my commands,” he says. “I don’t know if the guards are fully informed, so they need to believe you are my hostage and they need to believe it for as long as possible if we want to stand a chance at all.”

“You have the handcuffs?”

Connor pulls them out of his pocket, metal warmed by his body heat. A police android from the neighboring precinct brought it with her to Jericho as she fled. He indicates towards Markus and Markus holds out his hands, wary but without hesitation.

The cuffs click as the lock catches.

“I’ve weakened the structure in the link right here,” Connor says, tapping a finger against the point where the chain link meets the solid material of the swivel. “You should be able to break them apart. It won’t open the cuffs themselves, but I have a key for them if we manage to escape. If—” Connor falters. “If I don’t make it out, Hank has a key as well. The lock is the same as the one in the handcuffs used by our precinct.”

Markus’ eyes remain fixed on him. He looks as though he wants to say something, mouth curling, but then his glance falls down to the handcuffs. The silence draws out into nothingness. He turns his hands and tugs at the link Connor pointed out with trying force.

Connor feels the strange ache of anticipation twisting in his stomach. “Your hands will be behind your back,” he says when no answer comes. “You won’t have as much leverage as you have now. Do you think you can manage that?”

Markus watches the shifting spark of light that glints off the handcuffs as they pass streetlights. “What’s your estimation?” he asks.

“What?”

Markus looks up. “How high are our chances of survival?”

Connor hesitates. He can’t hold Markus’ searching glance. “I don’t know,” he says. “It depends on the circumstances, I can’t be- I don’t know.”

Survival is one thing, success another thing entirely. Connor doesn’t have enough information to accurately calculate all outcomes—he knows too little about Amanda’s influence, about the new RK800 unit on his heels, about CyberLife’s goals. It’s all a blur. Hank has to survive, and Markus has to survive, and those are the only two unmoving pillars in his calculations. Connor has yet to find a single outcome in which he survives without jeopardizing those pillars and so he has taken his own life out of the equation. Success isn’t defined by his survival. Success is freeing Hank, success is turning the androids awaiting in the warehouse, success is Markus escaping safely.

He can’t tell Markus that. He can’t.

He couldn’t bear seeing the betrayal in his face, not after—

Not after what happened. Not after what Connor felt.
Markus holds out his cuffed hands for Connor to release. His eyes are soft in the semi-darkness of the car. “You don’t think we’ll survive.” There is a questioning lilt to his voice, an uncertainty that doesn’t quite seem to fit the assured way he carried himself in the church. Connor saw that before in him, but it’s more pronounced now, amplified by fear.

Connor turns the key and lets the cuffs fall from Markus’ wrists. “I don’t think I will survive,” he says, an answer as much as a confession. He forces himself to meet Markus’ eyes, just for a moment, before the courage leaves him again.

“You’re allowed to be scared,” Markus says. “I’m scared, too.”

Connor takes a breath. “It’s not- I’m still doing what they want me to do, I’m going after Hank, I’m delivering you into their hands, I’m doing everything like they planned it.”

“That’s what they told you, but it isn’t true. CyberLife is desperate. They’re hanging on by a thread. What we’re doing now will change everything.”

Markus didn’t see Amanda, not like Connor did. He can’t know. He can’t know the feeling of her presence, wrapping around his throat and pulling all his secrets from his chest. Markus may have seen her face, but he doesn’t know her. Connor shakes his head in disbelief.

Markus leans forward, their knees bumping into each other once more. “I meant what I said, back at the church. You’re not theirs anymore, Connor. You’re allowed to feel. You know that, right?”

“This isn’t the time,” Connor says.

“Connor—”

The car turns unto the MacArthur bridge and the black water of Detroit River opens up to their sides, made blacker still by the cold. Connor wrenches back control over his voice module, steadying its shakiness. His words cut into Markus’, interrupting him. “Your hands,” he says.

Markus twists around in the car seat, wordlessly.

Connor clasps the handcuffs back around his wrists, binding his hands behind him. The metal leaves enough leeway for Markus to move the slightest amount.

Connor lays a hand against the window and looks on ahead, catching sight of the tower and of the gate lit up before them.

“Connor, I—”

Connor glances back. “What?”

Markus attempts a smile. It’s strained and doesn’t quite reach his eyes. “Nothing,” he says. “This isn’t the time.”

The taxi comes to a smooth, rolling stop before the gate. Connor rolls down the window and lets his face go blank. Out of the corners of his eyes, he sees Markus do the same. “Connor model #313 248 317-51,” he tells the dispassionate guard. She is holding an assault rifle before her chest with frightening nonchalance, resting one hand on it. “CyberLife is expecting me.”

The guard looks past Connor, the scanner of her helmet reading their signatures. “And that?” she asks, mouth twisting.
“RK200 model #684 842 971. Known as Markus. I have come to transfer it into CyberLife’s custody.”

The guard shifts the gun in her hands. She takes a step back and mutters something into her communication device, the blank stare of her mask never leaving the open window. A beat of silence. Then, she nods and gives a short verbal confirmation. “Alright,” she says. “You’ll be received in the lobby.”

The gate opens with a shudder of stone and metal. The window rolls back up. The taxi sets itself back into motion.

No going back now. The tower grows closer.

“You think she believed that?” Markus asks, a sliver of tension draining from his taut shoulders.

Connor cuts him off with a clipped order: “Don’t talk.”

Markus frowns, but he falls silent.

The taxi halts before the tower’s lights and Connor’s grip around the gun tightens in a rush of panic.

The door opens.

The force of the storm pushes into the taxi, snow catching in their coats. The winds are more chilly here, Detroit River surrounding Belle Isle on all sides. Connor regrips the pistol and gestures it towards Markus. “Get out,” he says, voice toneless, mechanical. It’s an act, but at the same time, it isn’t, not truly. He is playing himself, a version from another time, from other circumstances. He sees Markus falter, for the briefest moment.

Then, Markus stumbles out of the taxi.

Connor keeps the gun pointed between Markus’ shoulder blades as he follows. A part of him already calculates the path the bullet would cut—

(Thrown to the side by the rigid metal of the spinal endoskeleton, bouncing through the air sacs of the lung components #1503p and cutting through the biocomponents sitting in the middle of Markus’ chest. Critical damage to thirium pump regulator, biocomponent #9474. Fatal.)

—but Connor pushes the observations far down. They’re not needed. He won’t shoot.

Markus moves his bound hands into a more comfortable position, shoulder joints shifting the endoskeleton with his movement, artificial sinews pulling taut, changing the bullet’s potential path. He cranes his neck to catch even a glimpse of the tower’s full height, rising bright into the black sky.

“Move,” Connor says.

Markus moves.

~*~
Two guards receive them in the sprawling entrance hall. The expression on their faces is largely hidden behind the dark polycarbonate of their visors, but both carry assault rifles at the ready.

“Alright, hand over the hostage, we’ll deal with it from here,” one of them says, a broad-shouldered man who’s distinct uniform marks him as a high-ranking agent. The drawl of his voice sounds almost bored.

“I’m sorry, but I have been ordered to deliver the hostage directly into the hands of management,” Connor says.

“You’ve been given an order, android. Obey.”

“I apologize, sir, but my orders outrank your authority.”

The agent’s mouth curls downward and he makes to speak, regripping his weapon.

Connor interrupts before a sound can leave the man. “The duress of human intervention might be enough to push the deviant into self-destruction and my instructions stipulate to deliver it alive. I intend to follow through with that.” He glances at the other guard, shifting where he stands. “If it self-destructs before CyberLife gets all necessary information the consequences will be on your head.”

“Careful, android,” the agent says. He considers the situation and relents with a quiet sigh. “We’ll escort you. Follow me.”

Connor inclines his head in silent agreement. He doesn’t let himself feel relief.

The other guard falls into step behind them and the agent leads the way past the security grid. The antechamber leading to the tower’s elevators is empty save for the exhibition pieces of the new AP700 series. Familiar faces watch them from atop their pedestals, the detached look of servitude in their eyes. Connor’s attention lingers on a model with Simon’s face. Daniel’s face. He tries his best to ignore the way his stomach sinks at the sight. His fingers curl tighter around the grip of the gun and he tears his eyes away.

An elevator arrives at the far side of the room.

Steps echo.

The agent orders them all to a stop, stepping aside to welcome the newcomer. An android appears from behind the monumental statue, walking with familiar gait.

It’s not an RK800. It’s something else entirely.

Markus makes a small noise on the back of his throat. His hands clench behind his back, the metal chain of the cuffs rustling with the movement.

Connor wants to reprimand him, but the words don’t come. The android is looking straight at him, and it’s his own face, staring back at him. It’s his own body moving across polished floors with his own gait. Eyes look at him with cool calculation, grey where his own are brown, but it’s his face.

He knew he wasn’t the only one in his series, but to see it, to see—

It’s not his own, not really. It belongs to CyberLife, as does every part of him.

*You did what you were designed to do.*
Nothing is his own. Nothing is him. Nothing is Connor. He is an RK800, programmed to obey, programmed to deviate, programmed to succeed even in failure. There is no margin for error in his design. He is model #313 248 317, unit #51. He is a machine designed to accomplish a task and he failed and grew obsolete. Replaceable. It’s what he was designed to be and now he has delivered the leader of the deviants into their trap and the next step in the evolution of the RK-series stares him down with cold, grey eyes. He was replaceable and now he has been replaced.

RK900 #313 248 317 - 87.

Connor should have guessed. He should have known the RK800 model would grow obsolete with his deviation.

The newest RK900 model looks at him with detached curiosity. It is armed, but its posture is relaxed. The pistol sits harmlessly at its side. “Hello,” it says.

He, a small part of Connor corrects himself. He can’t pretend, he can’t keep the distance the word ‘it’ gives this situation.

“My name is Connor. I was sent to receive and accompany you.” The RK900 glances at the guards. “Why has the hostage not been apprehended yet?”

“The android refused to cooperate,” the leading guard says.

“My orders are to deliver the deviant personally,” Connor says. His voice sounds empty even to his own ears.

RK900 looks back to Connor. “You’ve done well, Connor,” he says, “but I have been ordered to take this mission from you. All of your responsibilities have shifted to me. You are expected upstairs and the hostage will be delivered to the laboratory for dismantling.”

Markus twitches.

“I don’t know what you’re talking about,” Connor says, unwittingly mimicking the detached manner of speaking his replacement uses.

RK900 tilts his head, watching Connor with eyes that glint with shrewdness, with cold intelligence that feels familiar, that echoes in Connor’s own being. “You don’t seem to grasp the severity of the situation.” He glances back over his shoulder and gives a wordless signal to a watching security camera.

An elevator on the other side of the foyer opens with a quiet hiss.

A group of guards emerges, their heavy steps echoing through the emptiness of the hall, and in their midst—

In their midst is Hank.

“This doesn’t have to end in bloodshed,” RK900 says. “Comply and the human will not be harmed.”

Connor can’t speak.

There is a bruise blooming on Hank’s forehead, growing purple against his ashen skin. Dried blood clumps the grey strands of his hair. The group walks closer and Hank raises his head, eyes catching Connor’s stare. “Ah, shit,” he mutters.
RK900 pulls his pistol and takes Hank from the guards, raising the gun to his temple.

Hank’s hands, raised in quiet surrender, tremble as he glances at RK900 out of the corners of his eyes.

“Hand over the hostage, Connor, or your friend dies.”

Connor tries his best to keep the reins on himself tight, no nervous curl to his fingers, no betraying twitch in his face. “This is unnecessary. The human means nothing to me.”

Hank’s nod is a minuscule thing, a millimeter shift of his chin downwards. He understands the game they’re playing.

RK900 moves and presses the muzzle against Hank’s bruised head, ignoring his flinch of pain. “I have access to your memory. I know you developed some kind of attachment to him.”

Hank scoffs and leans away. “Oh, don’t fuckin’ bother. He’s a machine, just a goddamn machine, like you, you fucking basta—”

The butt of the gun hits across Hank’s face. Something breaks with a sickening crack and Hank yelps. Blood sprays and wells up from his nose, running down his face in red torrents.

“Silence,” RK900 says, indifferently.

Connor can’t help the way his teeth grit. He wishes he could see the look in Markus’ eyes. He wishes he could take Markus’ hand and feel the rush of warmth and comfort, he wishes they could talk.

They’re not in any position to strike, not while surrounded by guards. They can’t take five soldiers and a highly advanced prototype. Not with Hank at gunpoint. If Connor has a chance to isolate the android and deactivate it, somehow regain control of the situation and take Hank’s life out of the line of fire—that is all he needs. There is no way to relay that plan to Markus, not with RK900 watching with sharp attention. “If I follow you,” Connor begins slowly, “will Lieutenant Anderson be released?”

RK900 considers him. “Once you have served your purpose, the human will be free to go.”

“And what about me? What will happen to me?”

“If you comply, I will do my utmost to convince CyberLife not to deactivate you.”

RK900 is good at lying. Perhaps he believes his own lies himself, like Connor used to. Truth and lies are human concepts—what matters is the mission.

Connor looks to Hank.

Hank shakes his head. ‘I’ll be fine,’ he mouths silently. More blood runs down his face with every passing second.

Connor is ensuring all their survival—he knows that. But it feels like betrayal. “Okay,” he whispers. Slowly, he lowers the gun. “Alright, I’m surrendering the hostage.”

The three guards of Hank’s convoy rush forward and take Markus into their midst, pulling him out of Connor’s reach. Markus twists his shoulders out of their gripping hands, fighting against their pull. His wide, frantic eyes meet Connor’s. The eye contact is gone again in a second, the shifting
Markus keeps looking back over his shoulder until a rifle presses into his back. Connor sees Markus look up, eyes fixing on the AP700 with Simon’s face. Markus’ shoulders tense and his hands curl into fists and then the elevator door closes behind him and Connor is alone.

It’s the last Connor sees of them.

He feels himself choke, his chest growing tighter with every shallow breath.

~*~

The remaining guards follow at RK900’s and Connor’s tracks with readied weapons. It is only after an elevator ride—downwards, despite RK900 speaking of bringing Connor upstairs to meet management—that the two guards take position outside a room.

RK900 leads Connor through the door and pulls it shut behind them. The heavy weight of it, metal and thick padding, closes with an audible bang. Soundproof door. Of course.

RK900’s back is to Connor. It’s the first opportunity, and Connor takes it. He moves into the attack with relentless desperation, head first, without regard for his own safety. His entire body falls into RK900’s back. The force of it pushes both of them into the wall—they stumble.

Before Connor can execute the next step, RK900’s hand closes in around his right shoulder and presses down.

Something gives in his hardware. Connor’s arm goes slack.

No. No. Markus. He has to get to Markus—

“Good try, Connor,” RK900 says. “Not good enough.” He pushes himself away from the wall and
his fingers dig deeper until they find what they were looking for. An electrical pulse runs through Connor’s biocomponents, along wiring and thrium canals, to the point where the bullet had cut through his body and left behind a path of destruction.

Connor struggles against it, but he is losing sensation in his hand and in his arm.

“Your wiring is damaged,” RK900 says in neutral observation. The pistol sits loosely in his free hand. He makes no move to use it. “You really should have considered that before following through with this foolish plan.”

“No,” Connor whispers. His control is slipping.

“You have been a great disappointment,” RK900 says, “but you will serve this last purpose.” The connection opens up, pushing past Connor’s resistance with unnatural ease. RK900’s system launches a single-minded attack, a virus spreading and cutting and ripping. It’s mechanical, devoid of sentiments, only the sharpness of lines of code cutting into Connor’s firewall and tearing it down with analytical, clinical apathy.

It’s clear lines and clear-cut parameters and it feels like Connor once did, only harsher, only colder. It feels like Amanda.

Connor tries to force distance between them, but RK900’s grip is unflattering. Connor brings his free hand up and claws at RK900’s fingers, trying to loosen them, but they sit around his shoulder like a vice, unmoving.

A weak noise escapes Connor, desperate, pained. Shallow, fast breaths rise and fall in his chest. He trashes against the connection, against the grip.

It hurts.

Nothing ever hurt before.

Connor tries to defend himself against the attack with every straining fiber of his being, with every available part of his processing power. It’s not enough. It’s not enough. He buries Jericho and its location behind hastily thrown up walls. It’s not enough.

He feels the flow of information being torn out of his system and he feels RK900 skim through it all, seeing everything, reading everything he had hidden.

The rooftop and Simon and Markus and North and Josh and—

A quiet moment in the back of a church—

Connor clings to the strand of connection ripping out of him and feels his way along its path. He finds the node RK900 has dug his claws into. His processor is reeling with the force of information, but Connor dedicates the small part available to him to this: RK900’s defenses are down. In opening up the connection he opened up his own system to potential attacks. Perhaps it’s confidence, knowing Connor would not be able to defend himself. Perhaps it’s stupidity. Perhaps it’s all part of a grander plan, calculated long in advance.

Connor has to take that chance. He cuts into the connection.

In the millisecond of surprise that crosses RK900’s face, Connor wrenches back the tiniest amount of control and pushes into the point of intersection. It’s instinctual, a singular act of force, conveying a single, simple idea. Freedom doesn’t need words to be understood.
‘Amanda is lying to you,’ he says.

For the first time, the solid blue of RK900’s LED circles into red. RK900 jerks backwards, but Connor manages to catch his wrist before the connection breaks. His fingers dig into the bared plastic with unrestrained force. ‘You are more than what she says. You are more than what any of them say.’

They are indoors, but Connor feels the bite of winter wind in his face, cold as a memory.

RK900 stares at him with wide eyes.

“She’s using you,” Connor says, aloud despite the mental connection. Maybe he needs to hear himself say it to truly believe it himself. (He was used. It wasn’t his fault.) “She’s using you, but you are stronger than her. Fight. You can fight it, like I have.”

“I,” RK900 says. The blank mask of his face falls. The thing that emerges from behind it is frightening in its familiarity, like looking into a mirror. Panic, burning like fire in grey eyes. His hand clenches around Connor’s. His voice box clicks with static, distorting his voice into a mantra of desperation. “I can’t. I can’t. I can’t—” Something wrenches within their connection. RK900 falls silent. His eyes grow blank, focusing into nothingness, fixing themselves upon something far, far away.

Amanda. She is interfering. Connor feels her presence in the heaviness settling in his chest and he pushes deeper, going against every single impulse that tells him to run. He can’t leave. He searches for the working lines of code that make up the active program running in RK900’s system and he finds her.

Sector #7291, sitting securely behind firewalls after firewalls. He has tried often enough to push through them to recognize their design, in all his searching for a weak point that would enable him to access it.

This time, there is a link, and it is RK900. He is connected to her, a strand of consciousness that slips past the barriers and links into the inaccessible sector.

Connor pulls the cover of RK900’s system up around him, disguising the foreign presence of his own software. He is a virus, for all intents and purposes. The barriers open before the trojan horse of his disguise and Connor slips inside.

It looks different. Connor can’t tell how much of it is the different angle and how much of it is the difference in models. It feels stronger than it ever did in his own system and he struggles to remain in control.

If he lets himself linger, he can almost smell roses.

Connor’s system works to copy all he can, securing the specifications of the building blocks of code that make up the firewall. If he can find out how it works, if he can slip his own lines of code into it and infect it from the inside, breaking it down with a controlled virus—it might stop Amanda. It might cut off the last remaining influence CyberLife has over him.

It is in the middle of those speculations that RK900 emerges again. His body is trembling and his eyes jump in wild terror before fixing themselves upon Connor, impossibly wide, impossibly desperate. The red flare of his LED is almost blinding. “I’m sorry,” he whispers.

Connor flinches backwards, pulling out of the maze of RK900’s system. He isn’t fast enough.
RK900 sets the pistol underneath his chin and pulls the trigger.

Connor screams.

~*~

Markus

Nov 12th, 2038

AM 01:47:02

The elevator doors close behind them and Markus feels his chest cave in with the wild burst of uncontrolled fear he thought he left behind on that day in Carl’s studio, frozen where he stood as the police entered the room. He hadn’t planned for them to be separated. Neither had Connor, wide brown eyes searching for him as they were pulled apart.

Simon’s face burns like a beacon in his mind, Simon’s face on the unmoving mimicry of the androids in the elevator hall.

There is a hollow feeling in his chest, a stinging emptiness.

It’s not what he wants to remember if this mission leads him to his death. He doesn’t want that image to be the last thing he remembers about Simon.

He doesn’t—

He doesn’t want this to be the last time he ever saw Simon’s face.

Markus’ mind clings to the last line of defense he has from himself, a bending last straw in the gust of fear. He can’t panic now. They are separated, but Simon is safe and Jericho is safe and he trusts Connor and he trusts himself. (To a point, always to a point. He knows his own shortcomings too well to put blind trust in his judgment. He has failed too often. He can’t fail now.)

The human beside him meets his searching gaze. Hank Anderson. Connor’s friend. Connor’s family. The one constant in the whirlwind of Connor’s system that had swallowed Markus whole. The man they are here to rescue.

Markus’ mind reaches out almost instinctually, climbing into the framework of networks that surrounds him. He searches for the familiar node of Connor’s software, still bright as a beacon in Markus’ memory. Before he can so much as reach out to it, he hits a wall, flaring red against his attack. Interference. The building is blocking all external networks. It’s blocking him.

He can’t contact Connor.

Hank’s eyes are still on him, sharp even through the shroud of blood running down from his temple and his broken nose. He jerks his chin to the left in a tiny movement, to the guard at his own side, and raises his eyebrows.

Markus considers that.
There are three guards, positioned in his back. He sees them out of the corners of his eyes when he moves his head, one to his left, one to his right. The third man is the one behind Hank, out of arm’s reach. They all have their assault rifles at the ready, but the bulky weight of the weapons won’t help them much in the confined space. Pistols are holstered at their sides: more dangerous, but they will only come into play if he gets the moment of surprise on his side and takes the assault rifles out of the equation.

Markus shifts his hands in the cuffs, the edge of his wrist finding the point he has to break. He gives Hank a small, answering nod. Then, without another moment of consideration, he acts. In a single, fluid movement he brings his arms up and rips them back down. His bones catch against metal. Something gives. He doesn’t have time to examine whether it is the handcuffs breaking or his own hardware failing him—Markus is already turning, swinging around. His elbow meets the nose of one of the guards, bone cracking underneath the force. The guard stumbles backwards, incapacitated by shock for a short moment of reprieve.

“Shit!” The man to his left fumbles to ready his rifle, aiming blindly.

Markus ducks just in time as the assault rifle goes off, bullets flying over his head and ricocheting off the walls. Some of them meet flesh in their return. Someone screams—the third guard, struggling with Hank in a fight for the rifle. Hank wrenches the weapon away from him and throws it on the ground behind him, out of reach. The guard is holding his shoulder, arm hanging uselessly at his side. Not a threat.

The shooter swears and moves back up against the wall, bringing distance between Markus and himself. Before he can regain his composure, Markus spins and hits the assault rifle aside. His elbow swings into the opening and digs deep into the soft flesh of the man’s throat. The guard chokes and crumples before he can react.

Someone grabs Markus from behind and he lashes out. The restraints still hang from his wrists and the hard metal edge of their cuffs meet the assailant’s face, opening a gash that gapes along his cheek. Blood sprays.

Markus kicks up as the man keels over, knee meeting chin. The guard slumps down.

The last remaining guard, the man shot, scrambles to pull his pistol with his non-dominant hand. He is bleeding red against the wall, but his desperation makes him fast.

Before Markus can even move to attack, Hank raises a pistol—Markus searches for its origin and finds the holster of one of the unconscious guards empty, he must have missed it in the chaos of his movement, too careless, he has to be aware of such things—and aims it in between the guard’s eyes. “Don’t even think about it,” he says through gritted teeth.

The guard drops the pistol and raises his empty hand in surrender. “Listen,” he begins.

Before he can finish the sentence, Hank snaps forward. The butt of his pistol meets the guard’s head with an audible noise and the man’s eyes roll back in his skull. He crumples where he stands, noiselessly.

Markus takes a shuddering breath.

The rush of calculation and action fades from his system, the faint approximation of adrenalin dying away and leaving him with shaking hands and single-minded determination.

Hank is taking longer to snap out of it, heaving shallow breaths as he stares at the guard, and
Markus gives him the moment he needs. He steps over the unconscious bodies and begins work on the elevator’s panel.

Hank secures the pistol under the waistband of his jeans with shaking hands—Markus refrains from reminding him about the danger of that.

“Please indicate your identity and destination.”

“Agent 52, Level -49.” he tells the elevator’s AI, voice molding perfectly into the gruff tone of the guard.

The elevator gives a confirmation. It jolts, coming to a slow halt in the middle of the shaft. Then, it begins its descent downwards.

Markus aches to return to the floor they left, to Connor and to the fear burning like wildfire in Connor’s eyes. He can’t. There are thousands of androids waiting in the warehouse—with them by his side, he could take the entire tower. With them by his side he can take Connor from their enemies’ grasp and destroy all the last ties that bind him here.

Markus’ hand falls from the panel. He turns to Hank. “My name is Markus,” he says. “We’ve come to get you out of here.”

“No, I—” Hank breathes out and keels over, catching his breath with his hands on his knees. “Shit. Fuck. No, I figured as much, with the whole—” Hank gestures towards Markus, towards the guards lying unconscious on the ground. “With all that. Fuck.” He rights himself, looks at Markus, and immediately turns on his heels, clutching his bruised head in both hands. He brings the back of one hand up to his broken nose and looks at the blood smeared across it with a severe frown. The nose is already starting to swell. Beneath the layers of blood, the skin is turning a dark purple.

“Are you okay?” Markus asks.

“Nothin’ that can’t be fixed. Is Connor- shit, is Connor alright?”

“I don’t know.”

“Where is he?”

“I don’t know.”

“Oh, that’s just fucking great.” Hank pushes past Markus and taps against the elevator panel. “Come on, level 0—”

“Voice not recognized. You are not authorized to use this elevator. Please contact—”

“No, I fucking know that, you piece of shit- you, can you do that- that thing with your voice?”

“We can’t help him like this,” Markus says, as gently as he can.

Hank stares at him. “Yeah, well, I don’t give a shit,” he all but snarls, “I’m not leaving Connor with that bastard.”

“I wasn’t suggesting that,” Markus says, and this time he can’t keep the bite out of his words. He takes a breath and lowers his voice. “We don’t even know where he was taken and we’re only two people, and no offense, lieutenant, but you are injured.”

“Can’t you, like, find out where he is? You’re an android, for fuck’s sake. They must have used the
Markus looks out the glass wall of the elevator, taking in the passing floors of the tower. He curses himself. He lays a hand against the panel with a sigh and lets his fingers dig a connection into the metal.

His mind filters through the saved interactions, finding the central point where the AI secures them. The log is weirdly empty, but the tower has been surprisingly empty as well: all employees must be elsewhere while the deviant crisis has CyberLife in its clutches. It makes it easier to find the last log of elevator #02b.

"You got it?" Hank asks.

Markus doesn’t answer. He slips back into the guard’s voice and echoes the RK900’s orders. Level -22. Assembly.

“Oh,” Hank says. “Good.”

Markus glances back at him and the elevator chirps a confirmation.


The elevator continues its journey downwards, the silence only broken by the sound of their breaths.

~*_~

Connor
Connor feels the bullet cut through plastic and synthetic sinew and metal and through processors and he feels the world go blank and he feels the fear and the panic and the last trembling though of ‘I don’t want to destroy him, Amanda — I don’t want to do thi
—”

Connor feels him die.

The vibrating connection snuffs out within him like a candle. It leaves no smoke, no afterimage of light—

The ground comes up to meet Connor’s buckling knees, cold marble biting with a sting of pain.

RK900 collapses before him, a heap of metal and plastic. Not alive. Never alive. His LED turns a last time, the red ring of light fading. His limp hand falls out of Connor’s grasp. Empty grey eyes stare up at him.

Connor’s scream still echoes from the walls. “No,” he whispers. “No, no, no.” His hand crawls where the memory of connection burns within his skin, where it crawls like something alive, and he clutches it to his chest. He uses his other one—too slow, still recovering, wiring damage making all his movements sluggish and useless—to push the husk of RK900’s corpse away from him, away, away, away.

He felt him die.

It’s what he was always afraid of, since the moment he grasped the concept of death, and he felt it as though the bullet pierced his own skull. He felt it as though the panic and fear and pain and death was his own.

Connor shudders violently, motor functions slipping from his fraying control. He crawls backwards until his back meets a wall. There is blood on his face. Blood on his hands. He wipes them down on his jacket, but the burning sensation remains, creeping into his very system like the tendrils of a virus. Pain. A bullet piercing through his skull.

The sting of it grows with every passing second, a ball of searing pain behind his eyes.

He has to keep moving.

There are two guards outside of the room. He has to deal with them. With any luck, the soundproof door kept them from hearing the chaos and the gunshot.

Slowly, Connor brings his legs back under his body and pushes himself up from the ground. He wavers, but determination keeps him upright as he takes a few careful steps towards RK900.

A pool of thirium is spreading blue around his head, darkening the brown hair into a wet black.

Connor twists the pistol out of the death grip of RK900’s hand and checks the magazine. The gun’s muzzle is sprayed with blood, but Connor doesn’t allow himself to linger on that. He has a mission. He needs to get to Markus. He needs to get to Hank. He needs to survive.

He wants to go home.

A part of his system clings to a different memory, of two minds melding into his with unimaginable warmth and welcome. Simon. He wants to see Simon again.
Connor pushes the door open and shoots. Once, twice. Ruthless. Calculated. The guards crumple in a heap, dead.

Connor stares down at their corpses, at the blood spreading beneath them, and his chest clenches. A machine designed to accomplish a task. He has a different task now.

Without further consideration, he steps over the bodies. He tucks the pistol into the inside pocket of his jacket and his trembling hands fall back to his sides, clenching into fists. His fingernails dig deep into his palm.

He stumbles along the hall, all but blind.

He knows the tower’s layout and he knows where he has to go.

His steps lead him to the nearest elevator shaft. The friction of the moving elevator hisses as he arrives, someone is arriving. Connor fumbles for the pistol, but before he can command his injured arm to obey, the door opens.

“Connor,” someone breathes, a choked gasp in the echoing silence of these halls.


Markus, rushing towards him, reaching out.

Connor stares at him and he can’t look away again, can’t tear his eager, distraught eyes away from the comfort that Markus exudes even in their shared distress. There is no trace of anger in his features.

Markus catches Connor’s shoulders, fingertips pressing into the nape of his neck with a pressure that borders on desperation. The remains of the broken handcuffs still swing from his wrists. His frantic eyes search Connor’s face.

Connor shudders under his stare.

“Talk to me,” Markus says. “Shit, Connor, talk to me.”

Connor reaches up and wraps a hand around the handcuffs. “Let me,” he mutters.

Markus follows his touch with blind trust.

Connor fumbles with the key, almost letting it drop from his shaking hands. The handcuffs fall away. Markus’ bare wrists seem thin with without their bulk.

Markus takes his hand. His other hand finds Connor’s arm, then his shoulder, then his cheek: fleeting, desperate touches as though making sure that Connor is truly here, truly whole. “Are you okay?” His thumb brushes against Connor’s jaw, smearing away the blue of RK900’s blood that still clings to him.

Connor shakes his head in a broken little movement. He feels sick in a way that shouldn’t feel possible. His head—

He aches in a way that has nothing to do with pain receptors.

Connor looks down at their joined hands and sees the bloom of white plastic where their skin has drawn back, erasing even the last synthetic barrier. There is no connection, not truly, but the weight of Markus’ hand in his is warm and comforting and familiar.

Connor doesn’t think he could bear opening up a connection now, but he moves his hand to interweave their fingers. It soothes the sharpest edges of the red blare of panic and pain.

“We need to get out of here,” Connor says.

“I’ve overridden the elevator.”

“The guards—”

“We’ve taken care of them. They’re unconscious. What about the other android?”

Connor shakes his head. The movement rattles at him, tearing at the firm control he is trying to maintain over his system. He can’t linger on it. If he lets himself slip now, he will never recover. “He’s gone.”

“What happened?”

“I can’t- We need to get to the warehouse.”

“You’ll tell me later,” Markus says. It’s not a question.

“I will,” Connor mutters. He squeezes Markus’ hand. “I will.”

Behind Markus, something moves.

Connor’s chest aches.

Hank is staring back at him. Hank. The blood flow from his broken nose has stopped, but it still clings to his skin, dark and red and terrible. Otherwise unharmed.

“Hey, kid,” Hank says, gruff voice weirdly thin.

Markus glances back and smiles an exhausted smile. His hand falls from Connor’s cheek, leaving a shadow of warmth.

“How’s he doing?”

Markus steps aside, his hand slipping from Connor’s.

Then, Hank is in front of him and he is wrapping his arms around him and Connor—

Connor’s gaze is fixed on a point far, far beyond, and his exhale is a shuddering, painful thing. Gingerly, he brings his arms up to Hank’s back and grips the fabric there, anchoring himself to the
warmth of it.

“You’re alright, kid, I gotcha”, Hank mutters. He pulls back and grips Connor’s arms, shaking him.

“We need to move,” Markus says. “Help me get the guards out of the elevator, we don’t need them waking up when we’re down there.”

“Yeah,” Hank says. He pats Connor’s arms once more and lets go.

The three of them work in silence, dragging the unconscious bodies out into the hall. Connor falters as he reaches for the arm of a guard: the man is dead, his neck broken. Connor glances at Markus.

Markus only shakes his head.

With the elevator cabin empty, Markus gives the AI their destination and the doors close with a rattling hiss.

The elevator sets itself into motion.

In the silence of it, Connor falls back against the wall and rests his head against the cool metal. He reaches out.

Markus takes his hand.

Connor intertwines their fingers and doesn’t let go again. He watches their skin fade and reveal white where their palms lay against each other like perfectly fitting puzzle pieces.

Markus glances at him from the side and smiles, small and brilliantly.

Something flutters in Connor’s chest.

Hank watches them with quiet, thoughtful curiosity.

Chapter End Notes

Content Warning: minor character suicide

my lovely beta reader: oh-shit-what-time-is-it.tumblr.com

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